

The Life-transforming Relevance & Power of the Gospel

by Pastor Marcus Johnson • www.LakeRegionBibleChurch.org • Scripture taken from the NIV

If God is more powerful than all the evil in the world, and if He is a God of love, why does He not intervene in this troubled world today, or does He? Why didn't Jesus Christ, a man who claimed to be God in human form, make the world a safe place to live when He came to earth the first time? How can we know who God is since we can't see Him or hear what He has to say? How do we know that there is a God and that He loves us, and why refer to God as He? What relevance does Jesus Christ have for my life and why should I believe in Him? Why believe in the Christian God when the church has done so much wrong in the past and when Christians today have so many faults? Why is this world so full of evil when Christians tell us that this loving and perfect God made everything to begin with? And finally, how can Christians say that the God of the Bible is a loving God when that same Bible teaches that there is a judgment day coming when God will send people to hell for eternity?

There is a God who reigns over everything that exists (the earth, the universe, and the spiritual world we can't see). God has always existed, and He is all-powerful and all-knowing. God created everything perfectly and He made the human race in His image. God loves us and in Him we can find meaning and purpose for our lives, inner joy and peace, the power to persevere by faith through trials and tragedies, and the hope of life after death (a new life that lasts forever, with new bodies that never break down or die, with no more pain or sorrow, and a life lived in a world where all wrong doing has been eliminated forever). God has spoken to us in many ways, but He has primarily revealed Himself by coming to earth as a human being named Jesus Christ some 2000 years ago. Jesus came to save us out of this spiritually and morally lost world, and raise us up as a people who would follow God by faith and have a relationship with Him through His Spirit. This was God's intention from the beginning of time: to have a world full of people who would worship Him and in whom He would make His dwelling (God living among us by His Spirit).

Jesus Christ is God the Son who entered into time and human history by becoming a man. He was born in the city of Bethlehem in Israel, grew up in the town of Nazareth, and lived here on earth for over thirty years. He had many disciples (or followers) during His ministry, and chose twelve of them to be His apostles (chosen representatives who became church leaders and missionaries), who were given authority to carry on His work after He left this world. Some of these apostles wrote part of what we know today as the Bible, the Holy Scriptures.

The Bible is a collection of sixty-six different books or writings, which serve as the foundation for Christianity and the Christian faith and life. The Bible tells the unfolding story of God's intervention in human history. It is filled with spiritual truth and guidance, and this truth is grounded in and understood in light of what God has done in the lives of human beings. The Bible is more than spiritual revelation and wisdom from heaven. It is a record of what God has done, is doing, and will do in our world; it is historical and prophetic truth. This truth can only be understood in view of the person of Jesus Christ, and likewise, Jesus can only be understood in light of this biblical story.

One of these books in the Bible is the Gospel of John, which starts off with these words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness 'has

not understood it' [or 'has not overcome it'] . . . The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (John 1:1-11). We know that John is talking about Jesus Christ as "the Word" from the rest of this passage (see verses 14-18), which is also obvious from reading the rest of his story. John says Jesus was with God and was God before the world began, in fact, God the Son has always existed. John tells us that God created the whole universe through Jesus Christ, and that Christ offers "light and life" amidst our world of "darkness and death." But what does all of this mean?

When John calls Jesus "the Word," he uses the Greek word "logos" that implied (in the Hebrew faith) the eternal and creative power of the spoken word of God. "By the word of the LORD were the heavens made" (Psalm 33:6). God created the universe by "speaking" it into existence. To the Greeks who did not share in the Jewish faith, "the Word" or "logos" referred to the divine reason or mind behind creation, but they did not view such deity (a god) as a personal God, and certainly would not have ascribed such power to a human being. So John uses a word that would have been well known among those who believed in this personal and all-powerful God, as well as those outside of the Jewish faith, who believed in an impersonal, divine power. Either way, John's use of "the Word" (logos) implied that this eternal and divine power that created the universe is found in a man named Jesus of Nazareth!

"In the beginning" means before time came into being, before the universe was created. So John is referring to this man Jesus Christ as the Word of God that existed before time began and through which the universe was brought into being. He says the Word was with God (equal to God yet distinct in personality) and that the Word was God. That is why the darkness (the spiritual opposition and rebellion to God among humanity and in the spirit realm) cannot overcome the Word which shines as the light, for the Word reigns as the all-powerful and eternal Lord of the universe.

