

## A JOURNEY BEGUN BY *Don't Walking*

### DON'T WALK

The sign screamed mutely in 216-point font, eerily shining through the October night air, which still bore the texture of a recent rain. The street was empty, but I obeyed the sign anyway. You'll just have to believe me (or not) when I say the attractive student (let's call her Danielle<sup>1</sup>) also standing at the corner wasn't the reason why.

I had come from dining alone, likely at *Everything But Anchovies* (a misnomer — but I forgive them on account of their Pasta Osborne). It's pretty much the only place in Hanover open late, and thus a favorite for Dartmouth students.

Eventually, the sign changed, and we crossed the slick street. I altered my gait to match hers down the sidewalk a few hundred yards. I figured anything more direct would frighten her. (As though having a tall, stocky, scruffy guy in a black fleece keep pace with you down a block at night is no big deal... Let's just say *Social Intuition 101* was not required for my degree.)

We neared a fork, and she braved a "Good night" in my direction, which I took as license to ask, "Why did you wait at the light?" — the question I had considered posing all along.

She managed to ask me my own question without answering it herself; I cannot for the life of me remember how she did it.

I stuttered, "I'm a believer in Kantian ethics and feel citizenship is tacit agreement to live by the laws of the land... and there are some other reasons as well." Yes, I really said "tacit agreement" in a midnight conversation with a woman I had never met. Did I mention I was in theoretic mathematics?

She answered after my suave response, saying she was starting to believe obeying laws should be part of her Christian faith.

Her response at once humiliated and encouraged me. Though I considered myself a devout believer, I had avoided mentioning it — the "other reasons" in

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<sup>1</sup>because that was her name

my answer — for fear it might color her opinion of me. Of course this humiliation did not stop me from declaring my own faith after I heard of hers.

She invited me to join The Navigators, a campus Christian fellowship, for their weekly Wednesday meeting. I figured it would be a replay of the dry InterVarsity Bible studies I had sampled at Grinnell, but the opportunity to be in the same room with her outweighed such minor sufferings. I would have even gone to a strictly vegan restaurant to spend more time with her.

I could not have been more wrong regarding The Navigators. Nearly 100 students worshipped with a full praise band, and a student gave a message. I was floored by the enthusiasm and vibrancy of the worship. On the downside, I assessed my chances of capturing Danielle's heart as rather slim.

A calculus student I tutored named Karen invited me to a Campus Crusade for Christ meeting the following week. I took her up on the offer and joined a score of students in a cozy room outside the mess hall. Chris West, the leader, gave a talk on *Romans 12:1–2*:

**... present your bodies as a sacrifice — alive, holy, and pleasing to God — which is your reasonable service. Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God — what is good, pleasing, and perfect.**

His talk left me feeling like Dorothy upon landing in Oz, exposing me to God's expectations. I had utterly compartmentalized my faith. I realized I could not wear my belief in Christ as a stamp, a label adorning the hellfire-retardant shrink-wrapping of my soul.

I had always considered myself a serious Christian. My dad was a devout conservative Lutheran. He died when I was seven, and soon thereafter we stopped going to church, but I eventually returned in seventh grade, just in time to begin catechism class. By high school I knew basic doctrine and often got into arguments with my atheist and agnostic classmates. (Most of them, of course, attended church, this being Texas and all. In my home town, there was no law strictly requiring you to go to church, but there was also no law strictly requiring you to breathe or worship football.) On the other hand, I never studied my Bible much. I packed it every time I moved to a new place, but somehow I never found time to read it, much like people "never find time" to floss.

Energized by Chris' talk, I began reading the Bible voraciously. As a graduate student with a knack for his subject, I had the type of free time typically reserved for the unemployed. I read and read, awash in newfound passion.

The ensuing months of study presented an odd puzzle — *Jesus and Paul appear to fundamentally disagree about the Judgment!*<sup>2</sup>

Let me explain. Paul writes things like . . . **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, . . . a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus**, and **For by grace you have been saved through faith**. It sounds like Paul is saying everyone deserves to go to hell<sup>3</sup> *by default* while those who have faith in Christ are saved from this fate.

