

Introduction

“For from his fullness we have all received,
grace upon grace.”—John 1:16

My driving conviction in this book is that the gospel of Jesus Christ is big. Like, *really big*. Ginormous, if you will. And deep. Deep and rich. And beautiful. Multifaceted. Expansive. Powerful. Overwhelming. Mysterious. But vivid, too, and clear. Illuminating. Transforming. And did I mention big?

I grew up in a Southern Baptist church in the Bible Belt. We were conservative, biblical, evangelistic, and invitational. Not a Sunday school class, worship service, Wednesday evening prayer meeting, youth group function, retreat, camp, or potluck went by that we weren’t given an opportunity to receive the gospel. No matter what the topic of the gathering might be, we could always count on being invited to raise a hand or walk an aisle at the end. And that is not in itself necessarily a bad thing. Many of us point to experiences just like that as the moment of our conversion to Christ. And the preaching of the gospel should always come with an invitation (of sorts) to repent and believe in it.

As I look back now, however, I hear a scratching of a needle on a record when I think of those invitations. I hear a car screeching to a halt and changing gears. Why? Why do those moments now seem jarring to me? I think it is because the invitation time did not often follow the preaching of the gospel; it followed the preaching of something else. Something biblical, of course. Something helpful. Something practical. Something spiritual. But not the gospel. In fact, what these invitation times began to train people like me to think is that the gospel is *only* for these invitation times. The sort of preaching I grew up with—sincere, experienced, Bible-based, sometimes even expository—inadvertently taught me that the gospel is for the evangelizing of unbelievers only, not for the already convinced.

On top of that, as responses to invitations waned, the alternative was not to take evangelism outside the church or even develop ways of educating and edifying believers in the gospel, but to find new ways to insinuate that believers weren't really believers, that perhaps their sins and struggles required their "getting saved" again. The same preachers who were adamant about the doctrine of eternal security put a lot of rhetorical weight behind cultivating insecurity. In this way, the gospel ceased being the power of God and began becoming the magic formula for a clean slate.

Raised in the church, I heard lots of preaching and teaching. I did not lack one bit for information on the Scriptures. But I was never introduced to the concept of the gospel's bigness. We did not have the gospel *wrong*, really. We just had it shallow. I didn't understand that the gospel was for all of life. If I had read Paul's reminder in 1 Corinthians 15:3 that the gospel of Jesus's death and resurrection is "of first importance," I would have assumed he meant it was a first step.

Obviously the gospel is the ABCs of salvation. But it is also the A to Z.

We had the knowledge of the gospel but we denied the power thereof.

In 1 Corinthians 2:2, Paul tells the church in Corinth, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Seems a simple enough thing to only know. A few verses later, however, he writes:

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,

"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love him"—

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. (1 Cor. 2:7–10)

Oo, boy, now we're talking *big*. That same simple knowledge—"Jesus Christ and him crucified"—is also the secret and hidden wisdom from God. The knowledge of Jesus and his atoning work is, Paul tells us, "the depths." The central problem with the evangelical church's mostly truncated gospel (or its simply transactional gospel formula) is that it misses out on these depths. Indeed, it does not evidence knowing that these depths are even there!

I own a MacBook Pro. I like my MacBook Pro a lot. It does the things I want a computer to do. I use it for sending and receiving e-mail, surfing the web, writing blog posts and articles and books, and occasionally listening to music or watching movies. People who know the subject of computers, however, will tell you that if all you want to do is e-mail, surf the Internet, and do some word processing, you probably don't want a MacBook Pro. (Mine came to me used and was a going-away gift from my former church, so I did not overspend.) One day a friend asked if he could use my computer for a minute. I said sure. And then I watched him do things on my computer I didn't know it could do. He opened up programs I didn't even know I had. There are things on this computer that, when accessed, look really, really cool. And as I type these words right now, I have no idea how to see that coolness again. I know I have widgets on this thing, but I have no idea what widgets are, really. People make really nice looking movies on MacBook Pros. I have GarageBand, which everyone says is awesome, but for which I have no use and about which I have no clue. All of this potential sits on my desk or in my lap whenever I open up this machine, but I don't have the slightest notion where it is or how to use it. Similarly, we evangelicals love the gospel for the few of its uses we're aware of, and we end up missing its depths.

We like that our gospel gets our sins forgiven and gives us a ticket to heaven, but we're not sure of its functionality in our lives every day. Many of us don't think of the gospel as applying to marriage or parenting or friendships or even to more explicitly theological subjects the way other categories of information and skill-sets do. We're content to keep the gospel at an elementary level, assuming that we graduate from it, and the sad result of this

neglect is that we thereby deny the “grace upon grace” in the fullness of Jesus. There is one gospel, as there is one Jesus, but there are many facets to this gospel, as there are infinite excellencies in Jesus.

