

What is the gospel?

Part 1: The purpose of salvation

What is the gospel? What is the message of 'Good News' that Christianity brings?

Sad to say, too many churches and professing Christians have increasingly watered down, added to, or subtracted from the Biblical message of the gospel. Rampant confusion exists, even among believers, as to exactly what it means to be saved, and what one has to do.

Ask a group of Christians and you are bound to get a cross section of answers – believe, repent, believe and be baptized; believe, be baptized and be filled with the Spirit; or believe, be baptized, be filled with the Spirit and be faithful to Christ all your life. But what does the Bible have to say?

We'll look at this rather large subject as a series. In Part 1, we'll begin by looking at the **point** of salvation. In Part 2, we'll look at the **person** of salvation. Then in Part 3, we'll study the **process** of salvation and finish off in Part 4 by examining the **power** of salvation.

The gospel is the 'power of God unto salvation' – it is the narrow path that leads to eternal life. It stands between eternal torment and eternal life. Confuse, twist, add, subtract, modify, re-interpret – whatever methodology is used, the result will be the same – a corruption of the gospel. If the gospel can be twisted, then people place their trust in someone and something that is not of God – which consequently leads to destruction. Paul warned the Corinthians of this in 2 Corinthians:

But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if ye receive another spirit, which ye have not received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with him.

2 Corinthians 11:3-4

A corruption of the gospel is another gospel, with another Jesus, and another spirit. Paul took this so seriously as to issue a curse on anyone who corrupts the gospel **Galatians 1:8**: *"But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed."*

It is imperative that, as believers, we understand what the gospel is, and crystallize the issues in our minds. The mark of the mature, according to **Ephesians 4**, is that we are henceforth no longer children, tossed to and fro and carried with every wind of doctrine by men's trickery and deceitfulness. We need to know what we believe and why.

As **1 Peter 3:15** exhorts: *"But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear..."* How can we witness to others; how can we share the message of salvation, if we are not clear in our own minds as to what it is?

So the place to start is to ask what is the point of salvation? Why did God ultimately choose to bring about this situation that we call 'the good news'? What is He doing when He saves a person, and why? If we have a faulty idea as to why God has chosen to give man the gospel, and why He has graciously offered us salvation – then the rest will be as faulty.

A God-centred gospel

There are really only two choices we have as to the purpose of salvation. One of them is man-centred, the other is God-centred. God either gave salvation primarily because of man, or primarily because of His own glory.

Whenever you find that a teaching centres around man, you know that something is out of balance. Man's needs may be addressed, man's makeup and desires may be taught in Scripture, but man can never be the ultimate centre or purpose of things. The universe does not begin and end with man – it begins and ends with God. Reading through Scripture, we see that man was created for God's pleasure.

For example, in **Revelation 4:11** the song is: *"Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for Thou hast created all things, and for Thy pleasure they are and were created."* In **Isaiah 43:7**, we read: *"Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him."*

God does not exist because of man. Nor is man's existence or happiness the chief end of the universe. Man was created for God's pleasure. As we'll see, man's pleasure in God is part of God's design for him, and not at all at odds with God's glory, but the point is that man is all too prone to believe that the universe does indeed revolve around the earth in a spiritual sense – that he is the point of all that God does.

But Scripture says something different. Scripture consistently teaches that whatever God does, He does for His own glory. God's final purposes are for His own glorification – and man's salvation is included in there. See, sometimes, we are a little uncomfortable with that thought – God does what He does for His own glory. At the back of our mind, we can't help feeling it sounds a bit selfish. And it just seems a lot more like an unselfish God to have given us salvation primarily for our benefit, not for His, as an unselfish person does.

But this is what we must understand – God loving His own glory more than anything else is simply the most honest and natural thing He can do. God is the most beautiful, most worthy One of all. If God loved anyone or anything more than Himself – He would be an idolater. God would love something less worthy than Himself, which would make Him guilty of sin – which is impossible. So when God acts to glorify Himself, He is doing what God has always done – enjoying His own perfection as the chief end of His existence.

Realise then at the same time, that the glorification of God is the most natural thing in the created universe. It occurred before the physical universe, and it will occur after it. You could say, in a very real sense, that the glorification of God is the point of the universe. Glory belongs to God as naturally as iron is drawn to magnets, as natural as gravity's attraction of all things to itself.

When we speak of glory – we mean God's excellence. We mean His firstness. It means that if God had to compete against any of His creation in any category – be it beauty, be it wisdom, be it strength, be it power, be it love, be it joy, be it holiness – He would always win. He is glorious in His absolute superiority and perfect excellence. His glory is all His person shining forth in its brilliance.

Now, how does man fit in? Well, God's glory has been shown forth, and will forever more, in His dealings with man. Though man suspects God of selfishness, God has always sought the wellbeing of His creatures. So long as man has submitted himself to his own design instructions – to glorify God – he has found that God is overwhelmingly a rewarder – a God who blesses, and brings joy.

