LIVING THE PROMISE TODAY

All Scripture points to the gospel message that Jesus died to save us from our sins and an eternity without Him. That alone is huge, but there's so much more! When Jesus made us new creations in Him, He secured our future and gave us a new life and a fresh start. We now love and serve Him in this world. We have a role in sharing the good news of salvation so we can all connect to Him in this life and the next.

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Gospel Here and Now
What Difference Does The Gospel Make?

The Bible is a story, but it’s bigger than a story; it’s God’s story, and so it can never really be contained between two leather-clad covers and placed on a shelf. God’s story spills out into history and into the lives of his people. But it’s difficult to see the roles we are
to play if we don’t understand what’s already taken place. That’s why we must know what the gospel has accomplished and we must learn from those who have come and gone before us in this grand narrative. That’s what we really want to know: *What difference does the gospel make in my life today?*

*John Greco*
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one

Bigger Than a Story: What Difference Does the Gospel Make?

Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has been already in the ages before us. —ECCLESIASTES 1:10

entered through the front doors of Christian Heritage School in Trumbull, Connecticut, as I had done a thousand times before, but this September morning was different. When I arrived at my desk, it faced the back of the classroom rather
than the front. I was now a teacher—at least part-time—at the small Christian school I had attended years earlier as a student.

A few weeks prior, in what I thought would be a quickly passed-over email, I congratulated the school’s new headmaster and offered to help in any way I could as he settled in to his new role. To my surprise, he responded that same afternoon and asked if I would meet him for lunch the following day. Over sandwiches and chips at a local grill, he told me there was, in fact, something I could do to help the school: teach an introductory Bible course.

He explained that Bible courses were the most difficult for some of the incoming transfer students. Unlike history, mathematics, or English, the Bible was often a strange and foreign world for students new to formal Christian education. This headmaster wanted to provide a class for all transfer students in grades nine through twelve that would cover the basics of the Bible, but he needed someone to teach the course. The teaching schedules of the full-time faculty were already overloaded, so he was looking for someone with a background in biblical studies to teach this single course, four days a week. I jumped at the chance.

Since there was no set curriculum, my initial approach was to teach straight through the Bible, starting in Genesis and working all the way through Revelation, highlighting the important people and events over our two semesters together. The Bible is,
after all, a story. That idea has become something of a cliché in recent years with the publication of many wonderful books and studies aimed at helping people learn to read the Bible as a single, unified story with Jesus at the center. But as I discovered during my first few weeks of class, sometimes telling the story is not enough.

On our first day together, I punted. I handed out the course syllabus, told my new students a little about myself, and asked them what they were hoping to learn over the course of our year together. There were only fifteen students in the class, so I could spend a couple of minutes focused on each one. Their questions were good ones, and I left school that afternoon excited to jump into the creation account from Genesis the next day.

Over the next two weeks, however, I found myself continually falling behind in my lesson plans. Each class period would end before I could get to all my points, and I would start the next day trying to make up for the previous day’s abrupt ending. Since I was a new teacher, the lion’s share of the blame was
probably mine, but I sensed it was more than that. Every day, the students asked a lot of questions—great, important questions—and these questions always found their way back to the gospel. With their questions and arms stretched to the ceiling, my students wanted to know what difference the gospel should make in their lives. That’s why we could never finish the class lesson I had planned.

These were kids who, for the most part, had grown up in church and were being raised by Christian parents, but they somehow gotten the idea that the good news of Jesus Christ was about nothing more than getting into heaven someday when they died. They couldn’t understand why we were spending so much time in Genesis talking about Adam and Eve, Noah, and Abraham. And no matter how many connections to Jesus I could show them in those early chapters of the Bible, they simply weren’t interested. None of it mattered to their everyday lives.

And they were right.
If the Old Testament is only background information for Jesus’s mission, isn’t it worth skipping over? By the same token, if Acts through Revelation is just the history of the early church, interesting as it may be, isn’t it merely a distraction from the gospel? The Bible may well be a unified story from start to finish, but if we can’t see that the gospel is there on every page, then it doesn’t matter how well we know the people, places, and events the Bible records; it’s all just filler. Story is not enough.

**In the Dark, Under the Sun**

In the book of Ecclesiastes, King Solomon wrote, “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun” (1:9). It’s not the kind of verse you often see on family Christmas cards. It’s downright depressing, but it neatly sums up the theme of Ecclesiastes and, I realized much later, the feeling in my classroom.

