

# THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL

A SHORT ACCOUNT OF THE MOMENTOUS  
NEWS ABOUT JESUS CHRIST



Tony Payne

The teaching of Jesus and his followers has been undeniably influential in our world. It has deeply shaped our Western society, and has almost certainly shaped *you*, even if you're not particularly conscious of it.

Which is all a bit strange, because that teaching is largely focused on the meaning of Jesus' death on a Roman cross, and the surprising claim that he had risen from the dead. How does this centuries-old message have anything to do with our lives today?

The answer is found in exploring other questions: Why was the title 'Christ' added to the name of this man Jesus? Everyone dies, so why was *his* death so significant? Is it believable that he rose from the dead, and why does it matter?

More to the point, is any of this strange message even true? And if it is, does it really bring the peace, joy and hope that Jesus promised and to which his followers testify?

These are the questions Tony Payne answers for you—directly and compellingly—in this short and highly readable book.

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NEWS ABOUT JESUS CHRIST



**Tony Payne**

 **matthiasmedia**  
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

*The Christian Gospel*

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# Introduction: Is this book for you?

One of the best pieces of advice I received many years ago as a young writer was to jot down the names of a few specific people I'd like to have as readers. "Put those names on sticky notes", I was told. "Stick those notes to the side of the computer screen. And write every sentence as if you were talking directly to those people."

I often do this, but I've found it very difficult this time around. My screen is not big enough for all the names.

One, for example, is a relative of mine in her early 30s, with a strong social conscience and a progressive view of the world. Another is a member of my extended family in his mid-60s, semi-retired, and looking forward to enjoying the fruits of his labours. I think about the guy in my neighbourhood in his 40s who came over to Australia from South-East Asia about 25 years ago. He has a wife and two kids and a busy job and no time or headspace at all for politics or social causes. I'd say he has a foot in both cultures—Western and Asian—and doesn't feel a hundred per cent comfortable in either. Then there's the couple I met at church the other day whose teenage daughter had become a Christian, and who were dipping their toes in the water to see what it was all about.

I could add many, many more to this diverse list, of different ages and stages, different tastes and interests, different political leanings.

The thing these friends and relatives have in common is that they don't base their lives on the Christian gospel.

Some of them had a Christian upbringing, or went to church schools, or were churchgoers at one time. Some have had no meaningful contact with the Christian church at all, and would self-describe as 'no religion'. Some belong to other faiths. Most of them would not step through a church door from one year to the next (funerals or weddings excepted). If asked whether they are a 'Christian', some would quickly say, "No", some would shuffle their feet before answering, "Not really", and some would still be happy to wear the label.

For all of them, in practical terms, Christianity plays little or no part in the decisions and priorities of their daily lives.

Is this you?

If so, no matter what your age or culture, I'm writing this little book with you in mind. I want to explain to you, as simply and clearly as I can, what the Christian gospel is.

I have two particular reasons for doing this, but before I mention them, a quick word about the word 'gospel'.

The English word 'gospel' is a translation of a Greek word from the Bible. It means 'a momentous announcement'. A gospel is a piece of big news, often good news—although that depends on your perspective. "Russia has invaded Ukraine" is a 'gospel': an announcement about a momentous event that will have massive implications for many people. Whether you think it is 'good news' or 'bad news' rather depends on your allegiances.

Christianity is based on a 'gospel'—on the declaration or

announcement of some extraordinary and momentous news—and this book is an attempt to explain clearly what that news is, and why it is important.

And, as I said, there are two particular reasons for doing so.

The *first* reason is that **it may help you understand yourself.**

If you have spent a major portion of your life in a Western country—like Australia or the USA or any part of Europe—you have been profoundly shaped by the Christian gospel. You may not be consciously aware of it. In fact, you may instinctively recoil at the idea. But if you live and breathe in a modern Western culture, you are breathing in Christianity every day, whether you realize it or not.