This message is at the core of the gospel you have likely heard from any number of evangelists (and quite possibly have preached yourself). It can be packaged in several ways but generally boils down to the following:

- All humans sin, making them unrighteous in God's eyes and hence disqualified from heaven.
- Jesus died so that believers could receive forgiveness through His sacrifice, allowing them to enter heaven without upsetting God's justice.

Most assume the above is *what the Bible says*, whether or not they agree with it. I'll call this general idea the *modern gospel* or the message of *modern Christianity*. The first half of this book is mostly devoted to engaging that message, and I'll call people who believe some variation of it *evangelicals*, though given how broad of a term that is, perhaps "Conservative Evangelicals" would be a better label. I apologize beforehand for any overgeneralizations that come from addressing this large school of thought while not being too concerned with the differences within it.

Now, evangelicals have much more to say than this, but when it comes to the Judgment, the above crudely captures the essentials for all practical purposes. The only escape from hell is belief in Christ, which means we need to spread the message so everyone has a chance to "make it." There *appears* to be no other conclusion if we believe, as written in *2nd Timothy 3:15*, we are saved by **faith in Christ**. Clearly, people cannot have faith in Christ if they never hear of Him. (Lest you get the wrong idea, I too believe we are saved through faith.)

I found while I read Jesus anew that His teachings on the Judgment just don't jibe with the modern gospel. It's as though He and Paul speak of two different things, and most of what Jesus says just makes no sense if you accept the message presented by evangelicals (or Catholics, for that matter).

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<sup>2</sup>I use "Judgment" (with a capital J) to refer to the "final judgment" throughout this book.

<sup>3</sup>By "hell" I mean "whatever happens to those who do not pass the Judgment." I'll use "heaven" as the opposite, though we'll find later that this is mildly imprecise.

As a Lutheran, I had grown up on Paul. The gospels almost seemed foreign to me. Sure, I had read all the “important parts” that get stressed in church. I think that’s how most Christians read the Bible;<sup>4</sup> we know the parts we like and doze off during the parts we might not understand or do not want to hear. Now, as I read Jesus again for the first time, a surprise lurked on every page. Frankly, He seemed to be saying everything a good Protestant is *not* supposed to believe.

You are likely skeptical of this last point, especially if you are an evangelical. I give several examples in chapter two, but page 173 has a summary of the points covered throughout the book. I bet you’ve read several passages yourself that looked strange while studying the gospels, and each time you convinced yourself it wasn’t perplexing enough to fret over. I further suspect the reason is that you thought *you had no choice*. You were told the only option, if you wanted to believe the Bible, was to agree with the message of modern Christianity.

Keep in mind that those verses that pricked your conscience are the tip of the iceberg. We generally do not find what we are not looking for: If we do not want to see *apparent* contradictions between Jesus and Paul, or contradictions between what the church teaches and what the Bible actually says, our psychology will happily oblige us. Add to this the pressure Christians feel to fit into their local fellowship and support each other’s faith, and it’s easy to see why problem verses are easily glossed over.

That’s much of this book’s aim, reading the Bible without sprinkling arcane theological pixie dust over everything that conflicts with what we are told (or want to believe). If you can do this, the Bible as whole (and the Living God it reveals) makes far more sense. But you’ll have to leave your dogma at the door.

*Note: This book is about God’s Word and has over 1000 scripture citations. I suggest first reading through without looking everything up. After getting the general idea, go back and dig into your Bible on anything you want to check or explore. For an easy way to see the passages I cite, go to [Scripture.John173.net](http://Scripture.John173.net)*

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<sup>4</sup>By “most Christians” I mean “the majority of the small number who read the Bible at all.”

## A Classic Question: A Simple Answer

*Luke 10:25* raised my eyebrows as I was reading the Bible anew. A scribe asks Jesus, point-blank, **Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?**

Isn't that the question most see at the heart of the gospel?

No evangelical would give the answer<sup>5</sup> Jesus gives — *Love God and your neighbor*. They might answer, "There is nothing **you** can **do** to inherit eternal life," and should be surprised that neither "faith" nor "Christ" enters into Jesus' answer. A minister who gave Jesus' response would be accused of teaching "works righteousness" or saying we can "earn our way into heaven."

