

Do you remember playing the game “telephone” as a kid? We played it regularly in school. The teacher whispered a one-sentence message to a kid at the back of the class. Each kid along the way relayed what they heard, all the way to the front of the class. After twenty kids, the message usually got distorted. It started with, “Pastor Gary has grey hair,” and it ended up, “Pastor Emerson shaved his head.” Over time, through inadequate people, the message got compromised.

Understandably, many people fear something like that has happened to the message of the gospel. If you were to do a “man on the street” experiment and ask ten different people what the gospel is, you’d probably get ten different answers. It’s that God loves you. It’s that Jesus died for our sins. It’s about a personal relationship with God. It’s about going to heaven when you die. Every one of those statements contains truth. They are all a part of the message.

But what’s the actual message? Thankfully, we don’t have to rely on what has been whispered from person to person for two thousand years. We have the original source! In Acts 2, Peter stands up and preaches the first gospel message after the resurrection of Jesus. That’s the passage we get to read today!

“Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. David said about him:

“‘I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest in hope, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.’”

“Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

“‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”’”

“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. (Acts 2:22-41)

This is the first public proclamation of the gospel! This isn’t the downstream, diluted, and distorted message; this is the original source. Let’s dive in to see what we learn!

The Substance of the Gospel

The core content of the gospel that the apostles proclaimed, and that we proclaim today as the church, boils down to four pillars.

Jesus Came

In Acts 2:22, Peter said, “Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.” There is a very real person named Jesus Christ who came to this world and gave many convincing proofs that he was sent from God. He spoke with a wisdom the world had never heard before. Even 2,000 years later, people who don’t believe in Jesus say his teachings are the gold standard for ethics in the world. People in our country who are on the left and on the right both look to Jesus and say his teachings are pretty much perfect. They can’t agree on anything else, but they agree on that. But Jesus didn’t only teach ethics; he taught about truth and righteousness; he taught that he himself was the Son of God; he taught that he was the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one can have a relationship with God apart from him. His teaching was validated by miracles. He spoke a word and calmed the storm. He reached out his hand and cured the lepers. People touched the edge of his garments and were healed. He caused the lame to walk and the blind to see. He called people’s names, and the dead came back to life and literally walked out of their tombs. The gospels begin with the good news that through Jesus, God has come near to us.

In 2018, twelve boys from a soccer team in Thailand went exploring in a cave with their coach. Heavy rains fell while they were inside. Water began rushing into the cave, trapping them deep underground. For nine days, their families didn’t know if they were alive. Finally, after days of searching, two divers found them. They were alive, but they were more than two miles inside the cave. They were surrounded by darkness and rising water, and they couldn’t get out. The rescuers couldn’t stand at the entrance of the cave and yell, “Come on out!” They couldn’t send them a map and say, “Here’s the way home.” They couldn’t simply tell them what to do. If those boys were going to be rescued, somebody had to go down into the cave and meet them right where they were. That’s exactly what God did for us. We were trapped—not in a physical cave, but in sin. We couldn’t make our way back to God. We couldn’t climb our way up to him. God didn’t stand at a distance and yell, “If you are down there, find your way back to me.” We couldn’t get to him, so he came to us. The gospel begins with the good news that Jesus came.

Jesus Died

Jesus not only came; he died. The Bible says that the light shined in the darkness, but the darkness did not comprehend it. Some didn’t understand who Jesus was. Others knew but were so radically opposed to him that they killed him. Peter looked at the leaders of the city and said, “And you, with the help of wicked men, put Jesus to death by nailing him to the cross” (Acts 2:23). Jesus was tortured and then nailed to two pieces of wood and left to die. It appeared that this unspeakable suffering was planned only

in the minds of the people who did it, but Peter said this was part of God's plan. Before the world began, God knew that the people he created would sin, and that sin would require a penalty. He can't be a just judge and let sin go unpunished. But he didn't want us, his children, to take the punishment, so from the beginning of time, he planned to send his son to die on the cross, and while dying on the cross, to receive the appropriate punishment for sin on our behalf. "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24). That's why Jesus died on the cross. He died on the cross so we could live.

