



G O S P E L

Recovering the Power that Made
Christianity **Revolutionary**

J D G R E E A R

Foreword by **TIMOTHY KELLER**

“J.D. is clear on the gospel, humble and humorous. He’s written a book that’s good for the Christian lacking assurance, the Christian tempted to legalism, the Christian tempted to guilt, the Christian tempted to selfishness. If you want to be missional and faithful, reaching out while holding fast, this book will encourage you.”

—Mark Dever, senior pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church and author of *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*

“With this book J.D. Greear solidifies his position on a team of young evangelical voices calling the twenty-first century church back to the gospel. He powerfully and probingly shows that the gospel is just as necessary and relevant after you become a Christian as it is before because the gospel doesn’t simply rescue us from the past and rescue us for the future; it also rescues us in the present from being enslaved to things like fear, insecurity, anger, self-reliance, bitterness, entitlement, and insignificance. J.D. makes the clear case that when the word of the gospel—Christ’s love for us without strings attached—grips our hearts, it sets us free and changes everything.”

—Tullian Tchividjian, pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, and author of *Jesus + Nothing = Everything*

“My soul continues to be encouraged by the stirring up of strong voices to point people to the gospel and what appears to be a genuine movement back to that thing that Paul considers “of first importance.” J.D. has done a masterful job of clarifying and wringing out the gospel implications for the life of the believer. Whether you are a pastor, have been in church your whole life, or have recently become a Christian you will find this book to be helpful.”

—Matt Chandler, lead pastor, The Village Church

“My fellow pastor, J.D. Greear, through his book, has helped us in this quest for gospel-saturated living. He takes the principles of gospel centrality and shows us how to orient our lives around it. I appreciate how in refreshing and real ways he makes the gospel accessible to others so that they can experience its transforming power. I especially like the book’s practical section on gospel prayer as a way to assist us in rehearsing these truths deep into our hearts and minds. Whether you are exploring Christianity for the first time or are longing to ‘look into these things’ again and again, let me invite you to spend time with this helpful book.”

—Timothy Keller, senior pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church and author of *The Reason for God*

“Radical obedience to the person of Christ can only spring from reckless trust in the sufficiency of Christ. I am grateful to God for my friend J.D. Greear and his call to plant our lives and churches solidly in the soil of the gospel. This book will help you rest daily in God’s great grace as you live continually for God’s great glory.”

—David Platt, senior pastor, The Church at Brook Hills
and author of *Radical*

“With disarming honesty, J.D. offers an insightful look at the spiritual realities which face us today. I love the section on Your New Identity! Perhaps the most poignant and central truth for me is ‘being gospel Centered is not moving past the gospel but continually swimming deeper into it.’ I encourage you to read this book.”

—Dr. Frank Page, chairman of the Executive Committee of the
Southern Baptist Convention

“J.D. Greear is one of the greatest men of God I know. And one of the most brilliant. His ability to communicate the gospel in a fresh yet faithful way perfectly positions him to speak the life-giving message of Jesus into you in a way that you have never experienced. And in a way that will change your life forever.”

—Steven Furtick, lead pastor, Elevation Church
and author of *Sun Stand Still*

“I’ve lived long enough to know that there’s only one hope, one thing that can actually heal us and transform us: the grace-saturated gospel of Jesus. J.D. Greear invites us to dive into the bottomless end of the gospel pool and find life that deeply satisfies.”

—Jud Wilhite, senior pastor of Central Christian Church,
Las Vegas and author of *Torn*,

“What is left if the gospel is lost? That question should haunt the evangelical mind as we are now surrounded by so many false Gospels, partial Gospels, and confused Gospels. Addressing this emergency, J.D. Greear offers sound counsel, clear biblical thinking, and the full measure of conviction in helping Christians and churches recover the authentic gospel of Jesus Christ.”

—Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr., president,
the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
and author of *He Is Not Silent*

“The gospel truly changes everything. In *Gospel* Pastor J.D. Greear makes that truth crystal clear. In this book you will learn that Christ’s

presence and approval are all you need today and always for everlasting joy. I love this book for the blessing it will be to the body of Christ. It has a word for us all.”

—Daniel L. Akin, president,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
and author of *Engaging Exposition*

“I believe God had J.D. write this book for such a time as this, for there has never been a time in the church where we so desperately needed to see the gospel more clearly, and the person of Christ so central to the gospel. This book is a gift from God to His church and to the world.”

—Clayton King, president of Crossroads Worldwide
and author of *Dying to Live*

“If you’re not amazed by the blood-soaked good news that ripped you from the grave, then you just might be on your way to being bored to death. And boredom leads to the futility of rote performance, pretending, and ultimately despair. I’m thankful one of my favorite preachers in the world, J.D. Greear, takes all that on in this book. With precision and punch, J.D. brings the shock and awe of gospel power. This book won’t just engage your mind, it’ll quicken your pulse.”