Historian Tom Holland, who is not himself a Christian believer, has argued for this at length in his extraordinary book *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*. He demonstrates that only one culture in the history of the world has ever been based on values like these:

- the inherent dignity and equality of every person, regardless of their race or sex
- the existence of certain universal rights that we possess by virtue of being human
- that justice should be rendered impartially and righteously to all, regardless of who we are
- that self-sacrificial love is the noblest of virtues
- that humility and gentleness are signs of true strength
- that history is going somewhere, and that there is hope for a better future.

As Holland points out, how these profoundly Christian ideas have been played out in Western culture is a long, complicated

and not always pretty story. But his underlying point is not complicated, and is hard to argue with. Our whole society is deeply Christian in its origins and in most of its core values, even though it is now no longer really Christian in any explicit sense. If we were to get down ‘under the house’ and take a look at the foundations of our culture, we’d discover the Christian gospel there.

And so it is for many of the people I am writing for, at least in my part of the world. They are not committed to Christianity in any real sense, and yet they remain strongly committed to many of the values they have inherited from Christianity.

This puts them (and most Westerners) in a strange and conflicted position. Much of what we hold dear is built on Christianity in some way or other. And yet we don’t really want Christianity. We’ll see this often in the chapters to follow.

As we look closely at what the Christian message actually is, I suspect you will often find it both appealing and unattractive. You will recognize in it the foundations of many of the attitudes or ideas you believe in and take for granted; and yet you may also see in it something that you have rejected or ignored.

There’s also a very good chance that you will find the Christian gospel *surprising*. I’ve been talking with people about the Christian faith for nearly 40 years, and my universal experience is that most people have major misconceptions about it. They think Christianity is mainly about going to church, or having a religious kind of personality, or supporting traditional values, or being a good, moral person, or trying to please God so as to get into heaven, or inhabiting a particular subculture, or avoiding particular practices (like sex and drugs), and so on.

At its heart, Christianity is none of these things.

I'd love to clarify that for you. I'd like to *clear away the misconceptions*, and help you understand *what the Christian gospel really is*, and in so doing, help you understand yourself and the culture we all live in.

However, self-understanding is not the only reason for reading on, or the most important.

I wonder whether you think that the values I listed above are just a description of what people in Western culture happen to approve of. Or are they more universal and important than that? Love, justice, the dignity and value of each person—that kind of thing. Are these a set of convictions that our culture has just chosen for whatever reason? Or do you think that they are grounded in how the world really is, or should be? Do you think that these are the kinds of ideas that every person—no matter their background or culture—could and should embrace? Do you think that these values are in some deep sense *true*?

I'm convinced that they are, because the Christian gospel they are based on is true. I believe it explains the way the world really is, and who we really are, and what our lives are really for.

If that is the case—if the Christian gospel is profoundly *true*—then it is worth building our lives upon. And conversely, to ignore it or reject it is to build our lives on an uncertain and unstable foundation. Which is rarely good. The person who will figure very prominently in the pages to follow once put it this way:

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his

house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

That’s Jesus speaking, in the blunt and challenging way in which he usually spoke. Perhaps I can be similarly straightforward ...

My *second*, and more important, aim in this book is for you **not only to understand the Christian gospel but to build your life on it.**

Actually, I should put that differently. I’m hoping that you will arrive at a new understanding of the person at the centre of Christianity—Jesus Christ himself—and build your life on *him*.

As we’ll see in the chapters to follow, the Christian gospel is really all about him. (It’s right there in the name.) All the other practices and traditions and trappings that we associate with Christianity are footnotes and side issues by comparison. Jesus is the subject of the ‘big announcement’.

From the very beginning, when Jesus’ followers began broadcasting the news about him, their preaching was built around who Jesus was and what he had done—and, in particular, the meaning of his death on a Roman cross, and the claim that he had risen from the dead to be Lord of all.

That’s the Christian gospel in a nutshell.

But it’s a very compressed and strange nutshell when you

think about it. Why did this man Jesus have the title ‘Christ’ added to his name? Everyone dies, so why was his death so significant? Is it believable that he was ‘raised’, and why does it matter?

