

“I’m tired of people talking about the gospel as if it were a syllogism on a whiteboard. The gospel ought to give us a dry mouth and hands trembling with joyful exuberance. If the gospel has become something routine to you, not the kind of good news that lights up a Galilean sky with angels, read this book with expectation. J.A. Medders is a pastor, a leader, and, most importantly, a cross-bearing student of a rabbi king who isn’t dead anymore. His enthusiasm can shake you out of routine and toward glory.”

RUSSELL D. MOORE
President, Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission
Southern Baptist Convention

“The gospel is the message of how all things are made new through Jesus Christ. It is therefore a matter of regret that the theologically minded often talk about this message in ways that are dull and uninspired, not new at all. Thankfully, Jeff Medders doesn’t think much of that approach. I commend the fresh approach of *Gospel Formed* to you.”

DOUGLAS WILSON
Senior minister, Christ Church
Moscow, Idaho

“Jeff Medders has given us a devotional book that is fresh, biblical, and very funny. “Sola bootstrapa” was not part of my vocabulary before, but it is now. These short readings are words fitly spoken, and they pose grave danger for spiritual weakness. Read this book, savor this gospel, and then get off your couch and take some dominion in the name of Jesus.”

OWEN STRACHAN
Author, *Risky Gospel*

“We have become a culture of niches and specialty issues. In all our clamoring for our own soapboxes, we have sidelined the main thing: the gospel. I’m grateful that this book walks our minds and hearts back home to Jesus. Read it to enjoy him!”

JIMMY NEEDHAM
Christian recording artist

GOSPEL FORMED

Living a Grace-Addicted,
Truth-Filled, Jesus-Exalting Life

J.A. MEDDERS

FOREWORD BY JARED C. WILSON

 **Kregel**
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For Ivy and Oliver.

Kids, it's all about Jesus. There is no one more important—more incredible!—than Jesus. I hope you see the greatest truth in the universe: God loves sinners like us.

*You are invited to take the comfort of this gospel
truth, that “there is forgiveness with God.”*

JOHN OWEN

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FOREWORD

What do Christians today need in order to walk with encouragement through the life events they experience? Is it a newer model of worship? A new set of instructions? The latest innovation in religious technology? A handbook of tips and skills and troubleshooting flow-charts? Do we need more inspirational pick-me-ups? Do Christians need more classes, more diplomas, more specialized training?

The drudgery of daily living and the failures we experience, both by us and toward us, have this in common: they require a vision beyond ourselves if we are to transcend them. In an age of Christian media saturation and an embarrassing wealth of religious resources, it is not more information we need.

It is power.

As has been true of humans in every age, we have need of great, enduring, supernatural, and alien power. What we need cannot come from ourselves, and that is where most religious inspiration fails. And it is why books like *Gospel Formed* by my friend Jeff Medders are not just helpful but needful. We need this book because of the kind of help it provides.

If we go into God's inerrant, infallible, inspired Word looking only for things to do, we will come away with God's good instructions for the good life but without the power to actually follow them. The power to obey does not lie in the commandments. The power to get through the day does not come from the instructions on how to get through it. The power to glorify God is in the glorious gospel, which says not "Do" but "Done!"

Jeff understands this contrast like few others and aims to help us meditate every day on the "Done"-ness of God's work in Christ. The Reverend Maurice Roberts once wrote, "It is the unhurried

meditation on gospel truths and the exposing of our minds to these truths that yields the fruit of sanctified character.”¹ If this is so—and I believe it is—then Christians today need more and more resources that help us do this, that take us right to the water of the living well and bid us drink deeply. We need more and more resources that show us the gospel in its multitudinous glory. This is what we need, now and ever!

This is why I am grateful for the growing gospel-centered body of literary work in evangelicalism, and why I am grateful for Jeff Medders’s contribution to it. In his preaching and pastoral ministry, and from the public platform this ministry has afforded him, Jeff has proven he understands not just the truth of the gospel but the *power* of the gospel as well. He knows that the finished work of Christ is a deep well, beautiful and satisfying and eternally sufficient. Page by page and day by day, his book will give you nothing to drink here but the gospel’s living water. In these pages, if you have the eyes to see them, are revealed the things into which even angels long to look (1 Peter 1:12).

Jared C. Wilson
Pastor, Middletown Springs Community Church
Middletown Springs, Vermont
Author, *Gospel Wakefulness* and *Gospel Deeps*

1. Maurice Roberts, “O the Depth!” *The Banner of Truth*, July 1990, 2. Quoted in Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1991), 51.