—Russell Moore, dean of the School of Theology and senior vice-president for Academic Administration at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and author of *Adopted for Life*

I have spent my entire life studying movements. Great spiritual movements like Great Awakenings or missionary movements have at their center the recovery of the gospel. We desperately need such a movement in our time, and I for one believe we are seeing it. J.D. Greear gives clarity and perspective to this growing gospel movement. This book should be read by every person breathing, whether believer or not, whether “leader” or not. Get to know afresh the God who saves by reading this book, and find rescue for your soul.

—Alvin L. Reid, professor of Evangelism and Student Ministry,
Bailey Smith Chair of Evangelism at
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Nothing has affected my life more than the gospel. My thirty-five years of pastoral ministry have given me an ever-increasing love for, and deeper awe of, its power. Dr. Greear has much to offer the body

of Christ in embracing this gospel in all its glory. The gospel really is the power of God for salvation, so read and be forever reminded!”

—Johnny Hunt, senior pastor,
First Baptist Church of Woodstock

“I love the gospel and the way that the gospel fuels zeal . . . and I love the way that J.D. writes about it. This is a gospel saturated book that will guide you in your desire to love the Lord and your neighbor. I highly recommend it.”

—Elyse Fitzpatrick, author of *Give Them Grace: Dazzling Your Kids with the Love of Jesus*

“With the clarity and conviction of a prophet, J.D. Greear calls us to more than accuracy and academics with the text. In his book he challenges us to be sure that the gospel is more than central to our theology . . . but that it has transformed our lives.”

—Mac Brunson, senior pastor,
First Baptist Church of Jacksonville

“Are you tired of the disconnect between head-religion and heart-religion? Read this book. Are you tired of the treadmill of performance-driven Christianity? Read this book. Are you unclear about how your love for the gospel should play-out in your daily walk with God? Read this book. Are you tired of the empty ‘gospel-jargon’ that, regrettably, has become vogue in our day? Read this book. In this short volume, J.D. Greear has gifted the church with something wonderful: he calls us to rediscover the Source of the transforming power of the Christian life. In short, he beckons us, woos us, and drives us to Christ, our great treasure and eternal joy. Hopeful and life-giving, I highly recommend this book.”

—Scott Anderson, executive director, Desiring God,
Minneapolis, Minnesota

“The fruit we crave—joy, peace, love, goodness—persistently eludes our techniques and formulae. J.D. Greear reminds us that Jesus and his gospel are both the means and the end. Savor this book.”

—Glenn Lucke, president, Docent Research Group



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Nashville, Tennessee

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Dedicated to the members of the Summit Church,
who have patiently walked with a pastor who was
rediscovering the revolutionary power of the gospel.

Against the world; for the world.

—St. Athanasius



Acknowledgments

To my wife, who has lived out the gospel as well as anyone I know. Her passionate love for Jesus has often rebuked my tendency toward separating knowledge from passion. Thank you for your patience with me, and for extending to me the grace of the gospel. In her grace I have seen that I am “first, sinner; only second, sinned against.”

To my parents, who faithfully modeled a love for Jesus for the twenty years I spent in their home. They never used the term “gospel-centered,” but they lived in awe of the God of gospel. That, as I see it, is the whole point of gospel-centeredness.

To Tim Keller, whose thinking has so permeated my own that I can no longer really tell where his stops and mine starts. I am heavily indebted to him for many of the ideas in this book, particularly in chapters 2, 3, and 6. I have listened to and read Tim Keller so much that I tend to plagiarize his interpretation of a passage before I even hear him teach on that passage. I told him that once, and he laughed and said he did the same thing with Ed Clowney. I have met Dr. Keller only twice, for a combined total of six minutes. The second

time we met, I asked if I could call him my friend. He said yes. So, to my BFF Tim Keller, thank you. I have tried to note where I recount a point I heard from him. However, having listened to and read so much of his teaching, I sometimes forget when I heard something from him first. Any omission of citation is accidental.

To Paul Carlisle, Sam Williams, David Powlison, Elyse Fitzpatrick, and Ed Welch, whose counseling and writing have profoundly influenced my thinking. Since my first counseling class in seminary, I've always said that if I could preach like anyone, I'd preach like a counselor.

To my friends Bruce Ashford, Danny Akin, Mark Driscoll, Tyler Jones, Clayton King, Steven Furtick, David Platt, and Tullian Tchividjian: Hearing your insights, listening to you preach, and bouncing ideas off of you have changed the character of my ministry forever. You have been gifts of God to me.

Finally, I want to thank the loyal, patient team at B&H Publishing Group, particularly Jedidiah Coppenger, Michael Kelley, and Tom Walters for hours and hours of labor with me on this project. At times it seemed you were even more committed to this book than I was! Thank you for your dedication to making theologically rigorous material accessible to all. This book is much better because of your labors.

