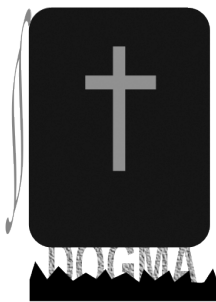


WHO *Really* GOES TO HELL?
THE GOSPEL YOU'VE NEVER HEARD

What a Protestant Bible written by Jews says about
God's work through Christ

(A book for those in the church and those offended by it)

by David I. Rudel



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The Bible is best read with
your own eyes... preferably open

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FOREWORD

Well, there it is. You cannot see it because you are reading the text on a printed page. The annoying green wiggly line is only on my computer screen, flagging "there it is." Sometimes I see wiggly lines that are green, sometimes red, but no matter what color they are, they irritate me and I know that the only way to make them disappear is to stop what I am doing, stop what I am thinking, and deal with them.

I am required to hover the cursor over the wiggly line, right click the mouse, and read and respond to the dialogue box that appears. If the line is red, the computer tells me that my word choice deviates from the standard dictionary, and if the line is green, the problem is my grammar. Then, my computer asks me (ever so gently) if I really meant to spell the word that way or if I really meant to use the word in that peculiar fashion. I can respond with several options. I can insert a correctly spelled word from a list, I can insert a grammatically corrected sentence, I can scrap what I have written and begin again, or I can ignore the problem and settle for being incorrect.

I am sure that somewhere in my computer software there is a way for me to disable my annoying wiggly lines. I choose not to. As annoying as it is to have my thought processes interrupted, I realize that when misspelled words and poor grammar appear in a text that bears my name, I inevitably lose credibility in the eyes of discerning readers. How convincing can my argument be if I cannot choose the right word for a sentence?

I call the wiggly lines essential annoyances.

You are holding in your hands a book that may well become for you an essential annoyance. David Rudel's *Who Really Goes to Hell? — The Gospel You've Never Heard* is an important book. He will posit ideas and ask questions about the Bible's teachings and about the Church's use of those teachings that may trouble you. The questions are honest, thoroughly researched, meticulously argued, and will wash over you like incessant waves. Most annoyingly, his questions are always referenced to scripture as the standard.

I don't agree with all of Rudel's conclusions and I question some of his Biblical-critical methods, but it isn't his conclusions that annoy me. Somehow, the questions that he asks have become embedded in my mind—in my operating system. They open in a dialogue box in my head, and they require a response. Rudel's questions have become a kind of annoying filter through which I must pass my sermons and my sermon preparation, my Bible teaching and the reading that informs it, my public prayers and the very personal contemplation that gives birth to them, and even my intimate thoughts about salvation, damnation, eternal life, death, heaven, and hell.

Well, there it is. If you love God's Word and treasure God's Church, this book will be an essential, albeit annoying, challenge.

Edward Hopkins
Pastor
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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THIS?

WARNING: Cigarette Smoke Contains Carbon Monoxide.

You probably do not read the warning labels on cigarettes. You know the gist and purpose of the warning; reading the text is unlikely to provide any new insight. The warning could say almost anything, and you would read it as, "Hey, perhaps willfully inhaling fumes isn't a good idea."

In fact the label itself does not say smoking is hazardous, even if you assume everyone knows carbon monoxide is dangerous. After all, chlorine (poisonous in pure form) makes up over half of common table salt. But we know the warning really means that the carbon monoxide in smoke, unlike the chlorine in salt, can cause us harm when we put it in our bodies.

Furthermore, we know this warning is different from, say, caution labels on curling irons suggesting you not put them in your ear. The cigarette's warning is not meant to stop you from using the product in a dangerous manner; it discourages you from using the product at all.

We would know these things even had we never read such a label, for the media, our doctors, our parents, etc. tell us smoking is unhealthy. We don't need to read the text; we've already been told what it says... and if we do read it and find something unfamiliar (e.g., *carbon monoxide*), it doesn't stop us from determining the intent. Like watching a foreign version of a film you've already seen in your native tongue, you know the plot without reading the subtitles.

Had the warning read "Exposure to gelid hydroxylic acid can result in horripilation," we might assume cigarettes contain gelid hydroxylic acid and that horripilation is some terrible medical disorder. In reality the label would simply be saying that cold water can cause goose bumps.

My point? *Our assumptions color not only how we read things but also the conclusions we draw as we make the text meet our expectations.*

Our presuppositions are unlikely to lead us astray when we read warning labels, but what about when we read the Bible?

Almost everyone is told what Christianity is about and what to expect from the Bible long before reading it carefully. In addition to these assumptions, we have our own opinions on what we'd like the Bible to say. In the end, it's very hard to simply read the Bible for what it says. Instead, we read into it what we think it should say or what we have been told it says... or we don't read it at all, having decided its teachings (as described by others) make no sense.

What people think Christianity "is all about" is largely based on the views presented by active spreaders of the gospel. From these messages, a consensus has formed among non-Christians of the basic principles of biblical Christianity. For understandable reasons, non-believers tend to define Christianity in terms of its claims regarding how the Judgment works.

This book emerged as the product of a spiritual, scriptural journey that began when I realized the claims we assume to be *what the Bible says* do not appear to be motivated by scripture at all. Rather, the Bible seems to have been bent to match our assumptions. I eventually found the Bible describes a perfectly reasonable, logical, God-centered story of salvation far afield from what people in America perceive based on evangelists and evangelicals.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THIS?

I was once an conservative Calvinist, so I'm hopeful this book will turn upside down the worlds of a few who are now as I once was. But I also hope it shows liberal Christians that a literal reading of the Bible makes a good deal more sense than they realize, and (perhaps most of all) I hope it speaks to non-believers who may have judged Christianity too soon based on modern dogma.

The first four chapters demonstrate the motivation for constructing a different salvation paradigm fitting naturally with scripture as a whole.