I've heard some rather strained attempts to explain what Christ *really* meant here, but the simple truth is that Christ's Jewish audience took His answer exactly as it sounds<sup>6</sup> — that those who loved God and their neighbor would inherit eternal life — so efforts at explaining away His answer paints Jesus as a rather odd Savior who willfully misleads those He was sent to help.

Today we see the whole Bible as a single package of truth given to us by God. While we should consider all scripture before arriving at a conclusion, we must also keep in mind that the gospels are not merely opportunities for God to speak to us 21st-century types. When Luke wrote his gospel, he may have known of Christian literature, but he could not assume all his readers had access to any particular epistle or gospel. Furthermore, the Jews were not mere foils used for dramatic effect to allow 21st-century Gentiles a better understanding of God. Jesus *loved* the Jews, a people He wept bitterly for in *Luke 19:41–44*.

The anguished *Matthew 23:37* is not the anger of a resentful ruler, but rather the wailing of a mother whose children have refused all efforts at aid. Whenever Jesus speaks plainly to the Jews, we have to assume it is for their benefit. We cannot go around claiming *He says you have answered correctly; do this and you will live, but He really means ...* There's nothing in the narrative, and in particular the conclusion (*Luke 10:37*), suggesting Jesus is misleading or rebuking the scribe. His answer and the narrative is instructive, like Jesus' sermon in *Matthew 5:13 – 7:29*, which begins on a note similar to *Luke 10:28*.

Furthermore, the gospels written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John did not originally go out bundled with each other and all of Paul's letters. They were read (or, more likely, heard) by people who may well have had no other accounts

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<sup>5</sup> He said to him "What is written in the Law? How do you understand it?" The expert answered "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself" (quoting *Deuteronomy 6:5* and *Leviticus 19:18*). Jesus said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this and you will live."

<sup>6</sup>Though they might well understand the *question* differently than we do. More on that later.

of Christ. To interpret them in the light of Paul's letters or 1900 years of religious philosophy is to read them with a lens their writers never intended and their original readers did not have. If Luke thought Jesus' answer was ambiguous and needed clarification, he would have provided it himself.

The only context given by Luke is that this discussion introduces the parable of the good Samaritan, a story not told to answer the question "who goes to hell?" but rather the question **who is my neighbor?**

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* claims the questioner takes Jesus' commendation in *Luke 10:28* as a conviction because he knows it is impossible for him to keep the requirement perfectly. That commentary then says his second question is an effort at looking for a way out.

This explanation might make sense if the scribe has a 21st-century evangelical understanding of God's justice, but it hardly fits the actual context. First, he answers his own question with a standard Jewish response, so it's hard to imagine it throws him into a fit of terror. Second, the Jews have lived for centuries knowing their obligation to the Law without any emotional trauma. (Indeed, Luke begins his gospel [*Luke 1:6*] referring to two people **blameless** and **righteous before God** by keeping the Law!) Jesus' answer affirms rather than attacks that concept. Third, the scribe's second question would hardly get him out of the hot seat even if we assumed a modern understanding of the situation — even if Jesus tells him only other Jews count as his neighbors, would that really change whether he can keep the command to our 21st-century standards?

Another explanation I've heard is that Christ is "meeting this man where he is" — that this one Jew has a problem with treating his neighbor as himself. Thus, Christ is not teaching fundamental truths but rather showing this particular man the one thing he has to change to follow Jesus.

In truth, the question "who is my neighbor?" is<sup>7</sup> highly debated during Jesus' day. It makes perfect sense for a scribe (whose profession depends on interpreting the Law) to test Jesus' understanding because Jesus is considered a rabbi or prophet at the time. Note the address: **Teacher, what must I do. . .**

Jesus' answer goes far beyond anyone's expectations. Not only does He claim that anyone can be our neighbor, but He further indicates we should actively try to *be a neighbor* to those God puts in our lives. Note how He changes the question from **who is my neighbor?** to **which of these became a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?**

One Jewish sect holds that only upstanding, righteous people count as their neighbors. Another sect believes *almost* everyone can be a neighbor. But *no*

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<sup>7</sup>I prefer the present tense for describing the historical context of scenes depicted in the Bible.