I have no desire at all to be original. I have had only three original thoughts in my lifetime, and they weren't that good. I desire for people to understand the concepts that are in this book. Consider me, and this book, merely a rehash of truths that God revealed to His people in ancient times. God is the source; the church is the conduit. I stand in grateful debt to both.



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Foreword

BY TIMOTHY KELLER

One of the most startling passages in the Bible connects the magnificence of angels with the mystery of the gospel. Angels are incredibly majestic and powerful beings, living in God’s eternal presence. Yet there is something that has happened on the earth that is so stupendous that even these immortal beings experience the persistent longing “to look into these things” (1 Pet. 1:12 NIV). What are “these things” that could possibly and consistently consume the attention of God-fixated creatures? The answer is—the gospel.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care. . . . It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. (1 Pet. 1:10, 12 NIV)

The angels never get tired of looking into the gospel. This means that there is no end to gospel exploration. There are depths in the gospel that are always there to be discovered and applied not only to our ministry and daily Christian life, but above all to the worship of the God of the gospel with renewed vision and humility.

The underlying conviction in my preaching, pastoring, and writing is that the gospel—this eternally fascinating message craved by the angels—can change a heart, a community, and the world when it is recovered and applied. The gospel is life giving, because it generates changes that are received only by grace through faith. This foundational truth, however, gets bypassed, obscured, and forgotten, because, as Martin Luther noted, religion forms the default mode of the human heart. It is essential, then, that we distinguish religion from the gospel. Religion, as the default mode of our thinking and practices, is based upon performance: “I obey; therefore, I am accepted by God.” The basic operating principle of the gospel, however, is, not surprisingly, an about-face, one of unmerited acceptance: “I am accepted by God through Christ; therefore, I obey.” To truly understand this paradigm shift at a life-altering level requires that the gospel be explored and “looked into” at every opportunity and in regular, systematic ways.

When the gospel is explored in this way, it produces uncommon properties. Blaise Pascal, writing in the seventeenth century, reveals how this occurs:

Without this divine knowledge, how could we help feeling either exalted or dejected? The Christian religion alone has been able to cure these twin vices, not by using the

one to expel the other according to worldly wisdom, but by expelling both through the simplicity of the gospel. For it teaches the righteous that they still bear the source of all corruption which exposes them throughout their lives to error, misery, death, and sin; and [yet] it cries out to the most ungodly that they are capable of the grace of the Redeemer. Thus, making those whom it justifies to tremble, yet consoling those whom it condemns, it so nicely tempers fear with hope through this dual capacity. . . . Grace and sin! It causes infinitely more dejection than mere reason—but without despair, and infinitely more exaltation than natural pride—but without puffing us up! (Pensées 208)

It is one thing to understand the gospel but is quite another to *experience* the gospel in such a way that it fundamentally changes us and becomes the source of our identity and security. It is one thing to grasp the essence of the gospel but quite another to think out its implications for all of life. We all struggle to explore the mysteries of the gospel on a regular basis and to allow its message to influence our thinking.

My fellow pastor, J.D. Greear, through his book, has helped us in this quest for gospel-saturated living. He takes the principles of gospel centrality and shows us how to orient our lives around it. I appreciate how in refreshing and real ways he makes the gospel accessible to others so that they can experience its transforming power. I especially like the book's practical section on gospel prayer as a way to assist us in rehearsing these truths deep into our hearts and minds.

Whether you are exploring Christianity for the first time or are longing to “look into these things” again and again, let me invite you to spend time with this helpful book.



Introduction

I am a professional Christian. But for many years I found Christianity to be wearisome. That's a confession you won't often hear from a pastor, but it was true of me.

I first put faith in Christ when I was in high school. My conversion, as far as I can tell, was sincere. I understood that Christ had paid the full penalty for my sin, and I surrendered to do whatever God wanted me to do. I got a big list of stuff to start and stop doing for God.

I went to a Christian school that emphasized conformity to a set of rules. We didn't dance, because dancing would make you have impure thoughts. And we couldn't listen to music with a beat in it because that would make you want to dance. We weren't allowed to go to see movies, because movies would make you worldly. We couldn't even go see the Christian movies when they came to the theater because if people saw us at the movies they might assume we were there to see worldly movies, and that might make them think it was *OK* for them to see worldly movies. It was rules like these that real Christians lived by.

I learned that real Christians tell other people about Jesus, so I set goals for how many people I would tell about Jesus in a given month. I even established a maximum time limit (fifteen minutes) for how long I would sit with a stranger on an airplane before bringing up whether or not they knew Jesus.

In college I learned that real Christians love international missions, so I took lots of mission trips (twenty-five countries in ten years!) and gave lots of money to missions. I even packed up my entire life into an oversized duffel bag and went to live in a third-world fundamentalist Muslim country for two years.