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Someone pinch me. I can't believe I'm an author. While my name stands alone as the author, lots of people were a part of making this happen. A big thanks to Chad Rippy and Lawson Flowers. A massive "Thank you!" to Russell Moore, Douglas Wilson, Owen Strachan, and Jimmy Needham for their endorsements. To all of the contributors in the introduction: Thank you! And I couldn't have written this book without the help, support, correction, and encouragement of the following people:

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Brandon Smith. Our friendship is one of Googled Providence. I'm thankful for the many opportunities you've given me to write. You've been so encouraging—too encouraging! You are way gracious with your editing chops. "A gracious editor, who can find?" You, buddy. You.

Natalie. You are my rare jewel. Your love, support, and encouragement keep me going in all of life. Writing, schmiting—the Lord has used you to make me a better man, a more faithful follower of Jesus, and an obsessor of grace. Love you, babe.

Jesus. You are my King, my great God and Savior. You, literally, are my way, truth, and life. I'm so overwhelmed by your grace. Your love for a complete idiot like me is astounding. You are incredible. I love you and your church. I hope this book glorifies you and encourages the saints at large. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The best way to enjoy *Gospel Formed* is to read one chapter a day. Read more than one if you like—that’s cool; don’t mind me. Each chapter stands alone but is part of the journey; you are holding expository mutterings that will take you through your worship, community, mission, and identity in Jesus. They shouldn’t take long to read—I wrote them to be quick bursts of gospel truth. The introduction, “Gospel Primer,” is the longest and by far the most important chapter.

As you read *Gospel Formed*, please do the following for me (and for yourself):

- Read the Bible verse at the top of the page. Don’t skip or skim it. It frames what was written and is more helpful than anything I wrote. The goal is to understand, love, and honor God by his Word more and more.
- Read the Bible verses in the notes. There are a lot of them. God’s Word is mega-important; take your time and stew in it.
- Read the Bible verse at the end of the chapter. Get the picture? I hope you’ll grow in God’s Word.
- Pray at the end of each reading. This book is about growing in Christlikeness and drawing near to God, not merely enjoying a parade of gospel-centered jargon. So whatever you do, draw near to God.

Above all, worship Jesus. Make much of Jesus. It’s all about him.

INTRODUCTION

Gospel Primer

*Now to him who is able to strengthen you according
to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ . . .*

ROMANS 16:25

The secret to Christian growth is no secret. It's Christ. The cat is out of the bag. This book is an attempt to follow that cat—the Lion of Judah.

Every Christian wants to grow and mature in his or her faith, but sometimes we can't get any traction. We spin our wheels, give up, and fall back into the proverbial La-Z-Boy of the Christian life. I've been there, and since you are reading this, I'll bet you have too. Surely there is more. Right? Of course there is, and it's simple and jaw-dropping. It sounds too good to be true.

The good news for Christian growth is the Good News. The very truth that saved you is the same truth that sanctifies you, grows you, forms you. You grow not by a new method or revelation but by the old, old story. You don't need new tricks and tactics but the truth of Jesus, his person, and his work—the gospel.

We grow by the gospel. We grow in the gospel. We grow with the gospel.¹ Gospel-centeredness is where we need to live. We need a constant reformation under the gospel of grace.

Jesus died in the place of sinners to grant forgiveness, cleansing,

1. "Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth" (Col. 1:5–6).

renewal, justification, hope, freedom, and the power to change through his promised Holy Spirit.² We don't move on from Jesus. We don't graduate from the gospel. Moving toward gospel-centered living means we never move on from the gospel; rather, its force moves further into our heart. In the long run, devotionals, accountability groups, books, and sermons won't change us—if the gospel is missing. It is the very message of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit that changes us.

We need the prescription-strength “preaching of Jesus Christ.” In Romans 16:25, the apostle Paul is clear: it's the gospel that makes us strong. Saints require the continual reminder, encouragement, and proclamation of the person and work of Jesus for sinners.