But if Jesus is God the Son who became a human being, why did the people as a whole not recognize him, or receive him, and why is our world referred to as the darkness that did not understand Him? This problem dates back to the first two human beings God created named Adam and Eve, from which the whole human race has originated. Before they had any children, Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and their fellowship (or their relationship) with God was broken. Immediately they began to experience the consequences of their disobedience (such as their feelings of shame and fear).

As part of the consequence of their actions, their human nature became corrupted by what the Bible calls sin. This is a spiritual-like cancer that is spiritually hereditary in nature, passed on to every human being. The Bible teaches us that "there is not a righteous [person] on earth who does what is right and never sins" (Ecclesiastes 7:20). To be righteous means you have the character of God Himself, and you live a godly life without ever sinning. Sin refers to the unbelief, distrust, and rejection of God by the human race. Sin also includes human acts of disobedience that are contrary to God's moral law. All humans have a sin nature that has corrupted who we are, and none of us are pure or without fault in God's sight. In fact, our sin is so offensive to God, that we as the human race are under God's wrath (subject to His terrifying anger) and destined to face an eternal judgment in hell, separated from God forever. However, even though we are all sinners facing judgment, we are also loved by God. Everyone person is created in the image of God and is loved by God.

Sin is ultimately what is responsible for the spiritual darkness, emptiness and death that we face in this life. We are also spiritually blinded by our sin, and cannot find God through our own efforts or pursuits

of Him. That is why in the darkness of our spiritual situation, we cannot through our own human reason or intelligence "understand" spiritual truth or God Himself. With that, the pride that comes with our sin nature deceives us even further, as we are blinded by our own self-centeredness and selfishness. We are also too proud to admit our need for God and for spiritual help, and are certainly not naturally prone to admit our sinfulness. But God in His mercy breaks us of our pride and opens our eyes to be able to see and understand the spiritual truth found in Jesus Christ. It is also because of and thru His Son Jesus that God has been willing to withhold His wrath and judgment from being fully poured out and pronounced upon this world until a later date when Jesus returns to this world to set up His kingdom (His reign) and to judge the living and the dead.

God sent His Son Jesus Christ to earth about 2000 years ago, to reveal Himself to the whole human race. "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3). The Bible teaches that there is one God who is three Persons: God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We cannot fully understand one God in three Persons, but we can deeply appreciate each aspect of what we call the "Trinity" (one God in three Persons). At this point, it is also helpful to mention two things regarding God as our Father. First, both males and females are created in the image of God and reflect His image. Scripture teaches us that God is our Father and He also has characteristics like a mother (God as Father: Isaiah 9:6; Matthew 6:9; John 20:17; Acts 2:33; Romans 1:7; Ephesians 1:2-3; Philippians 2:9-10; 1 John 3:1-2. God is like a mother: Deuteronomy 32:18; Isaiah 66:13; Matthew 23:37). Second, the love and trustworthiness of God the Father is perfect and unending, unlike that of human fathers. If you have not had a loving father you could trust, it is helpful to read about Jesus in the Gospels in order to see the love that God the Father has for you, and to see how much Jesus loved and trusted God the Father (the Gospels are four of the books in the Bible that reveal the life, ministry, and message of Jesus Christ: Matthew, Mark, Luke, & John).

God made Himself known to us through the person of Jesus Christ, who by His death and resurrection from the dead has provided the way out of the bondage of sin's power, the punishment it brings, and has opened the door for life after death for all who will believe. Jesus came to show us who God is and to make it possible for us to live with God forever, after we die or after this world as we know it comes to an end. For through Jesus Christ, the wrath of God (over our wicked sinfulness) and His divine justice (that demands our eternal punishment) has also been appeased (satisfied) and removed from everyone who has believed on Christ. No woman or man, girl or boy is pure or spiritually clean in God's eyes. Because of our sin nature, our relationship with God is broken and we are spiritually and morally bankrupt. We are also spiritually blinded and cannot find God or spiritual truth on our own, and are headed for judgment in hell. But God sent His Son Jesus Christ to earth about 2000 years ago, to reveal Himself to the world and to have Jesus pay the debt that we owe God for all of our spiritual and moral wrong doing and robbing God of the honor due His glorious name.

The salvation that God brings through the cross is then made available to sinners as God reveals Himself through His spirit speaking to our minds, tugging on our hearts, and convicting us of our sin and our need for a Savior. God speaks to us as Christians share the gospel message with us, as we read or hear about Jesus and the Bible, and through the circumstances in our lives. Perhaps you have been sensing God drawing you to Himself and revealing His Son Jesus to you. God comes looking for us often times when we have not been looking for Him, and revealing to us what we could never figure out for ourselves. The Apostle Paul, who was a Pharisee (a teacher of God's law) and who was strongly opposed to Jesus Christ's message and His followers, experienced this revelation of God.