*one* thinks Samaritans (hated by the Jews) are included. The scribe cannot even bring himself to say “the Samaritan” in answer to Jesus’ question. Instead he simply says **The one who showed him mercy.**

Jesus’ response is revolutionary in its answer to **Who is my neighbor?** It is definitely *not* revolutionary in its answer to **How do I inherit eternal life?** The scribe answers his own question and Jesus commends him: **You have answered correctly; do this and you will live.**

The fact that Christ’s response is a prelude to the parable of the good Samaritan does not make it any more compatible with modern Christianity, though I suggest you keep it in mind next time you see a hitchhiker.<sup>8</sup>

## A Wild Gospel Chase

You can generally find a Bible verse or two to support almost any viewpoint you want. If you want to show God is a vegetarian who roots for the New York Yankees, you could probably find verses to support that. It’s called proof-texting, and it is not very constructive.

On the other hand, I submit you’ll have trouble finding even *one* verse in Matthew, Mark, or Luke that closely matches conservative Christianity’s understanding of the Judgment, where all are judged as guilty and God grants forgiveness to believers based on Christ’s sacrifice.

It is hard (impossible?) to read Matthew, Mark, or Luke in its entirety and come away with anything similar to the gospel you’ve likely heard. That’s a pretty serious problem — that a gospel’s message has nothing to do with what we today consider the crux of Christianity. Remember, these early writers had to assume their readers might have no other New Testament writings. Anything critical should be found stenciled in purple Technicolor, jumping off the page. Yet the modern gospel is hard to find clearly portrayed anywhere, let alone spelled out in each work. Evangelists today can sketch out their message in five minutes; you’d think if it were an accurate depiction of Christ’s work, each writer would clearly write it *somewhere* in his *gospel*.

So, either now or soon, read all of Mark and ask yourself how much of “the gospel” is in his gospel. The only place Mark mentions hell is *Mark 9:38–50*,<sup>9</sup> a

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<sup>8</sup>Have you ever heard a sermon on how Jesus says we should pick up hitchhikers? Unfortunately, neither have I. It is incompatible with Christians’ interest in “prudence.” Course, most of what Jesus says is rather anti-“prudence.”

<sup>9</sup>This presumes we ignore Mark 16:9–20, which practically all scholars claim was added later.

passage failing to do traditional Christianity any favors. *Mark 10:21–31* is closer to what we expect, speaking of **the kingdom of God** and linking it to following Jesus, but then *Mark 12:28–34* makes clear that this phrase (**the kingdom of God**) does not mean “heaven” *in the sense we generally use the word*.

Pretend you’ve never read any of the New Testament. Consider all of Mark and ask yourself *Why was this written? What would I believe about Jesus if this is all I had to go on?* You won’t come up with anything resembling the modern gospel. We expect Mark to clearly weave it throughout his work if it were true, yet there’s nary a trace. I’m not “throwing away” everything but Mark here, just asking you to ponder his message based on what he wrote.

Even using liberal dating of these gospels, where we assume the writers thought their readers had other information, it is hard to understand why they would not affirm the modern gospel (if it were true); instead they chose (or the Spirit chose for them) to relate teaching after teaching that chafes against it.

Similarly, after you read any of these gospels, you are not drawn to go out and save people from eternal torment in hell by teaching them to believe in Christ. You might come away with many ideas, but “I need to go proclaim Jesus to others *or else they will go to hell*” is certainly not one of them.

Even “The Great Commission” does not suggest this. Read *Matthew 28:18–20* carefully, and you’ll find Jesus directs His disciples to spread the *commandments* He taught while on earth. Jesus tells them to make *disciples*, not *believers*, and the reason given is not *otherwise they will go to hell*. What’s the reason? — **All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.**

When pondering what the disciples think they are doing, keep in mind *they initially only go to the Jews!* Note the shock and surprise in *Acts 11:18* when Peter defends his baptizing of Gentiles over a decade after Christ’s resurrection. Unless we believe these holy men of God are so callous that they want all Gentiles to be eternally damned, we simply cannot think that Jesus’ disciples spread the good news in an effort to save souls *from hell*.