More to the point: Is any of this strange message really true? And if it is, what does it mean for us and the way we live?

That’s what I will do my best to explain over the next seven chapters.



Before we get started, three quick introductory notes.

The first concerns the source of our information about Jesus and the Christian message. It all comes out of a collection of 66 books called ‘the Bible’, written from around 1500 BC to AD 80.

And so as this book unfolds, I’ll be quoting from and explaining parts of the Bible quite often. As I do that, I’ll use references like this: Matthew 7:24-27. That means the book of Matthew, chapter 7, verses 24-27 (which is where Jesus’ words quoted above, about building your house on the rock, come from). Feel free to chase up the references yourself, and read the Bible passages and chapters in their contexts. You can do this easily online at [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com).

That brings me to the second introductory thing to say about this book. As we explore the various aspects of the Christian message, it’s possible that you’ll have various questions along the way—such as questions about the Bible and how it came to be written. I won’t be pausing to answer many of these. I think it’s best just to explain as simply,

straightforwardly and briefly as possible what the Christian message is, and to leave the questions till later—especially since some of the questions that the early chapters raise will be answered as we go along. The appendix, ‘Exploring further’, has some suggestions about how to address whatever questions you might have.

The third thing to note is that although Jesus is the centre of the message, he’s not where the story begins. In fact, to understand who Jesus is and what he achieved (especially what his death and resurrection mean) we have to paint in a bit of background. We have to start a little further back.

At the very beginning, in fact.

# 1. Beginning with God

The Christian gospel is like one of those six-part TV series that are all over the streaming services.

The title scrolls across the screen saying something like ‘The history-making message about Jesus’.

Then there’s an opening montage. A Jewish man named Jesus staggers up a hill carrying a wooden cross. It fades to him hanging from that cross, breathing his last breath. It fades again to a cave-like tomb cut into rock, with the massive stone that covered the opening now rolled away. We see the astonished, tear-stained face of a woman as a man walks towards her.

Then the scene shifts again, and the words ‘Six months earlier’ appear on the screen ...

Except that in the case of the Christian message, it’s a bit more than six months earlier. In fact, so much more that we can’t really put a date on it.

The story of Jesus begins at the beginning of the world.

Needless to say, there weren’t any cameras there to film it, nor people to witness it. The only person there was the one who did it—the God who created all things. The story of Jesus begins all the way back, with the creation of the world by an all-powerful, personal God.

For some readers of this book, talking about ‘creation’ will be controversial—but not for most. The vast majority of people who have ever lived on our planet, including most people living in Western cultures today, believe that this world had a beginning, and that a creator God began it.<sup>1</sup>

It’s not really surprising that most people think this way, because virtually everybody *lives* this way—that is, as if the world is an ordered kind of place, with meaning and purpose built into its fabric.

We all live, for example, as if there are such things as good and evil and right and wrong in the world. (We might argue about what they are, but we never doubt that they exist.) We live as if love and justice are real and important. We treat each other as ‘persons’, with minds and personalities uniquely our own. We think that people *matter* and shouldn’t be treated as objects. And we relate to the world itself as if it were the kind of good, orderly, predictable place that can be studied and understood and navigated and talked about.

When you stop to think about it, none of these basic realities that we experience every day has any foundation if the world is just a gigantic accident, resulting simply from the interplay of various purely physical evolutionary forces. They only make sense if the world was formed and ordered by the mind of a creator.

Most people understand this intuitively, even if they have not thought about it in detail. And even those who vigorously reject the idea of a divine creator still think and live as if the

1 Interestingly, even though a majority of Westerners today believe that some kind of evolutionary process was involved in the world becoming the way it is today, a majority also believe that a creator God is behind the whole thing. See, for example, A Swift, ‘In U.S., belief in creationist view of humans at new low’, *Gallup*, 22 May 2017, accessed 8 November 2021 ([news.gallup.com/poll/210956/belief-creationist-view-humans-new-low.aspx](https://news.gallup.com/poll/210956/belief-creationist-view-humans-new-low.aspx)).

world were an ordered, purposeful, morally charged place.