So, Christian—slow down. For real. I hope this entire book helps you to quit laboring in the self-serving salt mines of sanctification and to leap in love for your Lord because of his great love for you. George Müller (1805–1898), faithful pastor, prolific man of prayer, and founder of orphanages in England, recounting his conversion, helps us when he says,

Apprehending in some measure the love of Jesus for my soul, I was constrained to love Him in return. What all the exhortations and precepts of my father and others could not effect; what all my own resolutions

2. *Forgiveness*: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28). *Cleansing*: “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb. 10:22). *Renewal*: “[God] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). *Justification*: “[Jesus] was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). *Hope*: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope . . .” (1 Tim. 1:1). *Freedom*: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1). *Power to change*: “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16).

could not bring about, even to renounce a life of sin and profligacy: I was enabled to do, constrained by the love of Jesus. The individual who desires to have his sin forgiven, must seek it through the blood of Jesus. The individual who desires to get power over sin, must likewise seek it through the blood of Jesus.³

The love of Jesus constrains us, drives us, moves us, changes us, forms and reforms us. I believe with all my heart that when you start leaping because of his love, you'll be leaving sin behind and clinging to your Savior. *That's* Christian growth. My prayer for you is that you will, as my friend Jared Wilson says, go from "Woe is me!" to "Whoa is God!"

The Gospel

Before we go on, take some time, right now, and *re*-remember the gospel. Now is the time to worship.

Jesus. He isn't Diet God, JV God, or God Jr. He is very God of very God, eternal, all-powerful, Creator and Sustainer.⁴ A man from heaven, who is also God from Galilee, died in your place, for your sins, he rose from the dead, and Jesus is very much alive today. He gave you a new life. He justified you. He redeemed you. He cleansed you. He filled you with the Spirit. He adopted you. He loves you. He empowers you. He makes you more than a conqueror. He will never leave you, lose you, or quit loving you.⁵

Is your soul stirring yet?

Let this truth weigh in: You are fully accepted before God, not because of anything you do or don't do but because of everything

3. Roger Steer, *George Müller: Delighted in God* (Fearn, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2012), 18.

4. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God" (John 1:1–2).

5. Dive into Romans 8 to find all of these great truths.

Jesus did and *is doing* for you right now. God loves you when you are growing in leaps and bounds, and he loves you when you've blown it. Gospel-centered Christians base their hope and joy on the stellar performance of Christ, not their own—or their lack thereof.

To move toward gospel-centeredness means you need to relentlessly rehearse the truths, or *glories*, of the gospel. Remind yourself that apart from Jesus, you can't do a single thing.⁶ Soak your heart and mind in the truth that “Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20 NLT).

The apostle Paul was convinced that the gospel, the preaching of Jesus, is exactly what you need. Everything else is a placebo. Accept no competitors. Knockoffs will not do. You need the tried-and-true message of God's glory shining at Calvary.

What Is Gospel-Centeredness?

If gospel-centeredness is where we are headed, then what in the world is it? So you don't only take my word for it, I emailed a few top scholars, writers, thinkers, and pastors and asked what they think gospel-centeredness is. Here's what they offered.

Jerry Bridges, author of many gospel-saturated books:

Being gospel-centered means relying on the shed blood and righteous life of Jesus for our standing and acceptance with God. It means that we seek to obey and serve God out of gratitude for what he has done rather than obeying and serving in an effort to earn his acceptance.

Matt Chandler, pastor, author, and president of Acts 29 Network:

Being gospel-centered is being empowered by the Holy Spirit not only to understand the robust nature

6. “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

of the gospel but also to walk in the implications of it in every area of our lives—to repeatedly be shaped and defined by our identity in Christ, and to build rhythms and structures at home and church that support marveling, cherishing, and being formed by the gospel message.

Dr. Jim Hamilton of Southern Seminary and author of the pyrotechnically brilliant biblical theology *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*:

To be gospel-centered is to believe in the one who, though he was rich, became poor for our sake, so that by his poverty we might be rich.⁷ Gospel-centeredness is believing in him and then following him in the impoverishing of ourselves for the enrichment of others in Christ.

Sam Storms, pastor and author:

To be gospel-centered begins with the reality that the gospel is not simply the entry point into the Christian life but also the foundation and force that shapes all we do as followers of Jesus, both in our daily lives and in our experience as the corporate body of Christ.

The gospel is the good news of what God has graciously done in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to satisfy his own wrath and secure the forgiveness of sins and perfect righteousness for all who trust in Jesus by faith alone. The gospel informs, controls, and energizes all we do, from the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and

7. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

marriage to work, our use of money, speech, parenting, mission, and all aspects of ministry in the local church and beyond.

Tim Challies, überblogger and pastor:

To be gospel-centered is to live your life with the constant awareness that the gospel changes everything. It is to ask in every situation, What difference does the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ make here and now?