> **King Solomon** stands as a type—a forerunner—of Christ himself. The book of 1 Kings tells us, “God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure” (4:29). God also gave Solomon unprecedented wealth, and his reign brought a rare peace to Israel. Solomon’s magnificent realm hints at something far better—something that will satisfy our deepest longings—including Solomon’s. It is the future reign of Christ.
Solomon wrote as a man looking for fulfillment in this world. He tried everything: acquiring knowledge (1:12–18), pursuing pleasure (2:1–11), living wisely (2:12–17), working hard (2:18–26). He had money, power, and more wives than he could count, but nothing seemed to bring lasting peace and contentment. This world is broken, and we are powerless to fix it. “What has been is what will be.”

The key to understanding Solomon—and what difference the gospel makes to our lives here and now—lies in the phrase, “under the sun.” From where we live our lives every day here on earth, under the sun, life does appear to be meaningless. “All is vanity,” Solomon wrote (Ecclesiastes 1:2). We live, we die. We come into this world with nothing, and we leave with nothing. There are joys, to be sure, but there is also suffering, and no one escapes it completely. From this vantage point, it seems Solomon is correct: “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil” (2:24). If the promise of the gospel is only heaven once we die, then it doesn’t change much in this world. It makes the hopelessness we often feel in this life only temporary, but it doesn’t remove its weight from our shoulders as we walk through our days.

Above the sun, however—now that’s a different story. From heaven’s perspective, this world may be broken, but it was not always so, and it will not always be so. In fact, because of the life, death, and
If fact, because of the life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, the brokenness of this world is being undone right now. Solomon, in his search, gets a glimpse of this. He sees that in the end God’s justice will prevail: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:13–14). Solomon didn’t see the whole picture, however. God’s plan as he works through human history is not just to judge the world but to save it (John 3:17).

In the beginning, the world God created was good, but then sin entered the garden God had placed at the center of it all and spread across time and space, corrupting and twisting everything in its path. Everlasting life, as tremendous as it is, does not begin to set all this right. What about the creation all around us that waits for its redemption? What about the kingdom of darkness that continues to oppose God and stalks all who have been created in his image? What about God’s holy design for humanity, now shattered? The gospel is the cure for
every strain of sin’s disease. It’s so much bigger than a ticket to heaven to keep until we die. That’s the good news.
two

The Gospel:  
A Short Summary of the Story of God

*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.* —2 Timothy 3:16–17

*L*et’s *r*e*wind*, back before the days when I was a teacher at Christian Heritage School, back to when I was a student. It was during my junior year of high school, and I thought it might be fun to try out for our drama department’s spring production, *The Music Man*. But while I was patiently
waiting for my audition and watching other students perform for the director, a thought occurred to me: I can’t sing, and I can’t dance. I had no business trying out for a show like this. When it was finally my turn, I sang a few lines of “Jingle Bells” and admitted that it probably sounded terrible. The director shook her head politely, but I knew the truth.

The only part of my audition I enjoyed was reading from the script. And that must have been the part the director liked too. When the cast was announced, I discovered I had not one or two, but three separate speaking roles in the show. I had several costume changes, lots of makeup to apply and remove and then reapply, and lots of lines to memorize, but I didn’t have to sing, and the only dancing I had to attempt was a short waltz on a crowded stage at the end of the show. (The director put me and my partner in the back.)

The week before the show premiered, I had my lines down, perfected my delivery, and had timed all my wardrobe and makeup changes down to the minute. I was ready to go. But then a classmate asked me what

The Bible is a gift, given to help us get to know the God who loves us. As we dive into the story, we’ll do well to remember that God is the main character.
the show was about, and I realized that I really didn’t know. I had skimmed the script for my own lines, and I only showed up at rehearsals when it was time for my scenes. Even when we did run-throughs of whole acts, when I wasn’t on stage, I was backstage, changing clothes or fussing with my fake mustache. I had never actually seen the entire show. I decided it might make the experience of being in The Music Man a bit more enjoyable if I read the entire script. So with just a few days to go, I sat down one night and read every photocopied page.

