

discover



Questioning  
Your Way  
to Faith

Mike McGarry

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# Introduction

**T**eenagers ask great questions. When I think about the most difficult questions I've been asked in nearly two decades of youth ministry, they're usually prefaced with, "So, I know this is a stupid question . . ." or "I feel like I should already know the answer to this question, but . . ." and then they ask a nuanced theological question that's been debated by the greatest theologians and philosophers for two thousand years. And it's not just upperclassmen. Many of those questions come from the same middle school boys who refuse to admit they got hit during dodgeball and whose body odor makes youth leaders second-guess their commitment to youth group. But that's the beauty of helping young people discover faith: you never know what's going on in students' heads until you make it okay to ask their questions.

I sincerely pray this book is an opportunity for you to discover faith by leaning into your questions. Maybe you've grown up in church and haven't felt comfortable enough to ask your questions. Perhaps doubts have crept in that you're having a hard time admitting even to yourself. Or maybe you're new to Christianity and have some questions about what it really means to follow Jesus. I'm also hoping that some of you readers are young men and women who don't consider yourself a Christian, but you're interested in learning how Christians respond to

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these common questions. Whoever you are, and whatever the reasons you have for reading this book, I'm praying for you, and I hope this book helps you believe that the gospel really is the good news of great joy for all people.

There are three different ways you can choose to read this book: on your own, with a parent or mentor, or with a small group. The "Digging Deeper" section at the end of each chapter includes a few reflection questions. If you're reading on your own, you can write in the book or in a journal as you process each chapter's message. If you're reading with others, use these questions to discuss and to learn from each other. I'll admit that I often skip over discussion questions when I read them in other books, so if you do the same, I get it. But they're there, so you might as well give them a chance to help you process what you've read. You're reading the book—so make the most of it by really chewing on it before getting sucked back into your phone and homework. Read the questions and take a few minutes to discuss or write down a short response before moving on.

# 1

## What Is the Gospel?

**T**he gospel is the best news in the history of creation. And yet, many who've grown up in church are so familiar with some parts of the gospel they've stopped listening to it. Even though some could repeat the Sunday school definition, "gospel means 'good news,'" most will struggle to articulate what that good news actually is. Since the gospel is the heartbeat of this entire book, it's important for us to begin by getting clear on what the gospel really is.

### GETTING CLEAR ON THE GOSPEL

The gospel isn't a good idea or a mystery that we need to unlock. The gospel is a person: Jesus Christ. He is the "good news of great joy for all people" that the angels declared when they announced his birth (Luke 2:10). The gospel is good news because it's a celebration of who Jesus is and what he has done to save sinners and adopt them as children of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, the gospel isn't merely news to tell, it's an invitation: "Here's who God is and what he's done to make us his dearly loved children." If it's true, it's a message worth shouting from the rooftops.

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It is impossible to receive the gospel in faith without believing in these key components: Jesus's sinless life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection. Who Jesus is matters just as much as what Jesus did. Jesus lived a sinless life, died a painful death as the substitute for all of God's children, rose from the grave in victory over sin and death, and will return to complete both his judgment of sin and the salvation of his people. This is good news for every generation, and it is worthy of being proclaimed every chance we get.

There are times I've heard "the gospel" preached with barely any mention of Jesus. That's not the gospel, even if those sermons included gospel-sounding promises. The gospel is good news about Jesus. In many ways, Jesus actually *is* the gospel. The gospel is not a set of theological beliefs or a spiritual mystery that needs to be unlocked. Talking about the love and grace of God is not the same thing as believing the gospel. After all, faithful Jews and Muslims can talk about God's love!

At its heart, the gospel is the proclamation that God saves sinners through Jesus Christ. It is not a "new law" or an update to the Ten Commandments. It is the grace of God that sinners receive by faith in who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. If we overlook or downplay the bad news of sin and judgment, then the gospel becomes much easier to shrug at. The gospel is good news of great joy because there is bad news: the wages of sin is death, and we're all guilty (Romans 3:23, 6:23). Through the gospel, sinners can become children of God, be set free from bondage to sin and guilt and shame, and have a new destiny: eternal joy in the presence of God, their heavenly Father. This, my friends, is good news indeed!

The gospel of grace lies at the heart of Christianity. We live in a world that puts so much pressure on you to get good grades, earn that scholarship, and change the world. But Jesus simply invites you to come to him. You don't need to be impressive or worthy. You don't need to clean yourself up before God will

accept you. The Bible says it this way, “But God shows his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). This gift of grace is just that, a gift. It’s unearned, undeserved, and doesn’t need to be paid back. Believing the gospel will change your life because when you turn away from sin in order to follow Jesus, then God will transform you from the inside out (instead of requiring you to fix yourself on the outside before he “moves in”).