Douglas Wilson, pastor and prolific author:

I believe in a gospel-centeredness that extends out to the circumference of all things. The gospel is not simply a password for getting into heaven. The gospel is a true explanation of the world.

Dr. Russell Moore, brilliant author and president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention:

Gospel-centrality means that any aspect of life is viewed in its cosmic context, in which God is “summing up” all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10–11). All of creation is seen in that full context, and connections are made between everything that is and the kingdom purposes for which it was called into being. Every passage of Scripture is interpreted in light of the story of Jesus, as is every passage of a believer’s unfolding life story.

Owen Strachan, author, professor, and president of the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood:

The gospel-centered life is one that is driven by the knowledge that God has redeemed me, a sinner,

through the vicarious death and victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Spirit brings this truth to mind daily, and this daily meditation transforms my life, allowing me to experience power over sin in every area such that I give maximal glory to God as his re-created image-bearer.

Tullian Tchividjian, pastor and author of many grace-laden books:

The gospel is God's good-news announcement that Jesus has done for sinners what sinners could never do for themselves. The gospel doxologically declares that because of Christ's finished work for you, you already have all the justification, approval, security, love, worth, meaning, and rescue you long for and look for in a thousand different people and places smaller than Jesus.

The gospel broadcasts the liberating truth that God relates to us based on Jesus' work for us, not our work for him; Jesus' performance for us, not our performance for him. Because Jesus came to secure for us what we could never secure for ourselves, life doesn't have to be a tireless effort to justify ourselves. He came to rescue us from the slavish need to be right, rewarded, regarded, and respected. He came to relieve us of the burden we inherently feel to "get it done." The gospel announces that it's not on me to ensure that the ultimate verdict on my life is pass and not fail.

I hope you are getting the picture. The risen Christ shapes our lives. Gospel-formed people are Jesus-centered people. Here is my attempt to wrestle down a definition using what I like to call a gospel-formed grid.

A Gospel-Formed Grid

Gospel-centeredness means that the person and work of Jesus is the central *message* in all things; he is our *model* for all of life and ministry; the Son of God is our *motivation* in obedience to God's Word; and Jesus of Nazareth is the *means* to carry out all that God commands.

The gospel is a word with many words. It's a message, a proclamation of truth. Jesus is not a side message to the Christian: he is *the* Message, *the* Truth, and *the* Life. It's all about Jesus.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is where we find out who we are as people in Christ Jesus. We start with the gospel message because the gospel of the kingdom informs us how we, as citizens, are to live. We learn our identity from earth-shattering, veil-tearing truths from that place called the Skull—ground zero of the gospel.⁸

While our identity matters, it only matters if we know Jesus' identity—because we are *in Christ*. If we don't think rightly about Jesus, we won't think rightly about ourselves. Jesus is our friend and our Lord. He is the cosmic King, and he's closer than our skin. We ought to fear him, but we should never be afraid of him. The gospel is meant to humble us. And part of the gospel is the glory due Jesus. The glory of Christ needs to take hearts and minds hostage. Jesus is to be exalted over all things in our lives. We are not the ones who have been given a name at which every knee will bow (Phil. 2:9–11).

The person and work of Jesus fuels gospel-formed lives. No one can hear too often that Jesus is our great God and Savior, he has made us his people, and he is purifying us for his glory and our good (Titus 2:13–14). Jesus is the rocket fuel of the Christian experience, of life “in Christ.” And he's the destination. We will be with him forever, and we are being formed into his image. I'm convinced, more and more, that we need the teaching of Jesus Christ brought to

8. “And he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them” (John 19:17–18).

our weak and trembling hearts. Paul, at the end of Romans, writes, “Now to him who is able to *strengthen* you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ . . .” (Rom. 16:25, italics mine). God himself makes us strong. He does the strengthening. But what does God use? He uses the message of Jesus, the gospel of grace, to transform us. And this is available to Christians everywhere. No seminary credentials needed. No spiritual pedigree required. Christ is available to us all. And he is who we need.

I once was privy to a conversation I’ll never forget. Over a tasty lunch, a fellow clergyman confessed his pain and heartache to pastor, scholar, and author Ray Ortlund. I was on the edge of my seat to hear Ray’s response. His steady, hope-filled eyes looked into the other man’s eyes, and softly and firmly he said, “Brother, Jesus loves you.”

Powerful. We need more of that. I need more of that.