After Jesus had died and rose from the dead, Paul was going from house to house looking for Christians

and having them arrested and killed because he thought they were deceiving God's people. But Jesus Christ appeared to Paul in a blinding light, and revealed Himself to Paul. Paul was zealous for God, but amidst his own pride and sin, he was ignorant of who God really was and his own need for a Savior. After receiving this revelation, Paul had a change of heart, and became a believer in Christ and immediately began preaching the message he had once labored so hard to destroy.

It is this Paul who wrote these words: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God ... Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world ... but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Corinthians 1:18-23 & 2:2-4). The cross or crucifixion refers to a horrible form of torture and capital punishment used in the first century by the Romans, and was also the means through which Jesus was killed. The message of the cross proclaims Jesus Christ as God the Son and the whole human race as sinners facing the judgment of God. But on the cross, Christ died to take away or cleanse us from our sins and then rose from the dead to offer us eternal life, something we do not deserve and cannot bring about ourselves.

Christ's death on the cross also reconciled us to God by satisfying God's demand for justice (holding us accountable for our unbelief and rebellion), and appeasing or satisfying His wrath that burns against us (due to the sinfulness of our human race amidst His purity and glory). Paul writes in Romans 1, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities -- his eternal power and divine nature -- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Romans 1:18-20). But thanks be to God who has rescued us thru Jesus Christ from His wrath and judgment to come, if we have believed in Christ as Lord. For Paul also tells us that God our Savior wills all people "to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men -- the testimony given in its proper time" (1 Timothy 2:4-6).

This message of the cross calls us to surrender to Christ by faith, to repent of sin (turning away from living life in unbelief and rebellion), and to live in obedience unto the Lordship of Christ. However, this message is "foolishness" to us until God opens our hearts and minds to understand it. The Jews in Jesus' day "stumbled" over the crucifixion of Christ because they were expecting a Messiah who would come in political power and triumph over the world (that is actually what Christ will do when He returns: He came the first time as a suffering servant to die once, He's coming back as the King to reign in power and glory forever). Gentiles (all those who are not Jews) view the message of the cross as foolishness, since it would be inconceivable that a respectable and powerful person would be subjected to the humiliation of being crucified, let alone one who claimed to be divine and the Savior of the world. In the Greco-Roman world, acts of mercy and self-sacrifice were not viewed in a favorable light. Using power for personal gain was highly esteemed, expected and encouraged.

But, Jesus Christ, God the Son, indeed left His place in glory, came to earth, became a human being, and suffered the horrible execution carried out on the vile offenders of the lower cast. He was born as a baby just like you and me, but He had no biological earthly father. His mother Mary was a virgin, and

she conceived, becoming pregnant supernaturally through the Holy Spirit. Jesus was fully human, yet also fully God. He started His public ministry as a preacher and healer around the age of 30. He performed many miracles and taught the people about God and the devil, heaven and hell, love and forgiveness, living by faith and serving one another. About 3 years later, Jesus Christ was nailed to a cross (a "T" shaped piece of wood that was used to execute criminals of low social ranking who were accused of evil crimes).

Jesus Christ was killed, His body died, just as the Old Testament Scriptures in the Bible had foretold would happen, through the prophets who wrote them. The religious leaders of the day were threatened and jealous of Jesus because of the crowds that followed Him. So they falsely accused Him, and handed Christ over to the Roman authorities to be killed. But this was all part of God's plan. In order for you and I to be forgiven, someone who was without sin had to die in our place to satisfy the divine justice of God and remove His wrath that burns against us. God's justice demands that He hold us accountable for our wrong doing.

Thankfully, Jesus makes Himself available to all people, to anyone who will receive Him. To those who receive Christ, He calls us to love and serve God with all our hearts. He also calls His followers to repent when we do wrong. The church has made great contributions to society over the last 2000 years, serving the poor, helping mend broken families, and proclaiming spiritual truth down through the centuries. Yet we have often times abused our power or served our own selfish means, and fallen way short of the standard set by Jesus Himself. God holds His children accountable and He disciplines us out of love. Christians are to repent when we sin and seek forgiveness and reconciliation from those we have wronged. Yet, God continues to dwell in the lives of broken and imperfect people by His Spirit and to share the gospel message and carry out His work here on earth.