I later learned that real Christians love the poor. So I sponsored a Compassion child. But wasn't she just one in an endless sea of hurting people that desperately needed my help? Should I adopt five more? Twenty-five more? Did I really need to drink that Coke with dinner? Couldn't that money be used to feed another orphan? I constantly felt guilty about anything I owned. Whatever I gave, it wasn't enough, because there was *always* more I could give. And, after all, "God doesn't judge your giving by the amount you give, but by the amount you have left." I always had a little more left than the kid in India did.

And then of course, there was the unfortunate day that I read the biography of a missionary who talked about how much more you could do for God if you were single, and so I concluded if I was really serious about being used maximally for God, I had to be single. That's what Paul said, right? To paraphrase 1 Corinthians 7, he said, "I wish you were all like I am" (i.e., single), so you could be unencumbered in ministry. Thus, if I wanted my life to be *maximally* leveraged for God's

kingdom, how could I desire anything *but* celibacy? Wouldn't I be willing to be single for seventy years so souls could be saved for eternity? So I tried to ignore girls for a semester during college—but to my chagrin, they wouldn't leave me alone. (At least that's how I remember it.)

By that time I was living in a way that would have met just about anybody's standard as a "real," committed Christian. But this religion of so-called grace often felt more to me like drudgery than delight. No matter how many rules I kept and how disciplined my life was, I walked around with an ever-present sense of guilt. In the deepest part of my heart, I knew—*knew*—God was not really pleased with me, because there was always something I could be doing better. The really good Christians were always doing something that I wasn't.

To make matters worse, my marriage kept revealing how selfish and petty I was. Seeing others more successful than me in ministry made me jealous to the point that I delighted in the thought of them falling into sin and being disqualified from ministry. I still felt enslaved to the lusts of my flesh. My service for God was fervent, but my passions for Him were cold. I certainly didn't *desire* to know Him more.

I was tired, and while I would never admit it, I was starting to hate God.

He was the merciless taskmaster always standing over me yelling, "NOT ENOUGH! I want MORE!" He was always there, waving damnation in my face, saying, "If you want My approval, there's something else you must *do*." His constant demands were driving me insane. The more I strived to walk in His ways, the less love I felt for Him. The more closely my feet followed Him, the more my heart ran away.

Oh, I had the facts down. I knew He had taken the penalty for my sin. I also knew that He was the universe's most satisfying possession. But if my head knew that truth, my heart didn't

The more closely my feet followed Him, the more my heart ran away.

feel it. I was motivated to walk with God primarily by my desire to stay out of hell.

Recently, however, I discovered something that has changed everything.

The gospel.

I know saying that sounds strange for an evangelical pastor who is leading a growing megachurch to say, but it is true.

It's not that I didn't understand or believe the gospel before. I did. But the truth of the gospel hadn't moved from my mind to my heart. There was a huge gap between my intellect and my emotions. The Puritan Jonathan Edwards likened his reawakening to the gospel to a man who had known, in his head, that honey was sweet, but for the first time had that sweetness burst alive in his mouth. That is what happened to me.

The Puritan Jonathan Edwards likened his reawakening to the gospel to a man who had known, in his head, that honey was sweet, but for the first time had that sweetness burst alive in his mouth.

"Rediscovering" the gospel has given me a joy in God I never experienced in all my years of fervent religion. Now I sense, almost daily, a love for God growing in my heart, displacing a love for myself. The jealousy that once consumed my heart

is being replaced by a desire to see others prosper. I feel selfishness giving way to tenderness and generosity. My cravings for the lusts of the flesh are being replaced by a craving for righteousness, and my self-centered dreams are being replaced by God-glorifying ambitions. A power is surging in me that is changing me and pushing me out into the world to leverage my life for the kingdom of God.

I still have a long way to go, and I daily have to struggle against the God-hating desires of my flesh, but I am changing. I am, as Paul would say, making “progress” in the gospel. The gospel has done in my heart what religion never could.

I believe it can do the same thing for you. That’s what this book is about.

*“Rediscovering” the
gospel has given me
a joy in God I never
experienced in all my
years of fervent religion.*

Over the next several chapters, I want to reacquaint you with the gospel. Not just with the doctrines, but with its power. The gospel is the announcement that God has reconciled us to Himself by sending His Son Jesus to die as a substitute for our sins, and that all who repent and believe have eternal life in Him. I want you to see the gospel not only as the means by which you get into heaven, but as the driving force behind every single moment of your life. I want to help, in some small way, your eyes to be opened (again) to the beauty and greatness of God. I want you to see how the gospel, and it alone, can make you genuinely passionate for God, free you from captivity to sin, and move you outward to joyful sacrifice on behalf of others.

Here's how we're going to go about this together. The first section of this book is about *why* the gospel—and only the gospel—is the means by which we can truly be changed. I want to show you why “religious” (what we're going to call “mechanical”) change absolutely, positively, does not work. In this section, I will show you how the gospel changes us in a fundamentally different way than religion does, and that it can do something in our hearts that religion is utterly unable to do.