Understand that the God who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, is not a stingy God with hidden agendas. He is committed to His own glory, and our happiness. Those are not two different goals – they are one. You can think of it like this: God's glory is like rain upon a mountain, the creatures below will always delight in the pure rivers that flow from it.

So the point of salvation is to glorify God. Yes, it has many other benefits: it saves us from hell; it gives us eternal life; it gives us power over sin – but these are contained under the umbrella truth of God glorifying Himself. We must not fear to say that God saves man for His own glory, for how does that lessen your salvation in any way? Instead of lessening, it actually secures it. It means that God's decision and ability to save is not going to be swayed by human unfaithfulness, rebellion and wickedness.

God saves us for the same reason He remained faithful to Israel – for His own name's sake. For His own glory as a gracious God, as a faithful God, as a longsuffering God, as a truthful God – He saves. So it means that our fickle natures are not the deciding factor in salvation – it is rooted in the unchanging purpose of God to enjoy His own glory.

So we now need to ask, how does God glorify Himself through people getting saved? If the point of salvation is God's glory – how does a person coming to Christ for new life achieve this?

1. It accomplishes it through imitation.

For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren."

Romans 8:29

This verse tells us that God saves people so that they might be changed into the image of His Son. His end destination for a person He saves is a likeness to Christ. Salvation is the start of the process of restoring a fallen sinner's reflection of God. It is God getting His own image in a human being back to normal. He wants a family resemblance to His Son! He wants the imitation of the most Beautiful One – the Son.

Why do you imitate someone? Most often, because you admire the way they talk, walk, act, or behave. Youngsters often imitate an older brother or relative or friend because they respect them and want to be like them. Imitation of the Son by millions of believers exalts Christ to be the most worthy Person of all. He is shown to be the Perfect Man, because He was God in the flesh. This glorifies the Son. Christ is shown to be first, most excellent, most delightful. Of course, if the Son – the express image of God, the radiance of the glory of God – is glorified, who does that in turn glorify? God the Father.

2. Salvation however also glorifies God because it accomplishes a display of His character.

What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory.

Romans 9:22-23

Here we read that God is glorified no matter what men decide to do. God does not ever lose glory in salvation. Man simply loses out by His own sin. If people are saved, God is shown to be merciful – glorious in His grace. If people are not saved, God is shown to be just – glorious in His righteousness. The whole aspect of man's salvation is an arena in which God's character is on display.

Like a prism which splits white light into its various colours – salvation has made it possible for a whole array of God's attributes to be seen, which would not have been seen as clearly prior to man's fall and redemption. Before Adam fell, there was not such a clear platform for God to display such attributes as anger, justice, mercy.

Certainly Adam experienced God's grace and love. But who would have thought that God's love was so great that He would give up His own Son to die for hopeless rebels? Who would have thought God's nature included mercy and pity that would die for His own enemies? Who would have thought God's passion for His holiness would have such terrifying punishment? Thus the whole scope of human history has provided a stage for the grand production known as God's glory in relation to man.

The salvation of man is like black lights that bring out certain materials under UV light. No fallen angel could accuse God of being tyrannical and unkind after the story of mankind is finished – God having sacrificed Himself for a fallen creature. It puts God's very character on display, and thus glorifies Him.

No matter which way it goes – men being saved or men dying without Christ – God remains exalted as perfect. He is grieved over the death of the wicked, and there is joy over the repentance of a sinner – nevertheless God is glorified no matter what. These are just some of the ways God is glorified in man's salvation.

Now, ask yourself, do you think less of your salvation when you think God did it for His own glory and for your benefit? How preposterous! It is a high privilege – because then you are one of the creatures drinking in the pure water at the foot of the mountain; drinking in the wonders of God's glory. That is not to say you are insignificant to God, or a mere pawn in His endeavour to glorify Himself. Remember, God's glory is the most natural thing in the universe. It is the life and soul of the universe, all that is against it is sin and evil.

Everything that opposes God's glory is an unnatural evil; it is the very essence of sin – an attempt to rob God of His glory, and claim it for ourselves, as Lucifer did. God glorifying Himself overwhelmingly brings wholeness and health to the creatures that submit to the end of glorifying God.

We can say then that man's salvation, the Gospel, is theocentric: it revolves around God's glory, followed by man's benefit, in that order. Why is that distinction important? Well, if you do not understand the purpose of the Gospel – you will get the rest wrong.

A man-centred gospel

Consider the effects of a man-centred Gospel:

- 1. First, if you think God's purposes in salvation revolve around man, you end up thinking that God will do anything for a man to be saved, to the point of compromising His justice and standards.**

Make no mistake, God wants people to be saved, but it is always on His terms, not on man's. An illustration of this occurs in **Deuteronomy 20**. Here Israel was commanded to approach an enemy city and offer peace. The terms were complete surrender and accepting slavery under Israel. If the city accepted this, they would enjoy the benefits of a godly society as slaves of Israel. If they rejected these terms, they would be destroyed.

