

A LEARN TOGETHER BOOK

Learn the Gospel

DEEPEN YOUR
UNDERSTANDING OF AND
TRUST IN THE MESSAGE
ABOUT JESUS



TONY PAYNE



Whether building a house or building a life, solid, square and true foundations are vital.

If you're just starting out in the Christian life—or considering it—you want to get those foundations in place from the start. Even if you've been a Christian for a while, it's important to occasionally check your foundations; they might have shifted or been attacked by white ants, or perhaps they weren't laid quite as straight as you originally thought.

In this **Learn Together** book, we'll thoroughly inspect our gospel foundations and make our understanding of that gospel sound and biblical.

Through reading, studying the Bible, watching some video input and discussing what we're learning together, we'll go deep into the gospel of Jesus Christ—understanding each of its parts and how they fit together, and what implications the gospel has for our lives.

Tony Payne is known around the world as a Christian teacher and writer. He is the author (or co-author) of many popular books and resources, including *Two Ways to Live*, *How to Walk Into Church* and *Guidance and the Voice of God*.

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TONY PAYNE

 **matthiasmedia**
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

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Matthias Media

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Email: info@matthiasmedia.com.au

Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com.au

Please visit our website for current postal and telephone contact information.

Matthias Media (USA)

Email: sales@matthiasmedia.com

Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com

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How to make the most of this “Learn Together” book

This is a special kind of book, and not only because it deals with a special subject—the gospel of Jesus Christ. It’s a book that’s written to be read and discussed and worked through *with other people*.

It’s a **Learn Together** book.

In one sense, every book could be a way to learn together. Talking with other people about the books we’re reading is one of the joys of life. Other people teach us, sharpen us, and show us the truth in action.

But this book is particularly and deliberately designed to help *a group of people* learn and grow together. That group might be your family or some friends or a Sunday School class or the regular small group of people from your church that you meet with each week. It might even be just one other person with whom you organize to meet, in order to read and learn and grow together.

The way we’ve put this book together is built on four

fundamental convictions:

1. God's word, the Bible, is the source of our knowledge of God and of ourselves.
2. God has given us each other to teach and encourage and help each other to learn from his word, and to put it into practice.
3. Reading is a wonderful gift from God—one that is uniquely useful for learning certain kinds of things.
4. A *combination* of learning inputs and approaches is the best way to learn. This book contains multiple opportunities to read, to respond by jotting things down, to listen, to watch, to reflect, and to discuss.

Building on these convictions, we've designed this to be a particular kind of book:

- *It contains sections to read aloud with other people*—you can take it in turns to read, or you might like to appoint someone who is particularly good at reading aloud to do most of the reading. Some of these sections of text will be from the Bible itself.
- *It's a book to write in*—we've provided plenty of white space and generous line spacing so that you can underline things in the text that strike you, scribble in the margins, and jot down your own ideas and what you're learning from others.
- *Interaction and discussion are integral*—at numerous points in each chapter you'll notice some

numbered questions. This signals a good point to pause and talk about what you've been reading, using the discussion prompts and questions to help you get started. These questions and prompts are there to help; don't feel you have to use them all—the important thing is to talk together, and to help each other learn and grow.

- *It's a book with bonus videos*—we've produced some free bonus videos that you can also use as you work through this book together (you'll find them at matthiasmedia.com/learnthegospel). Depending on the circumstances of your group, for example, it might be helpful to watch a video together outlining or illustrating some of the key content (rather than reading aloud together). At various points in each chapter you'll see a little video icon to show where there is a free bonus video that would fit in well at that point. Make good use of the bonus videos *and* the text in this book. If you decide to watch the video together during your group discussion, read over the text later in your own time to solidify the ideas—and vice versa (if you read the text, watch the videos in your own time). Absorbing the key ideas of each chapter in *both* text and audiovisual form maximizes your learning.

My prayer is that this book will be a useful and enjoyable way to do something supremely important and special: *to*

learn with other people what it means to know and serve God through Jesus Christ.

1. Why learn the gospel?

Introduction

In any long-term, important project—whether building a house or building a life—it’s vital to pay attention to the *foundations*.

If you’re a newish Christian and have a lifetime of spiritual building in front of you, now is the time to make sure that your foundations are solid, square, and true.

