



# **GOSPEL 101**

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Learning,  
Living, and Sharing  
the Gospel

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**JEFF  
DODGE**

“Jeff Dodge is one of the most respected, faithful pastors I know. He has led countless people to Christ, discipling them in the way of Jesus. This book will equip the church to carry out our mission by taking us through a clear, easy-to-understand layout of the language of the gospel. By the end of this book you will feel less scared and more confident to share the gospel with those around you, including those who seem really hostile to the faith. The Great Commission starts with getting the gospel right, and this book gets the gospel right. Read and go do likewise.”

**Russell Moore**, President, Ethics & Religious Liberty  
Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“Jeff is a thought leader as it relates to gospel-centered ministry in the context of the local church. I’m so thankful that he has written this rich and accessible introduction to the gospel and the implications of the gospel. It will undoubtedly serve the church for years to come.”

**J. T. English**, Pastor of the Village Church Institute,

“I first came across Jeff Dodge’s gospel training course more than a decade ago when a college student passed a copy along to me. I’ve referred to it often since then—in fact, it’s sitting in a binder on my bookshelf right now! I’m thrilled to see this excellent resource published. It will help you understand the gospel more fully and communicate it to others more effectively.”

**Bob Thune**, Founding Pastor, Coram Deo Church, Omaha, NE;  
author of *Gospel Eldership* and coauthor of *The Gospel-Centered Life*

“For over a decade *Gospel 101* has deeply impacted college students and leaders planting churches in university connects. It has given emerging leaders enormous clarity in understanding Christ, his work, his mission and his call for Christ followers to make disciples. Dodge’s simple, transferable insights drive to the heart of mission, giving readers a clear pathway for advancing God’s Kingdom through how they

think, how they live, and how they articulate the gospel to the lost. I recommend this book because I like it, but even more because I see the fruit of its impact.”

**Brian N. Frye**, National Collegiate Strategist, North American Mission Board

“Jeff Dodge is one of the most vibrant followers of Christ and one of the most committed Christian ministers I know. He also serves one of the most compelling college ministries I’ve ever observed. He is a man worth listening to, and *Gospel 101* is a book I highly recommend reading.”

**Jason K. Allen**, President of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“*Gospel 101* is a primer on the gospel. It covers the theological and biblical basics, but always with an eye toward evangelism and how to share the message that changes our lives. Jeff Dodge brings simplicity, clarity, and passion to the central message of the Bible and showcases Jesus as the Hero of the story.”

**Trevin Wax**, Director for Bibles and Reference at LifeWay Christian Resources; author of *This Is Our Time* and *Eschatological Discipleship*

“Of all the messages competing for our attention today, none is more needed than the gospel. With more than 267 million people in North America headed to an eternity separated from God, we need men and women who can confidently share the gospel with the people God is bringing into their lives. My friend Jeff Dodge’s book, *Gospel 101*, will help you dive deep into how the Bible explains the gospel so you can share it in a simple yet powerful way. I pray as men and women gather to study God’s Word through this book, God will use it to begin a gospel movement across North America and the world.”

**Kevin Ezell**, President, North American Mission Board, SBC

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Jeff Dodge



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This book is dedicated to  
the incredible young men and women  
of The Salt Company at Iowa State University.  
You continue to prove that the gospel of Jesus Christ  
transforms lives and changes the world.

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# Introduction

*“I watched in dismay as a friend attempted to explain his faith to an unbeliever. As he jumped back and forth from Old Testament to New Testament he used a multitude of verses, but never explained clearly how to become a Christian. Since then I have made a commitment that whatever I do in evangelism, I will never be fuzzy or unclear. I don’t have the right to take a simple message and make it difficult.”<sup>1</sup>*

I read this quote years ago in an article about evangelism, and it has stuck with me ever since. As I think about gospel conversations I have had, it seems there are two ditches I inadvertently fall into. Maybe you can relate.

*Information overload.* One ditch I fall into is overwhelming my unbelieving friend with content. By the time I am done, I have often felt like I dumped a jigsaw puzzle onto the table and carefully explained a bunch of individual pieces while never actually letting my friend see how beautiful the big picture is—how it all fits together.

*Too simplistic.* The ditch on the other side is just as dangerous. In my desire to make the gospel understandable (and avoid the first ditch!), I am tempted to reduce the gospel down to quick soundbites, often with Christian jargon that is lost on my unbelieving friend.

The first ditch makes the gospel too complex and leaves my friend lost in data. The other ditch makes the gospel too thin and leaves my friend imagining that the gospel is shallow or even trivial.

We have to avoid those ditches!



