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T h e A n s w e r J e s u s G a v e

*“It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong,
but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about...
when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants
to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine
what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far
too easily pleased.”*

- C.S. Lewis

(Real quick — if you skipped the introduction — don't. Go back, and then join me here!)

What do you think Christianity is Capital A “About”?

I happened upon a survey the other day — thousands of people answering their questions about their views regarding Christianity. The answers were startling — and illuminating.

When asked what they thought Christianity was most fundamentally about:

12% of respondents said “loving your neighbor.” OK!

25% said “being forgiven of your sins.” Fine!

A full 40% said “going to Heaven when you die.” As expected!

But, amidst a smattering of other answers, **only 4%** gave *the answer that Jesus himself gives over and over on the pages of Scripture.*

Four Percent. And of those 4 percent, I wonder how many of them truly understand what He *meant* by it. Probably very few, I'm sorry to say.

Since 99% of us don't even know what the hope of Christianity truly is, once we finally grasp it, it holds the potential to upend everything and change our whole life to fit the incredible story that God is telling.

The Hope That Overcomes All This

If Christianity is *for* anything at all, it should be the triumphal announcement of some radically good news, as the result of which the world is now a different kind of place, and the future a different kind of reality. If it's worth placing your weight on — unlike your football team winning this weekend — it has to be a hope that overcomes, well. . . *all of this:*

All the pain, all of the sadness, all of the evil, all of the brokenness, all of the crushing weight of the great destructive evils as well as the minor banal evils that beset every day; the pervading sense of pointlessness and despair and malaise and ennui that have haunted every second of the lives of every human being that exists, and every human being that has ever existed in the history of the world.

That sounds like a tall order. It is. We're skeptical of any claim that *anything* will overcome even the simple pains and foibles of our own lives; to imagine all of the suffering of the billions of humans all down through history? The Holocaust? The Trail of Tears? The Crusades? The Rwandan Genocide? Hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, famine, diseases like Malaria and the Bubonic Plague?

Whatever the hope of Christianity is, if it's worth anything, it will have to outweigh those real, weighty, and substantive evils to an infinite degree.

Loving your neighbor is an excellent idea - Jesus himself said so. Being forgiven of your sins is a crucial pillar of what Christianity is about. Going to heaven when you die, while *true in one very limited sense*, is not the focus of Christianity; remember that

the phrase “go to heaven when you die” doesn’t show up a single time in either the Old or New Testament. None of these is what Christianity is “About”. None of them represents a hope for a good future, a putting-right of all that is wrong.

It is the answer that *Jesus* gave that far outweighs the evil of the world.

The answer that Jesus gave is an infinite degree better than any other answer, and it is the reason why Christianity changed the world, starting in the Ancient Near East 2,000 years ago.

The answer that Jesus gave is what emboldened Christians to show no fear when being thrown to lions in the Colosseum in Rome. The answer that Jesus gave is what also emboldens Christians today in the Middle East to say to the jihadi pointing an AK-47 at their head, “You can kill me, but take my Bible.”

The answer Jesus gave is so powerful that it infinitely outweighs the pain, suffering, and despair in the children’s hospitals, the refugee camps, the abusive homes, the smoldering ruins of villages both now and back through history. Jesus’s answer *overcomes* all of that.

The answer that Jesus gave is why I *still*, years later, have shed no sad tears for my father.

The hope of Christianity is something breathtaking; something so surpassingly wonderful that I have seen it literally change people’s entire way of life overnight once they really grasp it. And if you don’t know to which teaching of Jesus I am referring, *that is the issue that this book will help you resolve.*

The Central, Ultimate Hope of Christianity

Hope is, by definition, forward-looking. As Paul says in Romans 8 (a chapter to which we will refer often), “Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” (Romans 8:24b-25 ESV)

Hope is always anchored into something in the future; it isn’t retroactive. We don’t have it in fullness yet. And if a hope is “*ultimate*” then it must be the *final* hope. The end-all, be-all, fix-all thing that will overcome all the wrongs and evils of this world.

I’m going to be frank: most of us grew up being told that “Heaven” is that hope. We were all wrong — gloriously, awfully wrong — and I can’t wait to unpack why.

There has been a great confusion over the minds & hearts of the people in our churches. Even most of the leadership, most of the pastors, most of the authors, most of the songwriters seem to have completely skipped over the part of the story that *Jesus* thought was the most important.