I'm not going to spend much time, then, arguing for the fact of creation or about the scientific details of exactly how it happened.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of creation by the creator for the story I want to tell is that it establishes the basic relationships that are the foundation of all that follows.

There's God.

There's the good world that he made.

And there's us—humanity—also his creatures, but with a particular place in his world.

## God

It all begins with God himself:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good ... (Genesis 1:1-4)

The God of these opening sentences of the Bible is not a nature deity, or in some way part of his creation—like a Sea God or Tree God or Mountain God. He is a supremely powerful being who stands before and outside the physical world, and brings it into being.

The God we meet in these words is undoubtedly in charge of events. He acts with the authority of an all-powerful king.

2 If these issues are important to you, see the appendix, 'Exploring further', for where to find more discussion of these questions.

He has only to say a word and it is done. “Let there be light”, he says, and there is. And on it goes, through the rest of the creation account in Genesis chapter 1. Let there be water and sky; let there be dry ground; let the ground bring forth vegetation; and so on.

The fact that God *speaks* in Genesis 1 is very striking. He is not an impersonal force or a silent and distant ‘first cause’. He is a person, who thinks and speaks and acts as persons do, with intention and purpose. He creates with a rational order in mind. In the rest of the chapter, he makes various spaces (sky, sea, earth) and then fills those spaces with life (birds, sea creatures, animals).

The overall picture is of a majestic divine ruler, who is separate from the world he creates and yet close to it and active within it. His Spirit hovers over the waters. His word forms and shapes the world, in all its intricate order and interconnections.

## **The world**

The world that God makes and forms is *good*. Every time God creates something in Genesis 1, he pauses to see how great it is. The phrase “And God saw that it was good” echoes throughout the opening chapter (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), culminating in a final evaluation: “God saw all that he had made, and it was *very good*” (Genesis 1:31).

God himself is very good, and the world he creates is very full of goodness. It’s a delightful and functional world. It works beautifully, and it’s a joy to behold.

Of course it is, I hear you say. Who would *not* think that the physical world is full of goodness and beauty and amazing functionality?

The answer is: pretty much every other religion and philosophy except Christianity. We may not always realize it, and our culture certainly doesn't acknowledge it these days, but our Western beliefs about the orderly beauty and goodness of the physical world stem from the biblical truth that the world was created by a powerful and good creator.

In primitive animist religions, for example, the world is an unreliable, chaotic place ruled by various spirits and nature gods that have to be appeased in order for things to turn out right. In Greek philosophy, the physical world is less real than the pure world of thought and reason—our physical existence is a prison to be escaped. Similarly, in most Eastern religions (like Buddhism), the physical world is an illusion—the more we can detach ourselves from it, the closer we get to true enlightenment. In contemporary atheism, the world is neither good nor bad—it just exists as a result of accidental, purely physical forces, with the fittest and best-adapted surviving to replicate themselves and become dominant.

By contrast, the Bible teaches not only that the world is real, but that it is *good*, because it is the orderly creation of a personal, rational, all-powerful, good God.

## Us

So far, we have talked about 'the world' and 'creation' without mentioning the strange and particular species that dominates the world—the species that sees itself as part of the world, and yet as special or different from every other creature.

In Genesis, humanity is very much part of the created order. We are made of the same stuff as the rest of the world—from “the dust of the ground” as it says in Genesis 2:7—and

yet we are different. At the climax of the creation story, God makes a creature that is in some ways like himself:

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”  
(Genesis 1:26-28)

Humanity is created “in the image of God”. We are still creatures, but unlike the rest of creation, we are like God in some way. The passage itself doesn’t explain exactly how we are “in the image of God”, and many people have wondered over the centuries which aspects of human nature are ‘godlike’. Is it our ability to reason or to speak? Is it our grasp of goodness and morality?

The only thing that the passage itself says about “the image of God” is that like God, humanity is supposed to *rule over the world*. God is the Ruler of the world with a capital ‘R’. He gives humanity the job of supervising and looking after the world—of being his middle managers, if you like, with responsibility and authority over the other animals and creatures.