It appears the Greek version of Matthew we have today might come from an earlier Hebrew version written before the Gentiles were welcomed into the church. The original version may not have included the part about **all nations**. This would explain the apostles’ action but does not let the modern gospel off the hook. *The fact that all the original apostles thought Jesus’ work was only for the Jews certainly says something about what Jesus taught them.*

Evangelicals make certain claims about our status in God’s eyes. These axioms are the basis of their gospel. Let’s look at what Christ had to say on the matter.

## Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount

Commencing a sermon spanning three chapters, Jesus says, **anyone who breaks the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever obeys them and teaches others to do so will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness goes beyond that of the experts in the law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.** (*Matthew 5:19–20*)

This seemed strange to me as I read through the Bible because Christ not only links righteousness to obeying the commandments, but also links obedience to entering the kingdom of heaven. Evangelicals firmly deny both connections.

Some people read this verse with an eye patch, seeing only part of it at a time. They first disregard all the stuff about commandments and claim Jesus is saying the works the Pharisees had done did not make them righteous. Then they disregard the part about righteousness and focus on the first sentence to say breaking one commandment one time is as bad as breaking all of them all the time. These conclusions ignore the middle part — **but whoever obeys them and teaches others to do so will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.**

The cut-and-paste theology also ignores the context of the passage. He says **these commandments**. What commandments? He means the commands *He is going to articulate next*. Surely the focus cannot be about the futility of trying to follow laws (“works”) when He is about to give some of His own! Immediately after this introduction, Christ clarifies God’s commands and stresses the danger of ignoring them. If you read it as saying “you have all already broken one of these, so all of you are already cursed,” it provides no motivation to do God’s will in the future. Thus, the common treatment of the passage destroys the very thing Christ was trying to accomplish in His address!

He’s not saying the works of the Pharisees are insufficient because people have no hope of doing God’s will. He is saying the Pharisees kept the letter of the Mosaic law without respecting the deeper desires of God shown within it. He makes the same observation in the “Seven Woes” proclaimed in *Matthew 23:1–36*. He shows this clearly in *23:23–24*.

**Woe to you, experts in the law and you Pharisees, hypocrites! You give a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, yet you neglect what is more important in the law — justice, mercy, and faithfulness! You should have done these things without neglecting the others. Blind guides! You strain out a gnat yet swallow a camel.**

Jesus is saying it is not enough to follow the letter of the Law. They must respect the weightier aspects God displays in the Law: compassion, mercy, and love. This is what the Pharisees missed, just like their forebears. To correct this, Jesus gives them a taste of the new covenant's law in the "Sermon on the Mount," just as Moses brought the commandments of the old covenant down from Mount Sinai. (To the Jews of Jesus' day, it would seem that Jesus was a rabbi with authority to reinterpret the Mosaic law, but to Matthew's audience the comparison to Moses would be obvious.)

Jesus is definitely not saying it is impossible to please God through obedience (that would make the second half of *Matthew 5:19* look stupid). He's indicting the Pharisees for doing a lousy job because they are manipulating God's law, twisting it to their political needs. Worse, their hypocrisy and mis-teachings are causing well-meaning Jews not to know how to please God either, thus the frustration Jesus shows in *Matthew 23:13-15* and why He speaks in *Matthew 5:19* of both obeying and teaching others to obey. He's addressing the two errors the Pharisees made, and He is going to do the opposite. He keeps the commands, and later sends His disciples out to teach others to do so as well.

Incidentally, this passage makes it hard to believe that those who came before Christ have their fate determined by whether or not they believed a savior would come. The Pharisees of Jesus' day definitely believed *that*, as did the Pharisees who came before them and the Jews who stoned the prophets.