Knowing the whole story made a difference. While my performances up to that point had been fine, when I understood where my roles and my scenes fit into the larger story, my delivery somehow had more life. I could feel it, and my director could see it. After our first dress rehearsal, she asked me what I had done to improve my performance. “Just practice, I guess,” I said. I was too embarrassed to admit I had just recently read the entire script for the first time.

Knowing the Whole Story

For many of us, our experience with the Bible is a lot like my experience with The Music Man. We know a few scenes, and we do our best to play the roles we’ve been given, but we would walk with new life if we knew where we truly fit in the larger story, if we knew the entire script. But that’s not often the way the Bible is taught. A Sunday morning sermon will usually focus on one text or one theme. A Bible study might walk
participants through one book of the Bible or trace a topic of interest. And a through-the-Bible reading plan will get a faithful reader from Genesis through Revelation, but she would be like someone who has traveled across Europe by train, never getting off at a stop. Technically speaking, she saw Europe, but she didn’t experience it—not really anyway.

There is a danger the other way, though, too. Sometimes people, in an attempt to find their place in God’s story, impose their own questions on the Bible, rather than letting Scripture speak for itself. This can lead to serious misapplication of certain verses, or it can lead to frustration because the answers these readers want to find are just not there.

This chapter opened with a passage from the Bible, a promise God’s Word makes about itself: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17 NIV). There’s no promise to address all our curious questions or provide a roadmap to a life of wealth and success. The Bible is a gift, given to help us get to know the God who loves us. As we dive into the story, we’ll do well to remember that God is the main character. Whether we’re reading about Moses or Esther or David or Barnabas, every chapter is about God.

Our goal in this booklet is to take a quick glimpse at the whole story of God. We’ll see that we have a role to play, but that role is informed by the larger story—
what has gone before, what is happening right now, and what will someday come. But, so we can all be on the same page, I offer the follow summary of God’s story from Genesis to Revelation.

**Genesis to Revelation: The Short Version**

In the beginning, it was all about goodness. God made the heavens and the earth, and they were good. In fact, God made all things to reflect his goodness. But sin twisted the goodness of creation—all that we can see and all that we can’t. Every aspect of creation was affected. Nothing was left unbent. Worse still is that we opened the door and invited sin in. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, were deceived and believed a lie about God’s heart. As a result, they discovered what it was like to be separated from that good heart. Down through history, every child of Adam and Eve has experienced this brokenness firsthand. The situation, apart from God, is hopeless, for nothing broken can fix itself. But thankfully, our Maker does not want us to live apart from Him.

> In the temptation of Eve, the **devil’s lie** contained several layers. One was to question God’s instructions: “Did God actually say . . . ?” (Genesis 3:1) Another was to deny the truth of what he had said: “You will not surely die” (v. 4). But the worst aspect of the lie appealed to their pride: “You will be like God” (v. 5).

Starting with one man and his wife, Abram and Sarai, God created a nation to be a light to the
world. Israel was to walk in God’s ways and invite her neighbors to do the same. But Israel blew it. Over and over again, the people disobeyed God, and instead of inviting others to know the true God, they chased after the false gods of their neighbors. It would seem that God’s plan had failed. But God’s plan never depended on the faithfulness of his people. God is the faithful one.

At just the right moment in history, God himself put on flesh and came to earth to be born of a virgin in Bethlehem. Jesus did what Israel never could: obey perfectly. Jesus did what the sacrifices of animals never could: pay for sin. And Jesus did what broken people never could: make a way back to the Father. Someday, he’ll return to put an end to every evil thing and restore the unbroken goodness of God to all creation.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his listeners, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17). His life on earth perfectly lived up to the requirements of the Law and fulfilled multiple Old Testament prophecies about Messiah.

This summarizes the whole Bible, but the questions my students asked me in chapter one remain: What difference does the gospel make right here, right now? What difference does it make in our lives today?
A few years ago, I got on a kick to reinvent myself a bit physically. At the time, I had a beard, glasses, and an extra thirty pounds. I decided it was time for a change. Losing the beard was easy, though it took several weeks to...
get back into the habit of shaving every morning. Taking off the glasses for good was a bit harder, but to my surprise, my ophthalmologist told me I was a good candidate for LASIK eye surgery, and I scheduled my appointment. Finally, there was the weight to be lost. I started by cutting out as much sugar from my diet as possible. I switched to stevia in my coffee, passed on desserts and snacks, and became a connoisseur of low-fat cheese and crackers. Then, I committed to running at least three days a week. At first, it was more of a run/walk with lots of water breaks, but after a dozen or so sessions on the treadmill, I was able to jog for five miles or longer at a time.

