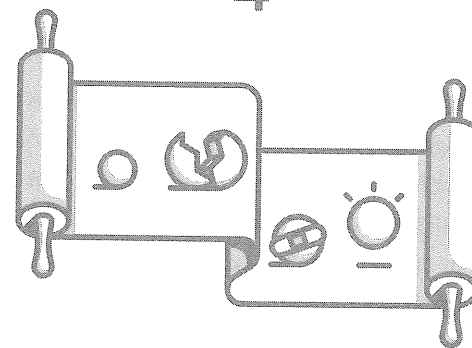


This is a sample from the book *Gospel Fluency*. These chapters represent an excellent description of the basics of the gospel message. We highly recommend ordering the book.

4



## THE TRUE STORY

When learning a new language, you study vocabulary (words and their meanings), grammar (how to structure the words into meaningful sentences), and culture (what the words actually mean in context). When you're a child, you learn a language orally in the culture where you are brought up, and that culture plays a very significant role in your understanding and speaking of the language. In fact, some of the dictionary definitions of words do not always line up with the cultural meanings of those words because the cultural context has given them new meanings.

For instance, one dictionary defines a cat as "a small domesticated carnivorous mammal with soft fur, a short snout, and

retractile claws. It is widely kept as a pet or for catching mice, and many breeds have been developed.”<sup>1</sup> I, on the other hand, grew up believing that cats were actually little demons looking to take the lives of small children if they could, while also giving me significant breathing problems due to my allergic reaction to them—which I, of course, understood as God’s way of protecting me from the evil spirits!

That’s a little extreme, I know, but you get the point.

Then, through hanging out with some of my African American friends, I learned that a cat is actually an adult male who is highly skilled in a particular craft—such as music, the spoken word, sports, or preaching. “Listen to that cat! He’s dope!” (not referring to something you smoke, of course).

So culture shapes language.

Likewise, language shapes culture. Do you want to change a culture? Change or redefine the language. You change or redefine language through story. If you want a new or redefined language, tell a new story.

Story gives meaning to language. Every word we know has meaning because of the story in which that word was defined.

If I say “Aslan,” some of you think of a Christlike lion king. And when you read *The Lion King*, some of you think of Simba and start singing, “I just can’t wait to be king!” Some of you don’t know what I’m talking about because you’ve never read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis or viewed Disney’s animated movie about a cowardly young lion growing up to be the courageous king of the jungle. And it’s very possible that after reading these sentences together, some of you are now looking for parallels or divergent themes as you compare both stories.

The stories of our lives are especially powerful in shaping

1. Angus Stevenson, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 272.

how we understand and interpret language. For some, the word *father* is a wonderful term that conjures up all kinds of tender emotions—love, care, and feelings of provision and protection. When others hear the word *father*, they feel abandonment, emotional disengagement, rejection, and fear.

Culture shapes language. Language shapes culture. And stories have the power to redefine or create new language. Our words have meaning because of the stories in which they are used. And we understand our words from the story *we* find ourselves in.

So how do we become a gospel-centered culture full of gospel-fluent people? We need gospel language that is correctly shaped by the gospel story.

All of us are living our lives under a dominant story. We perceive the world and human interactions through the stories we know and believe. For most of us, that is our story of origin, our family story. This is a much smaller story inside the larger one, and often it leads us to wrong perceptions of God, ourselves, others, and the world around us. In some cases, we believe outright lies.

But there is a true story. It’s the story of God found in the Bible. It’s the story that redeems, heals, and completes our personal stories—the smaller stories within the true story.

We will talk about the makeup of the gospel (like vocabulary) and how it has meaning for our lives (like grammar), but we first need to get the overarching story because it is the true story that informs the meaning of the gospel.

Other authors have dedicated entire books<sup>2</sup> to the true story, and there are some helpful tools<sup>3</sup> that can guide a group

2. See Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014); Bartholomew and Goheen, *The True Story of the Whole World: Finding Your Place in the Biblical Drama* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive, 2009); Justin Buzzard, *The Big Story: How the Bible Makes Sense Out of Life* (Chicago: Moody, 2013).

3. See *The Story-Formed Way*, <https://saturatetheworld.com/story-formed-way/>; *The Story of God*, <https://saturatetheworld.com/story-of-god/>; and *The Story of God for Kids*, <https://saturatetheworld.com/story-of-god-for-kids/>.

through the story together, but for the purposes of this book, I am going to walk through a summary narrative of the true story using four key movements: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and New Creation.