In 2006, US Army Private Ross McGinnis was serving as the gunner in a Humvee when an insurgent threw a grenade through the vehicle's hatch. McGinnis had a split second. He could have jumped out and saved himself. Instead, he yelled a warning and deliberately threw himself over the grenade. He was killed instantly. The four other soldiers inside the Humvee survived because he absorbed the blast. He was awarded the Medal of Honor because in the ultimate act of bravery and selflessness, he died so his friends could live. That's what Jesus has done for the entire world on the cross!

Jesus Rose

The story doesn't end there. After Jesus came and died, he rose. Jesus really died on the cross. He took a final breath. The soldiers ran a spear through his side. His body was taken down, wrapped in linen, and laid in a tomb, with a large stone rolled over it as a seal to secure it. The Romans even stationed soldiers at the tomb to make sure no one broke in. They never thought about someone breaking out! But that's the very thing that happened. Peter said, "God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him" (Acts 2:24). I love that phrase, "it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him." Jesus was too powerful for death.

Do you remember when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans? The city had built levees all around the town to keep the water out. Those levees had held up to storms for years. But Katrina came with greater force than anything the city had seen before, a force so strong that eventually the levees gave way. It was impossible for them to hold the water back. That's what happened at the resurrection. Death had a hold on Jesus. He was in the tomb, with a stone and a seal and a squadron of soldiers. The tomb was as fortified as much as possible, but death could not keep its hold on Jesus. He conquered death. And his victory wasn't just for himself; it was for all who would choose to follow him. Jesus said, "I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death" (Revelation 1:18). Because Jesus knocked down the walls of the prison of death, he has the keys to set anyone free from death and give eternal life to all who follow him!

Jesus Reigns

Jesus not only rose, Jesus reigns! Jesus is the true and rightful ruler of the universe. Peter said, "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah" (Acts 2:36). This is the exclamation point to the gospel—not only did Jesus come, die, and rise from the dead, but he is now the Lord and Messiah, which means he is the King. He is the ruler. He is in charge.

Think back to three years ago when King Charles III was crowned. Technically he had already been king for nearly a year before the ceremony, but his coronation was the public display and proclamation of his rule. The crown was placed on his head, the scepter was placed in his hand, and he took his seat on the throne. Like him or not, agree with his policies or not, but if you live in England, he's in charge. That is what Peter was declaring about Jesus—that when he rose from the dead, God declared him as King, not over a country, not over a region, but King over the world. He is the rightful ruler of the universe. He is

Lord and Messiah. “Messiah” means he forgives us from our sins; he is our savior. “Lord” means that he is the leader of our lives. We surrender to his will.

The Beauty of the Gospel

Jesus came, Jesus died, Jesus rose, Jesus reigns—that’s the substance of the gospel. Now I want to draw your attention to the beauty of the gospel. The gospel isn’t simply intellectual, historical, or factual. It’s beautiful. The gospel is the most aesthetic, compelling, enrapturing reality in the world. I want to show you three expressions of the beauty of the gospel.

From Fragmentation to Restoration

Genesis, the first book in the Bible, tells us that long ago, all humanity lived close to one another and spoke one language. But instead of worshipping God, they tried to make themselves like God and build a tower to heaven. God confused their language so they no longer could understand one another, and they spread throughout the world. Everything was fractured, divided, and broken. But in Acts 2, when the gospel was first preached, people had come to Jerusalem from every known nation in the world. To be fair, they didn’t know about Australia and South America at the time, but if you looked at a map of the ancient world, representatives from every known part of the world had come together to Jerusalem. Through the Spirit, they were all able to hear the gospel message in their own language. Before the gospel, there was confusion, division, and separation, but the gospel came, and through the gospel, God repaired what had been broken.

Let me speak personally to some of you today. There are parts of your life that feel broken, that feel fractured. There are parts that feel like, “This can’t be God’s plan for my life. This certainly isn’t what I want my life to look like.” When the gospel comes, it is so beautiful, because like resetting a fractured bone, it repairs what is broken in our lives and allows us to live the way God always intended us to.