While *message* focuses on right thinking, *motivation* hones in on right doing for the right reasons. Jesus shapes what we do and *why* we do it. The gospel compels us to seek and grant forgiveness with one another *as God in Christ* forgave us (Eph. 4:32). The gospel reveals to us that we are no longer our own; we belong to Jesus. Now we make it our aim to honor and please him (1 Cor. 6:20; 2 Cor. 5:9). The glories of Calvary ignite in Christians a mad dash away from sin, but not simply to avoid getting in trouble—also to enjoy God and glorify Jesus forever.

I’ve heard Christians say (and I know I’ve said it before too), “I’m waiting to be freed/released/saved from _____.” Is that truly biblical? I think the satanic forces conjured up that formula and have been peddling it in accountability groups since the nineties. Christians are not waiting to be freed from sin. Here’s why: a man from Galilee once screamed, “It is finished!”

Our brother Paul writes:

We know that our old self was crucified with him
in order that the body of sin might be brought to

nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. (Rom. 6:6–14)

So why should we flee sin? We've been brought from death to life. Why won't sin bully us any longer? We're under grace. The chains don't need re-breaking. We need renewed minds (Rom. 12:1–2) and re-fixated eyes on our encouraging Christ (Heb. 12:1–2). The gospel motivates us to pursue holiness because we are free, and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom (2 Cor. 3:17).

Jesus isn't only about what we shouldn't do; he is also about us moving into the things we should do. The gospel motivates us to flee sin—yes and amen!—and the work of Jesus invites us toward the good works that Jesus has prepared for us to walk in (Eph. 2:10). What was Jesus' motivation in his life and ministry? "Hallowed be your name." What is ours? "Hallowed be your name." The Holy Spirit gifts us for good works so that "God may be glorified through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 4:10–11).

If the gospel is our message and our motivation for obedience, it is also our *model*. Here we see that Jesus models for us the right attitudes, tones, and heart-posture in all of life. The gospel gives the reason (motivation) and the rhythm (model).

How should a husband and wife relate? In accordance with the model God provides in the gospel: Jesus and his church (Eph. 5:22–33). All Christian virtue is modeled and made known to us by the Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. If we want to be more loving, humble, and selfless—there is nowhere better to look than the foot-washing, ever-patient, always-compassionate, ultra-caring Jesus Christ who loved us sinners at the cross (John 15:13).

Up to this point, everything sounds all fine and dandy, but a question looms: “How am I *really* going to change? How can I do all this? I fail often. I struggle. I want to change and grow, but my goodness—this seems beyond me. I want a gospel-formed life. I want my life to be all about Jesus, but I don’t even know where to start.”

Brothers and sisters, let me encourage you: You are right—you cannot do this. None of us can. This kind of life is way beyond our horsepower. But the good news is that it isn’t beyond Jesus. It *is* Jesus. We cannot forget our gospel *means*: the One who now lives in us (Gal. 2:20). The means, muscle, capacity, and know-how of the Christian life lie not in our personal sufficiency but in Jesus. And if we are in Christ and Christ is in us, then the power for the Christian life is now *in* us. The Holy Spirit of God is rumbling through our lives—and he will bear fruit, he will help us cry out, “Abba!” We unspectacular Christians work in concert with the glorious Spirit of the Christ (Phil. 2:12–13). We are totally at the mercy of our merciful Lord. Is there a better place to be?

A gospel-formed life has Jesus as our message, our motivation, our model, and our means. All of this matters because the worship of Jesus is the goal of the gospel.

Worship Is the Aim

My goal for *Gospel Formed* is to serve you in the worship of God. Some of the chapters will be punchy, and some of what you read will be irritating, because truth is known for going against the grain. If you grew up in the Bible Belt (like me), there are lots of grains that need some going against. Grace does that.

The ultimate aim of this little book is to crank your worship of Jesus up to eleven. Only God can do this in you, and only the glories of his gospel are able to ignite our hearts to worship in spirit and in truth, not just words. Our Christian culture's gospel-centered jive is in danger of being a dance with no soul or a Quick-E-Mart chemical cake passed off as Aunt Betty's homemade Chocolate Cardiac Hero: a complete fake. Being gospel-centered in language and theology isn't enough. Pharisees can yack away with hyphenated gospel-talk, but we are after the *spirit and truth* of gospel-centeredness: worship.

My deep prayer over this project is that these expository mutterings would stir our hearts to rejoice over our great God and King, our Lion and Lamb, our Savior and Friend. Let's worship Jesus. There is a reason why we ought to beat the gospel-centered drum again and again, and then some more. The Bible gives us ample motivation to worship Jesus. It's called the gospel.