## Creation

“In the beginning God . . .” (Gen. 1:1).

That is how the story begins—with God.

God eternally existed in community—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—one God in three persons, existing in perfect unity. Nothing else existed.

In the beginning, God created by his word. He created the heavens and the earth out of nothing. He spoke and it all came into being.

God’s word brought about God’s work.

God designed a beautiful place full of everything necessary for life where humans could live.<sup>4</sup> Then he created man and woman in his image, after his likeness. The invisible God created humans to be a visible display—a picture—of what he is like. After creating, God said that it was *very good*, then rested from the work of creating. That was essentially God’s way of saying: “I did great work! I am satisfied with what I have done. This is righteous.” God wanted the man and the woman to know that he declared them good—he declared them righteous.

God’s word is powerful and true. His work is very good. Rest in it.

Why is this so important?

Well, if everything came into existence through the word of God, and if everything that comes into existence through God’s word is good, then God’s word and work are to be completely trusted and depended upon. We have our very existence

4. This part of the story is found in Genesis 1–2.

through his word and work. Therefore, our identity, purpose, and truth are all to be found in God’s word and God’s work.

Not just in the beginning—always.

The questions “Who am I?” and “Why am I here?” are not meant to be answered outside of what God says and what God does.

Before we go any further, ask yourself: “Who or what do I look to—trust in, depend upon—for my worth?”

God also created work for the man to do by creating a garden for him to care for. He commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:16–17). God called the man to look to him, not creation and not his own work, for his identity. He called the man to look to him for purpose and truth. Eating of that tree would be essentially turning to another source for identity, purpose, and truth.

God called the man to trust him and obey him: “Believe who I say you are. Trust in what I’ve done to make you who you are. And as a result, do what I command.”

At this point in the story, the man was still alone. No suitable helper for him was around yet. No friend, partner, or mate—just the animals. And God said that it was *not* good that the man was alone. (This is a good reminder that a dog is not man’s best friend.)

So God made a helper fit for the man. He put the man to sleep and took a rib out of his body. The first surgery in the history of the world led to the first woman, made from a man. When the man woke up from his slumber, he saw the beauty in front of him and exclaimed, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Gen. 2:23).

The woman was made from man. And together, they were a

picture of the unity and community of God. God commanded them to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over [it]” (Gen. 1:28). They were called to submit to God, rule over the earth on behalf of God, and fill it with more image bearers who would do the same.

A mandate to love, work, and rule in such a way as to show all of creation what God is like.

A good and beautiful garden.

A man and woman living in harmonious and pure love, naked and unashamed, daily enjoying each other, working and ruling over creation, and interacting with God in their midst.

It was all very good! But that was about to change.

## Fall

They didn’t believe. They didn’t trust God’s word and work.

The problem was unbelief. The action was sin. The result was death.

The Serpent, the Devil, convinced the woman that God’s word was a lie and his work was not good: “God knows you aren’t as good as you could be. He knows that if you just take matters into your own hands, you will be much better. You can be like God if you just eat the fruit he told you not to eat.”<sup>5</sup>

She believed the lie and ate the fruit, then she gave some to her husband, and he ate too.

God had told them they were very good—they were made in his image, after his likeness. But they didn’t believe him. Instead, they believed the Devil, the master of lies. God had told them they would surely die if they ate the fruit. But they didn’t believe him. Instead, they believed the lie of the Devil, that they wouldn’t die. As a result of their rebellion, sin entered the world and brought about death and destruction.

5. This part of the story is found in Genesis 3.

When I shared Romans 6:23 with our missional community recently, one of the new believers in the group asked, “If the wages of sin is death, and if God promised Adam and Eve they would surely die if they ate of the tree, why didn’t they die?”

“Well, they did die,” I responded.

“But why didn’t they die immediately?” she retorted.

It seemed she understood the severity of their rebellion and wondered why God didn’t just strike them down then and there.

I responded: “Well, the death God was referring to wasn’t just a physical one. It was spiritual, relational, and physical. Besides, if he had destroyed them then and there, it would have been the end of humanity. God didn’t want to destroy humanity. He loved them and wanted to save them. He wanted to rescue them from the consequences of their sin.”