Salvation is much like that – God approaches man and offers peace. The peace is on His terms – complete surrender to Him, followed by a life of service to Him. Rejection of those terms will ultimately bring destruction. Acceptance brings the blessing of abundant life. But a man-centred Gospel makes God out to be one who wants a truce, not a complete surrender. In this Gospel, God is frustrated, weak and pining for man's affections, terrified of what man is doing to himself.

No, God remains perfect, not requiring man's devotion to meet His needs – for He has none – but instead exalting His nature of graciousness by redeeming pitiful human beings. God will not compromise His justice, nor will the fact that He is a God of love change the fact that He is a God of justice. **Exodus 34:76** has both concepts in one verse: *“Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty”* – God is a forgiving God; He is merciful; but He will not let people off the hook without their sins paid for.

Every sin will be paid for – either on the cross, or in hell. It's funny how we love justice when we have been offended. If someone robs us, then we love the idea of the evildoer being caught and tried and punished. But if we do wrong – if we are caught speeding or cheating on our taxes – we want mercy. Suddenly we hate justice: it seems too harsh, and we want grace.

Now, God is not biased. He gives grace to the repentant, and justice to all. His justice is met in the sacrifice of Calvary for those who receive Christ, and it is met in the fires of hell for those who reject Him. A man-centred Gospel hates these ideas, and begins to edit them out of the Gospel.

2. Second, a man-centred gospel can never truly understand sin.

If you approach sin from man's point of view – sin seems like a problem, like the thing that got us in trouble. Man-centred gospels say, 'You have sinned,' i.e. that is the problem. Then they say, 'Sin brings death' i.e. that is the real problem – that sin has a consequence for you. They then go on to explain how Jesus can wipe away those consequences. But sin is not seen as an offence against God – as a God-centred gospel sees it.

Consider **Romans 3:23**: *“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God...”* This harmonises with the understanding that God's main purpose is to glorify Himself. Sin is anything that fails to do so. Remove God's glory as the point of the universe, and you will no longer understand sin, what it is, and why it is evil. Sin is sin because it wages war against God's supreme worth. Sin makes out that God's gifts are superior to God, that man is superior to God, that man can rule Himself because He is wiser, stronger and better than God.

Sin is evil because it says God's instructions as to how to live life are foolish, and therefore says that sin's wisdom, our wisdom, is superior to God. If God is not the centre of the gospel – you will never understand what sin is, and therefore you will never understand what we are to be saved from.

Salvation is when a human agrees with God about his sin. This is repentance. To see sin as He does – a wound against Him. It is only when you understand that your sin has been rebellion against God that you will understand that the gospel is really about the end of that rebellion, the death of your disobedience and the resurrection of a new life of submission and obedience to Him. But a man-centred Gospel has sin as the problem, and God as the solution. It is a fire escape from hell.

A man-centred gospel says – like Balaam, like Judas, like Saul, like Pharaoh – *‘I have sinned.’* But like the child who was caught stealing, they are not saying, *‘I am sorry I sinned’* they are saying *‘I'm sorry I got caught’* and *‘I'm sorry there are consequences.’* Seeing sin God's way leads us to say as David did to Nathan when confronted with His sin, *‘I have sinned against the Lord.’* That's God-centred. Sin is heinous because it is against God, not because it has negative consequences.

3. Thirdly, a man-centred gospel tends to make the whole issue of salvation one of spiritual geography: Where do you want to spend eternity? Heaven or hell?

Here, the whole appeal is to a man's selfish desires: 'Don't suffer, enjoy the greatest retirement benefit ever!' It's not about holiness, or about reconciliation to a Person in a man-centred gospel; it's all about location – where do you want to be? God becomes almost like a third party in this transaction; in a man-centred gospel, He is merely the deliverer of salvation, the agent of salvation, but never the point of salvation.

A God-centred gospel sees salvation as man needing to reconcile with His Creator, and God having provided the way for reconciliation to occur. Heaven and hell are the results of one's decision about reconciliation with God. They are not to be the main point.

Yes, we must preach on hell, yes, we must warn sinners of judgment and yes, we must show people how glorious heaven will be. But a God-centred gospel confronts people with their relationship to God, not solely with a decision about where they would like to spend eternity. Such an approach almost certainly results in the false repentance of souls who never truly see their need to repent before a God they have wounded.

We need to get the right understanding of the purpose of salvation. It is for the glory of God. The gospel is for man, but its purpose is nevertheless, theocentric – God-centred. Let us guard against a man-centred gospel in our effort to win people. Let us see that God is in charge of it – it must be on His terms, for His glory, with no compromise. Our job is to declare it accurately, and God will do the saving. Ephesians 1 sums up repeatedly why God chose to save people:

...Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, wherein He hath made us accepted in the beloved.

Ephesians 1:5-6

That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of His glory.

Ephesians 1:12-14

It couldn't be clearer: the greatest benefit in the universe to us – being saved – is based on God's purpose to glorify Himself. This is the Good News – that the unchangeable God has chosen to make our salvation part of His enjoyment of His glory. He could have done otherwise and remained as perfect, but the true gospel is this: there is reconciliation with such a God through His Son. In Part 2 of this series, we explore the Person of salvation – Jesus Christ.