Chapters five through seven investigate the Judgment, engaging the question in the title of this book. I do not suggest skipping forward to it.

Chapters eight through eleven build up a biblical understanding of salvation. They also serve to defend the paradigm described in the first four chapters and fill a void left by the castles torn down by the middle three.

In short, this book is for anyone who thinks Jesus knew what He was talking about and wants a second opinion on what that entails. I've tried to make the book meaningful to evangelicals, liberal Christians, and non-believers. To do so has required that it not be the perfect match for any one group. This is an *interactive* book in that you can go to www.john173.net to connect with others, see discussion of reader questions, and/or submit your own.

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 Danielle¹) 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 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 vibrance of the worship. On the downside, I assessed my chances of capturing Danielle's heart as rather slim.

¹because that was her name

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 shrinkwrapping 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!*²

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 hell³ *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*. 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.

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

³By "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.

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).

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;⁴ 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 evangelical. I’ll give several examples in chapter two, but if you can’t wait you can go to page 27 and see a summary of the points we’ll be covering later. I bet, though, that you’ve read several passages yourself that looked strange while studying the gospels, and each time you’ve convinced yourself it wasn’t perplexing enough to fret over. I further bet the reason is that you thought *you had no choice*. You were told that the only option, if you wanted to take the Bible seriously, 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, citing over 1000 passages. 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.

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 answer⁵ 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

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

⁵He 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.”

"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 sounds⁶ — 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 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.

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

In truth, the question “who is my neighbor?” is⁷ 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 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.⁸

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*,⁹ a passage failing to do traditional Christianity any favors. *Mark 10:21–31* is closer to what we expect, but then *Mark 12:28–34* torpedoed that, leaving us to wonder what exactly **the kingdom of God** means.

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

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

⁸Have 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.”

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

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 fifteen years 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 might 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 how God views us. 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

While commencing a sermon spanning three chapters (*Matthew 5:19–20*), 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.**

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. 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.**¹⁰ 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 un-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.

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

¹⁰*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.

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 early if their sins were not forgiven, for Christ had not yet died? Suggesting God forgives their sins by looking forward to Christ's sacrifice throws the entire Old Testament into chaos.

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 29) 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 here 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 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. 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.

– II –

JESUS' TEACHING ON THE JUDGMENT

In chapter one I boldly claimed the interpretation we take from Paul's writing chafes against Jesus' teachings on the Judgment. I gave a couple examples and then broached a whirlwind of related questions and ponderings.

As mentioned earlier, Jesus and His apostles could not have spread a message about how His blood was going to redeem us from our sins — no one, not even His disciples, knew He was going to die. He alluded to this a few times, (which the gospel writers point out because it would have significance for their audience), but this could hardly have been part of His or His disciples' general message to the Jewish crowds if not even John, Peter, and the rest had figured it out. (Just a reminder — there is a deeper discussion on what Jesus did not preach in the appendix beginning on page 29.) We will investigate Jesus' general message in chapters five and six, but here we focus just on His words concerning the Judgment and why the standard reconciliation between His words and church doctrine simply does not work.

Here I'm not developing an extensive description of the Judgment but merely demonstrating a need for a conversation. Don't draw too many conclusions from the observations in this chapter, observations that might leave you even more bewildered and quizzical than the last chapter. The good news is that in chapter three I start answering some questions instead of just piling more on.

Nor am I looking for a total refutation based on a single passage (though I do believe some of these examples provide that). My point is not *this parable absolutely unmans the modern gospel*. Rather, I'm asking people to look at the collection of teachings the gospel writers included and realize they point unequivocally at conclusions very much in conflict with the evangelical dogma.

The Synoptic Gospels

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels because they give a synopsis of Christ's ministry. Since they largely reinforce each other, I will discuss examples in Matthew. As we look at these passages, ask yourself what message Matthew is conveying. How would a 1st-century Jew understand Jesus' teachings (or Matthew's compilation of them)? Note: I only discuss places where it is obvious Jesus refers to the Judgment rather than passages that mix the Judgment with the near-future acceptance of the Gentiles into God's kingdom.

Matthew 5:22–30

Here, Christ gives several warnings about hell, portraying the dangers of sin rather graphically, saying things like **If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away! It is better to lose one of your members than to have your whole body thrown into hell.**

Now, I don't believe Jesus is advocating actual self-mutilation, but the gist of His message something along the lines of *Avoid sin at any cost, for sinning puts you in danger of hell, which is worse than anything you might imagine.*

These admonitions strike me as unnatural when put next to the modern gospel. Christ speaks to people who have already sinned. According to the modern gospel, they are *already* be condemned to hell, regardless of whether they sin in the future or not. In *Mark 9:43–49* Jesus directs these warnings to His disciples. Why would His disciples (who began believing in Him back when He turned water into wine: *John 2:11*) be in danger of hell? On top of that, why would they be in danger due to possible future sins?

Christ's words imply that all are in danger of hell due to their sin without necessarily *already condemned*; that is twice removed from the modern gospel. Evangelicals claim believers are in no danger of hell while non-believers are in total danger. They further claim we all naturally deserve eternal wrath.

Matthew 7:21–23

Jesus crowns the Sermon on the Mount by saying

Not everyone who says to me “Lord, Lord” will enter into the kingdom of heaven — only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day, many will say to me “Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons and do many powerful deeds?” Then I will declare to them “I never knew you. Go away from me, you lawbreakers.”

Jesus does not dispute that they have true faith, faith enough to throw out demons. Yet Christ indicates these will be rejected at the Judgment.

People key on the **I never knew you** snippet, as though that is the cause for the exclusion. In reality Christ has already indicated the reason: **only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.** Note this passage leads into 7:24–26, contrasting those who adhere to the commands Jesus has just given (**Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them**) with those who ignore the commands Jesus has given in His sermon. And *then* you can go to *Luke 6:47–49* (where Jesus contrasts those who put His commands **into practice** and those who do not) and find that *Matthew 7:21–23* actually matches up with **Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and don't do what I tell you?**(*Luke 6:46*)! So we must understand the condemnation in *Matthew 7:21–23* as an indictment of disobedience, not a lack of relationship.