Then I went on to explain what I meant by spiritual, relational, and physical death.

Adam and Eve rebelled against God by looking elsewhere for identity, purpose, and truth. They looked away from the giver and sustainer of life to the one who is committed to taking and destroying life instead.<sup>6</sup> This led to a *spiritual* death, or brokenness in their relationship with God. They turned from submitting to and believing in God to trusting in and submitting to Satan.

In that moment, Adam and Eve surrendered their God-given authority over the world to Satan. They were meant to rule the world on behalf of God. But they gave that authority to the Devil, who became known as “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4; cf. John 12:31).

We see the results of this spiritual death immediately in the shame they felt, which led to a desire to cover themselves with clothing they made out of fig leaves. And they immediately

6. Jesus said in John 10:10: “The thief [the Devil] comes to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

hid themselves from God when they heard him coming near. If they had trusted in God's word and work, they would have had no need to hide or cover up because they would not have been guilty or felt any shame. They would have had no reason to be afraid.

The second death was *relational* in nature. Our relationship with God affects every other relationship. Before their sinful rebellion, Adam and Eve were perfectly united, naked and unashamed in each other's presence. However, after they sinned, they turned on each other and blamed each other. They were looking for someone to pay for what they had done. This is called atonement—payment for sin. However, neither could pay for the other because both had sinned. Only an innocent one could do that.

Both were guilty. Both needed to pay for their own sin.

When we sin, we feel shame, and then we look to blame someone. Someone has to pay. Everyone intuitively knows and feels this. Humans feel this because we are image bearers of God. We reflect God's perfect, loving justice. We long for things to be made right.

Some of us blame others for sin, and hate or despise them because we want them to pay for what has been done. Some of us blame ourselves and try to pay for our sin through self-loathing, self-hurting, religion, or good works. Adam and Eve did both.

We are to blame for our sin. We are guilty, and because we are, we need someone else to pay for our sin.

Adam and Eve had that need too.

That leads to the third kind of death, *physical* death.

God covered the man and woman with the skins of an animal (Gen. 3:21). An innocent animal died so their shame could be covered. This is the first sacrifice for sins that we see in the story. Eventually, an innocent human would have to

willingly die to atone for our sin, remove our guilt, and cover our shame.

Until then, sacrifices for sin would be made, but they would never be enough to truly forgive sin or make people new. People would continue to sin, and sin would continue to destroy. People would be born, be hurt, and die. This pattern continued from generation to generation.

We see this in the very next story in the Bible, as the same relational discord that afflicted Adam and Eve was passed on to their children.<sup>7</sup> Cain killed Abel out of jealousy for his brother's acceptable offering to God. Cain, like his parents, didn't want to heed God's word for acceptance. He put his hope in his own work instead. But his work fell short. And again, someone else suffered for sin.

Sin produces death. Enemies kill one another. So do jealous brothers. Eventually, everyone dies.

And this physical death doesn't just affect humanity. All of creation is affected as humanity's sin wreaks havoc on our world. We see the physical effects of sin producing death and destruction everywhere on the planet as we continue to kill it with our selfishness and greed.

The wages of sin *is* death—spiritual, relational, and physical.

Sinful rebellion produces brokenness, suffering, and death.

This is because rebellion against God is rebellion against the giver of life. And this rebellion began and continues to go on because of unbelief in the truthfulness of God's word and the sufficiency of his work.

## Redemption

Thankfully, the story doesn't end with destruction and death. Even as the man and woman were being informed about the curse of sin and its effects on their lives and relationships, God

7. This part of the story is found in Genesis 4.

also promised to put an end to the Serpent and the rebellion he had started. Through Eve's offspring, Satan would eventually be crushed (Gen. 3:15).

God would have the final word. He would save us from our sin. He would rescue us from Satan. He would put death to death.

His word is true and his work is sufficient.

As the story continued, things went from bad to worse. But God never let things get as bad as they could. He regularly put an end to the progression of evil to prevent humanity from completely wiping itself out. The flood is one of the greatest examples of this.<sup>8</sup> A time came when every intention of the human heart was evil all the time. That was really bad! God was sad he had created man. However, he still saved them. He did it through a great flood. He cleansed the earth of all the evil and chose one man through whom humanity would get another chance.