In part 2 I want to introduce you to a simple tool that has helped me, for several years now, saturate myself in the gospel. It is a small, four-part prayer that I've come to call “The Gospel Prayer.” Each part of that prayer serves a specific purpose, pointing you to what God has done for you in Christ and how that changes how you see God, yourself, and others. I believe this prayer can be the means by which you “preach the gospel” to yourself daily.

As you read the first two sections, there will probably be some questions that arise. Things like, “If we are free in Christ, why do I still find so many commands in the Bible?” “What should I do when I don't desire God?” “How much does God expect me to do for Him?” “What does a true, gospel-centered church look like?” and so forth. In the third section, I want to confront these questions head on, and I hope to provide solid, biblical answers for you. I hope this section will convince you that the gospel really is, as the apostle Peter would say, all that you need for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3).

That's it. Simple enough? Good. Time is wasting, and the most amazing news in all the universe is waiting to be discovered.

PART 1



How the Gospel Does
What Religion Cannot



CHAPTER 1

The Missing Gospel

Is the gospel really missing? If so, where did it go?

Most Christians have the facts straight: Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a perfect life, died on the cross in our place, and was raised from the dead. All those who place their faith in Him will be forgiven and have everlasting life. So, the gospel is not missing.

Not so fast.

I mentioned in the introduction that there is a difference in knowing that honey is sweet and having that sweetness burst alive in your mouth. Being able to articulate the gospel with accuracy is one thing; having its truth captivate your soul is quite another.

The gospel is not just supposed to be our ticket into heaven; it is to be an entirely new basis for how we relate to God, ourselves, and others. It is to be the source from which everything else flows.

*Being able to articulate
the gospel with accuracy
is one thing; having its
truth captivate your soul
is quite another.*

Let me lay all my cards on the table: I believe evangelicalism, as a whole, desperately needs a recovery of the gospel as the center of Christianity. Even in conservative denomina-

tions like my own (the Southern Baptist Convention), the gospel has been eclipsed by any number of secondary stimuli for growth.

I don't mean that we have corrupted the gospel—no, we've still got those facts right. But the goal of the gospel is not just that we pass some kind of test by accurately recounting the importance of Jesus. The goal of the gospel is to produce a type of people consumed with passion for God and love for others. We certainly don't seem to have *that* right.

A Christianity that does not have as its primary focus the deepening of passions for God is a false Christianity, no matter how zealously it seeks conversions or how forcefully it advocates righteous behavior. Being converted to Jesus is not just about learning to obey some rules. Being converted to Jesus is learning to so adore God that we would gladly renounce everything we have to follow Him.

In graduate school my roommate kept a dog named Max in our house. Because poor Max was crippled in his back legs, his life consisted of lying on our doorstep and staring up at us when we walked by. I remember looking at him one day and thinking, "Based on how most people see Christianity, Max would make a fine Christian: he doesn't drink; he doesn't smoke; he doesn't cuss; he doesn't get angry; we've had him

neutered so his thought-life is under control.”

Jesus’ disciples are not supposed to be merely compliant, neutered dogs. Jesus’ followers are to be *alive* with a love for God. When you love God and love others, Jesus said, all the rest of the Christian life falls naturally into place (Matt. 22:37–39).

A Christianity that does not have as its primary focus the deepening of passions for God is a false Christianity, no matter how zealously it seeks conversions or how forcefully it advocates righteous behavior.

How Do We Learn to Love God?

How, then, do we learn to *love* God? That’s the dilemma of the “great commandment”: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37). But how can true love be *commanded*?

Being commanded to love someone you have no natural affection for becomes wearisome. True love grows as a response to loveliness. The first time I saw my wife, I felt the beginnings of love for her. The more I’ve gotten to know her over the years, and the more I’ve seen of her beauty, the more I’ve grown to love her. My love is a response.

Love for God is commanded in Scripture, but the command can only truly be fulfilled as our eyes are opened to see God’s beauty revealed in the gospel. The Spirit of God uses the beauty of the gospel to awaken in our hearts a desire for God. “We love Him,” the apostle John would say, “because

He first loved us” (1 John 4:19 NKJV). Love for God grows out of an experience of the love of God.

When we focus primarily on behavior change, we are ignoring the real issue: a heart that doesn’t want to love

Love for God grows out of an experience of the love of God.

God. That’s certainly not to say that we should only obey God when we feel like it; only that preaching Christianity primarily as a set of new behaviors will

create people who act right without ever loving the right.¹ This creates hypocrites, weary and resentful of God.

What Is “Real” Spiritual Growth?

In the last message Jesus gave to His disciples, He told them that the way to fruitfulness and joy—the “secret” to the Christian life—was to *abide* in Him. They wouldn’t produce “abundant fruit” by reading books, intensifying their self-discipline, memorizing Scripture, or getting in accountability groups. Those things all have their place, but real fruit comes only from one place: abiding in Jesus.