When Jesus says **I never knew you**, He is *disavowing* them, not indicating a lack of familiarity. Like in *Luke 13:27* (**I don't know where you come from**), He is not saying He doesn't know the people — He taught and ate with them. Rather, He is disassociating Himself from those who do not do God's will, just as Peter did when he denied association with Christ (e.g., *Luke 22:55–60*).

This denial should not surprise us. As Paul writes in *2nd Timothy 2:12* **to believers if we deny Him, He will also deny us.** His words in *1st Thessalonians 4:3–8* show this rejection cannot be seen as simple unbelief.

Matthew 12:36–37

Jesus tells the Pharisees **I tell you that on the day of Judgment, people will give an account for every worthless word they speak. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.**

When I asked my evangelical friends about the first of these two verses, I was told, “There will be an accounting, but we will not be condemned by it.” That struck me as odd. It does not make much sense given the second verse.

Furthermore, how does the idea of our being **justified** by our own words fit the gospel we are taught?

Matthew 13:24–50

Jesus describes the Judgment in the *Wheat and the Weeds*, a parable recorded in *Matthew 13:24–30* and explained in *Matthew 13:37–42*. Someone plants wheat in a field and is later told by his slaves that weeds sprouted at the same time as the wheat. The slaves ask him if they should go pull up the weeds now. The owner replies **No, since in gathering the weeds you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest.**

At the harvest, The angels pull out the weeds (described as **everything that causes sin as well as all lawbreakers**) and throw them into a **fiery furnace**, leaving the **righteous** to shine in the **kingdom of their Father**.

The most obvious question to ask is, “What would cause the slaves to uproot good wheat when pulling out the weeds?” The answer becomes more clear if we understand that Jesus does not mean just any old weed here. The plant He refers to is *darnel*, which closely resembles wheat until harvest time. The *fruit* of the wheat plant is very different from the *fruit* of the darnel plant (to put things in the context of *Matthew 12:33*), but otherwise the plants are nearly indistinguishable.

There is no mention of atonement or forgiveness of sins. All plants are judged the same way. The reapers are not told to overlook the bad fruits of certain special plants. While parables are not exhaustive treatments of a subject, we expect some mention of Christ’s sacrifice if forgiveness of sins (rather than judgment of fruits) is the prevailing factor at the Judgment.

A few verses after explaining this parable, Jesus gives a very similar one in *Matthew 13:47–50* where fishermen cast nets. The conclusion of that parable reads **It will be this way at the end of the age. Angels will come and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**

Some claim the first parable says nothing about how the Judgment works, but teaches that only good seed can bring forth good fruit. This makes little sense of the whole dialogue between the reapers and the owner. In any event, the second parable contains nothing that would point to this conclusion.

Evangelicals often explain parables like these by saying our works are judged *as proof of our faith*. Another solution Christians propose is “God judges us by our works, but only judges believers by their *good works*,” which is the Lutheran position (as described in *Christian Dogmatics*).

The explanations suggested don’t explain why Jesus makes no mention of atonement or forgiveness. A straight forward reading has Jesus tying the Judgment to repentance, rather than to belief, forgiveness, or redirection of God’s wrath. In particular, it is hard to reconcile this parable with the claim that those who never hear of Jesus are simply “out of luck” because God’s hands are tied.

Worse, these defenses fail to respect Jesus’ point. Christ’s words are a call to repent from **everything that causes sin**, which He alludes to before these parables (*Matthew 13:15*). Indeed, Matthew describes the same message of repentance with identical imagery when referring to John’s ministry in 3:8.

This must be an exhortation to repentance rather than something more arcane, for the disciples indicate they understood these parables (*Matthew 13:51*), yet Jesus had not even begun to speak of what was to happen to Him (which occurs in *Matthew 16:21*). Matthew gives no commentary here or anywhere else that would lead a reader to violently reinterpret this parable as anything other than a call to turn away from evil deeds.

These teachings of Christ really represent two separate problems for the modern gospel. First, Jesus is presenting a Judgment using language that people today would decry as “works-righteousness.” Secondly, Jesus’ description implicitly disproves the idea that none are “righteous in God’s eyes.” When Jesus speaks of

the evil in this parable, He clearly does not mean *everyone that has not been cleansed by My blood*. There is no inkling of that either in the parables or in the commentary by Matthew. No objective person would read this and think the **evil** here refers to every person's default state. If Jesus wants His disciples to change their understanding of *the evil* versus *the righteous*, He would not describe the **evil** people in *Matthew 13:41* as **everyone who causes sin and the ones who practice lawlessness just as He did in Matthew 5:19**.

Matthew 16:26–27

Jesus says **For the Son of Man will come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will reward each according to what he has done**.

To explain this verse and similar ones, some strands of Christianity developed "rewards theology." They claim good deeds earn prestige in heaven's society without determining who gains admittance. In other words, they say Christ is talking about icing on the cake here. . . without discussing the cake.

But Christ is clearly not referring to such "bonus points" here because this passage comes immediately after the warning **For what does it benefit a person if he gains the whole world but forfeits his life? Or what can a person give in exchange for his life?** (The Greek for "life" and "soul" are the same.)

Another reason Jesus cannot be referring to mere rewards here is that the verse He quotes from the Old Testament (*Psalms 62:12*) is the same one Paul uses in *Romans 2:6* when describing who goes to heaven and who goes to hell — exactly what "rewards theology" claims Jesus is not discussing here.

Jesus encourages His disciples, knowing they would be persecuted as His followers soon. The Jews already had an idea of how the Judgment would work based on God's Word. Jesus reminds them of the benefits of persevering as faithful servants (and the perils of faltering). As in *Luke 10:25–28*, Jesus is affirming the Jews' understanding of God's Judgment, not reinterpreting it.