In just a few months, I felt healthier, looked younger, and had much more energy. In fact, my appearance was so different that one coworker, who normally worked remotely and hadn’t seen me in a few months, didn’t recognize me. He passed right by me in the hallway, offering only a polite nod of his head as he would to any stranger. When I spoke with him later, he did a double take and admitted I looked completely different.

The Bible says that when we come to know Jesus, we become completely different too, only our transformation in Christ doesn’t affect our outward appearance just yet. Second Corinthians 5:17 says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” In other words, because Jesus’s resurrection sparked the dawn
of the new creation, those of us who are connected to him are also part of that new creation.

**The Once and Future Kingdom**

While the resurrection and transformation of our physical bodies is still a future event, the Holy Spirit living inside of us brings our dead spirits back to life. We become new. That’s why in one place Paul could write, “Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him” (*Romans* 6:8; cf. *2 Timothy* 2:11), referring to a future resurrection. But in another, he could say, “In him also you were . . . buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead” (*Colossians* 2:11–12), emphasizing that believers have already been “raised,” a past event.

Jesus made this clear as well when, in John 3, he told a religious leader named Nicodemus that he needed to be born again: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (*John* 3:3). Many people miss the significance of this because they equate the kingdom of God, also called the kingdom of heaven, with the afterlife. But the kingdom is not just another way
of referring to heaven. The kingdom of God is the rule and reign of God, which, of course, is the way of things in heaven. But one day, everything in creation will come under God’s rule, just as it was in the beginning. God’s kingdom will cover the whole universe.

As it stands now, our world is in rebellion. That’s why it’s perfectly acceptable to talk about the kingdom in a future sense, as Jesus often did. But that’s not the whole story. When someone comes to know Jesus, they enter into God’s kingdom, right here and right now. And as individuals and families, whole communities and nations, bow to Jesus, his kingdom takes new ground. In fact, Jesus instructed his followers to pray for God’s kingdom to come to earth (Matthew 6:10; Luke 11:2). That’s the future aspect of the kingdom. But he also referred to the kingdom as having “come near” (Luke 10:9, 11), having “come upon you” (Matthew 12:28; Luke 11:20), and being “in the midst of you” (Luke 17:21). That’s the present aspect at work.

Nicodemus seemed to understand that Jesus was requiring a present change in order to enter into God’s kingdom here and now. His objection, while somewhat flippant, gets at the immediacy of Jesus’s call to be born again: “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:4). As a highly educated religious leader, Nicodemus understood the new birth to be figurative language on Jesus’s part. But his response, cloaked in literal language, demonstrates that he recognized the impossibility
of Jesus’s statement. If he had taken Jesus’s demand of a new birth as merely a requirement to enter the pearly gates of heaven upon his death, he wouldn’t have flinched. He knew Jesus was telling him that God required a total change of life, right then and there, in order to be a part of the new thing God was doing. What Jesus was asking for was as impossible as a grown man making his way back into his mother’s womb to be born again. But of course, “with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

Just as no part of the old creation willed itself into being, so with the new creation God brings to each of Christ’s followers, the miracle belongs to him alone. None of us can take the slightest credit for what God has done. The apostle Paul goes so far as to say that the change in a believer is nothing short of the difference between death and life:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4–7).

Notice that Paul’s description of the believer’s experience is, once again, in the past tense. God has already “made us alive together with Christ”
and already “raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places” (vv. 5–6). While we await a future bodily resurrection and the coming of new heavens and a new earth, we have already been awakened to the age to come. Our status as new creations in Christ Jesus is already firm and secure.

God performs a miracle within every believer to make each one a new creation. This comes by nothing we have done—“by grace you have been saved” (v. 5). And the reason for this new birth? It is “so that in the coming ages [God] might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us” (v. 7). Just like the creation of the heavens and the earth at the beginning of everything way back in Genesis, this work of new creation in our hearts is from God and by God. Through and through, it is an overflow of his love.