## Questions: All Who Wonder Are Not Lost

I've given just one example of how Jesus casts the Judgment. We'll investigate that topic more in chapter two. Jesus' words made me wonder about other things as well. It was terribly hard to accept that what I had been taught and had told others might be wrong. Conservative Christianity has such a tight structure that people are generally given the choice of accepting the entire ensemble or none of it. Each point of doctrine is protected with so much zeal that you would think Christ's existence was being attacked.

Many have questions along the lines of *Why would a loving God only let some people into heaven?* or *Why does God treat those who never heard of Jesus the same as those who rejected Him?* The questions that perplexed me back then had more to do with the internal consistency of the gospel I had been taught.

## Forgiveness

For example, Christ says **For if you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your sins.**<sup>10</sup> What happens to believers who do not forgive others? Are their sins forgiven or not? What about someone who forgives others but does not believe in Christ? Jesus gives no impression that He is only speaking of present-day forgiveness. This verse is part of a sermon where He discusses hell multiple times.

Why does Jesus even say this if the only thing that ends up determining if our sins are forgiven is faith in Him? It would be like a professor (Jesus) telling you that passing (forgiveness by God at the Judgment) his course is based entirely on the quizzes (forgiving others) and then being told by the course's teaching assistant (evangelicals) that passing is based only on class participation (faith in Christ).

## Judging Others

In the same vein, Jesus often discussed judging others. Given the stereotypes the church has earned, one has to wonder what **Do not judge, and you will not be judged** (*Luke 6:37*) and **For in the way you judge, you will be judged** (*Matthew 7:2*) mean for judgmental believers. What do they imply for those who are non-judgmental but never hear or perhaps even reject Jesus?

Some claim, "Jesus is just talking about present judgment here — we are judged as we judge others now. But at the final Judgment, we must be judged against God's perfect standard."

I don't know about you, but I do not find that explanation very fulfilling. How could God forgive my sins today (when I forgive others), but then not forgive them later at the Final Judgment (if I was not a believer)? Why would Jesus say we are judged as we judge others, but omit that this fundamental truth does not extend to the most important judgment of all?

The context of these passages does not suggest Jesus' message is limited in scope. *Matthew 18:21–35* in particular appears to have an eternal time frame in mind. Similarly, one of the anti-judgment passages, *Matthew 7:1–2*, comes in the same sermon as verses with the end-times in sight (e.g., *Matthew 7:13*). If different rules apply between present and eternal judgment, you'd think Jesus (or Matthew) would have said so — His Jewish audience would be even less likely than we are to think such a thing.

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<sup>10</sup>*Matthew 6:14–15*, see also *18:34–35*; *Mark 11:25–26*; and *Luke 17:3–4*. Jesus stressed our forgiveness of others far more than modern Christians do.

Evangelicals hold that all of us are essentially judged as unwelcome in heaven on our own. Those who don't believe in Christ are condemned because, as Paul says in *Romans 3:23*, **all have fallen short of the glory of God**. Believers pass the Judgment not due to their righteousness but because God has forgiven their sin. If that's true, then what does it matter how I judge my neighbor, either lightly or harshly? Why is Jesus wasting His listeners' time (and misleading them as well) by saying **For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged** if the reality is that a single sin is enough to disqualify you from heaven?

Evangelicals believe it is our sin against God that makes us unworthy of heaven. Our judgment of others or lack thereof cannot change that. . . can it?

### Fate of Earlier People

In *Luke 13:28*, Jesus says a whole slew of personages will enter the kingdom of heaven who could never have known Jesus while **evildoers** are not allowed in. How is a 1st-century Jew to take that warning, especially since the only thing Jesus asks of these people is to **repent**?

Jesus refers to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets "making it in," but these people could not have "had faith in Christ" the way we are told people need to. In fact, the Hebrews before King David did not even look forward to a singular Messiah. Abraham had received a promise that all nations would be blessed through him, but it was not made clear how that promise would come to fruition until after Israel fell. After all, Israel was looking for a political savior, and until they had been defeated they didn't have anyone to be *saved* from.