“Abiding in Jesus” may sound like spiritual mumbo jumbo to you. It always did to me. I assumed that when you were “abiding in Jesus” you’d walk around with an ethereal glow in your eye and inexplicably wake up at 4 a.m. strumming passion tunes on the golden harp you keep beside your bed. But the word *abide* is much more straightforward than that. The Greek word *meno* means literally “to make your home in.” When we “make our home in” His love—feeling it, saturating

ourselves with it, reflecting on it, standing in awe of it—spiritual fruit begins to spring up naturally from us like roses on a rosebush.

Spiritual “fruit,” you see, is produced in the same way physical “fruit” is. When a man and woman conceive physical “fruit” (i.e., a child), they are usually not thinking about the mechanics of making that child. Rather, they get caught up in a moment of loving intimacy with one another, and the *fruit* of that loving intimacy is a child.

In the same way, spiritual fruit isn’t made by focusing on the commands of spiritual growth.

*When we “make our
home in” His love,
spiritual fruit begins
to spring up naturally
from us.*

You can’t just grit your teeth and say, “I will have more loving feelings toward God! I will be more patient! I will have self-control!” I’ll explain later the role for denial of the flesh and self-disciplines, but true spiritual *fruit* comes from getting swept up in intimate, loving encounters with Jesus Christ. His love is the soil in which all the fruits of the Spirit grow. When our roots abide *there*, then joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control grow naturally in our hearts.

So if you want to see spiritual fruit in your life, don’t focus primarily on the fruits. Focus on Jesus’ acceptance of you, given to you as a gift. Focusing on spiritual fruit will usually produce only frustration and despair, not fruitfulness.

Have you ever looked at your life and thought, “Why am I still so impatient? How could I really be saved and still have such a problem with self-control?” I certainly have. If

anything, the more I've walked with Jesus the more aware I've become of my sinfulness. Jesus, however, did not tell me to "abide" in my fruitfulness. He told me to abide in Him—in His acceptance of me, given to me freely as a gift.

Abiding in Jesus means understanding that His acceptance of us is the same regardless of the amount of spiritual fruit we have produced. Ironically, it is only when we understand that His love is not conditioned on our spiritual fruitfulness that we gain the power to become truly fruitful. Only those who abide in Him produce much fruit. In other words, those

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people who get better are those who understand that God's approval of them is not dependent on their getting better.

So what I really want to help you do in this book is abide in Jesus. The by-product of abiding in

Jesus is that you will become more patient in your marriage; you will develop self-discipline; you will become generous. Abiding in Jesus will produce *all* of the fruits of the Spirit in you—but not by having you concentrate particularly on any of those things. You concentrate on Jesus. You rest in His love and acceptance, given to you not because of what you have earned, but because of what He has earned for you.

Without Love, It's Ultimately Worthless

My senior year of high school, I started a relationship with an incredible girl for whom I *should* have been head over heels. “On paper” she was perfect. The problem was that when we were together there was just no *magic*, if you know what I mean. I couldn’t find a reason to *quit* dating her, however, so we kept on dating, even after I left for college 1,200 miles away.

I returned home for the first time over Christmas break, and we agreed to see each other the day before Christmas. All was well and good until the afternoon before I went to her house, when I had an alarming thought: *Was I supposed to get her a Christmas present?* It was, after all, the day before Christmas. If she got me a Christmas present and I didn’t get her one, then I would look like a total sleezeball.

Just to be safe, I stopped at the mall on my way to see her. I went into a sporting goods shop, the natural place you look for romantic gifts, and there I saw it—the absolutely perfect gift: an Adidas snow-skiing neck-warmer. It was \$7. I wrapped up the woolen masterpiece and put it under the seat in my car and drove the forty-five minutes over to her house. She came to the door, and after a few pleasantries, she said, “I bought you a Christmas present.” I said, proudly, “I got you one too!” She said, “Here is yours!” and gave me a *beautifully* wrapped box from under the tree. I opened it and took out; to my horror, it was obviously a very expensive shirt.

She looked at me expectantly and said, “Where’s my gift?”

I said, “Uhhh . . . I left it at home!” (Thinking that was safe . . . I could go home later, buy a new gift, and mail it to her. And I got to keep the neck-warmer. Win-Win.) But then

she said, “Well, we don’t have anything to do tonight. Maybe we could go back to your house and get it. I’d like to see your parents, anyway.”

I’m sure that during the forty-five-minute drive home I seemed a little distant. It’s because I was plotting. Praying. Vowing. When we walked in the house, I pulled my mom aside and said, “Hey—is there anything you were planning to give my sister that she doesn’t know about yet?” My mom said, “Why?” I said, “No further questions, please.” My mom went and got a gift intended for my sister (another pretty expensive sweater) and we put my date’s name on it instead. I took it in to my “girlfriend” and said, confidently, “Here’s your gift. I thought this would be perfect for you.”