If you’re a more established Christian, it’s also really important to get down under the house and check the foundations. They might have shifted or cracked or been attacked by white ants. Or perhaps they weren’t laid quite straight in the first place.

And if you wouldn’t yet call yourself a Christian but are interested to find out more, there’s no better place to start than with the absolute essentials—the foundations of Christianity.

The foundation of Christian faith and life is *the gospel of Jesus Christ*.

In the eight chapters of this **Learn Together** book,

we'll thoroughly inspect that gospel foundation, and we'll make our understanding of it deep and solid and true. We'll learn *the gospel of Jesus Christ* together—understanding each of its parts and how they fit together, and what implications the various facets of the gospel have for our lives.

1. In as few words as possible, write down what you think the “gospel” is.

2. Talk about why you wrote down what you did.

Why learn the gospel?

a. First importance

The Christian gospel is an announcement of great or momentous news—that's what the word “gospel” means. And like any piece of news, the gospel message can

be communicated and understood and remembered clearly, or it can be miscommunicated, misunderstood, or forgotten.

The “gospel,” in other words, is the kind of thing that can and should be *learned*.

It may not have occurred to you before that the gospel was something that you should *learn*. But the New Testament certainly assumes that it is. When Paul is urging the Ephesians to abandon their former way of living, he says, strikingly: “But that is not the way you *learned Christ!*—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus” (Eph 4:20-21). In much the same way, Paul reminds the Colossians that when they first heard the word of truth, the gospel, they “*learned* it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant” (Col 1:7).

In fact, the apostles often write to believers in the New Testament to *remind* them of what the gospel is, to teach it to them again, and to make sure that they understand it deeply and properly.

A classic example is found in 1 Corinthians 15:1-5, where Paul reminds his somewhat chaotic Corinthian friends of the essentials—the things of “first importance” that he preached to them, and that he wants them to hold on to:

¹ Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved, if you

Paul talks about his ministry in 1 Corinthians 15 as if he were a courier. He had been given a message, it was his job to deliver it (by preaching), and that's what he'd done. And this message ("the gospel I preached to you") had become the rock and foundation of his hearers' lives.

Now he wants to make sure that they cling to that rock, because like any message or word you receive it's possible to lose your grip on the gospel—to forget or ignore it, to become confused or vague about it, to mis-remember or distort it. And this would be terrible, says Paul to the Corinthians, because the gospel is the message "by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain" (1 Cor 15:2).

This is perhaps the most fundamental reason to learn the gospel. *It's the message that saves us, like a rock we cling to in a raging sea.* And the way we cling to that message is by knowing it clearly and continuing to trust it wholeheartedly.

Before we leave 1 Corinthians 15, it's worth noticing how Paul summarizes his "gospel" in a nutshell.

Firstly, the gospel is a message *about a king*. That's what the word "Christ" means. It's an Old Testament term meaning the "anointed one" or "kingly ruler" that God promised he would send to rule his chosen people Israel and the whole world. "Christ" isn't Jesus' surname; it's a title—like saying "King Jesus." The gospel is a message about God's long-promised worldwide king.

Secondly, we only know who or what a “Christ” is, and why his death and resurrection are so important, because of the *Old Testament*. Twice Paul says that the gospel is “in accordance with the Scriptures” (which in this context meant the Old Testament Scriptures). The death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ didn’t happen randomly or out of the blue. It was the culmination of the long history of God’s purposes revealed to Israel, and we can only really understand the gospel against this background.

Thirdly, the basic content of the message is *the death and resurrection of the king*, Jesus Christ. The gospel is the momentous newflash that Christ died for sins, was buried (i.e. he really did die), was raised on the third day, and was seen by a whole bunch of people (i.e. he really did rise).

Whatever else Christian faith is about—whatever implications it has or other important themes it addresses—these are the things of “first importance”: that as a matter of historical truth the man Jesus died for our sins, and he was raised from the dead on the third day to be the king or Christ of all. This is the center of the center; the foundation on which we take our stand and build our Christian lives.

What Paul says here is echoed in different ways all over the New Testament—that the foundation of our Christian lives is the gospel message about Jesus Christ’s death for our sins and his resurrection from the dead to

be lord of all, in accordance with the Scriptures. This is the message we need to learn, understand thoroughly, and hold fast to.

