

## The Gospel in Three Words

Ephesians 1:3-7

Ephesians 1:3-7 (ESV) “[3] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, [4] even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love [5] he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, [6] to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. [7] In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.” (my apologies for stopping mid-sentence)

### Introduction

- A. A clear definition of the gospel is vitally important to Christians. By gospel we refer specifically to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The word “Gospel” literally means “good news.”
  - 1. We cannot afford to get this “good news” wrong. The Apostle Paul uses strong language to make this point to the churches in Galatia:

Galatians 1:8 (ESV) “[8] But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed!”

- 2. Notice that Paul includes two entities in this dramatic warning. Paul himself, or angels, should speak a different gospel pay no attention to it. We need clear definition.
- B. What then is a clear definition of the gospel? My title is **The Gospel in Three Words**. If you were around in 2003 you may recall the sermon title (but I rewrote it).
  - 1. I saw a well-intentioned pastor on Twitter recently give a three-word definition of the gospel. He said the gospel is “Jesus is Lord.” Yes, he is but that is not the gospel.
  - 2. J. I. Packer, in his excellent book *Knowing God*, gives us his proposal for the gospel in three words (chapter 19). This is glorious!

“... were I asked to focus the New Testament message in three words, my proposal would be *adoption through propitiation*, and I do not expect ever to meet a richer or more pregnant summary of the gospel than that.” J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 214

- C. My aim is to pound these two words (adoption and propitiation) into your head so your heart is warm toward God. May we live on this “good news” and avoid hard thoughts about God.

1. Two points:
  - 1) adoption
  - 2) propitiation

## I. Adoption

A. What is adoption? Two definitions of adoption (by God):

“Theologically, the act of God by which believers become members of “God’s family” with all the privileges and obligations of family membership.” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*

“... that judicial act of God by which He confers or bestows upon us the status or standing of children.” Martyn Lloyd-Jones in *Great Doctrines of the Bible, Vol. 1*, p. 184

1. To adopt, then, is to take by personal choice into a relationship. An act of God! God adopts us into His family. This leads us to consider where we were prior to our adoption.

Ephesians 2:1-3 (ESV) “[1] And you were dead in the trespasses and sins [2] in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— [3] among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”

2. We were sons - sons of disobedience. We were children - children of wrath. The next two words, in Eph 2:4, are “but God.” God intervenes by calling us, causes us to be born again, justifies, and adopts us into His family. God becomes our Father.

Ex: A human illustration is our adoption of our son Matt. Matt was age 6 and he was without a family (his birth dad will never be known). We chose him, we adopted him, we loved him, we treated him like our own (same as other three). In no way could it be said that Matt decided for us.

3. How then shall we think of ourselves now? We may say that we are Christians and disciples but how shall we think about and describe our status?

“What is a Christian? The question can be answered many ways, but the richest answer I know is that a Christian is one who has God as Father.... Adoption is a *family* idea, conceived in terms of *love*, and viewing God as *father*. In adoption, God takes us into his family and fellowship - he establishes us as his children and heirs. Closeness, affection, and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the Judge is a great

thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater.” J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 200 & 206

B. Two reasons adoption is precious. One, adoption is precious because it means **we are loved by God**. We who were rebels, enemies, lovers of self, are now loved by God.

1. Verse 4 - “In love [5] he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons.”
2. Note that this is not all of humanity. No, this is personal, we are adopted by God.
3. The NT gives us two ways to measure God’s love. These two ways are precious gifts to us. The first is the cross of Christ (propitiation) and the second is sonship.

1 John 3:1a “[1] See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.”

Could we with ink the ocean fill, and were the skies of parchment made  
 Were every stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade  
 To write the love of God above, would drain the ocean dry  
 Nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky  
 Frederick Lehman and Unknown

4. Perhaps the best image of the love of the Father in the Bible is found in the parable of the prodigal son. We can profitably study the sons (prodigal and self-righteous).
5. Just don’t miss the Father (see Luke 15). He sees the prodigal son (His son) in the distance, feels compassion, runs, embraces, and kisses him. This is our God.
  - The son says I’ve sinned, I’m no longer worthy to be called your son. But the Father says bring the best robe, ring, shoes, steak. The Father rejoices. The Father overlooks past flaws, sins, and rebellion. Why? Love. Our God rejoices over us.

Zephaniah 3:16-17 (ESV) “[16] On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: “Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. [17] The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.”

6. The love of God for His children super-abounds and overflows. He isn’t disappointed with you. There is therefore now no condemnation. He shouts (loudly)!
- C. Two, adoption is precious because it gives us **assurance** of our salvation. Our assurance is decidedly not located in ourselves.

1. We did not adopt God, God adopted us. We receive (v. 5) adoption as sons. Granted, we received and believed, but adoption, like salvation, belongs to God.
2. Verse 6 - "to the praise of his glorious grace." Not to the praise of you, or to the praise of your decision, but to the praise of his glorious grace.

John 1:12-13 (ESV) "[12] But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, [13] who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

2. You say but I decided, I chose, and we say yes you did. But before that God moved.
3. The Scriptures assure us that God is at work in His children and He will hold us fast. Let the Word of God speak to our minds and hearts.