Matthew 25:31–46

Could Jesus be more clear about the Judgment than in His parable of the sheep and goats? . . . **inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. . .** certainly seems clear to me. He goes so far as to call one group **righteous** before contrasting them with the **unrighteous** who ignored those in need and will depart into **eternal punishment**.

Christ calls certain people **righteous** based on charity and stewardship. He makes no reference to Christians being judged any differently than unbelievers. How would a miserly believer fare according to Christ's depiction?

When considering these verses, ponder that only a sliver of the world had even heard of Jesus at the time. If somehow the people of that generation were infinitely blessed to have an opportunity for heaven unavailable to those who came before Christ or had never heard of Him, Jesus gives no mention of this here or anywhere else.

Artificial Righteousness

Some evangelicals preach that nothing we do makes us righteous, even after we believe. They claim that our righteousness, at least for purposes of the Judgment, is an artificial righteousness God gives us. Just as God places our sins on Jesus, Jesus' merit is placed on us. I'll occasionally refer to this notion of "imputed" righteousness throughout the book, but for right now I just wanted to point out we find absolutely nothing like that portrayed in Jesus' teachings.

What about John?

It must be admitted that many passages and verses in John appear at first blush to support the modern gospel, but there are also places, like *John 5:29*, that agree with the repeated teachings of the three synoptic gospels.

The passage of Jewish ideas to Greek manuscripts to English translations has been roughest on John's gospel, which presents many abstract discourses Jesus told Jews that John had to convey to Greeks. The next two chapters are dedicated to understanding John's gospel, but for now I'd like to use a single, extremely famous, example to show how easy it is to misconstrue John's words.

John 3:16 represents to many a clear articulation of the gospel. It has all the ingredients: God's love, the giving of the Son, belief, and eternal life. What happens when we read the passage in context?

The **eternal life** in *John 3:15–16* is linked to the **kingdom of God** described in the conversation John is commenting on (3:6). Jesus says **unless a man is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.**

This **kingdom of God** is clearly a reference to the Holy Spirit received through baptism, not post-Judgment life in heaven. Enoch and Elijah had *already* ascended to God, but the Spirit had not been given (*John 7:39*). A simple reading of the rest of that conversation confirms Christ's focus on the Spirit. I realize it is odd to say that **eternal life** refers to life in the present rather than life after the Judgment, but that is the main point of the next two chapters.

John 3:16–21 does not say that unbelievers are condemned due to a general unrighteousness plaguing all humanity. What is the reason given?

Now this is the basis for judging, that the light has come into the world and the people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light and does not come to the light, so that their deeds will not be exposed.

The condemnation described is *because the person loves the darkness rather than the light*, which is very different from the reason given by the Church. Imagine a 2nd-century Jew who has never heard of Jesus and is trying to do God's will, living by the commandments given in the Torah. The evangelical viewpoint is that such ignorance is no excuse... but does that Jew fail to believe *because she hates the light*? No. She fails to believe for the same reason that ancient people didn't believe in Elvis sightings.

Now, consider a 21st-century Buddhist who lives out Christ's laws but does not self-label as a Christian because every Christian he ever knew was a judgmental jerk. Did that Buddhist *reject* Christ because he *hates the light*?

No, the passage is not a universal discussion of how the Judgment works; by its own wording it could apply only to those with full knowledge of Jesus. Even if this passage refers to the final Judgment, it would not do evangelicals any favors, for the passage clearly links the condemnation to someone's *disposition*.

In reality, John is referring to the judgment of the Jewish leaders who rejected Christ (3:19). This condemnation *has already taken place* (3:18), for the Romans came in 70 A.D. and destroyed the Temple, an indescribably severe loss for the Jews whose entire culture revolved around it.¹ As we will see in chapters five and six, the Jews reject Christ because He exposed their twisting of God's Law to their own ends, hence the **For everyone who does evil hates the light and does not come to the light, so that their deeds will not be exposed.**

¹Indeed, *John 11:48* is an ironic prophecy. It's also a clever wordplay because "take away our Temple" could just as easily refer to Christ's crucifixion — the Greek for "take away" is the same word John uses for "crucify," and Jesus' body is God's Temple.

So, John is not discussing the Final Judgment; even if he were, the reason for condemnation here is not the reason given by the modern gospel. John indicates a Judgment of disposition, which is very different from the Judgment claimed by evangelicals. This whole passage makes more sense when you understand John's purpose in writing his gospel, which we will discuss in chapter nine.

Why the Standard Answer Fails

Evangelicals have faced a philosophical problem for centuries. *If we are saved by faith, what stops someone from being a terrible, greedy, selfish person, all the while being assured a place in heaven based on faith in Christ?*

A commonly given response is "true faith produces works." While this addresses the *philosophical* issue described above, it does not solve the *biblical* problems described in chapters one and two.

The philosophical problem "why do believers get to do anything they want without fear?" is *not* the same as "if our entrance to heaven is based only on forgiveness through faith, why is that message not found in the gospel of the early church or in Jesus' teachings?" I think Christians confuse these two issues, thinking a valid solution to the first is a way to get around the second.

I've hinted already why "we are judged by our works as evidence of our faith" is not a satisfactory answer. After all, if Jesus thought the Judgment really boiled down to forgiveness through faith, He could have simply said so. If the apostles saw Christ's purpose as delivering people from hell, they would have gone to the Gentiles sooner. They didn't.

Here I'd like to show directly why "true faith causes good deeds" does not resolve the difficulties posed by the teachings of Christ.

In *John 5:29* Jesus describes that He will raise all the dead, . . . **the ones who have done what is good to the resurrection resulting in life, and the ones who have done what is evil to the resurrection resulting in condemnation.** (Incidentally, I asked a trained evangelist about this passage and was told "John doesn't say there *are* any people in the group Jesus says had 'done good.'")