We must communicate the gospel in a way that acknowledges its profound depth while simultaneously making the message clear, understandable, and compelling. To help you get there, I have three objectives:

*Gospel Fluency.* You will become familiar with the language of the gospel. We will all spend a lifetime exploring the many dimensions and textures of the gospel, but this book's focus will be on the "big picture" (the core message) of the gospel.

*Gospel Community.* Working through this material with others will add dimension and conviction to your studies. It is amazing what your fellow students will teach you!

*Gospel Action.* The gospel message is not simply to be studied; it is to be shared. This material will help you engage in gospel conversations with your unbelieving friends and family.

So, grab your Bible (it's going to be your main textbook!), gather a small group of study partners, and use this small group resource as a guide to compel you toward understanding the gospel. You and the others in your small group will emerge from this study not with a formula, but rather new language and new terminology you can use to anchor everyday conversations back to the gospel.

I expect that this coordinated pursuit will lead you to vigorously share this good news with the waiting world!

## HOW TO USE THESE SESSIONS

Studying the Bible in community is important. Why? One reason is that if you only study your Bible alone it will be easy for you to go in the wrong direction. We don't self-correct very well. Throughout the centuries, God has used his people to anchor one another in the Scriptures. God has connected us to each other through the Spirit to bring balance and help to our understanding. Because of that, the reading

and activities in each session are designed to be preparation for a small-group discussion. *Complete the study on your own before your group meets.*

Each study starts with a *Bible reading assignment* that will encourage you to engage the text as you answer questions. This is far and away the most important aspect of this study. Then, you will read a short *article* that locates the Bible reading in a broader stream of understanding on that topic. Using what you learned from the Bible passages and the article, you can then complete a short *workbook*.

To finish your preparation, you will be encouraged to conduct a *survey* in order to take what you are learning out into your world. This survey includes a single question you can ask someone in order to get into a spiritual conversation. We suggest taking these surveys to people with whom you have a relationship so that these conversations can develop over the eight sessions of material. Listen and learn from your respondents and watch as you are able to connect the material from this book and your small-group discussions to those conversations. That is gospel fluency in action!

When you meet with your small group, share what you learned from the survey. You may want to compile and compare the group's results. Then use the workbook questions you answered to guide the rest of the discussion.

This book will present the core tenets of the gospel message, invite you to entertain the difficult questions inherent in gospel theology, and get you started on developing your own ways to share your faith with others.

Diving into deep study of the gospel encourages humility. In turn, humility puts us in the right mind frame for worshiping God. Also, this humble posture is just where we need to be as we share our faith with others. As you work through this book, let the gospel truths go deep into your soul. Stop often to praise God in gratitude, and let your joy

overflow to others. Studying the gospel necessarily leads to worship, as the apostle Paul illustrates in his letter to the Romans. After writing eleven chapters unpacking the gospel, it is as though he pushes back from his desk, throws his hands in the air, and with tearful joy exclaims,

Oh, the depth of the riches  
both of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable his judgments  
and untraceable his ways!  
For who has known the mind of the Lord?  
Or who has been his counselor?  
And who has ever given to God,  
that he should be repaid?  
For from him and through him  
and to him are all things.  
To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33–36)

Session

# 1

## GOSPEL

### WHY THE GOSPEL MATTERS

The word *gospel* is used a lot by Christians. Yet we often use the word without setting it in its proper context. We must begin understanding the gospel by considering how the Bible explains it. The gospel is so central to the Bible that we find the first whispers of it in the opening pages of Genesis and continue to see it unfold until we get to the final words of the last book in the Bible, the book of Revelation.

The gospel is not just all over the Bible; it is all around us. The reason we can talk freely to people about the gospel is because all of us intuitively connect with it—even before we know what “it” is. Think about it: we have this nagging feeling that there is something beyond the material world. Why is that a common phenomenon? We crave hope and promise for a better tomorrow. We long for pure, unconditional love and are brokenhearted when it escapes us. Universally, humanity is hardwired to seek answers only the gospel provides. We even have an innate desire to be rescued by a king. What’s with that?

Don’t believe me? Trace the storyline of your favorite movies, the theme of the songs on your go-to playlist, or even the simplest bedtime stories. We can’t escape it. Is it possible that we fill our screens and earbuds with stories that point us to *the Story*—the gospel? Many of the stories we love, the aspirations that drive us, and even the heartbreaks that haunt

us all form the shadow of a greater Story. And maybe if we heard *the Story*—the gospel—we would recognize it and embrace it.

We hope *Gospel 101* just seems to make sense. Nothing new. Nothing novel. It is actually incredibly familiar. It is intended to bring clarity to the Story that is central to the Bible and uniquely makes sense of the world. And one more thing (spoiler alert): the hero king at the center of it is Jesus.