However, we must be willing to turn to Jesus Christ and put our trust in Him for forgiveness and spiritual life before we can fully experience His love. Serving God will not save us, nor will going to church. No other person or religion can save you, including the Christian Church or Christianity. Neither the Baptist Church nor the Catholic Church can save you, nor any other denomination or religion. Jesus Christ is the Savior of the whole world. His invitation goes out to everyone, and the path He lays before us is both narrow and fulfilling, and is marked by suffering yet full of joy and peace. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matthew 7:13-14).

Jesus Christ died on a Friday afternoon, but rose from the dead on that following Sunday by the power of almighty God, showing that He triumphed over sin and death. He was taken back up into heaven and will come back some day to judge those who are still living and all those who have died. This is also part of the good news. When Christ comes back, He will set up a new heaven and a new earth. Believers will be given new bodies that never grow old and never experience pain or death. We'll live in a world of perfect peace. Some day, all of the problems of this world will be done away with, when Jesus Christ returns. Yet, before all of this unfolds, we will stand before God on the judgment day and be held accountable for how we have lived our lives and for whether or not we received Christ into our lives as Lord.

However, God sent Jesus to earth the first time to die, to save us, to pay the penalty that you and I deserve for all the wrong we have ever done. God did this because God loves us! "For God so loved the

world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:16-17). So be ready, for there is a judgment day coming. "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (Hebrews 9:27-28). Are you waiting for Him? Jesus Christ is coming back. Are you ready? Intellectual belief is not enough. We must turn from living life our way and surrender our will and hearts to the person of Jesus Christ, trusting in Him and receiving Him by faith.

Going back to our original passage in John 1, let us pick up again in verse 11 and read on. "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God-- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:11-14). God is full of love for all people and desires to make His dwelling with His people (to have a perfect fellowship and relationship with human beings). Through Jesus Christ, God has made this possible and is calling out a people from this world to be spiritually born into fellowship with Him, and to share this gospel message with the whole world, in giving Him glory and enjoying Him forever.

Are you a believer in Jesus Christ? If not, has the grace and truth of Jesus Christ been penetrating your heart and mind as you have been reading about His gospel? Are you sensing the Spirit of God tugging on your heart, and opening your eyes and mind to see and understand this gospel message? Do you acknowledge your need of God's forgiveness, and that you cannot live the Christian life without God's power? Are you tired of living life in your own strength? Has your heart been touched by the love of God? Do you have assurance that your sins have been forgiven and that you will have life with God after you die? Are you overwhelmed with the problems of this world, or deeply wounded by the sins of others against you, or in need of mercy for your own wrong doings? Do you need spiritual or emotional healing from the Spirit of God? Are you willing to follow Jesus according to His Word in the Bible, through the power of His Spirit living in you, and to serve God in the fellowship of His church?

If not, but you would like to know more, we encourage you to call us or seek out another Christian and ask for prayer and counsel. Keep seeking the God who is not far from you. If you are ready to turn to God by faith, then we encourage you to do so now. If you are in need of some spiritual direction in this step of faith, you can use the prayer in the next paragraph below as a guide. These are not magical words, but if these words accurately reflect your heart's desire, then this prayer can help guide you into a relationship with Jesus Christ. Read through this prayer a few times first before praying it. Then, if you have come to believe the gospel, and want to profess your faith in Christ and surrender your life to God, then we encourage you to do so now, using the following prayer as a guide if needed.

"Father God in heaven, I believe you created me, and that you love me. I believe Jesus Christ is God the Son and the Lord and Savior of the world. I also admit that I am a sinner who deserves judgment, and that I cannot rescue myself. I ask you to forgive my sin, for the times I have lived in unbelief and rejected you, for the times I dishonored you, and for not trusting you. Please forgive all of the evil and wrong I have ever thought or done, or the good I have left undone, and all the times I have not followed you by faith. I believe Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead to offer us eternal life. And now, by faith, I receive Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior of my life; my master and my God. I ask for the Holy Spirit to live in me, and give me the love and power to live the

Christian life, to remain in the faith amidst hardships and persecutions, and to fill me with peace and joy. I ask you to protect me from the power and traps of the devil and my sin nature, to establish me in the fellowship of the church, and to lead me in my Christian faith and spiritual growth, in Jesus Christ's name, Amen."

If you just prayed this prayer, tell someone! It is important that you find a church that preaches the gospel message, one that helps you love God and others, and a church that teaches that the Bible is the Word of God. There are wonderful gospel preaching and Bible believing churches in several different Christian denominations all across this country and around the world. Feel free to call us (847) 886-9550. We look forward to hearing from you!