I’ve often wondered in the years since then what would have happened that night had I come clean and told her the truth that my gift to her was only done to save face. No doubt, she would have refused it flatly. No girl wants to be loved only out of obligation.

Somehow we think God is different, as if He is pleased when we serve Him because we’re required to. He’s not.

God desires a people who desire Him, who serve Him because they love Him. He “seeks those,” Jesus said, “who worship Him in Spirit and in truth.”

In fact, Paul says whatever we do for God that is not fueled by love for God is ultimately worthless to Him:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove

mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1–3)

Let's face it: Paul's list here is impressive by anyone's standard. "Speaking with the tongues of men and angels" has to put you in the top 1 percent of spiritually gifted people. "Understanding all mysteries and all knowledge" means that you've got even the finer points of Christian doctrine down pat. "Faith to remove mountains" means you can flat get stuff done in prayer. And "*giving away even your body to be burned*"? Wow. Obedience doesn't get any more "radical" than that. When the offering plate goes by, you pull out a match and light yourself on fire for God. That's Varsity.

Yet, Paul says, spiritual giftedness, doctrinal mastery, audacious faith, and radical obedience *do not equal* the only thing that actually *matters* to God—love for Him. Without love even the most radical devotion to God is of no value to Him.

Let me make sure that sinks in . . . You can gain all the spiritual gifts in the world. You can take the most radical steps of obedience. You can share every meal with the homeless in your city. You can memorize the book of Leviticus. You can pray each morning for four hours like Martin Luther. But if what you do does

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not flow out of a heart of love—a heart that does those things because it genuinely *desires* to do them—it is ultimately *worthless* to God.

The point is that to produce *real* love in your heart for God takes something beyond spiritual gifts, greater doctrinal knowledge, audacious faith, and even radical obedience. Something entirely different. Radically different.

That's where the gospel comes in. The gospel, and the gospel alone, has the power to produce love for God in the heart. Paul calls the gospel “God’s power for salvation” (Rom. 1:16). There are only two things that Paul ever refers to as “the power of God.” One is the gospel; the other is Christ Himself. As the story of the gospel is proclaimed, the Spirit Himself makes the heart come alive to see the glory and beauty of God revealed in it. Just as Jesus’ command to the lame man to “get up and walk” had *in itself* the power to obey the command, so the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection has *in itself* the power to make dead hearts new. As the gospel is believed, through the power of the spirit, our selfish, hardened hearts burst alive with righteous and godly passions.² As we behold the glory of God in the face of Christ, Paul says, we are transformed into glory (2 Cor. 3:18–4:14).

Religion, then, can tell you what to do—namely, to “love God with all your heart, soul and mind” and “to love your neighbor as yourself”; but the gospel alone gives you the power to do it.

The gospel produces not just obedience, you see, but a new kind of obedience³—an obedience that is powered by desire. An obedience that is both pleasing to God *and* delightful to you.

Now, one clarification: I'm not saying here that every sacrifice we're asked to make for God will be in and of itself *desirable*. The cross was not in and of itself desirable to Jesus. Hebrews 12:2, in fact, says that Jesus had to *endure* its pain, which means He had to submit His desires to God's will. But even the crucifying of His flesh was shrouded in joy for Him. The joy of what He was obtaining—the pleasure of God and eternity with us—was greater than the pain.

That's how God wants our obedience to be as well. When we pick up our cross to follow Him, He wants even the pain of the cross to be shrouded in joy over what we are obtaining.

That kind of joy in Jesus cannot be produced in us by simple resolutions to obey. That kind of joy comes only from being saturated in the gospel.

Thus, if you are not where you should be spiritually, the answer is not simply to get busier for Jesus. It is not just to get more radical in your devotion to God. It's not only to seek greater spiritual gifts or even to learn more about the Bible. It is to make your home in God's love given to you as a gift in Christ.

That's what I mean when I say the gospel is missing. We have substituted all kinds of cosmetic changes for true heart change. We encourage people to pursue new and better spiritual gifts. We tell them to recover ancient devotional techniques. We try to beef them up on a particular doctrinal system, as if more correct facts will do the trick in itself.

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We tell them to show audacious, mountain-moving faith in prayer. We tell them to get radically committed to the Great Commission. These things all have their place, but all we are doing is piling superficial changes onto a heart that doesn't really love God. *None* of those things can produce love for God. Only the gospel can. Without that, ultimately our changes are worthless.

