

Which Gospel?

Isn't good news amazing? There are few greater feelings in the world than hearing good news. Your favorite team won! You got the job! You got the promotion! She said "Yes!" The biopsy came back negative. The sermon is only 5 minutes today! Well, some things are too good to be true. Good news can lower your blood pressure, lower your stress and be an occasion to celebrate!

I've experienced good news many times. Shortly after my wife and I got married, we moved to Kentucky, where I went to seminary. Since I was in school, my wife worked full time to support us. It was a great job and she worked there the entire four years. A few months before I was going ready to graduate, we got the news that she was getting laid off and it was great news! How? Well, I'm glad you asked.

There was a lot to do at the time, so they said, "You're getting laid off, but stay as long as you'd like." So, she was able to stay two more months until I graduated, when we moved to Iowa. She got a six-week severance package and she was vested in some stock options she won from a company-wide award that ended up being worth about \$10,000. It was the best layoff ever—and really good news for us.

Now, the reason I bring this up is because *Easter is all about good news*. You've probably heard the word "gospel" before. It's not just a religious word. It's a word we use

in everyday language. You might hear someone say, “Don’t take this as the gospel, but I heard Jim and Sally are having a baby! So, we use it to mean a reliable truth. Gospel is also a type of music. But the word itself actually means “good news.”

Well, I believe the best good news we all need is good news that’s been here all along, but our culture has largely forgotten it. If you’ll allow me, I’d like to explain. Turn with me to the book of 1 Corinthians, chapter 15. (p 787)

The book of 1 Corinthians is the first of a number of letters the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth in the middle of the Roman Empire. He’s trying to encourage the church to live right and come together around their common purpose. The passage that we’re about to walk through is Paul’s explanation of the gospel—the good news of Jesus. And if it’s true, then I think you’ll find that it’s good news for all of us.

Verse 1, **“Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I have preached to you...”**

Now, many people don’t realize that this is a subversive statement from Paul. You see, the word “gospel” wasn’t a Christian, or even a religious word. Its roots come from the ancient Roman Empire. The Greek word is “*euangelion*.”

It wasn’t used much in ancient Greek, but it was used in some pretty significant circumstances. For instance, when Octavian became Rome’s first Emperor, taking the

name Caesar Augustus, a message went out through the Empire that said, “Fate has given us Augustus as our savior to end war and create order everywhere. It says *“the birthday of the god [Augustus] was the beginning for the world of the good news [euangelion] that have come to men...”* In other words, good news, the god’s gift to humanity has come!

The fact is that Rome had been through some tough times and they needed a leader. Augustus came to power in 27 BC and unified the Empire. He’s credited with ushering in a 200-year time of peace and prosperity for Rome called the Pax Romana. His reign was good news—euangelion. That was Paul co-opted to talk about Jesus.

But maybe you’ve learned this by now; *good news for some isn’t always good news for everyone*. For instance, when my wife was laid off from her position, she stayed on for a few month because she worked in human resources, and had to spend those months processing the layoffs of dozens of other employees.

The Pax Romana was good news for some, but the “peace” was maintained by an oppressive military force. If you were poor or a non-citizen—the Pax Romana wasn’t very good news. It was good news for the rich and well connected. The good news of Caesar wasn’t good news for everyone, but the propaganda machine did a great job of convincing people they were well-off.

Well, the pull of culture is strong and the people in the church of Corinth were immersed in that world and susceptible to its messages. So, when Paul saw his people

starting to buy in to the gospel of Caesar, he makes a direct attack, *“Let me remind you of the real good news that you believed and is good news for everyone.”*

Then he continues in verse 3. This is the gospel he preached. **“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance:”** This is the priority list, **“that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...”**

Let’s stop there a minute. The guts of the gospel message is that “Christ died for our sins, was buried, but was raised on the third day.” But notice that twice he repeats the phrase *“According to the Scriptures.”* It’s important to see this, because we have a habit of detaching the gospel of Jesus from the story that brought it about and making it about our personal happiness or just about going to heaven when we die. But what he’s getting at is that the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection—is not a random event disconnected from history, but it’s part of a bigger story—the story we find in the Bible.

Historians tell us that the Jews were unique in how they viewed history. Pagan religions of the day believed that history is cyclical. If you’ve ever seen the Lion King, there’s a song called “The Circle of Life” that’s about this endless cycle of birth and rebirth that is the same thing over and over only with different actors. There is no progress. What happened before will be repeated. The sun will go up in the morning and

down in the evening. The seasons come and go. There's the cycle of birth and death. There's no progress or purpose, just the cycle repeating itself over and over.