Noah was that man. He found favor in the eyes of God, which means God showed grace toward him. After the flood subsided and Noah and his family left the ark, God reminded him of the mandate: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Gen. 9:1). God also informed Noah that the life source of humanity is in the blood, so blood must be shed when life is taken, since man is made in the image of God (vv. 4–6). This set in place the concept that blood needs to be shed for the forgiveness of our sins. Since all sin is rebellion against God, blood—the source of life, including our life—must be given as payment (Lev. 17:11; Heb. 9:22).

Noah's family did multiply. And things began to get bad again. Sin was still present, and people continued to rebel against God.

Eventually, God called a man named Abram to be the one

8. This part of the story is found in Genesis 6–8.

through whom he would start a family for his purposes on the earth.<sup>9</sup> He promised Abram that he would make of him a great nation, that he would bless him, and that he would make his name great, so that through him all the people groups on the earth would be blessed.

Abram and Sarai, his wife, had no children at the time and both were too old to conceive. Yet God promised. And Abram believed God's word and trusted in God's work, and God counted it to him as righteousness. God changed his name to Abraham, meaning "father of many nations." This new name represented the new work God would do through Abraham.

God gave Abraham and his wife a son named Isaac, who became the father of Jacob, who became the father of twelve sons, through whom were founded the twelve tribes of Israel. One of those tribes was Judah, through whom the promised offspring, Jesus, eventually would come into the world.

God rescued Jacob's family, who become the nation of Israel, from famine through the provision of Egypt.<sup>10</sup> It was in that place that they grew in number. It was also there that they became slaves to Pharaoh. God sent Moses to confront Pharaoh and demand that he let God's people go. Pharaoh refused, despite the many plagues God brought upon the land. Then God took Pharaoh's firstborn son and all the other firstborn sons of Egypt. Pharaoh finally relented and God's people were released.<sup>11</sup>

They were redeemed from slavery to go to the land God had promised them. This land was to resemble a garden like the first. It would be a land of plenty where God's people could rest in him and his provision, where God would be present with the people, and where his image could once again be expressed.

Abraham's family was redeemed to rest. They were called to God to display and declare his goodness.

9. This part of the story is found in Genesis 12–18, 21.

10. To see how God accomplished this through Joseph, read Genesis 37–50.

11. This part of the story is found in Exodus 1–14.

Redemption became the running theme of the story as God continued to call his people to trust him by reminding them of what he had done for them and to obey him in light of their faith in him. Over and over, they forgot and failed to trust and obey. And over and over again, God rescued them from their slavery. Often the slavery was physical in nature, but it always reflected the spiritual slavery to sin to which they had submitted themselves.

God chose, called, and created Israel. He blessed them to be a blessing to the nations. God set them apart as his holy people. They were called to trust and obey God and, in so doing, to be a visible display of what God is like to the nations.

Israel was to be to God as a son who displays what his father is like.

But Israel failed. God's plan, however, did not. He would still fulfill his word. Through the offspring, the world would be blessed. Another son—the true Son of God—would accomplish it.

Jesus is that Son.

Jesus came as the true and better Adam, the true and better Abraham, and the true and better Israel. God's full and final redemption to rescue us from slavery to sin and Satan came in the form of a baby.

He is God's redemption plan. He always was—even before the creation of the world.

He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, yet he was without sin. He lived the life we were created to live, perfectly trusting in and submitting to God the Father. He overcame Satan's temptation, and served and ministered as the King of kings, who came not to be served but to serve by laying down his life in our place. He died as our atoning sacrifice, shedding his blood on the cross for our sin, removing our guilt, and covering our shame. He was buried and rose again

on the third day, triumphant over Satan, sin, and death as the firstfruits of a new creation.

This leads to the last part of the story.

## **New Creation**

Jesus was raised with a glorified body. He took on our sin at the cross, where he paid for it with his blood and destroyed its power. He overcame death and was given new life. And in his glorified, sinless body that can no longer be taken down by Satan, sin, or death, he has been given all authority in heaven and earth.

Jesus is the new and better Adam over a new and better creation.

And through his body, lifeless in the tomb, God brought forth another woman—the second woman to be brought forth from a man's body.

God brought forth the church.

The church is Jesus's bride. We are God's new-creation people (2 Cor. 5:17). All those who believe in Jesus's life, death, and resurrection go from having Adam as their authority and life source to having Jesus as the new Adam. Adam sinned, and everyone born since then was born into sin as a result.