I am a lazy yardman. To my wife's chagrin, I don't (willingly) plant flowers.⁴ I don't fertilize. I pay someone else to cut the grass. All I care about, as it relates to the yard, is that I don't get complaint letters from my neighbors and I can see the tops of my kids' heads when they go outside. My wife, on the other hand, loves a plush, bright, neatly manicured lawn. One day she complained that our flower beds had too many weeds in them, and that I needed to do something about it. Now, there are two ways to kill weeds. You can get on your knees and spend several hours pulling them up by the roots. This is the correct way. Or, you can napalm them with weed killer. This is the lazy way. My way. So, multiple times each summer I blasted our flower beds with weed killer . . . and all our weeds died, just like the advertisement promised. And so did quite a few rose bushes that were caught in the line of fire. Beautiful, green vines with budding scarlet flowers were turned into tumbleweeds.

My wife, of course, complained about that too. In a Spirit-filled way, of course. So, let's say that to make her happy I had gone down to the florist and bought several dozen roses, brought them home, and began to staple them to the dead branches of the rosebushes. Would I have fixed anything? For a while, the dead rosebushes may have given the appearance of

being alive, at least from a distance. But they would not really be alive, and I would not really be out of the doghouse.

Paul Tripp has said that most of the strategies for Christian growth amount merely to “rose-stapling techniques.” Give away more money. Be more serious about your sin. Be more disciplined in your life. Read your Bible and have accountability partners. Go to a small group.

Spiritual disciplines have their place (we’ll get to that later). But nothing can take the place of organic change in the heart.

Only in the gospel, you see, is the power to obey the first commandment. Only in the truths of the gospel can a heart turned in on itself burst alive in love for God.

For many evangelicals the gospel has functioned solely as the entry rite into Christianity; it is the prayer we pray to begin our relationship with Jesus; the diving board off of which we jump into the pool of Christianity. After we get into the pool, we get into the real stuff of Christianity: mastering good principles for our marriage; learning rules and regulations of how to behave; and figuring out if Kirk Cameron will be left behind.

The gospel, however, is not just the diving board off of which we jump into the pool of Christianity; it is the pool itself. It is not only the way we begin in Christ; it is the way we grow in Christ. As Tim Keller says, the gospel is not just the ABCs of Christianity, it is the A–Z; it is not the first step in a stairway of truths, it is more like the hub of God’s wheel of truth.⁵ All other Christian virtues flow out of it.

That’s why growth in Christ is never going beyond the gospel, but going deeper into the gospel. The purest waters

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from the spring of life are found by digging deeper, not wider, into the gospel well.

My prayer is that this book will call us to a deeper understanding of the gospel as the true center of

Christianity. I hope it helps you see that the gospel shouldn't just be a ticket to heaven but the core of our entire lives. When you have made your home in the gospel. You will be radically generous. You will show audacious faith. These things are not added after the gospel, they flow from the gospel.

The apostle Peter says that the angels still “long to look into” the things of the gospel, because it dazzles their minds (1 Pet. 1:12). The angels have seen God face-to-face, and yet they still can't get enough of the gospel! Do we think we are really ready to move on to something else?

Whatever spiritual dysfunction you have in your life, the cure is the gospel. Do we want to be filled with passion for God? We should drink from the gospel. Do we want to get control of our bodies? We must be captivated by the gospel. Do we want to be content with what we have? We need to feast on the gospel. Do we want to learn to love our spouse? We

have to be overwhelmed by the gospel.

Martin Luther said in his *Lectures on Romans* that true spiritual progress was “always to begin

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again.” He said we must daily “embrace the love and kindness of God . . . and daily exercise our faith therein; entertaining no doubt of God’s love and kindness.”⁶

Always “begin again” with the gospel. Abide in it; swim in it; make your home in it. See more and more of your life through it. Be absolutely convinced at every moment of every day of the goodness of God in your life. That’s the only way you’ll ever *really* grow.

The gospel has done its work in us when we crave God more than we crave everything else in life—more than money, romance, family, health, fame—and when seeing His kingdom advance in the lives of others gives us more joy than anything we could own. When we see Jesus as greater than anything the world can offer, we’ll gladly let everything else go to possess Him. When we love others like He loves us, we’ll willingly yield our possessions to see His kingdom come into their lives.

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Obedience that does not flow from love ends up being drudgery—both to us, and to God. The gospel turns that drudgery into delight. It changes us from being slaves who *have* to obey God to sons and daughters who *want* to obey God. Again, God is not just after obedience; He’s after a whole new kind of obedience—an obedience that is filled with desire.

Dwelling on the riches of the gospel has forever changed my life. It has transformed our church. I believe with my whole heart it can change you too. But the humbling thing for

me is that I can't really *teach* any of this to you. These things are spiritually revealed and spiritually discerned. They require the gift of heavenly eyes. I couldn't even teach it to myself

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when it was right in front of my face, so what would make me think I could illuminate your heart?

And what makes *you* think you can develop a passion for God by reading

a book? So why not stop right now and plead with God to open the eyes of your heart? You might use the words of Paul in his prayer for the Ephesians,

[I pray] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened . . . [and I pray that you] may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph. 1:17–18; 3:18–20)