John 6:37-40 (ESV) "[37] All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. [38] For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. [39] And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. [40] For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

- Jesus could say this even though Judas walked away. Without grace ...
- You may worry you end up as Judas. What if I don't have grace? What if I'm not called? Verse 37: "Whoever comes to me I will never cast out."

John 10:27-29 (ESV) "[27] My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. [28] I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. [29] My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."

4. What then of those who fall away from Christ (or the warnings)? Well, the words of Jesus are eternal and true. A Christian may stumble but there is, by grace, a return.

"Christians may act the prodigal, but God will not cease to act the prodigal's father." J. I. Packer in *Knowing God*, p. 225

Ex: We pray for any prodigals in our midst (they are without excuse). Don't give up on your children.

5. But we also call to mind the parable of the 4 soils (see Mark 4). Jesus says the seed is sown but it falls different places. How the condition of the heart matters! Seed is sown:
  - Along a path but birds devour the seed (Satan)
  - Rocky ground, springs up with joy, endure a while, but no roots (trials or persecution)
  - Among thorns and thorns choke it out (cares of life, riches, desires)
  - Good soil, hear the Word, accept the Word, and bear fruit

“So the old axiom in Reformed theology about the perseverance of the saints is this: If you have it—that is, if you have genuine faith and are in a state of saving grace—you will never lose it. If you lose it, you never had it.” R. C. Sproul

5. Because we are family, born into newness of life as a son, a gift of grace, we find desires to imitate our Father, glorify our Father, and please our Father. We enjoy His grip on us because we trust our Father more than we trust ourselves.

O to grace how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be  
 Let The goodness like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to Thee  
 Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love  
 Here's my heart, Lord take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above

- D. How did my adoption come to be? The other key word in our three word definition of the gospel is propitiation (through). We now turn to examine that word.

## II. Propitiation

- A. The word appears in our NT only 4 times (Rom. 3:25, Heb. 2:17, 1 John 2:2 & 4:10). But the idea runs through all of the NT.

1. In our text we read these words in verse 7:

Eph 1:7 (ESV) “[7] In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses.”

2. The problem, as we read in Ephesians 2, is that we were sons of disobedience and children of wrath. How then could we be adopted? God is holy, holy, holy.

“How can the holy love of God come to terms with the unholy lovelessness of man?” John Stott, *Cross of Christ*, p. 133

3. The answer is found in substitutionary atonement. In my place condemned He stood. The answer is the cross of Christ.

“God, because in his mercy he willed to forgive sinful men, and, being truly merciful, willed to forgive them righteously, that is, without in any way condoning their sin, purposed to direct against his very own self in the person of his Son the full weight of that righteous wrath which they deserved.” Dr. Charles Cranfield, *Romans*, p. 217

B. Propitiation means “to appease an offended person.” The wrath of God is satisfied. We were by nature children of wrath (Eph. 2:3).

1. What is wrath? We tend to think of an angry person flying off of the proverbial handle on a whim. Walk on eggshells because they might explode anytime. Perhaps they are having a really bad and now they have had it.
2. This is not the wrath of God. Rather:

“God’s wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger often is. It is, instead, a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil.” J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 151

C. In the Bible the wrath of God refers to justice. And, people choose this for themselves.

1. They do not come to Christ. Every single person will receive something from God. There is either justice (wrath) or there is mercy. Friend, have you come to Christ?
2. God cannot simply look the either way. He is just and justifier. So God devises a plan in eternity past whereby we will be saved from wrath.

“The only way for God’s holy love to be satisfied is for his holiness to be directed in judgment upon his appointed substitute, in order that his love may be directed toward us in forgiveness. The substitute bears the penalty, that we sinners may receive the pardon.” John Stott, *Cross of Christ*, p. 158

3. Who is the substitute? God himself. The judge steps down from his bench, comes around the side to us, and takes the sentence we deserved (death). Amazing love.

Isaiah 53:3-6 (ESV) “[3] He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. [4] Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. [5] But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. [6] All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

4. This makes our hearts sing about God the way He sings over us.

And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood?  
 Died he for me, who caused his pain! For me, who him to death pursued?  
 Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, should'st die for me?

- D. How will you respond? The Apostle Paul wrote that Jews demand a sign and Greeks (non-Jews) seek wisdom. For them the message of the cross is offensive, a stumbling block.

1. To us? It is the love of God on full display. It is precious. The message of substitutionary atonement is often unpopular, even in the church. For us it is life.

Galatians 2:20 (ESV) [20] "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

## Close

- A. The gospel in three words? Adoption through propitiation. Our revised SGC statement of faith (almost finished) takes about 135 words to define the gospel. All very good.
- B. But it is good for you to possess a shorter definition. A shorter statement that serves you.

Adoption through propitiation

1. Cherish this - you are a child of God if you have come to Him (adopted). His love is fixed on you no matter what this life brings. You cannot be separated from this love.
  - Sure, He disciplines us and prunes us. He works in us perseverance and endurance because He desires mature children.
2. Cherish this - Jesus loves you and gave Himself for you. He is your substitute and you are no longer a child of wrath. You are secure in His love not your performance.

## Pray

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