Or consider Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho who helps the Israelites (*Joshua 2:1-4*). She has no understanding of Judaism and certainly no understanding of a coming savior (or the need for one), yet the writer of Hebrews praises her in *Hebrews 11:31*. She has no gospel to believe in, yet it is hard to see Christ telling her "no" on Judgment day. It is equally hard to see what makes her any different from those after Christ who had no inkling of the Living God's gospel.

These people of the Old Testament who Jesus said will survive the Judgment had *faith in God* and were *faithful to God*, but the same could be said of many people in the past, present, and future.

Finally, how could Enoch (*Genesis 5:24*) or Elijah (*2nd Kings 2:11*) be taken to heaven if their sins were not forgiven, for Christ had not yet died? Suggesting God forgives their sins "early" by looking forward to Christ's sacrifice throws the entire Old Testament into chaos. In any event, the Old Testament writers certainly saw no need to make excuses for God or explain how these ascensions did not break the Almighty's supposedly rigid code of justice.

If believing in a coming savior were important for eternal safety, you'd never know it from reading the Old Testament. In all the teachings of the ancient Hebrews, there is not one vignette of a savior coming to deliver individuals from hell, nor is the importance of *belief* in such a savior to be found in all the pages of the Jewish Torah. You'd think that if the patriarchs who spoke to God and the prophets who spoke for God thought such faith were critical to avoid eternal hellfire, they would have mentioned it somewhere.

## Early Gospel

The early apostles thought that Jesus was returning very soon, signalling the end of the age, and this itself poses a problem for the modern gospel. If the apostles were going around telling people that Jesus was the only way to survive the Judgment that was coming very soon, what would that say about God? Why would God put Jesus through so much suffering to allow a single way out of hell *and then send Him at the very end, so as few people as possible can be saved?*

Of course, that isn't what the apostles taught or believed, but what gospel did they spread? Keep in mind that most of the Christian church kept the Mosaic Law for its first 15 years. What does it say about the gospel if the early Jewish Christians required Gentile Christians to keep the Mosaic law?

And, going further back, we reach an intriguing point concerning Jesus' own gospel: *No one knows Christ is going to die!* Jesus *begins* to hint at His coming death in *Mark 8:31*, but only to His disciples and only after two years of preaching. Furthermore, His disciples have no clue what He means — either at that time (*Mark 9:10*) or after several more months (*Luke 18:34*). As Jesus points out in *Luke 24:26–27*, they *should* have figured it out, but they don't. John confirms this in *John 20:9*.

Let me be very clear. Jesus *does* allude to His coming death, and Jesus *does* rise again. I'm simply saying those items are not in the gospel He and His apostles teach the Jewish crowds because not even His disciples understand what will happen to Jesus later. When the gospel authors write that people **believed in Christ** it evidently has nothing to do with His death or resurrection.

I realize this observation may have thrown you into confusion, so I have included in the appendix (beginning on page 177) a more detailed description.

It turns out that these questions, and many more, can be answered by simply letting Jesus and others mean what they say. However, I am getting ahead of myself. Just like any other jigsaw puzzle, it helps first to put the frame together; then you can place the pieces in later.

The framework I describe in this book allows all the following:

- Jesus' words are truthful and make sense to the Jews He spoke to without needing retroactive reinterpretation based on letters Paul would write to Gentiles 20 years later.
- The individual gospel accounts, as well as the specific teachings within them, transmit the core truths of Christianity to their original readers.
- Paul's writings make sense to his audience without conflicting with the teachings Jesus gives.
- Jesus fulfills the work described by the Old Testament prophets, work the modern gospel leaves mostly untouched. (Evangelicals are happy to show how Jesus fulfills the prophecies *identifying* the Messiah, but their understanding of the gospel ignores the hundreds of pages in God's Word describing why He was needed and what He was to accomplish.)
- Jesus works to heal the problems we see all around, and in, us. He brings *more* than hope — He brings good news.

## Summary and Final Notes

In this chapter I simply wanted to share part of my journey and give a flavor for what put me on the path I hope to show you in this book. Nothing in this chapter is meant to *prove* anything, just indicate why the modern gospel does not seem the natural conclusion from Jesus' teachings for a number of reasons. I promise the later chapters will feel less like a whirlwind.