Everyone except Jesus.

Conceived by the Holy Spirit of God, he was born without sin and is the very righteousness of God. When we are born again by the Spirit, we are brought under Jesus as our new Adam—our new life source and our new authority (head). Thus, he is the beginning of a new creation.

We are Jesus's bride (John 3:29; Eph. 5:22–33; Rev. 19:7; 21:2, 9), the church, and God's children, the family of God (Mark 3:33–35; John 1:12–13; Rom. 8:14–17; Eph. 1:3–6).

We have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness, with Satan as lord, to the kingdom of light, with Jesus as Lord

(Col. 1:13–14). We have been changed from being spiritually dead in our sins to being alive in Christ, able to live new lives because of him (Eph. 2:1–10). We went from being sinners to saints, from enemies of God to dearly loved children of God, and from powerless to overcome sin to mightily empowered by the Spirit to defeat sin.

Jesus was given all authority in heaven and earth, and all who are his share that authority in order to fulfill his mission. With this authority, Jesus commands us to make disciples of all nations, establish them in their new identity<sup>12</sup> in Christ, and teach them to obey Jesus's commands. Just as Adam and Eve were called to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, we are commissioned by and with Jesus to make disciples.<sup>13</sup> What is called the Great Commission is really the new creation mandate under Jesus as our head.

Everything has changed. Our identity and our purpose, as well as our understanding of the truths of God, have completely changed.

We also have a future hope. The new creation is not just personal but cosmic.

God will bring about a new heaven and new earth, which we will get to live in and enjoy forever. The true image of God, Jesus, will light up that world with his glory, and we also, with renewed resurrection bodies, will reflect God as redeemed, recreated, and resurrected image bearers, transformed by the glory of Christ.

We will forever dwell in the gardenlike city, where there will be no suffering or pain, sin or sorrow, brokenness or despair, sickness or death. All of God's enemies will have been captured and crushed, and all that is wrong will have been made right.<sup>14</sup>

12. That is what happens in our baptism. Remember, Jesus told his disciples to baptize into *the name* of the triune God (see Matt. 28:19).

13. He said he would be with us always, to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20).

14. This part of the story is found in Revelation 21–22.

Those of us who know and love Jesus long for that day.

However, we also let that future reality inform our present behavior. We let what we know about it inform what we do about the brokenness we see around us every day. Because we are already new creations in Christ, we invite the future hope into our present lives through the Holy Spirit, who raised Jesus from the dead. We, as his people, become a foretaste of the future, pointing forward to a better day by giving people a taste of it now.

Certainly we can't provide the full taste—only Jesus can, and will in the end. But he is in us and at work through us to show the world what God is like. Through our lives, Jesus is saying, "Taste and see that the Lord is good!" The new creation has already begun in Jesus and has begun in us, and one day he will bring it to full completion.

Until then, we live as the redeemed people of God, becoming more and more like Jesus every day so that more and more people come to him through our visible and verbal testimony.

This is our story.

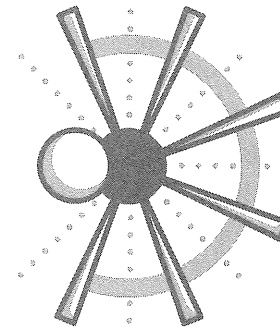
This is *the* story.

This is the true and better story that can redeem and make new every other story.

You want to change a culture? Give them a new story. Language will follow.



5



## POWER FOR SALVATION

When people say they are *saved*, what do they mean?

Suppose someone says, "I was saved when I was ten." Saved from what? I have to be honest and say that I am very concerned that most people who grew up in the church don't actually know what they mean when they say things like this. At the least, they have a very minimalist view of salvation: "I've been saved from going to hell when I die because I prayed a prayer I was instructed to pray."

This was my view for many years. I had no idea that God's salvation wasn't dependent upon my prayer and is so powerful and all-encompassing that it deals with more than just our afterlife (though it does deal with that).

We were powerless to save ourselves. We were dead in our sins, enemies of God, and, by nature, children of wrath. We were helpless and hopeless, slaves to sin and Satan. We needed to be saved from the power of Satan, sin, and death. We also needed to be saved from the wrath of God against sin.

I want to be very clear. We do not save ourselves. We cannot save ourselves. We do nothing in terms of our salvation. God does everything.