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To prepare for your small group meeting:

- Complete the reading assignment
- Read the article
- Answer the workbook questions
- Survey three people

## READING ASSIGNMENT

Read through the passages below a minimum of three times. Use a different translation each time. Record your observations below.

NOTE: Though there are many good translations to choose from, let me offer a few suggestions to get you started. For a translation that works hard to stay as close as possible to a word-for-word translation from the original languages into English, start with the English Standard Bible (ESV) or the New American Standard Bible (NASB). For a translation that focuses on making the English more readable, try the Christian Standard Bible (CSB), which is the one I use in this book, or the New International Version (NIV). For a paraphrase Bible that works even harder on making the text readable for the English reader, start with the New Living Translation (NLT).

What does each text tell me about the gospel or *good news*?

- Romans 1:1–17 and 6:20–23

- 1 Corinthians 15:1–8

- Revelation 14:6–7

Session

1

ARTICLE

Headlines are important. Some are even epic and timeless, especially if the headline is followed by news that rivets and changes the world. For instance, a headline declaring “PEACE!” grabs the attention of every reader who is ravaged by a devastating war. Context is everything with headlines.

The gospel stands as the Bible’s attention-getting headline of good news. In fact, the word *gospel* literally means “GOOD NEWS!” The story that follows the headline tells the reader that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come to set us free from sin by his life, death, and resurrection. That headline should grab the attention of every human being. But does it?

The goal of *Gospel 101* is to set the headline of the gospel in its context—to answer the question, “What is the gospel?” If we ignore the backstory, we will certainly not be riveted by the headline.

I first started thinking about the need to understand the bigger context of the gospel when I read an intriguing passage in the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation (which then sent me to the opening pages of the *first* book of the Bible—but more on that later). “Then I saw another angel flying high overhead, with the eternal gospel to announce to the inhabitants of the earth—to every nation, tribe, language, and people. He spoke with a loud voice: ‘Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship the one who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water’” (Revelation 14:6–7).

That passage really caught my attention. First, it is the only time God sends an angel to globally declare the big headline—the eternal gospel. But isn't there something glaringly missing? “Um, Mr. Angel, sir, I don't want to sound impolite. I mean, I'm from Iowa and you're, well, an angel. But didn't you leave something out? More to the point, didn't you leave *someone* out—Jesus, for instance?”

I panned back and looked at the context of this passage and was reminded that Jesus Christ is the central figure in the book of Revelation. The whole book is “the revelation of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:1). It is not lost on the angel that Jesus is the centerpiece of the gospel message. But in chapter 14, the angel proclaims aspects of the eternal gospel that are often missed. The angel declares a gospel that is centered on the Creator who is coming to judge the inhabitants of the earth—every nation, tribe, language, and people. By qualifying the gospel with the word *eternal*, the angel is telling us there is something timeless about this good news.

Then it hit me: the angel at the *very end* of the Bible is telling us that the eternal gospel starts at the *very beginning* of the Bible—the story of creation. The gospel is the storyline that ties the whole Bible together! This sent me on a journey to understand the incredible backstory of the gospel.

God isn't coy or unclear about this storyline. I think I had just been reading too fast to see it. In fact, here are a few of the cover-to-cover aspects of the gospel's backstory that became clearer and made Jesus's role in the gospel all the more incredible.

## 1. THE ETERNAL GOSPEL IS THE TRUE STORY OF GOD'S KINGDOM

The angel's eternal gospel concisely focuses our eyes on the God of the universe and specifically on his role as Creator. The creation-focused



language the angel uses takes us from the final book of the Bible back to the beginning of the Bible in the book of Genesis.

Consider all of creation as God's kingdom realm. This kingdom theme is prevalent page after page and culminates in the crowning of Jesus as the supreme King of all at the end of Revelation.

When an author reveals a theme that can be traced from the opening pages and ties it all the way to the concluding pages, that is probably something the reader should take note of! The Bible was written by many different human authors over thousands of years, and yet there remains a cohesive and distinct plotline. Make no mistake: the true Author of Scripture intentionally wove everything together for our sake.

Many authors, playwrights, and screenwriters follow a storyline similar to what we see in the Bible. We recognize it and connect to it. Check it out:

- First, there is the description of a kingdom marked by peace, harmony, and life-as-it-should-be that is disrupted suddenly and catastrophically. The kingdom falls into enemy hands (Genesis 1–3).
- The plot thickens and grows in intensity until the hero-king appears to reckon with the enemy. This is the apex of the story, accompanied by significant conflict and ultimate, heroic victory (Genesis 4–Revelation 20).
- Finally, peace and harmony and life-as-it-should-be is reestablished in the kingdom due to the heroism of the hero-king (Revelation 21–22).

It is as if God has put an antenna in us to pick up the signals pointing us to this epic storyline. As we go about our lives on this earth, we intuitively know something is very wrong. We long for peace and for a kingdom to be restored. God has written this epic narrative and the traces of it are all around us.