We Worship Jesus Because . . .

We worship Jesus because "he is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb. 1:3).

We harp on the gospel because "for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

Our hope is wrapped up in the truth that "he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the

chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Isa. 53:5).

We center our lives on Jesus because “we know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him” (Rom. 6:9).

We sing, sacrifice, and follow Jesus because “there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).

We go on gospel mission because “the saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15).

We have confidence in life and death because of Jesus, “who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (Gal. 1:4–5).

We walk with joy and no condemnation because “he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).

We know we are saved because “he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:12).

Jesus is our great reward and love because “in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7).

And lastly, *we are gospel-centered because* “though he was in the form of God, 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. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and

every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:6–11).

That’s why we worship Jesus! It’s all about Jesus.

Here is my prayer for you (and I hope you’ll pray it too): that over the course of these pages, you’ll be drawn deeper into the treasure trove of the gospel and be immersed in the greatness of Christ—his awesomeness and his love. We can’t comprehend the magnitude of grace unless God guides us into it (Eph. 3:16–19). The Puritan theologian Thomas Manton was right in saying, “The gospel is God’s riddle, which none but himself can expound. Beg the Spirit of revelation; you cannot have a knowledge of it without a revelation from Christ.”⁹ We need the Spirit of Jesus in order to behold Jesus. He can do that work in us. Today, even. Is this too much to ask of our lavish God? No way. Let’s pray that he will do more than we could even ask, think, or imagine.¹⁰

Throughout the rest of this book, I hope we can look at the gospel and our lives, where the bloody cross meets the road we travel. Since the gospel is our message, model, motivation, and means, the gospel informs and shapes our worship, identity, community, and mission. In two foundational New Testament passages—the Great Commission in Matthew 28, and Acts chapter 1—we see examples of how the crucified and risen Jesus brings this about (*italics mine* in the following):

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they *worshipped him*, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore

9. Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, vol. 11 (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1873), 134.

10. “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us . . .” (Eph. 3:20).

and *make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:16–20)

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and *you will be my witnesses* in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

The disciples *worship* the risen Jesus. Jesus establishes them as a *community*—the eleven disciples are together in following Jesus and in teaching others how to follow Jesus because Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). The Lord then gives them a new *identity*: witnesses. And their *mission* is to take the name of Jesus worldwide. Worship, identity, community, and mission are all rooted in the gospel of the kingdom.

As you dive into this book, I hope to be a mere tour guide. We’ll look at a text and I’ll make some comments, hopefully directing your gaze to our crucified King, and if I do my job, you’ll forget I’m even here. We’ll look at gospel worship, our gospel identity, the meaning of gospel community, and our charge for the gospel mission.

Now let’s plumb the depths of the wall-to-wall glories of the gospel together. And let’s always, only, and totally worship our King of kings.

Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

PART ONE

The Gospel Starting Block

The gospel, Jesus' death and resurrection for our sins, is our starting block and our anchor and our wings.

The gospel is our center, our core, our fuel. It's our framework for understanding reality.

CHAPTER 1

The Main Thing

*I decided to know nothing among you except
Jesus Christ and him crucified.*

1 CORINTHIANS 2:2

Have you ever heard of a pew rat? It's a kid-like creature that grew up on SunnyD and the Goldfish cracker crumbs found in the church carpet.

For as long as I can remember, I've been around a church. If our local church's doors were open, my family was there. I knew the blueprints of the church like I knew the maze on the back of my cereal box. Every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night, in a large room with an illuminated cross looming behind the preacher, I sat there, week after week. I was a pew rat.

Yet even with exponential hours of exposure to the Bible, a cross, a baptistery, and ice-cream socials in the fellowship hall—even after countless sermons and Sunday school lessons—I totally missed what Christianity is all about.

Is that you too? Or maybe you've never set foot in a church, or you are new to this Christianity thing, or you've been a Christian for some time but you've gotten sick of all the glitz, glam, frills, and hoopla. I'm with you. And I hope you won't be too shocked by what you are about to read. Though maybe you should be. I was when I first read it. I still feel the jolt.

One truth in the Bible is more important than the rest. I love the Bible and all its truths. And I believe every single word is inspired by

God and important, even the ones in the second half of the book of Numbers. But there is *one* truth of utmost importance. The others aren't trivial—by no means!—but this one truth is a big one, and I believe it with all my heart. Why? Because the apostle Paul said so. If he told me to jump off a bridge, I'd do it.