When we talk about the gospel, we are not just talking about a doctrine we write down and quote. We are talking about the very real, dynamic power of God to create, redeem, and save. The power I'm talking about brought the world into existence. It's the same power that breathed life into dust and formed a man. This power struck down the Egyptians and parted the Red Sea so that all of Israel could pass through on dry ground. The power we proclaim in the gospel is the same power that was visible on top of Mount Sinai, ablaze with fire; that was exerted to conquer Israel's enemies; and that helped David defeat Goliath with one stone.

The power of the gospel is the power that enabled Jesus to overcome temptation, preach with authority, cast out demons, heal the sick, raise the dead, and rise from the dead himself.

The gospel is not just dogma, though it is doctrine we believe. It's not just history, though it is historical. It's not just past, though it happened. The gospel is the power of God made available to us through the Son of God, who gave his life for us. He is alive and at work in those who believe by his Spirit. And that power was exerted, is presently available, and will keep us safe until the end.

The gospel is the *power* of God for salvation for our entire lives.

In my first book, *Saturate*, I wrote about God's power to save us—past, present, and future. We *have been* saved from

the penalty of sin; we *are being* saved from the power of sin; and we *will be* saved from the presence of sin. In this chapter, I want to delve into God's power to save in greater detail.

Think of this chapter as a vocabulary lesson. To become fluent in any language, you must develop your vocabulary. So let's delve into the aspects of the gospel that are expressed in the person and work of Jesus.

Belief in the gospel is not a one-time decision or a conviction that we need salvation only for our past lives and future afterlives. Belief in the gospel is an ongoing expression of our ongoing need for Jesus. Standing firm in it means we continue to put our faith in him for our past, our present, and our future.

Paul addressed a very broken church in his first letter to the believers in Corinth. Their lives were a visible display of their unbelief in God and the gospel. According to Paul, they had come to believe the gospel, but then they began living in a way that showed they were not standing firm in the truths of the gospel. So he clarified the basics of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1–6:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, *in which you stand*, and by which *you are being saved*, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that *Christ died for our sins* in accordance with the Scriptures, that *he was buried*, that *he was raised on the third day* in accordance with the Scriptures, and that *he appeared* to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.

The gospel is the power of God for salvation to all who *believe* (Rom. 1:16).

What do we believe? What are we putting our faith in?

### Jesus's Life

Let's start with the life of Jesus. "Wait a minute," you might be thinking. "Paul starts with his death. Isn't the gospel about Jesus's death?"

Well, there is no death if there is no life. Paul assumes this in saying "Christ died."

Too many people forget the life of Christ when they talk about the cross of Christ. But if we don't have the perfect life of Jesus, we can have no confidence in the death of Jesus. The righteousness revealed in the gospel (Rom. 1:17) requires the perfect obedience of Jesus.

Jesus's life represents both the righteousness of God in human form and the perfect fulfillment of the standard of righteousness on behalf of humanity. If you want to know what the righteousness of God looks like, you look at Jesus's life, and if you want to be declared righteous by God, you need to have faith in how Jesus lived on your behalf, not just in how he died.

Because of sin, we were all powerless to live righteous lives that would be acceptable to God. Even our best attempts fell woefully short.

Remember our story.

In prideful arrogance and selfish ambition, Adam and Eve disobeyed God. They had been made in God's image, created in God's likeness, but they sinned and fell short of his glory. They didn't trust and obey God, and as a result, they failed to display the truth about what God is like in their thoughts, motives, and actions. The Bible calls this sin. All humans since Adam have been born into sin and prove themselves to be sinners as well. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Not one of us trusts and obeys God, and as a result, we have all failed to display the truth about what God is like in our thoughts, motives, and actions.

We all needed a new human to give birth to a new humanity—

a perfect man who is also the true image of God, fully displaying what God is like by living a fully submitted and obedient life before God. Jesus is that man. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1:15).

It wasn't enough for him to just show up on earth and die for our sins. He had to live the life we don't live in order for him to be for us the righteousness of God we aren't—the life that God rightly demands that we live. You see, God doesn't just want us to have a zero balance in our sin account. He expects us to have a full and complete balance in our righteousness account. That's the standard. His expectation for the human life is his glory—living in such a way as to display and declare what he is really like in everything we feel, think, and do.

So Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit of God and was born of the virgin Mary, but without sin. The eternal Son of God took on flesh and dwelt among sinful humanity. He lived for thirty years in obscurity and humility. God was in the neighborhood, but almost nobody, except some angels and smelly shepherds, recognized him. Paul describes this humility in Philippians 2:6–8: "Though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Adam, full of pride, sought equality with God. Jesus, full of humility, even though he was in nature God, emptied himself and did not seek to grasp hold of equality, but instead became a servant. Jesus, the Son of God, did not come to be served but to serve and give up his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45). And he lived the only perfectly righteous human life ever. He is God's righteousness. He gave himself for us to be our righteousness before God.

Then, before he began his ministry of proclaiming and

displaying the good news of God's kingdom, he entered the waters of baptism for the repentance of sin to fulfill all righteousness (Matt. 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22).

Why did he need to do this? He never sinned. He had no need to repent!

Jesus was not baptized because he had sinned. He did it to identify with sinners—those who need to turn to God for forgiveness. In his righteousness, he identified with our sinfulness. He did not come for the righteous; he came for sinners (Mark 2:17). In his baptism, Jesus was saying: “I will identify with you so that you can identify with me. I will take on your sin so you can take on my righteousness.” As he came out of the waters of baptism, the Spirit descended upon him and God the Father spoke over him, saying, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11).

Following this, the Spirit led him into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. Unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus overcame. He didn't give in to the temptation. He is our righteousness and our overcomer—victorious over Satan's schemes. After that, he could proclaim the good news (gospel) that the kingdom of God was present because an image bearer of God—the *true image of God*—was taking back authority from Satan.

The true and better ruler had come and the kingdom of God was being expressed and experienced in and with Jesus. The good news has a King and a kingdom. This is why he is called Jesus Christ. Christ is not his last name. It is his title: Jesus the Christ. *Christ* is a transliteration of the Greek word for the King who is anointed by God to deliver his people from sin and Satan. Jesus has this power to rescue us out of darkness and bring us into his kingdom of light. His entire ministry is about the proclamation and demonstration of the kingdom of God—life as it should be under God's rule and reign as opposed to slavery under Satan's.

This is a very important part of the gospel. It is the gospel of the kingdom of God.

We need more than the humble life of Christ. We also need the victorious rule and ministry of Christ to overcome Satan's schemes, bring healing and restoration to the brokenness that sin produces, and provide reconciliation between God and man.

### Jesus's Death

Eventually, Jesus was betrayed, arrested, wrongly accused, and crucified. The perfect Son of God, the righteousness of God, the one who knew no sin, became sin at the cross so that we might become the righteousness of God in him (2 Cor. 5:21).

We needed a perfect substitute—one without sin, fully pleasing to God—who would die in our place. The Bible says, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). Our sin, our rebellion, every way in which we fall short of the glory of God, was put on Jesus at the cross. His perfect life was exchanged for our life of sin.

At the cross, Jesus atoned for our sins—he paid the debt we couldn't pay and suffered the death we should have experienced. At the cross, the wrath of God for sin was completely satisfied. Jesus is the propitiation for our sins (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). This means that God's anger against our sin was satisfied by Jesus's death for sin. And God's love for his own Son was poured out for sinners (John 17:23, 26).

When Jesus went to the cross, he was wounded for our transgressions, so that by his wounds we might be healed (Isa. 53:5). Jesus died to forgive us of our sins, to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, and to heal us from all the pain and brokenness that sin produces. Because of the cross, we become reconciled to God. We go from being God's enemies—who,

because of our sinful nature, were objects of wrath—to dearly loved children of God (Rom. 5:8; 8:14–17; Eph. 1:3–5; 2:1–6).

And Jesus died. He was *really* dead. He didn't just go to sleep. He didn't fall into a coma. He died and was buried in a tomb.

Jesus died for our sins. He took our sins on himself—on his real physical, human body—and then died for them. Our sins were buried with Jesus. They were not just removed and put in another place. They were destroyed by his death.

Death is terminal. Our sins were terminated.

If your faith is in Jesus, your sins, past, present, and future, were terminated through Jesus's death.

And he didn't die just to remove our sins from us, but also to destroy the power of sin over us. Paul says: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8:1–3).

He condemned sin, destroying its power.

### **Jesus's Resurrection**

And how do we know Jesus destroyed the power of sin and death?

