

**“Living the Resurrection”, 1 Thessalonians
The Gospel: Announcement and Invitation
1 Thessalonians 1:1-5a; 3:1-8
6.2.19**



Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context... (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

“In your own formation, what was your understanding of the gospel? Was it primarily about personal salvation or was it more collective in its scope? What aspects of the Story do you believe need to be shared to be considered a faithful presentation of the gospel?”

“How do you think the way we hear the word ‘gospel’ differs from that of Jesus’ first listeners? Is it important to understand the backstory? How do you see the gospel differently now that you have more of an understanding of its original context?”

“Why is an approach to the gospel which addresses our own personal sins, but fails to encourage or empower us to experience real-life-transformation simply not a robust gospel?”

“Now that the Kingdom has arrived—now that God’s lovingly-restorative rule is available to all— how should that impact the quality of my marriage? How should it effect the ways that I am with my children? How will it affect the values which impact the ways that I conduct myself on the job?”

“Where in your life could you use some ‘good news’? What in your life needs to be ‘gospelled’?”

“What have you yet to discover about Jesus which has made you hesitant to trust him?”

Teaching Notes...

“What is the gospel?”

Let's say you are chatting with a friend or neighbor, and the topic of your faith comes up. They are limited in their familiarity of the Christian faith and ask you to explain the gospel. What would you say?

I suppose that if you poll a dozen people with the question and you will likely get a variety of responses, each with some similarities and some glaring differences.

Some will emphasize personal salvation and the other the transformation of society through people committed to doing good and establishing a better world. Each is, in a sense, telling the same story and each is somehow incomplete in its expression

When we hear the word "gospel", we never hear it objectively. We already assume we know what it is because of the ways in which it has been offered.

"But is that what the people who were informed and formed by the biblical narrative would have heard?"

The word "gospel" itself simply means, "good news."

In a very literal (and most basic) sense, anything that is good news to you is 'gospel': job advancement, birth of a child, find a \$20 bill in your coat pocket, Mariner's actually winning a game. *"Good News!"*

But, the Bible uses the word gospel in a more "**storied**" sense. The New Testament reserves the term "gospel" for a very specific kind of good news so that whatever we say about the gospel has to be tethered to this Story.

In ancient Roman literature, the equivalent was the Greek term, *euangelion*, which meant *"a good announcement,"*; *"good news"*.

When a new King was positioned in authority, the announcement went out that people should *"repent"* and trust the good news. He was not calling for people to feel sorry for their sins, but to now re-think their life and loyalties in light of this new declaration. They were being asked to change allegiances; to live into another story.

Most NT scholars would agree that the backstory for the use of the word *"gospel"* is rooted in Isaiah, particularly chapters 40 and 52.

Jerusalem has been devastated by Babylon. Their church has been torn down. Many of their friends and family have been displaced, removed involuntarily from their homes and communities; wondering if their God had finally had enough and had abandoned them for good?

Isaiah offers this image of a 'watchman' standing guard on the city wall. He sees, on the horizon, an image of someone running toward the city yelling, *"Good news!"*

“How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who say to Zion (Jerusalem), ‘Your God reigns!’” (is King) Isaiah 52:7

Isaiah describes him as having ‘beautiful feet’ because they carried a message of hope. The message was that their God was becoming King and his rule would bring restoration and justice.

We don’t really get the idea of Jesus as being “King”. It’s not language familiar to us.

Kings: Establish “rules” (order), have spheres of influence (places where their rule is implemented), and exert their rule. What you will, what you desire, happens; it is the rule of the day.

Even though the language is strange, we all have something that is ‘ultimate’; that we ‘serve’; that gets the ‘best of us’ (e.g. time, energy, money, resources, etc.) We all have something which governs our determinations and sets a course for our lives. Something which carries ‘weight’. It’s what ‘rules’ you; has ‘power’/‘authority’ over you.

Isaiah is writing to a group of people who are anticipating the end of “exile”. A group of people who are “stuck”: they have lost their sense of identity and their sense of moorings for life, but were somehow certain that God was more faithful than they were. He would make good on his promises.

The end of exile is linked to the appearance of one who would be a “way-preparer”. This “way-preparer” will come bearing ‘good news’ (Matthew 3).