## TWO WAYS WE MISUNDERSTAND THE GOSPEL

There are two approaches to the gospel that I believe need to be revisited: one that crams Jesus down people’s throats, and another that attempts to “preach the gospel without words.” Although they appear to be opposite approaches, they are actually different sides of the same coin. Both try to compel a genuine profession of faith. This means that, at best, these approaches only produce false converts who conform to the externals of Christianity for a while.

The force-feeding approach fails because we’re all the same in this regard: when someone crams something down your throat, you’re probably going to vomit it out even if it’s good for you. We know this, but some youth workers and parents continue to do it anyway. Many church kids have not rejected Jesus as much as they’ve rejected him being forced upon them through pressure to think and behave like a Christian without their heart being in it. Their parents and youth workers misunderstand the gospel because good news of great joy doesn’t need to be forced; it simply needs to be announced. The gospel takes root in the heart before it changes anyone’s behavior. Consider your own background and prayerfully reflect on whether your faith is the result of your own relationship with Christ or if it’s the result of your parents’ (or youth leader’s) desire for you. My prayer is for this book and the “digging deeper” questions to prompt you to question your way toward faith.



The “preach without words” approach falls short because none of us can *be* the gospel. The gospel is an announcement. It tells of God’s grace poured out on sinners through the life, death, resurrection, and eventual return of Jesus Christ. When Christians live in a way that reflects the gracious love of God, it may warm nonbelievers toward hearing the gospel, but they still need to *hear* it, because it’s news about *who Jesus is and what he’s done*—not about what we have done to love them. So, let’s drop the talk about “being the gospel” and be free from that kind of pressure—who can live up to that? Instead, let’s walk by faith as we are being changed by the gospel, loving others as Christ loved us, and telling them what God has done through Jesus. As we do these things, the gospel will be heard and its power to change lives will be seen.

### THE GOSPEL IS FOR CHRISTIANS TOO!

The gospel is so much more than just a message that calls sinners to trust in Jesus for salvation and new life. The gospel of grace lies at the heart of our *whole* salvation: justification (our righteous standing with God), sanctification (our growth in holiness), and glorification (our coming perfection). And yet, with sanctification, it is common for Christians to overlook the centrality of the gospel. It can seem like what we need most is practical advice about how to become more like Christ. This usually happens with good intentions, but it leads believers into works-righteousness (believing our good works contribute to our justification) rather than daily dependence on the Holy Spirit. As the apostle Paul cries out in Galatians 3:3, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” Justification, sanctification, and glorification all rely on faith and grace, not on human effort.

Theologians often refer to four chapters of salvation history: creation, fall, redemption, and glorification. This is helpful to remember because it lets us locate where we are in our walk with Christ. Of course, none of us are still in the creation

chapter, and no one alive has already been glorified. So everyone you meet is marked by either the fall or redemption. Those who have not professed faith in Christ and repented of their sin are still marked by the fall—they do not belong to Christ and they need to hear and believe the gospel. But those who have confessed their sin, confessed Christ Jesus as Lord, and have professed their desire to turn from sin and follow Jesus (repentance) are marked by redemption. They have been transformed by the grace they received and by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit as they hear and grow in the gospel. This is why the gospel is the heartbeat that drives everything about our relationship with God.

Many teenagers who grow up in the church seem to talk about the gospel from their heels, holding back from believing it with joyful enthusiasm because they aren't sure it's all that great. Do you really believe the gospel is good news of great joy, or do you think it's just okay? Is your heart bored or lukewarm toward the gospel? The single best thing you can do for your life is to continually warm your own heart by the life-giving message of the gospel. If the gospel is just okay news, then it's on a level playing field with any number of other life-improving philosophies. But if it's true that God really does save sinners through Jesus, and that it's all a work of grace, then it really is good news!

### **DIGGING DEEPER**

Use these questions for your own personal reflection and journaling, or for discussion with others.

- What does the author mean by saying, “The gospel is not a good idea?” What are some ways we can reduce the gospel to being just that?
- Based on this chapter, how would you describe the gospel in one or two sentences to a friend who asked?

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- What are some common ways you've heard others misunderstand the gospel?
- What are the four "chapters" of salvation and how does that help Christians make sense of the world and the future?