He rose again from the dead.

Jesus put death to death. He was raised on the third day and appeared to more than five hundred people. He was raised with a glorified body, one without sin. This was a body for the new creation.

Paul calls Jesus the firstfruits of what will ultimately be true for all of us who are in Christ, who have faith in him (1 Cor. 15:20–23). Eventually, we will each be given glorified, resur-

rected bodies that are without sin, so that we may live in a new heaven and new earth forever.

Until that day, we have the presence of the resurrected Jesus in our weak and frail bodies to enable us to live a new life now. We have his Spirit.

The gospel doesn't just bring about forgiveness of sins and save us from hell. The gospel of Jesus Christ empowers us to live a whole new life today by the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead.

There's no greater power than that!

In fact, after Jesus rose from the dead, he ascended to the right hand of God the Father, where he is now making intercession on our behalf. He is continually praying for us, willing to empower us by his Spirit in us, and speaking a better word over us than Satan, sin, or our past experiences speak. We trust in the word of Jesus and the work of Jesus before God on our behalf. We are not like Adam and Eve, who put their trust in another word and another work. We look to and put our faith in the word of God and the work of God for our righteousness.

After Jesus's resurrection and ascension, God sent his Spirit to wake us up from spiritual death, convict us of our sin, make the truths of the gospel clear to our hearts, grant us repentance and faith, and bring about new life as a result. By his Spirit, we are born again from the dead, spiritually speaking (John 3:5–8, 14–16; Eph. 2:1). We become new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). Each of us has a new nature, a new identity, and a new purpose. And the Spirit in those who believe is a sign of all of this. The Spirit is also the means by which we have the power to live entirely new and different lives. He is the sign that we are forgiven and cleansed, changed and made new, chosen and adopted by God—he wants us, he chose us, he changed us, he empowers us, and he loves us.

The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is now in us who believe. Through faith in Jesus's life and death, we are cleansed from all unrighteousness and become holy dwelling places of God. God will not dwell in unholy people. But because of Jesus's work, we are declared righteous and holy by faith in Jesus. And now God's Spirit dwells in all those who are his (Rom. 8:9-11).

We now have the presence and power in us that spoke the world into existence, flooded the earth, parted the Red Sea, and empowered Jesus to preach, heal the sick, raise the dead, and cast out demons. We have the power that overcomes Satan, sin, and death.

This is what the gospel is and what the gospel does.

The gospel is the good news of the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, who is King. The gospel saves and brings God's rule into our lives (his kingdom) in order to bring the good news of his power into the world. The gospel changes us from the inside out and spreads through our lives and lips to the world by his Spirit.

This is the gospel that is the power of God for salvation to all who believe. This is what we have been saved by.

So what have we been saved from?

### **Saved From**

Jesus lived the perfect life of obedience so we could be saved from striving to live that life on our own. God declares us to be righteous, not because of any work we have done, but because of the work Jesus did. We can rest from working to measure up to perfection. We can cease striving to be perfect by our own strength and efforts. We can rest in the life of Jesus lived on our behalf.

Jesus overcame Satan's temptation and wants to extend his ruling power in our lives and through our lives so we also can

be saved from Satan's lies and power. Jesus came to set the captives free from slavery to Satan and sin.

Jesus died in our place to save us from the wrath of God and the penalty of sin, which is spiritual, relational, and physical death. He saves us from spiritual death and makes us alive in Christ. He atones for our guilt and removes our shame. He reconciles us to God so that we can also be reconciled to one another. And ultimately, though our bodies will fail and die, he will give us glorified resurrection bodies that will live forever.

Jesus ascended into heaven and saves us from living in the depths of sin by raising us and seating us with him in the heavenly realms. We were poor and lowly, but now we are co-heirs with Christ, sharing in his eternal blessings. We are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus.

And he sends his Spirit to give us new birth—a new life. He saves us from our old life of sin and identity in Adam to a new life with a new identity, a new purpose, and a new power. Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. Not only are we declared righteous, but we also can live righteous lives. Not only are we called holy, but we also can live as God's holy people. We are new! We are alive! We are free! We are no longer slaves to sin, but are now slaves to righteousness—slaves to what is truly living!

And all of this is a gift. It is all by grace. "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:8-9).

We receive it all by grace *through faith*.

So what does it mean to be saved through faith? What does faith have to do with all this?