New Vision for Kingdom Citizens

Shortly after my eye surgery a couple of years ago, I discovered that my mind did not immediately accept the new reality of 20/20 vision. Every morning for the first several days, I would wake up seeing clearly, but I
would inevitably reach for my glasses next to the bed out of habit. And while driving, I would often find myself squinting unnecessarily to see things in the distance. The squinting didn’t improve my eyesight one iota, but it somehow felt right to narrow my gaze in those situations, just as I had done before. I had new vision, but it took my brain a little time to accept the truth.

This is one of the ongoing challenges of the Christian life: learning to live in the truth of our new birth. We have been given a new nature, but we must choose to walk in it. While our status as new creations is a gift from God, we must exercise the gift every day. That’s why the apostle Paul encouraged the Christians at Ephesus “to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life” (Ephesians 4:22), and also “to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (v. 24). God has given us a new spirit, which is now able to obey Him (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26), and he has sent the Holy Spirit to live inside of us, but it is up to us to obey his promptings.

The Jewish prophet Ezekiel was exiled to Babylon when he saw a series of visions. In one vision he saw dry bones scattered in the desert. The Spirit of God gathered the bones together, gave them flesh, and then breathed life into them. The vision showed how God would restore his people Israel, but it also teaches how God breathes spiritual life into us (Ezekiel 37:1–14; See also Ephesians 2:1–10; Colossians 2:13).
While the Christian life is an ongoing battle against sin to walk in newness of life, too often we give up before we even start. We are quick to say with the apostle Paul, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God . . . .” That’s Romans 3:23—a popular verse and one many of us can recite from memory. But how many of us can recall the next verse? Paul continues his thought: “. . . and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (v. 24). We have been set free. We have been bought out of slavery. We have been made new. The new creation has broken into our lives, right here and right now. We are no longer at home in this world; we belong to another. And the sinful nature that we inherited from Adam, while it still attempts to pull us down every day, is just as alien within us.

The good news of the gospel extends to all of creation, but it starts with us. We really do have a role to play. We have been made new, and one day, when we find ourselves living forever with our Maker in a restored and renewed earth that has been joined to a new heaven, the sin we struggled with in this life will be seen for what it is: death, the very opposite of the goodness that was in our Father’s heart at the very beginning—and has been his desire for us ever since.
Conclusion: Where We Find Ourselves

On the cross, Jesus paid the penalty for our sins. He dealt with sin, once and forever. It is finished. The empty tomb on Sunday morning serves as proof that the Father accepted the Son’s sacrifice on our behalf. The good news of the gospel is true because Jesus is alive, and all who know Him will one day experience resurrection for themselves.

Jesus returned to the Father but sent the Holy Spirit to fill his followers with his presence and
power. From Jerusalem, God’s story—the gospel—spread throughout Judea, and then to Samaria, through the Roman Empire, and eventually the whole world.

Among the last recorded words we have that Jesus said to his disciples is what has come to be known as The Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (MATTHEW 28:19).

This is where we find ourselves in God’s story. We belong to this age—to the era of the church, which is made up of disciples who have been charged by Jesus to make more disciples, sharing the good news of salvation with every person who has yet to hear. God’s kingdom came to earth with his Son, but it is not yet here in its fullness. As citizens of his kingdom, we have opportunities to facilitate its coming as God’s Spirit works through us to bless our world. This is the difference the gospel makes in our lives today.

The Bible does not leave God’s story open-ended. The book of Revelation gives us a sneak peek at Jesus’s return. Until the end, Satan will

Everything that has gone wrong will be undone. Heaven and earth will be joined together.
continue to deceive as many people as he can,
and God will continue to invite into his kingdom
everyone who has ears to hear and eyes to see. Jesus
has always been and will continue to be our ark of
safety. And an ark will be needed, for judgment
is coming, just as it did in Noah’s day. When Jesus
returns, he will come as conquering King. Satan
and his legions will be thrown into the lake of fire,
along with all those who have rejected Jesus as Lord.
The kingdom of darkness will be laid waste. Sin will
be no more. Everything broken will be made new.
Everything that has gone wrong will be undone.
Heaven and earth will be joined together as New
Jerusalem comes down to meet a renewed earth. And
God will dwell with his people forever in a glorious
adventure that no one has yet seen.
   This is the story of God.

God promised Noah, “Never again shall there be a flood to
destroy the earth” (Genesis 9:11). But the apostle Peter warns
us, “The heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for
fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of
the ungodly” (2 Peter 3:7). We need an “ark” to save us from
this coming judgment. That ark is Jesus himself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
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notes
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