Most forms of modern Christianity are something like a skyscraper built on a cracked foundation. We think we know what the story is “about”, and so we read that into the Scriptures, we formulate our arguments and assumptions on top of it, and before long we are 5 wrong conclusions down the road, with no way of seeing where we went off the path; we weren’t on the right track to begin with.

So, what *are* the worldviews at war here, and how do we know which is the right one? What are the beliefs people hold about where we’ve come from and where we’re going?

What are the *stories* we tell ourselves and each other to try and make sense of where we've come from and where we're going?

The Worst Story



First, let's start with what your neighbors and coworkers *think* the story of Christianity is.

So, here's me. I live on Earth. God made it, humans broke it. Humans are evil and God doesn't actually like them very much. And He's really, really angry all the time, killing people left and right who dare to oppose Him. But since He's so... good?... He gives most people a chance to live a good life.

So here goes the direction of your life and you'll do some good things and some bad things, but at the end of it all when you die, if you did more good than bad, you go to the good place. If you did more bad stuff you go to the bad place.

In the good place, we become angels with little harps and play music on clouds. And there are pearly gates, and some guy named Peter. We don't really know what that's about.

And Jesus had to die, for some reason. We're not sure about that either.

But then down in the bad place there's fire and little men running around in red suits with pitchforks stabbing you while you burn.

And either God is there, or the Devil is there, and one of them is doing the torturing. We're not really sure which and that makes us kind of uncomfortable so we don't talk about it much.

And then at the end of the world, God destroys the Earth and the entire created universe and everybody that was left either goes to the good place or the bad place.

...*Sheesh*. OK, that's not a good story... so, what corrections do we usually make to that way of framing Christianity? Your average rank and file Christian or your average small-town pastor would say:

"No! You don't get into heaven by being good, you get in by being perfect! And none of us is perfect! Every one of us has sinned, so we are all doomed! But God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, so that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life!"



NOT the right story — and thankfully, not all bad — but the one we all learned.

... Is that better? Yes! Way better!

Something *like* this is what the overwhelming majority of Christians envision when

they think of the word “Gospel” — the good news, the message of Christianity.

But is that it? Is that the message of Christianity? You just tack on the cross to the bad story and suddenly it all *works*?

Listen. . . I love you. I want what’s best for you. But even **this** story, the one where we tell people how to get saved — it just isn’t cutting it. Worse, this isn’t our story. It’s not the story of the Scriptures. And it isn’t what Christianity is based on.

It is NOT false. It’s just that it’s not *true enough*. Maybe more importantly, it’s not what Jesus had in mind when He said the word “Gospel.”

The fact — and it is a fact — that we are all sinners who have fallen short of the holiness of the Creator God and justly stand condemned against the standard of His perfect goodness and Holiness is a horrible, horrible situation for humans to be in. And God, because of His incredible love, *has indeed* made a way for us to be rescued from the destruction we deserved, through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is very good news indeed! A person can become rescued from their sins by hearing this “simple gospel!”

But let’s just imagine for a moment that a traveling evangelist comes through a jungle nation, where nobody has ever heard of Jesus before.

And what he tells the native people there is *this* story right here. The kind where Jesus is simply a way to be forgiven of your sins so that you can go to heaven when you die.

And you know what? Wonder of wonders, the entire village believes the message!

They're saved! Thank God! Praise God! His Word is powerful and mighty to save, and they all now have eternal life! *Amen!*

But... what are some questions these jungle folk flat out don't have answers to if all they received was "Jesus saves"?

- Why am I here?
- Where did humans come from?
- Why did God make the world?
- What is God's plan for my future?
- How should I change what I'm doing now?

And what are some questions that this story gives them *wrong answers to*?

- Am I still a sinner? (More on this later.)
- Where are we all going?
- What happens to this beautiful jungle that I love so much?
- Does anything I do in this life matter?

In fact, this same thing happened to many of the churches represented in the New Testament. Paul or some other missionary would come with the message, many people would give their lives to Jesus, and then the teachers would leave.

And everything went perfectly in all of the churches from then on, right?

Of course not! Just for some examples:

Paul has to write to the church in **Galatia** and remind them not to add works as a requirement for their salvation.

The **Corinthian** churches were having disorderly gatherings and getting caught up in all kinds of sexual sins.

The **Colossians** were getting deceived by Gnostics who were telling them that there was some better, secret way to learn about God.

The **Thessalonians** thought Jesus was coming back in a couple of days, so they quit their jobs and decided to wait for him to return rather than working and spreading the good news.

Even the **Romans**, to whom Paul wrote his *magnum opus* — were struggling with trying to integrate a Jewish and Greek congregation around the new culture of the Kingdom — and failing. Hence, the letter.