## 2. THE ETERNAL GOSPEL CENTERS ON THE TRUE HERO-KING, JESUS

The coming of a hero-king was the long-awaited hope of God's kingdom since Genesis 3 (more on that in the next lesson). When Jesus stepped onto the scene, a booming voice from heaven announced his royal entrance. Immediately, Jesus began to declare the headline: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15).

The apostle Paul picks up on the theme as he instructs the church in Rome about the eternal gospel. Paul alerts the reader about the overarching storyline of the Bible and zeroes in on Jesus's role as hero. Notice how he begins and concludes his letter with this theme.

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—*which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures*—concerning his Son, *Jesus Christ our Lord*, who was a descendant of David according to the flesh and was appointed to be the powerful Son of God according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection of the dead. Through him we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the Gentiles. (Romans 1:1–5, emphasis added)

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation about Jesus Christ, *according to the revelation of the mystery kept silent for long ages but now revealed and made known through the prophetic Scriptures*, according to the command of the eternal God to advance the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles—to the only wise God, *through Jesus Christ*—to him be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 16:25–27, emphasis added)

This gospel message is present in the storyline from the first page until the last. The message itself is about the hero-king Jesus Christ, the Son of God as confirmed by his resurrection and by the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

Do you sense the urgency? Humanity has fallen, and the earth is not as it should be. But, the King has returned to his kingdom. All who hear should heed!

### 3. THE ETERNAL GOSPEL CALLS FOR A RESPONSE

Remember that *gospel* simply means “good news.” It is *news*, a message we are to proclaim to all people. And it is *good* because the King in whose realm we live is coming and he wants us to know him and enjoy him forever. This news is not just informational, it anticipates action!

What response is Jesus after? Look at Mark 1:15 above. Jesus calls for *repentance and belief*. Also look again at the two passages from Romans above. Paul refers to the response as “the obedience of faith” at both the beginning and the end of his letter.

Because humanity has fallen, our inherited state is one of desperate need. When we hear this message about Jesus Christ, we will either choose to repent and believe or we will choose to deny our King and suffer the consequences. There is no in-between. And as we do follow him in the joyful obedience of faith, we find new life in him. We live as citizens of his kingdom!

One way we serve as citizens is as bearers of his message: *Hear ye, hear ye, the long-awaited kingdom is dawning.*<sup>2</sup> Again, the apostle Paul picks up on this aspect of the eternal gospel, reminding his readers that there is an urgency to proclaiming the gospel. “How, then, can they call on him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing about him? And how can they hear without a preacher? And how

can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.’ But not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’ So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the message about Christ” (Romans 10:14–17).

Can someone pick up a Bible, read it on their own, and come to know Christ? Conceivably. Yet, if you think about your own life, I would bet that you can trace your journey of faith back to a relationship with a believer who told you the gospel. “Faith comes from what is heard.” Those gospel pamphlets left in the public restroom—not compelling! Instead, God calls Christians to use their feet and their voices to proclaim the gospel. This is how this glorious message has spread across the world.

## APPLICATION

This is only a brief introduction to the gospel, but I hope you are already captivated by the beauty of this message and its hero, Jesus. If you have already repented and believed this gospel and are now seeking to proclaim this message to others, your Bible study and the session above have provided you plenty of content to begin to do just that! In your home, you can remind your family how the struggles of your day are very real—but are ultimately resolved by our true King. As you seek community with other Christians, you can remind each other that your decision to follow Christ was a decision to eternally give him his proper due as a King, and you can ask if there are any areas of your life that don’t demonstrate your King’s influence. In your classroom or your workplace, you can agree with your peers that the world is indeed as broken as it seems, and yet “the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”



3. Why is the question “What is the gospel?” so difficult? If someone now asked you that question, how would you answer it?

4. The article highlighted three overarching principles in considering the theology of the gospel. Fill in the blanks below to test yourself.

The eternal gospel \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The eternal gospel \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The eternal gospel \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Which of these principles resonates with you the most? Why?

6. Why do Christians often fail to talk about Jesus with the same eagerness they might share other good news? What does the Bible have to say that might address a believer's fears and insecurities in talking about Jesus?

## SURVEY

Survey three people.

ASK: Have you ever read the Bible? What is the main message of the Bible?

RESPONSE FROM PERSON #1:

RESPONSE FROM PERSON #2:

RESPONSE FROM PERSON #3:

NOTE FOR YOURSELF: What did you learn from your survey? What connections do you see between the survey responses and the article or the Scriptures you've been studying?

## SMALL GROUP MEETING

Meet with your group to share what you learned from the survey and discuss your workbook answers.