But the Biblical story is the first story that had a vision for progress. It's a story that has a beginning and an end. The story goes all the way back to the book of Genesis that tell us the universe is not just a great cosmic accident, but that it was the act of a loving creator. It tells us that humans, male and female, were created in God's image, which means we have been given the responsibility to care for his creation and to work for human flourishing. People today assume that life has meaning, but when they do that, they don't realize that they smuggle that idea in from the Biblical story.

But that story is also a story of rebellion—that we rejected our responsibility because we wanted to act as our own gods, to create our own purpose and determine for ourselves what's right and wrong. And since that time evil, injustice and death control the world. But long ago, God made a promise that he would someday make the world right again. The story Scripture tells us is that the death and resurrection of Jesus is somehow, God's answer that gives purpose and meaning to life.

Verse 5, **“he appeared to Cephas and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.”** [that's a euphemism for death] **“Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also,**

as to one abnormally born.” In other words, the claim of the Bible is not that this is some kind of Jesus myth, or simply an inspirational story, but it’s real and it’s true and when Paul wrote this, there were 500 people around that could tell you.

Back to the passage: Paul then goes into a personal digression for a couple of verses, but then in verse 12 he addresses a debate that was happening at the time. He writes, **“But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?”** Now we tend to think that ancient people were naïve—that they believed in magic and that people regularly rise from the dead. But even at that time, people knew that when someone dies, they stay dead. In fact, the Romans didn’t generally believe in life after death. Even many Jews didn’t believe in life after death and the belief seemed to be spreading in the church. Today, there are even some who say it’s not really important that Jesus was raised. What’s important that it’s a noble lie that gives people hope. But Paul says that belief in resurrection is an indispensable part of the story of Jesus. And he tells us why starting in verse 13...

“If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised then Christ has not been raised either. And if

Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.”

Here's where we get to the heart of it. He says that if you don't believe in the Resurrection of Jesus then there's no reason why you should believe that your loved ones who have passed away are doing anything more than decomposing. It might make us feel better at funerals to say grandma is in a better place, but if Jesus wasn't raised from the dead, then there's no proof. It's just a case of wishful thinking.

And he adds in verse 19, **“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”** Let me paraphrase...if Christ was not raised from the dead and there's nothing beyond this life, then Christians are a bunch of pathetic losers who have wasted their lives. That's what you call sliding all your chips to the middle of the table!

Now, Paul isn't doing this just to be provocative or to ruffle people's feathers. He's doing it out of a deep and sincere belief that when people buy into the gospel of Caesar that's not only a false gospel, but it's one that will draw them into the endless, monotonous cycle of meaninglessness. He writes it because when he encountered the risen Jesus personally, he saw that his life was going somewhere and even if he wasn't on the good side of the Roman Imperial machine—which he wasn't—he was living for a purpose that extended beyond the grave. His message to the Corinthians is to warn them

not to buy-in to these alternative gospels that are unworthy of beings made in God's image who were made for eternity. And the reason they can reject the other gospel is because Jesus rose from the dead.

Now, I believe Paul's message to the Corinthians all those years ago is just as relevant for us today as it was for the people back then and maybe even more because the number of gospels we're tempted to believe has only expanded.

For instance, a prominent one in our day is the Gospel of Science and Technology. It tells us that the universe isn't the product of any creative mind. This gospel has many evangelists that promise that applying science and creating the right technology, we can save the world. The experimental psychologist, Steven Pinker—a really smart and nice, amiable guy just released a book called *"Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason Science and Human Progress,"* where he makes the case that humans have never had it so good. In fact, he's puzzled about why anyone in the world would be unhappy.

Now, I don't want you to misunderstand. I'm all for science and technology. There's no doubt that the world is better in many ways than it's ever been. Infant mortality is low, life expectancy and quality of life is high. Opportunities for women and minorities continue to grow; and abject poverty around the world is becoming incredibly rare. Science and technology have accomplished some really good things. But it's also become another gospel. Watch this brilliant evangelist. [iPhone introduction video]

Did you see how people are hanging on his every word and responding the same way people would respond at an old-time revival? “This will change everything.” And it has. But not all technological innovation is good. As good as much of our technology is, more and more studies are also showing the other side of technology. For instance, in western nations, dominated by science and technology, stress related illness and the suicide rate continues to climb with many studies linking these rises with technology and social media use.

The technology that promised to make our lives better and bring us together has also given us more opportunities to exploit and bully each other and live out our vices without consequence. Russia has now tested a new missile that can reach anywhere in the world at greater than supersonic speed—science and technology at work.

Science is a great tool, but a terrible gospel. It’s a great tool, but even science needs a guiding story to give it purpose, because without that story, the story of science tells us that you aren’t special, you’re an accident and that someday, the universe will wind down, collapse on itself and there will be no one around to remember anything you’ve done. That’s good news! The Gospel of Science and Technology doesn’t satisfy.