Based on this verse and many similar passages, the *only* way to maintain the evangelical view is to claim *only believers can do good* and *all believers do good*. But evangelicals *do* say only believers in Christ can do deeds that please God. So it does not seem like there's a problem.

But there is a problem — *Someone can be pleasing to God without having faith in Christ or knowing the gospel.* This has been shown throughout scripture by several people in different categories.

("Only believers do good" is the easier half. Debates on "all believers do good" get side-tracked into disputes over what constitutes a "believer." Still, there are issues for that half as well because *anyone* who receives the spirit *must* have genuine faith. We can have the Spirit and ignore it — *Ephesians 4:30.*)

Nineveh — Enemies of God

Jonah's work in Nineveh has to look bizarre to anyone who holds the modern gospel. Jonah's short book poses three separate problems for the modern gospel:

- A wicked people with no belief in a coming Messiah avoid God's wrath.
- This forgiveness occurs without sacrifice or preaching of the gospel.
- God reveals in *Jonah 4:11* that the clemency shown was partially due to the vast number of people in the city who had not received proper guidance in God's ways. Yet this is exactly the sort of deficiency that modern Christians say is no excuse.

Noah — Before there *was* a Gospel

God **found favor with Noah** (*Genesis 6:8*) *before* he built the ark. There was no gospel to believe in, no Christ to look forward to. God's promise to Abraham was the foundation of the gospel,² and he would not come for another 20 generations. Noah found favor by doing God's will as best he knew it.

Rahab — Oblivious to the Gospel

Rahab (*Joshua 2:1–3*) is commended for her faith in *Hebrews 11:31* and *James 2:25*. But what did she have faith in? She certainly didn't have faith in Christ, nor in any kind of gospel message. The only thing Rahab knew was that the God of Israel (Whom she knew nothing about!) was real.

That's it. That was all she knew — *the God these other people worship exists and has power*. James' general conception of faith (*James 2:19*) **God is one** is not much more sophisticated than Rahab's. Jesus Himself lumps this with the two great laws when quoting from the Old Testament in *Mark 12:29*: **The most important is: "Listen, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. . ."**

If Rahab (a heathen prostitute who had no understanding of the gospel) can be commended for her actions based on faith, we *must* allow that someone can act on a faith *in God* without any knowledge *of Christ*, or *the gospel*. Rahab's faith was not in forgiveness of sins. Rahab's faith was shown in her actions and her belief (*Joshua 2:11*) that **The Lord your God is God in heaven above and on earth below!** One cannot say she put faith in God to protect her, for it was the spies she trusted with regard to her personal security. Her faith was in God's power, not in any personal divine intervention on her behalf. It certainly had nothing to do with her *eternal* security.

If Rahab can be commended for responding to her primitive understanding of the Living God, why can't others who lack the gospel also do God's will? Rahab's example shows that you can do good *based on whatever understanding of God you have, even if you know no gospel*.

Cornelius — A Gentile Ignorant of Jesus

Cornelius' deeds found favor with God *before he had ever heard of Christ* (*Acts 10:4*). What makes Cornelius, who lived after Christ's coming, wasn't a Jew, and had never been told of Jesus, any different from people today who try to do God's will as best they know it? Note that the Jews, including the apostles, solidly believed that the Messiah was just for them. Cornelius refused to convert to Judaism, so it can hardly be thought he had faith or hope in *their* Messiah.

These examples show what most accept without evidence: people can do godly deeds based on whatever knowledge of God they have. Helping the poor, defending the oppressed, depending on God to provide, and many other virtuous enterprises adorn the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Can anyone really claim it is impossible to do these without faith in Christ? (I would concur it is impossible to do these things for the right reasons without faith in *God*.)

²Some claim there were predictions of Christ earlier than Abraham, suggesting that people from the beginning were told of a coming savior. The Jewish writers of the New Testament, who knew the Old Testament backwards and forwards, don't describe any. Nor do we see remarks stressing the importance of believing in a coming savior *anywhere* in the Old Testament or the concept that the Messiah was to save *individuals* from *hell*. We have no indication *Genesis 3:14–16* was treated by those before Abraham as anything but a "just-so" story explaining why snakes have no legs. Among the dozens of prophecies the gospel writers show Christ fulfilling, not one of them hails from before Abraham's time. The Jews thought Christ was only sent for them, which is why they only evangelized other Jews and were shocked upon learning any non-descendant of Abraham could share in the blessing. When the Gentiles are given the gospel, it is because they have become **descendants of Abraham** (*Galatians 3:29*), and the reason Christ gives in *Luke 19:8* for salvation coming to Zaccheus' house is **because he, too, is a son of Abraham**.

I'm not saying that people can just ignore Christ or that we should not proclaim the risen King. I'm just showing that the "true faith produces works" idea does not resolve the conflicts I've described so far because non-Christians can do God-pleasing works through whatever faith in God they have. There is a big difference between saying you cannot do good without faith *in God* and saying you cannot do good without faith *in Christ*. Yet evangelicals only allow the latter, for Peter claims **there is salvation in no one else** (*Acts 4:12*).

Some say "If you don't believe in Christ, you can't have faith in the living God, because the living God sent Christ. If you believe in a god that didn't send Christ, you believe in a god that does not exist." This reasoning appeals to dubious logic and is beaten senseless by several biblical examples.

Did Rahab respond to faith in a false god? Was Noah faithful to a false god? Was Cornelius commended for idolatry? None of these knew the gospel of Christ. Paul claims God's plan for all people to have a part in Abraham's blessing had been kept a secret (*Romans 16:25–26, Ephesians 3:5–6, Colossians 1:26*). Isn't the logical conclusion that these people were affirmed by direct belief in God's existence and power in the present rather than faith in a gospel of future grace? If the above examples did not convince you that ignorance does not make people idolaters, I refer you to Paul's respect for the Athenians in *Acts 17:23*.