The simple message about how you can be saved is important, but it's not the full story...

The full story is beautiful, and nuanced, and complicated. And so it bears repetition. Paul and the rest of the New Testament authors are *constantly* working at explaining the full message, if we're really listening. But most of the time, we aren't listening.

Let's take a closer look at the "Gospel" — and this time, why don't we let the Scriptures do the talking?

A "ReKnewed" Gospel

Before we get too much further, I'm going to introduce you to the term "ReKnewed".

You're going to have to allow me a little bit of cheesiness, I'm afraid. You see, what I want you to do is to Rethink everything you thought you knew about the message of Christianity, built on the solid foundation of the "Renewal of All Things."

So, for most of the rest of the chapters in this book, we will have "ReKnewed" in the Chapter Titles. Every pastor is allowed a few bad puns, and I'm no exception.

People start to get kind of twitchy when you start to talk about "the Gospel" in a way that's different from how they understand it.

I can't blame them! I think it's honestly a good impulse - we need to fiercely guard the core of truth in Christianity. As Paul said in the introduction of his letter to the wayward Galatians:

[6] I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—[7] not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. [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. [9] As we have said before, so now

I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. - Galatians 1:6-9 ESV

I'm not here to distort the Gospel of Christ. *I'm here to restore it to the best of my ability to the one Paul believed he was defending.*

The Scriptures are the most marvelous work of art that has ever existed, and it is not close. There isn't a single wasted word on its pages. It is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, it is the Christian's weapon of defense and its means of advance & deposition against the powers of darkness, every page glowing with the pulsating power of divine words conveyed through human vessels. In fact, to borrow more of Paul's words:

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." - 2 Timothy 3:16-17 ESV

A hearty amen to that!

It is also sometimes *profoundly confusing* to sit down and read. Where you expect inspiration and beauty, oftentimes you instead find bizarre stories of talking snakes & donkeys, patricide, fratricide, what-the-heck-was-that-ricide, and, to borrow a technical term, a *hot mess* of sex scandals, insane rituals of idol worship, dense and hard-to-unpack Hebrew poetry, and several-page long lists of names and descriptions of the shapes of national borders. Most Christians try to just kind of *distance themselves* from the Old Testament especially, like your weird Grandpa who won't stop telling inappropriate jokes and violent war stories in front of the kids.

We can't distance ourselves from the Bible, friends — there's nothing for it. We must dive in *deep* and do the hard work of *reading it and allowing it to speak for itself* if we hope for it to divulge its wonders. As Biblical scholar Michael Heiser says — “if it's weird, it's probably important.”

The one thing we *cannot* do is say “Oh yeah, I know what the Bible teaches! I've read it cover to cover and I know it like the back of my hand!”

If you've got nice, settled, comfortable beliefs about what the Scriptures have to say - for Heaven's sake, *don't read the Bible on its own terms*. Unless you want to have your categories blown out of the water. In which case, pour yourself a cup of coffee, or tea — or maybe something a little stronger — and dig in.

With that, let's turn our attention to the first chapter of Mark. I'll give you some of the context. Mark 1:1 in the ESV reads:

■ “The beginning of the **gospel** of Jesus **Christ**, the Son of God.”

We're only at verse 1 and already we have some things to unpack!

The word “Gospel” in English is a German word. The Greek word is “*euangelion*”, and it means “good news” or a “good announcement”. Tuck that away for a minute.

Next, what about “Jesus Christ”? The word we translate as “Christ” is another Greek word “*Christos*”, that we just chose not to translate from the original language when we brought it over. When we say “Jesus Christ”, in that usage “Christ” sounds almost like a last name. It's not. It is a Greek word for the *title* used to refer to the very *Jewish* concept

of the Messiah: the anointed one that God sent to rescue His people.

Are you with me so far?

So already, this is a different story from the one our friends think we believe! It's not some moral lesson like an Aesop's fable, using vaguely religious sounding words. It's the beginning of the good announcement of God's rescue plan through His chosen servant, whom the Jewish people were waiting for in desperation for thousands of years.

One thing about the Gospel of Mark is that it goes *very* quickly. The story just **moves**. So, within 14 verses, John the Baptist came already, Jesus is already baptized, and the testing in the wilderness has already happened, leading up to verse 14. No time wasted. So, because I really want you to get this, I'm going to put this in the form of a story leading up to Jesus's answer.

The Fisherman

Your name is יהושע (Yeshayahu, or "Isaiah"). You're a fisherman, living in Rome-occupied Israel, 2,000 years ago.

