

Understanding the Story You're Living In

(Or, "What's so good about the Gospel?") ... by Dave Benson

Looking From the Outside In

There are many things in this world that I'll probably never understand: global warming, interest rates, pokémon, and carrot-cake, to name just four. And life only gets more confusing when you change cultures. If you've just moved to Australia, you're probably wondering why we abbreviate every word ("barby" is for barbeque, "uni" is for university), we've got "no worries" that every second animal could kill us quickly, we care more about sport than politics, and for a country with no ozone layer we sure like to bake in the sun.

But for many people, the strangest thing in the world, and the most confusing culture of all, is that of the *church*. Perhaps Christianity is new to you? You genuinely don't get what Christians believe, and have some big questions, but you're not sure where to start or who to ask. Or maybe you've got a friend who invited you to a church service? You went along to see what it was all about—but then you experienced a kind of culture-shock as otherwise normal people began singing to God!

Church—and often Christianity as a whole—is a confusing enigma to many people, even to those born in Australia. Most Australians know someone who is a Christian, and have a 'believer' or two back in the family tree, but aren't personally connected with the church. Most can locate a Bible, but few have read it. A lot of people recognize the words (Jesus Christ, Saviour, cross, sin, righteousness, resurrection, etc), but they no longer make sense or connect into a coherent whole. It only becomes more confusing when you enter a church service and have to decipher all the symbols and stories.

If you do get along to a church service, you'll encounter all kinds of strange sights and sounds. For instance, you'll notice what looks like corporate karaoke—hundreds of people facing the front, singing with their whole heart about love, forgiveness, Jesus, and a risen Saviour, occasionally swaying or raising their hands like at a rock concert. (We call this *worship*—something we all do in one form or another, placing some 'god' at the centre of our life, making sacrifices to it and singing its praises—whether a career, our kids, self, sport, a band, money, a relationship, a guru, or God). You'll also hear some sort of mini-lecture (a *sermon*) intended to shape your thinking and life to be in tune with the way the universe really is—the way it works best.

But even if you understand some of the surface aspects of church, you may still miss the heart of who we are and what we believe. For at the centre of Christianity is what we call **the Gospel**, and it literally means **the good news**. It's a phrase that we hear way back at the very start of Jesus' mission in the world, some 2000 years ago: "*Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel'*" (Mark 1:14-15). And here's where you might start switching off, for the church is famous for jargon: *Gospel, Kingdom, repent*, and on it goes. You see, unless these powerful words are unpacked, I might as well be speaking another language for all the sense it makes.

Now in a short publication like this, I couldn't possibly hope to demystify all that is the church and Christianity. However, I am hoping to serve as your tour guide to cross the cultural divide, helping you see *what's so good about the Gospel*. In order to do this, I need to connect you into the much bigger story contained in the Bible.

Thank God You're Here!

Have you ever seen the T.V. show “Thank God You’re Here”? The premise of the show is simple: dress someone in a costume and get them to step through a door into a world they know nothing about. Who knows what the scene is on the other side of the door—a party, a courtroom, an emergency? Whatever it is, the actors, with minimal knowledge, have to bluff their way through until they can *understand the story they’re living in*. The humour comes as they do and say things totally inappropriate to the scene. But isn’t this a lot like our lives on Earth? We are born into a confusing story, greeted with “Thank God you’re here!” and then we wander the planet for decades trying to make sense of our lives!

There is no shortage of stories that try to tell us what life is about—that we’re a chemical accident, or that existence is illusory, or that we’re the experiment of a disinterested God. The problem, as humans, is that none of us have a bird’s eye view to objectively see the kind of story we’re in. Starting from ourselves and reasoning up, we can’t answer the big questions of how we got here, the meaning of life, the cause of the human problem, the solution to this dilemma, and where we’re headed after we die. That is of course, unless someone *outside* the system speaks into the world to tell us what we could never find out for ourselves.