The logic claiming "anyone who does not believe in Jesus cannot have true faith in God" is dangerously close to saying "If you don't believe everything we believe, you're an idolater." Using this reasoning, any Christian sect can claim all others are cults. For example, Lutherans (who believe the bread and wine of communion are more than a mere symbol of Christ's body and blood) could say, "If you believe the bread and wine are a mere symbol of Christ's body and blood, you are an idolater. Your Jesus never existed because the real Jesus (the one *I* believe in) said that the bread **is** His body and the wine **is** His blood."

The above paragraphs show the sort of energy wasted in fighting between factions. We can disagree without cultifying each other. What does Paul say in *1st Corinthians 12:3*? **No one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.** The same knife that divvies up the church cuts the hearts within it. How can we show Jesus' love to the world if we cannot show it to our brothers and sisters in Christ? The emotional mortar spent firmly maintaining orthodoxy's walls would be better spent mending creation and the lives within it.

The same applies to individuals in a given church. We should be united by our love of God and obedience to Christ, not our catechisms. A "dogma first" mentality may allow a church to win the battle of confessional purity, but risks losing the war — ministering to those for whom Christ died. When Christ healed people, He didn't ask them to affirm 23 articles of faith. When Paul refers to defending **sound doctrine**, he writes of *applied* doctrine regarding behavior **conforming to godliness**, not abstract theories about how God works. Our spiritual roadsides are bedecked by the battered souls of orphans effectively disowned by their local churches, to say nothing of those feeling lost within their congregations. Remember, dogma was likely the reason the priest in the Good Samaritan parable stayed far from the victim, who might have been dead — even accidentally touching a corpse would render him unclean for Temple service.

I think many believers grapple with the claim that only those lucky enough to hear about Christ have a chance at heaven. I doubt most evangelicals ever come to complete peace on the matter. Instead, they stop wrestling with these issues because no one presents a satisfactory solution. Our desire for personal security, our preferred conceptions of God, and pressure from the church create a draining tug-of-war in the heart of the believer, and I think many Christians eventually block it off, deciding it isn't worth the emotional turmoil.

Summary and Final Notes

Jesus' version of the Judgment stands in complete conflict with what people are told constitutes "Bible-based Christianity," which depends upon an *interpretation* of Paul.

Jesus' Teaching	Modern Interpretation of Paul
All deeds relevant	Only unforgiven sin relevant
Judgment like an evaluation	Judgment like a court of law
No special treatment for believers	Absolute special treatment
Those who do good are called to life.	Those who believe are justified.
Workers of lawlessness are "in danger of" hell, regardless of their faith.	Non-believers have no hope of justification regardless of their actions.
People are called righteous without mention of faith.	No one is righteous.
Focus on faithfulness to Jesus' commandments	Focus on faith in Christ's sacrifice
Righteousness by adjudication	Righteousness by imputation

You should not jump to conclusions about the Judgment based on the chart above. I'm not laying a foundation for Unitarianism, saying that it doesn't matter what you believe or that all religions are routes to God or anything like that. I am simply investigating the Judgment here.

One can hardly defend the broad chasm between Jesus' teachings and modern dogma on the basis that Jesus was not "showing the full picture" to the Jews. These parables represent not only Jesus' teachings to the Jews but the teachings Matthew, Mark, and Luke chose to capture for their audiences. As demonstrated in this chapter, if the gospel message is *Jesus died for our sins to allow God to excuse believers at the Judgment*, then Matthew does a rather rotten job of transmitting that message.³ In any event, Jesus' descriptions and admonitions are hardly a "partial picture" of a Judgment resembling that painted by evangelicals. One does not prepare lasagna by beginning with a graham-cracker pie crust and filling in appropriately.

The last two rows of the chart deserve special consideration. People often speak of "faith in Christ" when they really mean "faith that Christ's blood is sufficient to pay my debt" or "faith that Christ can save me from hell." These understandings of faith are even further removed from Jesus' description of the Judgment. Whatever faith is shown by the works being judged is certainly not a faith in the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice. It is easy to imagine people having full confidence that Christ's sacrifice has paid their debt, yet living with no respect for Jesus' commands of love toward all and succor to the oppressed. Isn't the conservative church indicted on this very charge?

Similarly, the righteousness of which Christ speaks repeatedly cannot by any reading be seen as righteousness gained by God taking Jesus' righteousness and putting it on believers. There is none of that to be seen in the wheat, fish, sheep, or any other metaphors Christ uses. Nor is it to be found in others' descriptions of the Judgment. For example, *1st Peter 1:13-16* exhorts people to righteousness and then *1st Peter 1:17* reads **If you address as Father the one who impartially judges according to each one's work, live out the time of your temporary residence here in reverence.** *James 2:12-13* is similarly at odds with evangelical thought on this score.

³We will discuss the closest thing to an homage to the the modern gospel, *Matthew 20:22-28*, later and see how it does show Jesus as a propitiation, but not of individualized final-Judgment-wrath.

These differences cannot easily be reconciled by saying "It is the will of God to believe in Christ" or "If you believe, you will do the will of God." There are plenty of people (those who came before Jesus, those who never heard of Jesus, those who heard a warped version of the gospel, etc.) who can do God's will and never come to faith in Christ. Furthermore, Christ is just as fervent in warning His disciples about the dangers of sin as He is those who would reject Him.

Such pat answers subordinate Christ to Paul, showing more interest in making Christ comply with our philosophy than allowing Him to simply mean what He says. It is not that His rendering of the Judgment is *incomplete* — His picture is *incompatible* with anything resembling the modern one. To say evangelicals get the Judgment right is to call Jesus a liar. The dogma of the church will pass away, but *The Sheep and the Goats* will remain for any who have ears.

