

**GOSPEL
HERE
&
NOW**

**YOUR LIFE
IN THE STORY OF GOD**

JOHN GRECO



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Gospel Here and Now: Your Life in the Story of God
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Bigger Than a Story

ECCLESIASTES 1:1–11

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

A few weeks prior, in what I thought would be a quickly forgotten email, I congratulated the school's new headmaster and offered to help in any way I could as he settled in to his role. To my surprise, he responded that same afternoon, asking 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 high school's incoming transfer students. Unlike history, mathematics, or English, the Bible was often a strange and foreign world for young people new to formal Christian education. The headmaster wanted to provide a class that would cover the basics of the Bible, but he needed someone to teach it. The teaching schedules of the full-time faculty were already overloaded, so he was looking for someone with a biblical studies background to teach this 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 my way to Revelation, highlighting 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 read the Bible as a single, unified narrative 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 in the class, so I could spend a couple of minutes focused on each one. Their questions were good, 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 there was more to my stumbling pace than that. Every day, the students asked a lot of questions—great, important questions—which would always find their way back to the gospel. Essentially, they wanted to know what difference the gospel should make in their lives. That's why we could never finish the class lessons I had planned.

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

And, in one sense, they were right.

If the Old Testament is only background for Jesus' 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 that 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, it doesn't matter how well we know its people, places, and events—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.

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. He discovered what many people have discovered down through the ages into our day: this world is broken, and we are powerless to fix it. “What has been is what will be.”

The key to understanding Solomon—and the difference the gospel makes to our lives here and now—lies in the phrase “under the sun.” From where we live our lives, *under the sun*, everything does appear to be meaningless. “All is vanity,” as 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 that we go to heaven when we die, it doesn't change much here and now. That kind of promise makes the hopelessness we often feel in this life only

temporary, but it doesn't remove the weight from our shoulders as we walk through this world.

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 resurrection of the Son of God, the brokenness of this world is being undone right now. Solomon, in his search, got a glimpse of this. He saw 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 indeed discovered there is hope for this life when viewed from God's perspective, above the sun, but he didn't see the whole picture. Not quite. 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 invaded. From the garden paradise where God placed our first parents, the disease of sin 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 around us that waits for its redemption? What about the kingdom of darkness that opposes 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 hold until we die. That's the good news.

This book will take you on a journey through the Bible, but this trek will do more than simply retell God's story. We'll start with the gospel. More specifically, we'll start with six unique ways in which the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is said to have changed our world for the better, and we'll trace those themes across biblical history.

Though there are other themes we could survey, I've chosen

DAY 1: BIGGER THAN A STORY

six gospel promises that are repeated in different ways over and over again in Scripture. Each theme is given one week of focus, resulting in six weeks' worth of daily readings. The first four days of each week deal with the Old Testament. The fifth chapter is drawn from the Gospels—from the life and teachings of Jesus himself. And the sixth is from the book of Acts, one of the New Testament letters, or Revelation. In God's story, Christians are part of the New Testament community, so the last chapters of each week have special significance as we look at how the gospel affects our lives right here and right now.

The Bible is a story, but it's bigger than a story. It's *God's* story, 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. 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 my high school Bible students really wanted to know: *What difference does the gospel make in my life today?* Looking around, here under the sun, it can be hard to tell. God's Word invites us to take another look, from the vantage point of heaven. And from that lofty place—with history stretched before us and the work of Christ evident across the ages—we will find the hope that Solomon sought all those years ago.

YOUR LIFE IN THE STORY OF GOD

The Bible is a story, but as the story of God, it's a huge, ongoing narrative that permeates every detail of our past, present, and future. The good news of Jesus Christ—the gospel—is more than a ticket to heaven; it's the power and presence of God in our lives here on earth. The gospel is the promise of better things even now, a preview of the day when God makes “all things new” (Revelation 21:5).

INTRODUCTION: THE GOSPEL HERE AND NOW

1. Why do you think so many people—from King Solomon to many of us today—struggle with feelings of futility? Why does life so often seem to be “vanity”?
2. How would you answer the question my students posed to me: “What difference does the gospel make in my life today?”
3. What areas of life would you most like to see the gospel affect? What kind of change do you long to see?