Life for you is good - you live nearby the lake of Galilee, which is huge and always has fish, so there's plenty of money for you to live on and care for your family. Your uncle Yochochunan tells you that although the Romans have been here for 50 years, you are living on your ancestral homeland, and one day you hope to see it restored to God's people. You hope and pray to God that one day, Israel will be restored as the rightful kingdom over the rest of the world, prepared to bless the world as God's chosen people.

You are walking to your boat one day, and as you walk by, you see a man get kneecapped by a Roman soldier because he didn't pay his taxes, which are more than he gets to take home.

A little further on, you hear some hushed whispers from other fishermen, talking about a rabbi who has entered the region, working the teaching circuits. They call him "Yeshua min-Natseret" - *Jesus who is from Nazareth*. The whispers are that people who are sick and weak and hurting enter this man's presence, hear his words, and are completely transformed.

You are looking for some good news. You walk to your community synagogue, and just like the stories said there is a *huge* crowd, probably 400 people, outside of the gates. From the middle, you can clearly hear a man speaking in a very authoritative voice. It seems he's the one who they all came to hear, this Yeshua person. You begin to push through the crowd and you make it through the group until you see him standing in the middle, delivering his message to the people gathered. He turns in your direction and you begin to make out His words, and he's talking about. . . what?

What do you hear Jesus saying?

If you put yourself in Yeshayahu's situation here, what do you hear?

Some of you might think of parables, some of you might think of the Golden Rule, some of you might think about his I Am statements from John, other people might think about His radical teachings of loving your enemy or turning the other cheek - what you hear in your mind tells you part of what you think Jesus is about.

What did *Jesus* think Jesus was about? What was the concept He was constantly teaching about? It shows up over 50 times in the 28-chapter Gospel of Matthew alone. About 1 and a half times a page. There's ONE thing that He uses to summarize all of His teaching — and only 4% of us got the answer right in the survey.

Let's circle back to the Gospel of Mark. Chapter 1, verse 14:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God,

Wow! Alright, this is it, guys! This is where we'll hear the story! Our fisherman breaks through to the front of the line, then Jesus turns to him and starts telling him what the good news is!

Here's the part where we learn about Heaven & Hell and how to live a good life, right guys?

OK, here it is, what does Jesus say the good news is?

Let's all read Mark 1:15:

you can be saved from your sins and go to heaven when you die through having faith in the power of my sacrifice!

...

Spoiler alert: *that's not what it actually says.*

Maybe we just need to read it again, let's see...

“The time is fulfilled, and the **kingdom of God** is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Or, a more literal translation / paraphrase would be:

“The time has come! **God's Kingdom** is here among you! Turn away from your current way of life, and come live differently in light of the good news.”

What's the good news? What is *the gospel*?

Jesus has brought God's Kingdom to us, and we have been invited to join it.

The Best Announcement of All

Jesus's purpose for coming to Earth was to bring the Kingdom of God to fruition, and you are invited to join it. This might be the most important single thing you can know!

The way that Jesus tells the story in Mark:

Do I have to try really hard to be “good enough” to *enter* the Kingdom of God? (No.)

Is the story about me *at all*? (... no.)

Is the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in heaven mentioned at all? (... no. Those become important later as *part of the story*, but they aren't *the story*.)

Is the story about me going somewhere or is it about something coming here? (... something coming here.)

Jesus's story, even the very Gospel that Jesus came to announce, is that God's Kingdom has come to the Earth. So — our friend's story about what Christianity is about is completely wrong. **Completely**. And the one we gave in return is only about *half* wrong.

Brothers, *we have forgotten or otherwise lost so much of what the Gospel is!* We have worked very hard over the centuries on what we believe is the most important part for an unbeliever to hear correctly: that there is a way for them to be saved from the punishment they deserve for sinning against a Holy God. And that is obviously a **hugely** important part of the story. But did we capture *any* of the rest of the story?

Apparently in Jesus's mind, the story of the Bible, the story of who He is and what He came to do, and the story of the gospel, the good news, the good announcement... that story is NOT about us going somewhere, whether we're good enough or not.

*It's about God coming **here** whether we are ready or not.*

You might not understand just yet why this is such a titanic paradigm shift for us. You're probably thinking that I just oversold my point. "What's the big deal? Wasn't God already ruling over the universe? What even changed?"

Or maybe you're asking "So, did Jesus just make this up out of whole cloth? Is this His radical new idea? What's the point of Him dying, then?"

We have to go back to the very beginning. This is where it gets *really* interesting.