



## Lesson 1

# The Beginning of the Journey The Gospel

It comes as a surprise to many to learn how very different Christianity is from other religions; at its core, it isn't about morality, or philosophy, or self-fulfillment. Rather, it's about news—good news: the greatest news the world has ever heard. In fact, the word “gospel” literally means “good news,” and it is this news that stands at the center of the Christian faith, and should be the informing core of the Christian life. It is what the apostle Paul called a matter “of first importance” (1 Cor. 15:3). Around Sovereign Grace Church, we like to refer to it as “the main thing.”

The gospel, the “main thing,” stands at the beginning of our journey, for it is truly the beginning of any Christian's journey. What exactly is this “main thing?” What is this good news? In this lesson, we will seek both to understand and better appreciate the wonderful news of the gospel.

## I. Man's Dilemma Before God

No one can gain an understanding of the gospel without first recognizing his own rebellion against a perfect, holy God, and the severe consequences justly deserved as a result. In short, we must understand some very serious “bad news” before we can adequately appreciate the “good news.” There are two key elements to the dilemma we all face: our sinfulness and God's holiness.

### A. Man's Sinfulness

“A person must confront his own sinfulness in all its ravaging depths before he can enjoy the comforts of salvation.” —Martin Luther

“Grace never ignores the awful truth of our depravity. In fact, it emphasizes it! The worse we realize we are, the greater we recognize what grace is! - Randy Alcorn

#### 1. What is sin?

“Sin is any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude, or nature.” –  
*Wayne Grudem*

- a. Not just actions, but attitudes. Denying God's right to be God in your life.

*Matthew 5:27-28: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."*

- b. Not just acting wrongly, but also failing to act.

*James 4:17: "So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin."*

- c. Not just actions and attitudes, but our nature—Who we are at the core of our being.

*Genesis 6:5: "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."*

"A sin consists in doing, saying, thinking, or imagining anything that is not in perfect conformity with the mind and law of God." —J.C. Ryle

- 2. Sin's True Nature. Defining sin in relationship to God reveals its true nature: sin is essentially rebellion against God.

- a. Sin is the willful and selfish rejection of God's rule while choosing to live independently of Him.

- b. Sin is always fundamentally and primarily against God.

*Psalms 51:4: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment."*

- 3. Sin's Universality. All people are sinners and stand guilty before God.

- a. Adam's sin brought sin and death to all men. All people sin because all are by nature sinners.

*Romans 5:12: "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—"*

- b. All people confirm this through their actions: all are sinners.

*Romans 3:22-23: "For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..."*

- 4. Sin's Pervasiveness. Man's sinfulness extends to every part of his being; nothing in him has been unaffected by sin.

- a. Sin's corrupting effects have touched every part of his being: mind, will, emotions, and body.

*Romans 3:10-12: "...as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.'*

- b. This means that man in his sinful state apart from God is incapable of pleasing or obeying God. Even seemingly "good" works are tainted by sin.

*Romans 8:7-8: "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."*

- c. Not only are we therefore enslaved to sin, but we are completely responsible before God for our sin.

*Romans 14:12: "So then each of us will give an account of himself to God."*

## B. God's Holiness and Wrath

The other facet of mankind's grave dilemma is the character of God. Indeed, man's sinful plight can't be fully grasped until it is viewed through the lens of God's infinite purity and holiness.

### 1. The Bible portrays God as holy. This idea has two main components:

- a. God is transcendent: He is infinitely higher than man—separate, different—He is wholly other than us.

*Isaiah 46:9: "...for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me!"*

- b. God is morally perfect and infinitely pure—untainted by evil desire, motive, thought, word, or deed.

*Deuteronomy 32:3-4: "...ascribe greatness to our God! The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he."*

*Isaiah 6:1-5: "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"*

"The Cross speaks not only of our sin, but of God's holiness." -Jerry Bridges

### 2. Because God is holy, He must respond with fierce opposition to sin. This is the meaning of God's wrath.

- a. Wrath is God's holy response to sin: His personal, active antagonism to sin that derives from His settled opposition to every evil thing. It is therefore right and necessary for God to hate sin and all who practice it.