Some people buy into the Gospel of Success and Accumulation. This gospel promises that you’ll find peace and fulfilment when you reach the pinnacle of your career or finally get that car or house you’ve always wanted. The problem is that enough is

never enough and we hear story after story of people who have achieved and accumulated only to find that it didn't satisfy like they thought it would.

If you get caught up in this gospel, it returns you to this circular thinking of the pagan world. You get on the hamster-wheel of getting up in the morning to make money so you can get home exhausted and fall into bed only to get up and do it again the next day and the next day and the next. And you will find some day you're lying on your death-bed, wondering what happened to your life. You can't take it with you.

Maybe the prevalent gospel today is the Gospel of Romance and Sex that tells us that if we just find our soul-mate, then we'll find joy unspeakable. Or maybe it's not even about finding a soul-mate, but when you're free to live out your sexual fantasies you'll be satisfied. It tells us if we deny ourselves we're repressed and if someone else denies us that we're oppressed.

But maybe you've moved on from that to the Gospel of Marriage and Family. You know random hookups aren't enough, but if you settle down and find someone to marry you and if you have kids and you raise them to be successful, then you'll finally reach it. But as good as marriage, family and kids are, they're not good gods. If you put your hope in your spouse, what happens if your spouse dies? If you find your purpose in your kids, where will you turn if they disappoint you or reject you?

Or maybe you don't believe any gospel at all and you've given in to a meaningless existence. There's no good news, so you retreat into the fantasy world of binge-watching Netflix or mindlessly scrolling through the internet. You see, there has to be more.

All of the gospels we're tempted to believe will give purpose to life are not adequate in themselves because someday they will end or you will come to the end of your life and you'll have to leave them behind. That's what Paul means when he wrote, **"If it's only for this life that we have hope in Christ, we are of all people to be pitied."**

But look at the good news in verse 20, **"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."** You might ask, "What does Christ being raised have to do with anything? Why do we have to resort to this religious stuff to find meaning and purpose?" Well, here's why.

When Paul calls Jesus' Resurrection the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep," he's using an agrarian term for the first of the harvest—the first apple, the first heads of grain, the first grapes of the harvest. When you see the first one come up, you know it's only a sign of things to come.

Jesus' Resurrection isn't just a theological abstraction, it's the sign and proof of things to come. His resurrection means that those who believe in him and live in his story will also experience the same kind of Resurrection. A new body in a new and redeemed

world. It's a chance to experience all the good things God intended for creation only without the evil, injustice and death.

If it's true that Jesus was raised from the dead, it means that what Jesus said and what Paul wrote is really true. It means the *whole story* is true and that history is going somewhere and this life *does* have purpose. It means there really is a loving God that, when you turn to him, is willing to forgive you no matter what you've done in the past. It means that *this* isn't all there is. It means that we don't have to be so desperate to succeed or make money or to get on top in this life because there is a life awaiting us that will far outweigh any pleasure get from money and outlast any technology we can devise. It means that we don't need to rely on sex or romance to be happy because there's a relationship that is far deeper and more intimate than just sex. It means that we don't have to fear death because even if your life is cut short it's nothing compared to eternity. Now *that*, it seems to me is really good news and you can believe it, not because of wishful thinking, but because Jesus really did rise from the grave.

So, what is the proper response to this gospel—it's simply to believe it. Not just intellectually. There are plenty of people who would say, "Yeah, I can buy into that." But belief for Jesus is that you begin to live your whole life like it's true. That get off the monotonous cycle of the other gospels, whether it's the new tech, the next dollar, the next sexual encounter or the relationship that will finally make you happy and trust Jesus,

his story, and his gospel and find forgiveness for your past, purpose for the present and hope for your eternal future. Which gospel have you been living for?

Some of you have been Christians a long time, but maybe today you've come to realize that although you say you believe this gospel of Jesus, you have actually been living another gospel. If you're in that category, I think you know what to do. Repent. Change how you live. Reconnect with the God who loves you and died for you.

There are some of you who are intrigued by this today. Maybe you see how gospel you're living won't ultimately satisfy or maybe you've already experienced the cycle of meaninglessness, but you're not quite ready to buy in to Jesus. Well, good news—we would love to have you come back and hang around and ask questions and challenge us and learn more. We won't judge you for where you're at or pressure you into belief—that's something you'll have to come to on your own. But we'd love to have you continue to come around to explore more.

And maybe there are others who are ready to admit what you've been doing hasn't been working and you're ready to commit to Jesus and you want to know more. I would of course invite you to come back, but even to talk to someone. If someone brought you today, you can talk to them. Or one of the pastors would be more than happy to talk to you more about what it means to commit to Jesus.