And this is precisely what Christians believe God has done. As the philosopher Francis Schaeffer often said, “God is there, and he is not silent.” The Creator of the world has revealed himself by speaking through chosen people across history and in the process, he has helped us to understand ourselves. The cosmic story he has told answers our foundational questions concerning origins, purpose, morality, salvation, and destiny. Now this story goes beyond being a good fit (as another made-up story might) in that it connects with real history on planet Earth. You need to know, however, that history isn’t maths; if it’s water-tight proof you’re after, then you’ll be disappointed. But, if you are willing to search, then I’m pretty sure you’ll find that the Biblical story connects this life’s dots and is worth trusting.¹

We all live according to the story we think we’re in. Too often though, we dismiss another’s story without ever really hearing or understanding it. *Take the time to enter into the Biblical story, and see how well it makes sense of all that you know*. This (true) story is not a dusty legend, but a living hope that animates literally billions of people. And you may be surprised to find that *your own life journey of need, struggle, and longing for victory, comes alive within these pages*. In broad brush strokes, here’s how it goes...

A Cosmic Story in Five Scenes

Let’s pick up the story with Creation. You see, God ***designed us for good***. We were made to love God, love others, and lovingly tend this world to make it fruitful. Humanity was appointed as God’s cosmic gardener of sorts, to represent his loving community among Father, Son, and Spirit in the world. You’ve probably heard of Adam and Eve as the first people. You may not know that Adam literally means “the man,” while Eve means “lifegiver.” Their story is our story.

And from this privileged position, “the man” and “the lifegiver” (every man and every woman) have fallen. We have all rejected our status as creatures and told the Creator to go jump. In pursuit of freedom, knowledge and power apart from God, we have abandoned our identity. Perhaps you don’t appreciate it now, but seeking “freedom” without God—or worse yet, freedom from God—is like a train seeking freedom from the tracks. It’s like a plant without soil, a car without a driver, lungs without oxygen, and a body without blood. We were made *for* God, and our hearts are restless until they find their home in him. Turned inward, we have despised God, hurt our neighbours and vandalized the earth. And the just Creator calls it “sin.” We’ve fallen short of our own standards, let

¹ A great read to help with this is Tim Keller’s book, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*.

alone God's perfection, and we are rightly judged by God's law written both in the Bible and on our hearts. When the gardener fails, the garden suffers too. Scene two: this world is **damaged by evil**.

Thankfully, the story doesn't finish with this sad state of affairs. You see, God was in the habit of choosing the few to bless the many. Take Israel for instance. The Jews had a long history of God working with their nation so that they would guide a wayward world. He freed them and blessed them, so that they would free and bless every other nation on earth (the book of Exodus covers this). By Jesus' day, this was hard to appreciate as they were living in virtual slavery, their home country of Israel occupied by the Roman Empire. But God had promised that one day He would send a Saviour to save them from their strife, judge all the evil in the world, and become the King of all Kings (see Psalm 2). So when Jesus enters the scene and says, "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel," the Jews really paid attention. Jesus was claiming to be the Saviour of the world, the *Christ*.² The Kingdom of God is where God's will for peace, abundance, happiness and freedom is a reality across the whole world—where God reigns and is King. Jesus was basically saying, "Re-think! Turn from your own agenda and align your life with God." If you do, then you'll be forgiven and flourish. If you don't, then you'll miss out; worse, you'll be under God's judgment, as each person shares the blame for why the world is such a mess (Romans 3:23; 6:23).

This brings us to the *third scene*. God had a plan so we could be **restored for better**. It turns out that God was less interested in a blood-bath and dethroning the Roman Empire, and more interested in identifying with us in our struggling state and standing in our place. He planned on paying for the wrong that we've all done. He didn't just want to free Israel; God so loved the whole cosmos that He had a plan to liberate every person, every nation, and even our groaning planet from every force bent on death and destruction. To understand this, you need to know a bit more about Jesus' life and message, for he *is* the plan (John 3:16-18; 14:6).

Jesus dedicated himself to demonstrating what the Kingdom of God is like. You can find his mission statement in Luke 4:18-19: "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*"

Rather than violent retaliation, Jesus taught radical compassion. (Check out the "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew chapters 5-7). Rather than setting up a club for the rich and popular, he hung out with the oppressed—the poor, the sick, children, women, orphans, tax collectors, and prostitutes. He called for disciples (a band of committed followers) who would serve even their enemies in recognition that God was about forgiving those who've failed, not destroying them. Because ultimately love wins, they were able to freely love everyone.