The issue is not that Paul and Christ disagree with each other, but rather that they *appear* to conflict due to the interpretations we are taught and assumptions we bring into our Bible reading. When Paul clearly speaks of the Judgment, his version is in line with Jesus'. We do not need to force one to agree with the other through rhetorical acrobatics, but we will need to put aside our expectations when trying to understand Christ's purpose. And that starts in the next chapter.

Additional Excerpts

ADDITIONAL EXCERPTS

In addition to the complete first chapter, I am including two related items:

- A summary of nineteen separate biblical problems with the modern gospel.
- A short tract explaining what Jesus *didn't* preach.

1. Problems with the Modern Gospel

The modern gospel states

- All people, having sinned, are unrighteous. Hence, due to God's perfect sense of justice, no one is naturally qualified for heaven.
- To address this, God sent Jesus as a sacrifice to grant forgiveness of sins to all believers.
- Those who have faith in Christ, and only those who believe in Christ, can thus enter heaven as their sins have been forgiven.
- God has no choice but to consign all others to hell for their unforgiven sin.

Throughout this work, I have discussed several reasons why the above is biblically unacceptable. A summary of these is given below:

1. It presupposes the Judgment has the format of a court of law where only our offenses are relevant. Christ's teachings on the Judgment indicate godly deeds (which Jesus and others say can be done even by those who have no knowledge of Christ) are as relevant as our failings.
2. The Bible depicts many people, including those who never knew of Jesus, as righteous. The idea that a single sin makes someone unrighteous in God's eyes is thoroughly destroyed by any reasonable reading of scripture.
3. The modern gospel claims faith in Christ is the only means by which sins can be forgiven, but scripture gives at least six different routes to forgiveness, most available to non-believers.
4. It fails to make any sense of why the original apostles only spread the gospel of Christ to other Jews during the decade after Christ's death. These men were full of the Holy Spirit and had been given a complete teaching of God's work through Jesus [Luke 24:27]. To suggest they believed Christ's purpose was to save believers from hell would indicate they wanted all non-Jews to be consigned to eternal torment.
5. It indicates God holds every person to the same standard of conduct, a claim without any biblical support. Dozens of passages demonstrate the opposite.
6. It fails to show the relevance of Christ's life and resurrection in God's salvific plan. If we are saved through Christ's sacrifice, then the resurrection itself is rather unneeded. Yet the early apostles and church fathers based their theories of salvation squarely upon the resurrection rather than the sacri-

ficial aspect of Christ's death. Jesus is never referred to as a sacrifice or propitiation anywhere in all the evangelism captured in Acts (the most comprehensive repository of the apostles' actual teachings to unbelievers), and very rarely is He so described elsewhere.

7. It declares Jesus' sacrifice grants forgiveness of all sins to believers when the Bible specifically says otherwise.
8. It is not consistent with the context and purpose of the Messiah as found in the later prophets.
9. Jesus' own disciples did not know of His coming death and resurrection even though He attempted to tell them privately about it. Thus, it is impossible for the modern gospel to have had any real place in the general message Jesus and His apostles proclaimed to the crowds during Christ's earthly ministry.
10. Jesus, Paul, and many others indicate believers and unbelievers are *both* in danger of hell due to their sins.
11. The modern gospel cannot explain how Enoch and Elijah were allowed to ascend to God's presence before Christ's sacrifice. Suggesting God forgave people before Jesus by looking forward to Christ's sacrifice would render nonsensical much of the Old Testament.
12. It is impossible to read Matthew, Mark, or Luke in isolation and come away with any semblance of the modern gospel. Thus, we must reject the modern gospel or else claim these writers cruelly and willfully misled their readers, for they could not assume their audience had access to any other specific commentary on Christ's purpose.
13. It violates Jesus' own teachings regarding how those who came before Him are judged. In particular it fails to explain how those who never knew of a coming Christ (much less that Jesus was He) could possibly be saved from hell.
14. It claims forgiveness of sins is the prevailing aspect of the Judgment while most descriptions of the Judgment found in the Bible make no mention of forgiveness at all.
15. It does not explain how the entire creation, including animals and God's angels, were reconciled to God through Christ's blood, for we do not generally believe either these of creatures are guilty of sin.
16. Jesus was sent to mediate the new covenant, so it is unnatural to suggest His sacrifice was aimed at the Judgment (which transcends covenant, for all are judged).
17. The Bible proclaims the **entire world** and **all people** have been saved through Christ. If salvation is derived from forgiveness of individuals' sins, such would imply that all have been forgiven of their sins, not just those who believe in Christ.
18. All the original apostles, and all Jewish Christians of the first century, continued to obey the cultural Jewish laws. The modern gospel has trouble explaining why Peter, nine years after Christ's death, still believed he could not enter a Gentile's house. It also leaves one bewildered as to why Paul was just as ardent about keeping the Mosaic laws after his conversion as before.
19. It does not respect the Jewish understanding of salvation, a rather serious issue given that all the books of the Bible were written by Jews, the original Christian church was entirely Jewish, and the gospels relate Jesus' interactions with Jews.

2. What Jesus Didn't Preach

It often comes as a shock to Christians to hear what *wasn't* part of Jesus' message during His ministry on earth. By *message* I mean *what He and His disciples preached to the Jewish crowds before His death*. (Jesus sends out His disciples to preach the gospel in *Matthew 10:5ff*, *Mark 6:7*, and *Luke 9:1*.)

In particular:

- His message did not include *anything* about His death or resurrection, and it certainly didn't indicate anything about His being a sacrifice.
- Until the very end of His ministry, His message did not even include anything about His being the Messiah.

I realize the above may look idiotic. A few points to consider:

- We must separate what He taught His disciples from what He preached to the crowds.
- We must recall that His message to the crowds who came to hear Him was of a different nature than His answers to Pharisees who questioned Him.
- We must understand that the gospel writers chose items from Jesus' ministry that got across points they wanted their readers to know. Much of this happened at the very end of His ministry and is not representative of what He taught during the years He preached throughout the land earlier.
- We must separate what Jesus says from commentary by the gospel writer (like *John 3:13-21*).
- We must realize that we see (after the fact) hints Jesus gave which even His disciples did not understand at the time.