*Habakkuk 1:13: "You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong."*

"The wrath of God is his steady, unrelenting, unremitting, uncompromising antagonism to evil in all its forms and manifestations." —John Stott

"There is nothing between you and hell but air. It is only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up." —Jonathan Edwards

- b. Some think that the idea of wrath is unjust or unbecoming to a God of love. This is largely because we underestimate both the extent and seriousness of sin and the holiness of God. Not only is God perfectly justified in His wrath, but without it His very character would be compromised.

*Psalms 36:2: "He flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated."*

"It is partly because sin does not provoke our own wrath that we do not believe that sin provokes the wrath of God." —R.W. Dale

3. In light of God's holiness, sin has grave and inevitable consequences:

- a. A broken relationship with God

*Isaiah 59:2: "but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear."*

- b. Enslavement to sin and Satan. Sin places us under the dominion of sin and Satan, unable to break free from their control.

*2 Corinthians 4:4 The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

- c. Consequences in life. All the sorrow, pain, suffering, sweat, tears, strife, sickness, and death we experience were not part of God's original good creation. They resulted from the entrance of sin into the world.

*John 8:34 "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin."*

- d. Eternal punishment. The ultimate, final, and irrevocable punishment for all who die in sinful rebellion against God is separation in hell from God's beneficent presence.

*2 Thessalonians 1:8-10: "in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed."*

## II. God's Answer to Man's Dilemma: The Gospel

How can we be saved from our sins and the righteous wrath of God? The answer is the gospel: the "good news" of God's saving work on our behalf through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

"The gospel is not only the most important message in all of history; it is the only essential message in all of history." —Jerry Bridges

- A. The motive for the gospel: God's love and mercy

- 1. As we have seen, the holiness of God demanded that sin be punished. If God failed to punish sin, He would cease to be just. If He ceased to be just, He would cease to be God.

2. But the Bible teaches that, not only is God holy, He is also loving—love is essential to His very nature.

*1 John 4:7-8: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love."*

3. Even though we were deserving of eternal punishment, God, motivated by His infinite love, chose to take upon Himself in the person of His Son the full measure of divine wrath.

*1 John 4:9-10: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."*

4. This is the glory of the cross: God saved us in such a way that, in one and the same act, He preserved His uncompromising holiness and expressed His fathomless love and mercy.

*Romans 3:25-26: "whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."*

"In a marvelous divine way He loved us even when He hated us." —John Calvin

"How then could God express simultaneously his holiness in judgment and his love in pardon? Only by providing a divine substitute for the sinner, so that the substitute would receive the judgment and the sinner the pardon." —John Stott

## B. The nature of the gospel: Grace

It is often said that "we are saved by grace"; and so we are. Perhaps the best one-word summary we could use for what God has done for us through Christ's work on the cross is "grace."

1. Grace refers to "God's free and unmerited favor." It is God freely bestowing His goodness to people who deserve only punishment. Notice the components of this idea:
  - a. God is in no way obligated to show kindness and mercy to anyone—least of all those who have rebelled against His rule.
  - b. We are completely unable to earn any merit from God; we stand condemned in the courtroom of God's justice.
  - c. Yet God resolves to extend mercy and favor to us in spite of our guilt.
2. It is this grace—this "merciful resolve"—that is the source of our salvation and characterizes what Christ has done for us.

*Romans 3:23-24: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus..."*

3. Because we are saved “by grace” alone, we can never earn our salvation or contribute anything to it. For all eternity, God alone will receive the glory and credit for graciously giving to us what we could never merit on our own.

*Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”*

*“Grace ceases to be grace if God is compelled to bestow it in the presence of human merit...Grace ceases to be grace if God is compelled to withdraw it in the presence of human demerit...Grace is treating a person without the slightest reference to desert whatsoever, but solely according to the infinite goodness and sovereign purpose of God.” —C. Samuel Storms*

### C. The substance of the gospel: the person and work of Jesus Christ

As stated earlier, the gospel is the “good news” of God’s saving work on our behalf through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the gospel; it is His holy history, the news of who He is and what He has done for us. The gospel includes Jesus’ birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and coming return.

#### 1. Jesus’ Virgin Birth

Jesus is fully God, yet He was born into this world as a man, conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin named Mary. Jesus is therefore both fully God and fully man.

*John 1:1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...”*

*Matt. 1:20-21: “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*

See also Heb. 2:17; Phil. 2:5-8

#### 2. Jesus’ Sinless Life

Even though Jesus was subject to all the temptations to which we are all subject, He never once sinned in any way.

*Hebrews 4:15: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”*

#### 3. Jesus’ Sacrificial Death

At the heart of Christ’s life and ministry stands the cross. All His life had been preparatory for and led to that moment. At the cross, Christ provided the ground of our salvation—the basis upon which God saves us.

- a. Jesus’ death was substitutionary in nature. He died on our behalf, receiving the legal penalty for our sins and satisfying God’s wrath towards us.

*Isaiah 53:4-6: “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*

*2 Cor. 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."*

- b. Satisfaction through Substitution. Because Jesus paid the penalty for our sins, God no longer holds us responsible to pay for our sin. All of our sins are forgiven: past, present, and future.

*Colossians 2:13-14: "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."*

"At the cross, in holy love, God through Christ paid the full penalty of our disobedience Himself. He bore the judgment we deserve in order to bring us the forgiveness we do not deserve. On the cross divine mercy and justice were equally expressed and eternally reconciled. God's holy love was satisfied." —John Stott

- c. Not only are our sins forgiven, but we are also "justified"—that is, we are declared righteous by God.
- Righteousness is a legal term: it speaks of a "right standing" before God
  - God considers the righteousness that Christ achieved as belonging to us
  - This declaration is a once-for-all, permanent event in our lives that nothing can change.

"We must above all remember this substitution lest we tremble and remain anxious throughout life in fear of God's judgment." —John Calvin

#### 4. Jesus' Victorious Resurrection

The resurrection demonstrates that Jesus' death was an acceptable and effective sacrifice on our behalf. Death is the penalty for sin, and Jesus' conquest over death in the resurrection shows that sin has also been overcome.

*Rom. 4:25: "who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification."*

*1 Cor. 15:17: "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins."*

#### 5. Jesus' Triumphant Ascension

The ascension marks the beginning of Jesus' reign. He now has all rule and authority and He reigns in heaven with the Father, building His church, defeating its enemies, and interceding for His people. At the time that God has determined He will return to consummate His work and initiate a new heaven and a new earth. Then we will reign with Him for eternity, worshipping God and experiencing the full fruits of His saving work.

*Matthew 24:30-31: "Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."*

*Revelation 21:3-4: "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.'"*

D. The centrality of the gospel: "the main thing"

It is no mistake that this journey begins with an exploration of the gospel. It does not simply mark the beginning of the Christian life; the gospel is to remain at the center of the Christian life. It is therefore to remain central to the life, ministry, and proclamation of the church.

*"We never, therefore, move on from the cross of Christ—only into a more profound understanding of the cross."*

—David Pryor

At Sovereign Grace Church, our goal is to keep the gospel at the heart of all that we do. It will be the substance of our proclamation, the fuel for our adoration, and the source of our motivation. We will do all we can to ensure that our zeal for the gospel is never eclipsed by any other doctrine, teaching, or practice. Our commitment to you is that, with all our might, we will endeavor to "keep the main thing, the main thing."

*"The gospel is not only the most important message in all of history; it is the only essential message in all of history. Yet we allow thousands of professing Christians to live their entire lives without clearly understanding it and experiencing the joy of living by it." —Jerry Bridges*