In everything Paul wrote—more than half of the New Testament letters are his—he says the good *news* is the front-page headline. “For I delivered to you as of *first importance* what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scrip-

The gospel is the center of the Bible, and it ought to be the center of our lives, homes, churches, ministries, spiritual disciplines, songs, parenting, marriages, jobs – everything.

tures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3–4, italics mine).

God says the gospel is the most important truth in his word. “First importance” (or “most important,” NLT), means that the gospel is the leading truth of the Bible; it's at the head of the pack, the alpha truth, and all other biblical truths fall in line behind it. The gospel is the mama duck in our gaggle of doctrine. She leads, she guides, and all other doctrine looks to her, follows her, and keeps in step with her. To live a Christian life is to live “in step with the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14) and to “let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1:27). The Christian life is formed by the glories of the gospel—it's patterned and powered by the gospel of grace in all of life, for the rest of life.

The gospel is the center of the Bible, and it ought to be the center of our lives, homes, churches, ministries, spiritual disciplines, songs, parenting, marriages, jobs—*everything*.

The focal point of the Christian life is one cross and one empty

tomb. Without the gospel, we lack the proper understanding of any doctrine, and especially a robust knowing of God himself. “The gospel,” Michael Bird, author and systematic theologian, says, “is the nexus into the reality of the God who has revealed himself.”¹ If we want to know the glory of God, his high-definition glory is found in the gospel of Jesus—for Jesus makes God known (John 1:18). The cross is our logo. It’s the power of our lives, because Christ is alive in us.² Husbands and wives pattern their marriage after the gospel (Eph. 5:22–33). Christian interaction is gospel-driven.³ Humility is possible for us proud people because of Jesus at work in us (Phil. 2:1–11).⁴ The gospel is the message of the church.⁵ Christians are made strong because of the gospel.⁶ Bird is right: “We need a gospel-driven theology in order to yield a gospel-soaked piety and a gospel-acting church.”⁷

It’s all gospel. All the time. A gospel party don’t stop.

The gospel, the news of the eternal Son of God dying in our place for our sins, is not only the center of the Bible; it’s also the center of history. In God’s gospel, he is reconciling all things unto himself for the praise of his glory.⁸ Nothing compares to the glory

1. Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 41.

2. “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

3. “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32).

4. “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5).

5. “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28).

6. “Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages” (Rom. 16:25).

7. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 41.

8. “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all

of the gospel in giving glory to God—and God will never get tired of the gospel; it’s the soundtrack of the heavenly places (Rev. 5:1–14). The angels, who have seen things we can’t even fathom, looked at the bloody cross and the empty tomb with sheer excitement. Peter tells us,

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Peter 1:10–12)

Do you long to look into the gospel? When you hear the gospel preached, do you perk up? I can relate to being bored by a lecture on some theological abstraction from a land far, far away, but not by the gospel; the wildness of the gospel vaporizes yawning and boredom. There is a shock-and-awe that comes with the gospel. God loves the gospel. The angels are giddy over it. If you don’t quite get the fireworks of the gospel, preach the gospel to yourself. Like Paul prayed for the Ephesians, pray

that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of

wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:7–10).

revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places. (Eph. 1:17–20)

Pray that the main thing will be *your* main thing. Pray to be gospel-centered, because you know how easy it is to get off-kilter. There's more than one way to skin a faith.

It doesn't take long to forget the gospel.

As D.A. Carson noted, "one generation believes the gospel, the next assumes it, and the following generation denies it."⁹

We must strive to make the good news the core message we put forth, the chief model we emulate, the leading motivation in obedience, and the proprietary means of growth in the Christian life. Anything else falls dreadfully, woefully short.

Anything else falls dreadfully, woefully short.

"Keep the main thing, the main thing." I've heard a gazillion people say that—and they're right.¹⁰ We must labor to keep the main thing, the main thing. Let the main thing be the subject of your life, not various theologies, sanctifi-cannots,¹¹ translation wars, musical styles, or whatever else you want to obsess over. Those are fine discussions, but they make a poor center.

There's more than one way to skin a faith. It doesn't take long to forget the gospel.

9. D.A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 26–27.

10. It's possible Stephen Covey (*First Things First*, 1994) said it first.

11. Sanctification is more than hammering on what we cannot and should not do—it's also doing good works, encouraging others, etc.