From Condemnation to Transformation

Acts 2 takes place on the day of Pentecost, a Jewish holiday that remembers the time, over a thousand years earlier, when God gave the Jewish people the law, the Old Testament commands. The Old Testament contains 613 rules that God’s people had to follow to maintain a right relationship with him. That’s a lot. And here is the thing: no one can keep them all. The law is a blessing because it brings important information, but it’s also a burden, because we can’t keep it, and it leads to condemnation and shame. That’s what so beautiful about the gospel. The gospel was preached on the day of Pentecost. On the day they gathered to remember the giving of the law, everyone who placed their faith in Jesus received the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is God’s power and presence inside of us, and he takes the place of the law. The law told us what God expects from us. The Spirit changes us our hearts and minds and makes us God’s. If you are here today, and you keep thinking, “There is a quality of life I want to live, and I keep falling short, I keep failing, I don’t seem to have what it takes on my own,” you are right—you can’t do this on your own, and you were never meant to. The gospel promise is that God will give you his Holy Spirit, and God will transform you to be a different kind of person who will continually grow to look, live, and love more like Jesus.

From Death to Life

On the initial day of Pentecost, recorded in the Old Testament in Exodus 32, when God gave his people the law, there was so much sin, wickedness, and rebellion that 3,000 people died that day. Pentecost was the reminder of the death of 3,000 people. But this is one of those areas where the Bible is so cool and so beautiful. When the gospel was preached for the first time on the day of Pentecost, and people heard

about Jesus, and the Spirit came to take the place of the law, how many people believed and were given new life? “Three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:41). The gospel has the power to restore life where there has been death. This is so personal for us. This is so impactful! This is not just a Bible lesson; this is real life! The gospel does this today, in our lives. There may be areas right now where it feels like death has taken over: death of a marriage, death of the family you dreamed about, death of your aspirations, death of your integrity and character in an area you swore you would never compromise. The gospel has the power to go to the deepest, darkest, most desperate places, and bring new life. The Bible says that the gospel brings beauty where there were ashes and joy where there was grieving.

The Response to the Gospel

The substance of the gospel and the beauty of the gospel lead naturally to the response to the gospel. The people heard the message and it did something to them; they knew something had to change.

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:37)

The response to the gospel was straightforward.

Conviction

First, we see conviction. The Bible tells us that when the people heard this message, they were cut to the heart. The Greek word here means to pierce or stab. It’s the difference between running a butter knife over your hand and feeling a light tingle and running a razor-sharp serrated blade over your hand and slicing your skin open. When the people heard the gospel, it wasn’t simply information for their minds to process; it opened their hearts. They were convicted; they were moved; they were stirred. About 20 years ago, the movie *The Passion of the Christ* showed us in two hours the suffering Jesus endured. When it came time for the scene in which Jesus was nailed to the cross, the director moved out from behind the camera, picked up a hammer, and was the one to nail Jesus’ hand. That was his way of saying, “I not only know that Jesus died; I know that he did that *for me*.” The gospel message causes conviction.

Repent

After they were convicted, the people asked, “What should we do?” Peter’s first answer was, “Repent,” which simply means to change. If you want to go to Chicago and you get on I-65 and then realize you made a wrong turn and are driving south, repentance simply means to get off at the next exit and change direction. What it really means is one word: surrender. You acknowledge that Jesus is God’s Son, and you allow him to become the leader of your life, rather than you. Wherever he may lead, you want to follow.

Be Baptized

To be baptized literally means, in the original language, to go under water. It means to be immersed. It is the same word that was used to describe a ship that was sinking in the sea. Why would people respond to the gospel by being baptized? First, baptism symbolizes the forgiveness of sins. After the Apostle Paul learned about Jesus and desired to follow him, he was told, “What are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away” (Acts 22:16). We use water every day to wash dirt and germs off our bodies. Going under the water is a living picture of God washing our sins away.

But it's not only that. Baptism also symbolizes participation in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. When you go under the water, it means that your old life, all the sins and mistakes and selfish ways of going about things, is dying with Christ and being buried. The old you is left in the water, and just like Jesus rose from the dead, when you come out of the water, it is a picture of sharing in the resurrection life of Jesus. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" That's the beauty of baptism: you go into the water as one type of person, and you come out a different type of person—forgiven of all sins, united with Jesus, a new creation!