“Jesus preached God’s good news. The time promised by God has come at last! The Kingdom of God is near (here; close; available). Repent of your sins and believe the good news!” (Mark1:14-15)

The gospel is both a declaration and an invitation. It is God’s dream for the world, come true!

The gospel is the announcement that God has acted in Jesus to restore humans back to their humanness: to lovingly reconnect them with God and each other and to empower them to resume their positions as stewards of all that he calls good.

When something is ‘declared’ to be true, the way that it becomes ‘truth’ for you is in your assimilation. Salvation is not simply something we receive, but something in which we participate.

I think we would have to say that the ‘gospel’ is the good news that, “Jesus is King!” Everything else we would say is essential (essence) to embracing and embodying that declaration is the ‘gospel’, as well.

Even when the word is not used specifically, “*the gospel*” shows up on every page of the Story. It’s the sound of Adam and Eve crouching in the bushes, scrambling for something without (3) leaves, and the love-sick voice of God calling, “*Where are*

you?” It’s the, “*Welcome Home, Son*”, banner waving in the breeze from the porch of the prodigal father. It’s the woman with a string of failed relationships who encounters Jesus and gets more than just a weekend pass to a marriage-enrichment weekend, but something to address her soul-thirst.

Whenever we are exposed to the gospel, it always...

... disturbs the status-quo. It challenges our version of reality and calls into question *who* and *what* we are trusting for life.

... makes claims on our lives.

The Story says that although God is sovereign and ultimate, he offers himself to us in ways which allow him to be disrespected and dismissed.

... demands a response.

Jesus frequently used words associated with his declaration, like “**repent**”, “**believe**”, “**follow**”.

Repent: consider another way; have a change of mind; pause and pivot. Most of us don’t ‘arrive’ at the end of ourselves, we typically ‘slam into it’. Up to this point, we are using ‘religion’ (God) as a performance enhancer or, at the very least, as a means of minimizing the damage we are doing to ourselves.

Believe: trust the goodness of what is being offered and re-order your life in order to accommodate your change of direction. “Accepting Jesus” and “following Jesus” are not God-options from which we choose.

Follow: actively positions us on this “way”. Perhaps if we hadn’t abandoned our original moniker, “followers of the Way” (Acts 9:2), the emphasis would have remained on faith as a journey “with someone” and “toward something”.

I’m not convinced that Paul’s purpose was ever to offer, in a single text, a thorough discussion about the gospel, but I do think that he continued to rehearse certain themes to which he would return in order to develop the Story and solidify his understanding. The most prominent of these being, “salvation”.

“**Salvation**” is the most comprehensive word that brings together all the aspects of God’s loving intentions and movements. It is not only a way of describing the self-initiated movement of God to rescue us, but a way of describing the consequence of right beliefs--- cultivating a lifestyle which allowed you to experience blessing.

[Ephesians 2:8-10]

The biblical narrative offers (4) *gospel-realities* we experience, which serve as ‘pillars’ for our way of understanding ourselves and our image of a preferred-future:

Identity: “Who am I and Why am I?” God’s unique image-bearing creation meant to represent the rule of the King in every corner of the earth. You were meant to ‘rule’! We only discover who we are and why we are when we know who God is. Our value and worth have been conferred upon us, not secured by our performance.

You are the “beloved” (Ephesians 1:4)

Encounter: “What went wrong?” We were created in a framework of “blessing”: to flourish in the environment of God’s goodness. Humanity called into the question the goodness and the good intentions of God saying, *“I don’t trust you”*. Our declaration of independence from God has had devastating effects on all of creation.

You have “sinned” (Romans 3:23)

Testimony: “What can be done?” Jesus life, death, and resurrection has somehow allowed us to be back in relationship with God, one another, and all of created order: “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Authentically transformed lives always seek to share what they have experienced of God with others.

You are “forgiven” (John 3:16)

New Life| “How can I help?” By becoming a people who are willingly and routinely embodying the values of the Kingdom--- right here and right now--- for the good of the world. Who are making “new life” attractive, accessible, and reproducible.

You are “empowered” (Acts 1:8)