Yet while the gospel is the main thing, don't forget about those other things. One of the dangers of being gospel-centered is neglecting what surrounds the center. You can't have a true center without surroundings. Gospel-centered ministries, books, and blogs are great at not missing the forest for the trees, the metanarrative of God's redemptive grace from cover to cover, but don't forget the trees for the forest. We need to be both forest and bark enthusiasts. The Bible is a holistic ecosystem; all of its verses live one off of another. That's why gospel-saturated Christians will read the book of Leviticus—because it's a part of what God has given us, which can make us wise to his saving work.¹² Gospel-centrality is an attempt to make the gospel the focal point, not to neglect everything else in the circle.

In 1 Corinthians 2:2, Paul wanted to make the gospel known among the Corinthians—and nothing else: “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” But if you are familiar with the Corinthian letters, then you know that Paul taught more subjects—way more—than the gospel alone. How does this align with gospel-centeredness? Paul taught not in *exclusion* to the gospel but in *relation* to the gospel; not in *addition* to the gospel but as an *explanation* from the gospel. All Christian teaching should be an exposition of the gospel. Everything Paul teaches about marriage, spiritual gifts, the Trinity, communion, church discipline, love, idolatry, and holiness either springs from the truth of the gospel or comes back around to it. Everything connects to the gospel. But while the glorious news of Jesus is of first importance, it is not of only importance.

If we don't talk about the pursuit of holiness—and actually

12. “From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15).

pursue it—then we aren't centered on the gospel.¹³ We can't be gospel-centered and ignore inerrancy, eternal torment in hell, the complementary nature of manhood and womanhood, biblical church membership, and church discipline. Gospel-centrality is a holistic approach to the Christian life, and it doesn't breed apathy toward the rest of the Bible; if anything, it ignites a passion for all that the Bible says, because it's all about Jesus.¹⁴

It's not anti-gospel-centered to discuss the end times, but it is if you *never* do. It's in the Bible. Mull over it. Paul even says that end-times doctrine is meant to encourage your heart,¹⁵ not elevate its beats per minute. View everything in relation to the gospel; teach and be taught the *whole* counsel of God. Don't dismiss other important truths—just keep the gospel as the blazing center of your theological solar system. If you are going to occupy anything, sit in the glories of the gospel—the death of Jesus in the place of sinners, and his rising again to give new life to all who believe. Jesus came to save sinners—glory to God!¹⁶ Which is the point of the

**View everything in
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whole counsel of God.**

13. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works" (Titus 2:11–14)

14. "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me" (John 5:39). "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

15. "Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore *encourage* one another with these words" (1 Thess. 4:17–18).

16. "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1 Tim. 1:15).

gospel: God being glorified. The gospel is not the endgame of the gospel; God is.

Jesus' work on the cross gave us life, peace, community, forgiveness—he lavishes his people with good things. And the prime lavishness, the reward of rewards, is God himself. Isn't that why Jesus tore the veil? "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18).

Salvation is only salvation because God is the reward. Eternal life is joyous and good because it is with the Eternal One. Heaven isn't heavenly because of its location; God's glorious enjoyableness is what makes heaven, heaven. His radiating presence is the zoning code for heaven. God makes all things awesome. God is the chief reward of the gospel, and all other gifts are from him. He is omnibenevolent. Every blessing we taste comes from God's kitchen, prepared by his hands, served up for us to enjoy. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). Like a master chef, he brings handcrafted delights for all the little former orphans, now beloved children he calls his own.

Gospel-centered Christians are God-enjoying, God-centered, Jesus-exalting, Spirit-loving, Bible-devouring Christians. We don't worship the gospel; we worship the God of the gospel. The gospel is God's act of turning scoundrels into saints, turning sin-seekers into people who now find their utmost satisfaction in God.

"God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:26). One day our bodies will fail. Our hearts will quit on us. And all of our stuff will be worthless. Everything we once could buy and enjoy, touch, taste, shoot, grill, read, and watch will be shelved, sold, or trashed. After our lungs deflate, there will be only one thing that remains for us—the Three in One.

God is the overriding and underwriting joy of gospel-soaked saints. The gospel gives what moth and rust—and death—cannot destroy. We get God.

Be engrossed by grace. Be engulfed in grace. Nothing deserves our obsession like the gospel. Keep it. Guard it. Enjoy it. Behold your God.

May you, by all means necessary, keep the main thing, the main thing.

*Far be it from me to boast except in the cross
of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has
been crucified to me, and I to the world.*

GALATIANS 6:14