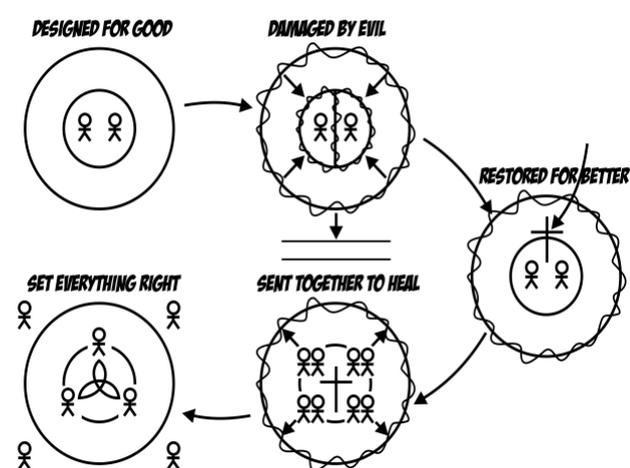
This kind of radical love led Jesus to his death. God would have been justified in judging and destroying all people for their wrongdoing right then and there, but instead he revealed His amazing love for us by taking the punishment we deserved. Over 700 years before Jesus came to earth, God revealed to the Jews that the "suffering servant" would stand in humanity's place and through his sacrifice freely offer forgiveness to anyone who would rethink their life and align with him (see Isaiah 52:13-53:12). Jesus was the Saviour of the world, the King of Kings and the Prince of Peace, but as the suffering servant he brought peace to the world through his nail-pierced hands (John 20:19-23). He died on the cross and was buried in the ground—a sad, but unfinished, story.

² You may not realise that not only do multiple and independent eye-witness accounts in the Bible support Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, but that around 14 ancient historical sources (many of these hostile witnesses) corroborate what the Bible teaches (such as Josephus, Tacitus, Pliny, and so forth). For those of you wanting to investigate the evidence, check out Lee Strobel's books, *The Case for Christ* and also *The Case for the Real Jesus*.

What happened next? Literally, a dead man stood up. Jesus was *resurrected* and conquered death. God the Father did this to show that Jesus' sacrifice was sufficient, that he really is the Saviour of the world. All who have trust in, and live for him will be forgiven for their sins.³ Jesus offered everyone a new beginning. This is the *fourth scene* in which Jesus commissioned his followers to continue his mission, ***sent together to heal the world***, empowered with the resources of God the Spirit (Acts 1:8). (This is the true church—not a building, but a people sent to love like Christ.) They were authorized to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:18-20). Jesus taught that “this Gospel of the Kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).

The “end” in view here is the *fifth scene*, the day when Jesus will return as conquering King—when he will judge every person, save those who have turned from their sin to align with His Kingdom, and ***set everything right*** (Acts 17:30-31). On that day, the whole universe and us with it (including all those who have already died) will be raised in Jesus' resurrection power (Romans 8:18-25; 1 Corinthians 15:21-26, 54-58), “those who have done good to the resurrection of life [literally, Heaven on Earth], and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment [Hell]” (John 5:29). *God throws a party and everyone's invited*, but he won't force his affection on anyone, so we can choose to exclude ourselves from his grace. All that is good, true, and beautiful comes from God; reject the life giver, and life will literally be hell.

Bringing all this together, *what's so good about the Gospel?*



We were created by God for good, but have been damaged by evil. The good news is that for all those aligning with Jesus, we have been restored for better, to once again work faithfully with God in this world. We are sent together to heal in the power of Christ's Spirit—a new creation transformed from the inside out, operating in a broken and needy world. And we wait in real hope for the day when the resurrected one (Jesus) sets the entire universe right once and for all. The good news that Christians live and share is that “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

We're convinced that not only does this story make sense of the human condition and the historical evidence, but it makes sense of your own desire for love, and hunch that this life has to be about something more: eternity (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Perhaps God is drawing you, and you can feel it. If so, then responding is as simple as saying sorry for your sins, thanking Jesus for his sacrifice and forgiveness, and then seeking first God's Kingdom in the power of his Spirit and in community with other followers of Jesus (Matthew 6:33). Along with millions of other believers worldwide, my story is that Jesus is real, my life is changed and I'm never turning back. God's waiting on your response, but He won't wait forever (2 Peter 3:9-10). How will you respond? At the very least, commit today to search out if these things are so. Questions are welcome (david.benson@kbc.org.au).

Nothing matters more. So, God bless, and may you too join God's party. *Dave Benson.*

³ What's resurrection about, and did it really happen? Listen to this: <http://www.mediafire.com/?zdmmyzqjgg>.