Initially, I found differences between Jesus' teachings (which we will investigate more deeply in the next chapter) and the interpretation we draw from Paul's letters. This got me exploring what, exactly, Jesus teaches as *the gospel* before His death. Through most of His ministry, people think of Him as a rabbi or a prophet, and no one, not even His disciples, knows He is going to die. So what message is Jesus spreading? If you take away Jesus as Messiah, Jesus as Sacrifice, and Jesus as Lord, what do you have left to tell people as the **gospel**? When Jesus says **repent and believe the gospel** what **gospel** does He mean?

And what gospel do His disciples spread afterward? Mark begins his gospel by saying **The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God** and then proceeds to give an entire narrative containing practically nothing we would consider the **gospel**.

I am not claiming the Bible is wrong. I'm not claiming Jesus wasn't crucified or that He wasn't resurrected. I'm not saying anything against these basic truths the Bible states clearly. I'm saying that the modern gospel is not only very different from the gospel Jesus and the apostles proclaim prior to His death, but suggests a version of the Judgment totally foreign to what Jesus preaches. You simply cannot read any of the first three gospels and come away believing the gospel is what we are told it is today. You certainly cannot read any of these gospels and Acts (which records the earliest teachings of the apostles as they spread the gospel) and take from them a view on the Judgment that is compatible with what evangelicals teach as the biblical truth.

That Jesus does not publicize His atoning death makes His discussion of the Judgment even harder to swallow if we assume He cares at all for the **lost house of Israel** He came to save. The Jews whom Christ speaks to, having no understanding of Christ's atoning sacrifice or Messiahship, can not help but take Christ's words in a direct fashion. Nor can we brush such concerns under the rug by claiming Jesus speaks in parables precisely because the Jews are not supposed to understand Him. Not all of Jesus' parables are inscrutable; some Jesus explains to the crowds, others the listeners understand without explanation (e.g., *Matthew 21:45*), and many of Jesus' teachings are not in parables at all — as in *Luke 10:25–28*, where Jesus leads the scribe to answer his own question.

Furthermore, one can only push this explanation so far, for Christ claims in *John 18:20*, **I have spoken publicly to the world. I always taught in the synagogues and in the temple courts, . . . I have said nothing in secret.**

In any event, being “unclear” is very different from inviting people to false conclusions. Furthermore, if Matthew, Mark, and Luke did not intend for their readers to take Christ’s teachings as recorded, they certainly could have clarified them. As it is, the explanations captured are hardly the message one expects if the gospel writers were pushing a theology where forgiveness through faith is the prevailing factor at the Judgment.

The original apostles do not take the gospel to the Gentiles until 10 years after Christ’s death, and that was only due to divine intervention. A decade after Christ’s resurrection, Peter has to be commanded three times *by God* before he so much as enters a Gentile’s house, let alone tells him of the Jewish Messiah. It isn’t that Peter hates the Gentiles or wants them to go to hell (for hell had nothing to do with the early gospel), but rather that he still sees the Law as a dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles, and he (like all Jewish Christians) keeps the entire Mosaic law.

Whatever our conception of the gospel and salvation are, it has to make sense of these practices by the Lord’s apostles. If the heart of Jesus’ gospel lives somewhere in the ribcage of **by the works of the law, no flesh is justified**, it’s hard to make sense of the (Christian) Jews’ continued observation of the Law, to say nothing of their efforts at forcing it upon Gentiles — unless perhaps our interpretation of Paul’s admonition is off.

The *DONT WALK* sign had led me on a journey. . . a journey that left me as bewildered as you might be right now. But with lots of reading and some inadvertent help from a Calvinist pastor, I found a route to a new place — a place where one can make sense of all these puzzling pieces.

To do this you have to throw away the frame most people push Christianity into, for the framework most people are taught from childhood is a very human-centric one. We should be seeking a blueprint that puts God’s desires, as made clear throughout scripture, at the center of our theological universe.

Join me as we step into a world where humanity revolves around God rather than the reverse, a world where Jesus means exactly what He says, Paul means exactly what he says, and we allow the Christ to accomplish the work Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the other prophets said He would.