And that's what the rest of this book will be about.



5. How do the elements of the “nutshell gospel” in 1 Corinthians 15 compare with your own gospel summaries? What do you notice?

c. More good reasons to learn the gospel

When Paul wrote to the Christians at Colossae, who had “learned” the gospel from his good friend Epaphras (Col 1:7), he was very keen that they stick closely to the one, true, original message (just like with the Corinthians). He didn’t want them to become captivated by other “gospels” that were doing the rounds and causing trouble (this is what chapter 2 of Colossians is mostly about).

The particular issue in Colossae seemed to be this: *How does someone grow in spirituality and become more godly?*

Here are some excerpts from Paul's letter. As you read them, ask yourself: *How have the Colossians grown as Christians? How does Paul want them to keep growing?*

³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶ which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, ⁷ just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf ⁸ and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

⁹ And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹ being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all

endurance and patience with joy; ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. (Col 1:3-12)

²⁷ To them [God's people, the saints] God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

^{2:1} For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, ² that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴ I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. ⁵ For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

⁶ Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. (Col 1:27-2:7)

6. From these passages, how would you describe Christian growth or maturity? What are its features?

7. How does Christian growth happen? What drives it or causes it?

8. How does this fit with your own experience of Christian growth?



d. The engine of growth and the word that we share

(Go to matthiasmedia.com/learntbegospel to watch bonus video 1b at this point if you'd prefer to watch and listen to the next section, rather than read aloud.)

It's hard to think of how a tree with deep roots can “walk” and make progress—unless it is one of those mobile trees from *The Lord of the Rings*—but that's what Paul wants the Colossians to do in the passage we've just looked at.

In order to grow and flourish day by day as Christians (to “walk” in Christ), they need to keep strengthening their roots. And those roots are the gospel message that was received and learned and planted within them—the “word of the truth, the gospel,” the message about “Christ Jesus the Lord.”

In other words, Paul is reminding them that *the gospel is not only what gets you started in the Christian life; it's also the ongoing engine of Christian growth*. That's why Paul's method for producing Christian maturity is simply to keep proclaiming Christ: “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col 1:28).

Don't look elsewhere; don't move on; don't be enticed by fancy alternatives or add-ons. The deep roots that will nourish us and cause us to grow solid and strong as Christians are the roots of the original gospel message

that we received and learned.

This, then, is a further compelling reason to learn and know the gospel thoroughly—*it's the source of Christian growth*.

And there's another reason too, which we also see in Colossians. Towards the end of the letter, Paul lifts the Colossians' eyes from their own issues and struggles to the world outside:

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the [message],* to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your [message]* always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. (Col 4:2-6)

Did you notice the repeated word “message” with the asterisk next to it? In the original Greek of the passage, this is the same word each time—it's the word *logos*, which is often translated “word” or “message.” The message that Paul has been commissioned to preach, and for which he is now in prison, is also a message that belongs to the Colossians and which they talk about with “outsiders” in the midst of everyday life and interaction.

We should learn the gospel really well *so that we can*

share it with others when the opportunity presents itself. A sure test of whether we've really understood something is whether we can explain it simply and clearly to someone else. And the gospel is no different. It needs to be learned in order to be shared.

Sharing the gospel with others won't be the focus of this book—there's a companion volume to this one that is all about that (*Share the Gospel*). But the first and prior step is to learn the gospel really well.



9. Given the reasons we've explored for learning the gospel, what are you looking forward to most from this book? What do you personally hope to gain?

How we'll learn the gospel

We're going to be learning the gospel using an outline called *Two Ways to Live*. For more than 40 years, *Two Ways to Live* has been used and appreciated all over the world as a simple, clear, logical presentation of the key elements of the gospel.

Two Ways to Live has six main points that focus on the death of Christ for sins and his resurrection from the dead, but which also sketch in some of the background (“in accordance with the Scriptures”) that enables us to make sense of what Jesus’ death and resurrection mean. The six points are:

1. God as the creator and ruler of the world, and of us
2. Humanity as rebels against the good creator
3. The judgment that we deserve because of our rebellion
4. The death of Jesus for our sins
5. The resurrection of Jesus as God’s appointed ruler (or Christ)
6. The response that this gospel calls for.