This is not a licence for humanity to despoil or destroy the

creation. Far from it. If we were to be like God, we would rule the world in goodness and wisdom and justice. The fact that we *don't*, and that the world is something of a mess, is a subject that we need to get to (and will do shortly).

But at this point, we need to notice two vital implications of God making humanity 'in his image' to rule over the world under his own over-arching rule.

The *first* implication is that **the 'specialness' we attach to human beings and human life is not an illusion.**

Article 1 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights has this extraordinary statement:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

This sounds right and obvious—'self-evident', even, as the USA's Declaration of Independence claims when it uses similar language.

But try to pretend that Genesis 1 had never been written. Try to pretend that no-one had ever believed in a God who created humanity in his own image, with all the dignity that this confers on every single human person. Try to pretend that everyone believed instead that human life simply evolved as one of the countless species of life on our planet, no different in value or meaning from a parrot or a python or a pot plant.

Now ask yourself *why*. Why human rights? Why does the assertion of the basic, universal dignity and freedom for every individual human on the planet seem so right and obvious to us? And why does the manifest lack of these rights and freedoms in our world strike us as outrageous and wrong?

Like so much in our Western culture, the UN Declaration says something profoundly true, but without a solid foundation—like a house built on sand, you might say. It’s an attempt to reconstruct and assert an essentially Christian view of the specialness and dignity of humanity without a foundation in the God who created us this way. Perhaps this is why it hasn’t really worked. Our world remains mired in inequality, lack of human dignity, and a widespread failure to treat one another “in a spirit of brotherhood”.

The *second* implication of God creating humanity in his image is not so much to do with how we treat each other, but with **how we treat God himself**.

The creation of humanity by God sets up a relationship between God and us. In many ways, it’s like the relationship between a parent and a child.

The parent brings the child’s life into being, and takes responsibility for nourishing and providing for that life. This is what God does. He not only creates the world (and us) but sustains and provides for his creation (including us). As the rest of the Bible goes on to say, God remains active in his creation, sustaining and supervising it at all times. He is the divine Father.

But the child has responsibilities in this relationship as well: to receive the care and goodness that the parent provides, with thanks, honour and respect.

God’s creation of us calls forth a similar response from us—to treat him as our good creator; to accept his authority over us as our maker and ruler; to receive all that he gives us with thanks and honour.

This is very nicely expressed in a passage at the very other end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation. In this section,

there is a vision of the leaders of God's people falling down before God and saying:

“You are worthy, our Lord and God,  
to receive *glory* and *honour* and *power*,  
for you created all things,  
and by your will they were created  
and have their being.” (Revelation 4:11)

This is an excellent summary of most of what we've seen in this chapter. If God is the mighty creator and sustainer of all things, then he is worthy to be regarded as the highest and greatest being in the universe (*glory*), to be respected and worshipped for who he is (*honour*), and to be obeyed as the supreme authority in the world (*power*).

This is the first foundational piece of the backstory that eventually led to that sequence of events in the first century AD when Jesus went to his death and rose again. God is the creator and ruler of all. This is his good and beautiful world. And we are his special creatures, made in his image to rule and take care of his world, all the time thanking and honouring him, and treating him as God.

It all sounds pretty ideal, in one sense—like that happy family portrait taken 20 years ago when everyone seemed young and smiling and without a care. But that's not the reality now, and when we look now at that portrait on the wall, it only reminds us of the pain and suffering that has happened since, and how many things have unravelled.

Our world is like that. It is still beautiful, but it is streaked with ugliness as well. We still sense that humanity is different and important, but our record in ruling and caring for the world is dismal. No-one would look at our world today and say

(as God did at the beginning) that it is “very good”. The place is a mess. Come to think of it, many of our lives are a mess.

And as for our relationship with God, that’s hardly ‘happy families’ either. For the vast majority of us, we’re not on speaking terms.

What happened?

That’s the subject of our next chapter.