The further into the gospel we go, then, the bigger it gets. There is no way for us to wear it out.

In the closing pages of C. S. Lewis’s *The Last Battle*, our heroes find themselves in the throes of glorious reunion in a great garden. Like many locales in Aslan’s Narnia, the scene without can belie the scene within, as Lucy Pevensie discovers. Looking over the garden wall to a panoramic view, she speaks to her old friend, Tumnus the Faun:

“I see,” she said at last, thoughtfully. “I see now. This garden is like the Stable. It is far bigger inside than it was outside.”

“Of course, Daughter of Eve,” said the Faun. “The further up and the further in you go, the bigger everything gets. The inside is larger than the outside.”

Lucy looked hard at the garden and saw that it was not really a garden at all but a whole world, with its own rivers and woods and sea and mountains. But they were not strange: she knew them all.

“I see,” she said. “This is still Narnia, and, more real and more beautiful than the Narnia down below, just as *it* was more real and more beautiful than the Narnia outside the Stable door! I see . . . world within world, Narnia within Narnia. . . .”

“Yes,” said Mr. Tumnus, “like an onion: except that as you continue to go in and in, each circle is larger than the last.”¹

The gospel of Jesus Christ’s atoning work on the cross and out of the tomb is like this. The further into Christ’s work we press, the more of our vision and the more of our heart it fills. Of course, an onion pales as the gospel’s symbol, just as my MacBook does. In the Scriptures, we find God’s prophets too overwhelmed by the glory of God in the gospel’s bigness to offer such miniscule metaphors. When Job gets a glimpse of the enormity of God’s sovereign plan for him and for all creation, he says, “I have uttered what I did not

understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (Job 42:3). Even King David, no stranger to waxing poetic about all manner of things above and below, ponders God’s expansive greatness and uses the phrase “too wonderful” (Ps. 139:6). Paul tells us in Ephesians 3:8 that the riches of Christ are “unsearchable.” The biblical writers don’t even try to come up with object illustrations: they just stagger. Leon Morris writes, “The New Testament writers are like men who ransack their vocabulary to find words which will bring out some small fraction of the mighty thing that God has done for us.”²

Still, all of that is to say that it is fine and fitting to search out symbols and metaphors—diamonds, oceans, even Narnian stables and common onions—to reflect the grandness of the gospel, but we ought to own up right away to the reality that none of these objects *fits*. The gospel is contained in an announcement of something Jesus did inside of history. It can even be tweeted in less than 140 characters! But it is nonetheless bigger than the universe.

We must get this. And we have to understand that not getting it is not just an informational “miss.” Venturing into the depths of the gospel—seeing Christ’s accomplishment (the gospel’s content) and what is accomplished by his accomplishment (the gospel’s implications)—is vital to better knowing and loving God. When we miss the depths of the gospel, we hinder our worship. In reflecting on how the good news of Jesus creates the people of God, Paul cries out, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom. 11:33).

What is Paul doing? He’s not just pontificating. He’s not just ruminating. He’s worshipping! He’s exulting. “Oh!” he cries, in response to the bigness of the gospel. Through the good news, Paul receives a clearer and clearer—and larger and larger—vision of God’s glory and God’s plan.

My previous book, *Gospel Wakefulness*, is mostly about the experience of personal revival and how that applies to multiple areas of the Christian life. Now, in *Gospel Deeps*, I want to explore the

C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 180.

²Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 419.

gospel itself, holding it up like a diamond and examining some of its facets. Our look into the depths of the gospel cannot be merely to know more information, as if deciphering some secret code, but instead to seek more and more to be awed by what God has done for us in Christ, what God is doing for us in Christ, and what God *will* do for us in Christ. Plumbing the depths of the gospel is an exultational pursuit, or it is a pointless one.

Come, let us reason together. And worship God.

Chapter One

THE GOSPEL DEEPS

“The things of the gospel are depths.”¹

—Thomas Goodwin

On the face of it, the good news of Jesus Christ is simply one thing. It is the news—not advice, instruction, or practical steps—that God saves sinners through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Depending on who we might be sharing this news with, we might want to expand a few of those details, mentioning for instance that all men and women are sinners from birth, that Jesus was God himself incarnate in human flesh, that Jesus was (and is) the Messiah, that his death was a substitutionary sacrifice, or that the resurrection was a literal resurrection of a glorified body from a real death. Or we may want to add details in order to put the gospel announcement into the context of the biblical storyline. But the basic facts are there in that first statement—God saves sinners through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—which expresses the simple gospel in a clear and concise way.