It is important to realize that *Two Ways to Live* itself is an *outline*. It’s like a set of bullet points that seeks to capture the key points of the gospel in the shortest, clearest, most memorable way possible.¹

1 You can find the full *Two Ways to Live* outline on the last two pages of this book.

But underneath each of the short, punchy statements that you'll find in *Two Ways to Live* is a deep well of biblical, gospel truth. In the remaining chapters of this book, we'll draw from that well at some depth, clarifying and exploring the meaning of each of the six points and how they fit together, and reflecting on their implications.

We'll also do something that is a bit unusual these days. We're going to learn the short, memorable statements of *Two Ways to Live* off by heart, so that the truths that they summarize are embedded in our minds to be called upon whenever we need them. Depending on your background, this sort of learning might be unfamiliar to you, but it is immensely helpful for planting the truths of the gospel down deep in our minds and hearts.

At the end of each chapter there will be a learning exercise like the one below ("Learn point 1 of *Two Ways to Live*: Creation"). These exercises are intended to help you learn the next main point of the *Two Ways to Live* outline. (Feel free to use the full *Two Ways to Live* outline at the end of this book as an aid to memorization. Keep reading it through. You might like to take a photo on your phone and carry it around with you.)

Before next time

Reflect and pray about what you've learned in this chapter

Look back over this chapter. Make notes in the margin about truths that prompt you to give thanks and pray. Spend some time thanking God and asking him to write these truths in your heart.

If you watched the videos in your group, make sure you read those sections of text—and vice versa (if you read aloud the sections of text, watch the relevant videos).

Learn point 1 of *Two Ways to Live*: Creation

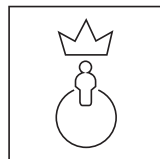
Step 1

Read the statements aloud three times, tracing over the drawing as you do so.

God is the ruler of the world. (*draw crown*)

He made the world. (*draw world*)

He made us to rule his good world, giving thanks and honor to him. (*draw humanity*)



Read the Bible verse and transition statement aloud three times.²

2 A note about the Bible translations used in this book: for the Bible passages that are studied and quoted, we've used the ESV (as we do in most Matthias Media resources). But when learning and quoting the *Two Ways to Live* outline, we've used the NIV because that is the translation used in the outline (it was deemed a more suitable translation for a wider variety of readers in evangelistic contexts). NIV verses are marked with a † symbol.

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

This is how God created things to be. But it's fairly obvious that this is not our experience of the world now. What happened?

Step 1a

Without looking at page 24, fill in the blanks in the statements.

God is _____ of the world.

He _____ the world.

He made us to _____,
giving _____ and _____ to him.

Check your answers, and make any corrections. Read the corrected version of the statements aloud, doing the drawing as you go.

Fill in the blanks in the Bible verse and transition statement.

You are _____, our Lord and God, to receive _____ and _____ and _____, for you _____, and by your will they _____ and _____ _____ . (Revelation 4:___)

This is how God _____.

But it's fairly obvious that _____
_____ of the world now. What
_____?

Check your answers, and make any corrections. Read the corrected Bible verse and transition statement aloud.

If possible, wait some time (perhaps even 24 hours) before moving on to step 2.

Step 2

Fill in the blanks in the statements.

God is _____.

He _____.

He made us to _____,
giving _____.

Check your answers, and make any corrections. Read through the corrected version of the statements, doing the drawing as you go.

Without looking at page 26, fill in the blanks in the Bible verse and transition statement.

You are _____, our _____, to
_____ and _____ and _____,
for you _____, and _____
_____ and
_____. (Revelation __:__)

This is _____
_____. **But it's fairly** _____
_____ of the
_____. **What** _____?

Check your answers, and make any corrections. Read the corrected Bible verse and transition statement aloud.

If possible, wait some time (perhaps even 24 hours) before moving on to step 3.

Step 3

On a blank sheet of paper, write out the statements from memory, and then correct your version.

Read the corrected statements aloud while doing the drawing.

Repeat this process until you can say the statements perfectly while doing the drawing.

On a blank sheet of paper, write out the Bible verse and transition statement, and then make any corrections.

Read the corrected version aloud.

Repeat the process until you can say the Bible verse and transition statement perfectly.