This simple gospel is power enough to save the most hardened sinner (which is every sinner). Salvation power is conveyed through the gospel message, and received to accomplish a sinner’s justification purely by a person’s faith, and Jesus tells us that just a mustard seed–sized bit of faith can move mountains (Matt. 17:20). Because of this, then, we know that it is not the size or strength of the faith that saves, but the truth of the faith, and because of *that*, we know it is not our power that rouses our dead heart to trust Jesus, but the Spirit’s power working through the gospel that is being believed. This gospel, Paul says, is the power of salvation for all who believe (Rom. 1:16).

¹Thomas Goodwin, *A Discourse of the Glory of the Gospel* in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Edinburgh, UK: James Nichol, 1862), 4:272.

In 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, Paul expresses the simple gospel message this way:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

Paul goes on to relay more historical detail, telling us that Jesus appeared to Peter and the other disciples, then to a crowd of five hundred, then to the apostles, and so on. But the sum of the gospel message Paul is delivering as “of first importance” is contained in verses 3 and 4: Jesus died for our sins, he was buried, and he rose again on the third day. This is the historic news that is the good news.

Simple, isn’t it? But 1 Corinthians 15 is anything but simple. As we progress through it, we see that the effects of the gospel are far-reaching and creation-transforming. That the gospel would empower the all-time forgiveness of a person’s sins is enormous in itself, but there’s more. The rest begins with Paul’s crediting the grace of the gospel for doing his good works (v. 10). Then, Paul says, the resurrection of the glorified Jesus activates the future resurrection of all believers (vv. 21–23). Then, because the gospel of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection essentially declares that he is the Messiah, the gospel’s power includes the subjection and destruction of all other powers and authorities (v. 24). Finally, not even death escapes the power of the gospel, because by conquering death and the grave, Jesus kills death and the grave (v. 26).

Clearly the gospel is both simple and complex, elementary and advanced. But all of the advanced stuff won’t fit on an end zone sign at the Super Bowl, so John 3:16 works just as well.

I have heard it said that the gospel is shallow enough that it is safe for a toddler to swim in, yet deep enough to drown an elephant. We might also think of it this way: We teach our little ones how to read by first teaching them their ABCs. From there, they may move on to the basic principles of phonics. ABCs and phonics are scaled for little children to grasp the English language. But

some people get advanced degrees in linguistics. Same category, different levels. The gospel is like that. The ABCs of the gospel work very well for people at all levels of their faith, including wise old pastors and brilliant theologians, but it’s possible to explore the ABCs into their inherent complexity.

Although a small child can learn the basics of the English language, many people will nevertheless tell you that English is not the easiest of languages to learn. In the same way, even the simple gospel can be seen less simply. Suppose we use the template “God saves sinners through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” We could go point by point through that simple statement and find depth along the way. God saves sinners through Jesus’s life? How so? Suddenly we are talking about Christ’s active obedience, the tension of the incarnation, the reality of temptation and the reality of sinlessness, and the like. How does God save sinners through Jesus’s death? There is a wealth of truth there, and now we are on the verge of discussing the various theories of the atonement. And since the resurrection changes everything, we are ready to talk about everything when we get to it! What sort of salvation does Jesus’s resurrection enact for sinners?

What we are glimpsing now is how a wardrobe can contain a world.

When Jesus came, we got all of him. Not a bit of him was held back from us. John 1:16 says that what we get in the gospel is delivered from Jesus’s fullness.

The great practical help of this truth is that no matter the day, the circumstance, the sin, or the trouble, there is a grace in the gospel demonstrating God’s love for us and empowering us to glorify him. From his fullness, John 1:16 tells us, we receive grace upon grace. In the gospel there is grace for every need, because it comes through an all-sufficient Savior who is the God of steadfast love.

THE DEEP, DEEP LOVE OF GOD

We are in love with God’s love. Even non-Christians admire this crucial tenet of the Christian faith, and hardly an atheist exists who does not know both that Jesus commanded us to love our

things nobody will ever discover to even have the opportunity to scrutinize. As Augustine is thought to have said, “I have seen the depths, but I cannot find the bottom.”

In Trevor Francis’s great hymn “O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus,” we sing:

O the deep, deep love of Jesus, vast, unmeasured, boundless, free!
Rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over me!
Underneath me, all around me, is the current of Thy love
Leading onward, leading homeward to Thy glorious rest above!

In Walter Matheson’s hymn “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go,” we sing of the “ocean depths” of God’s love. Francis and Matheson give us a more fitting symbol for the biblical picture of God’s love. It is deep like the ocean, and not just in fathoms and leagues, but in diversity and complexity. There are clear shallows to play in and opaque depths of mystery. There are hidden places in the ocean, places we will never see, places too deep for us to go. There are things about the ocean depths small children can understand, things marine biologists still haven’t figured out, and