The above points should help clear up the confusion that you are bound to have as I show it simply cannot be the case that Jesus preached the modern gospel to the crowds He encountered for a day or two each while traveling throughout the holy land.

Of course, *after* His death, Jesus' apostles did preach these truths. I'm certainly not claiming that Jesus is not the Christ or that He didn't rise from the dead. I'm merely pointing out that He did not preach these things before dying, and hence nothing like the modern gospel could have been in His general message. This is extremely important to keep in mind while interpreting His teachings found in the gospel accounts.

For example, as you read through Jesus' descriptions of the Judgment highlighted in the first two chapters, it is useful to know there was no implicit understanding of Jesus dying for people's sins or saving those who "believed in Him." When the gospel writers speak of people **believing** in Jesus, it does not mean what that phrase conjures up for most people today. His disciples **believed** in Him and knew nothing of His death and resurrection. Even in John, the gospel most likely to be used to support the modern gospel, it often just meant to believe Jesus was sent from God.¹

What Did Jesus Preach about His Death?

While Jesus certainly dropped hints about His coming death, it wasn't part of His and His disciples' message since not even His disciples understood that He was going to die and rise again. Furthermore, it was not until the last nine months or so that He even **began** telling *them* about it. (I'll explain the importance of the **began** part later.)

This all becomes easier to understand if we look through the eyes of the Jews of Jesus' day. Some, but not all, believed there would be a resurrection, but it would be far, far in the future and it would happen for everyone at once. The idea that the Messiah would die and rise again *before everyone else* was completely

¹E.g., *John 6:42, 8:42-43, 9:33, 11:42, 16:30, 17:21*

unknown. While it was encoded in the prophets, no one got it. No one. That's why the disciples were totally disheartened (*Luke 24:20*) when Jesus died, because they thought that was the end. **But we had hoped that He was the one who was going to redeem Israel.** (Note the verb is in the imperfect tense in the Greek as well. "Were hoping" or "used to hope" would be, strictly speaking, more accurate translations. In any event, the point is that they no longer were hopeful.) *John 20:9* also explicitly indicates the disciples did not know He was going to rise from the dead.

It's understandable that the disciples had not figured any of this out due to their understanding of what the Messiah would do. Today we demonize the Pharisees as rejecting Jesus "because they wanted a political leader." That can hardly be the reason they rejected Jesus, for it was the same expectation His own disciples had! They assumed, like anyone else, that He was going to eventually be king over Israel. Just as David had lived in hiding as the rightful king of Israel until Saul's reign ended, they assumed He would eventually be exalted. The idea that He would die made no sense to them. This is why there is the curious conversation in *Mark 9:9–13*. The disciples wonder what **rising from the dead meant** because it *couldn't possibly mean Jesus was going to die*.

They wondered what figurative meaning it had. The prophets occasionally used the idea of resurrection metaphorically, and Jesus was known to speak in parables, so it is not surprising that they heard about Christ's coming treatment and assumed it referred to something else. The crowd in *John 12:34* shows a similar understanding that the Christ would not die.

In *Matthew 16:21*, *Mark 8:31*, and *Luke 9:22* Jesus **began** to tell the disciples of the things that would happen to Him. Matthew and Mark explicitly use that phrase — **began to tell**. It might look like Luke indicates otherwise, but then in *Luke 9:45* Jesus is telling them about His imminent betrayal and they don't understand. *Mark 9:9–13* would also look odd if we thought Jesus had told them everything earlier. I believe Peter's confession marks the time Jesus started warning His disciples a little at a time of what would happen.

Peter gets upset in *Matthew 16:20–21* that any dishonor at all would be shown to Christ, the rightful King of Israel. The idea that Peter was upset about Jesus undergoing suffering makes far more sense than suggesting Peter was upset that Christ would die and rise again as Lord. Every other piece of scripture indicates the apostles were oblivious until after His resurrection, and the notion that any of this discussion was taught to the public makes no sense given that Jesus did not even want them telling others He was the Christ.

Later when He tells them clearly (*Matthew 17:23*, *Luke 18:32–33*, *Mark 9:31–33*, *John 13:33*, *John 16:16–18*), they still don't get it. In *Matthew 17:23* we read the disciples were **deeply grieved**, which suggests their understanding was obviously misconceived. The other passages clearly say they did not know what He meant.

Since Jesus didn't even hint of any of these things to His disciples until nine months before His death, and they never figured it out anyway, it certainly could not be considered part of His general message. He sent out His disciples to preach in all the villages *before* He began to speak on this topic at all.

The above information might make *Matthew 20:28* confusing. In that verse Jesus says . . . **just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.**

There are four important points to be made about this snippet:

- This pronouncement comes right before Jesus' death and is not representative of His teachings during His earlier ministry. Further, it was evidently not vital enough for Luke to include it in his narrative.
- He is speaking only to the disciples, and even they did not understand. *Luke 24:21–27* shows no one had an inkling of His coming death. *John 20:9* confirms this.

- Many early church fathers saw Christ as a ransom paid to *Satan*. It would take the church about 1000 years to fully reject this, so we cannot with any intellectual integrity claim Jesus is clearly describing Himself as an atoning sacrifice to God. We read that into the text based on what we have been told, but early church fathers did not see it that way.
- *Hebrews 9:15* and *Romans 3:25* show this ransom was for sins committed under the first covenant by humanity at large.

Did Jesus Preach He is the Christ?

Jesus did tell the (Samaritan) woman at the well that He was the Christ in *John 4:26*. Otherwise we see instance after instance where He tries to keep that information under wraps. He silences demons to stop them from proclaiming this (*Luke 4:41*), and every description of Peter's confession shows Christ earnestly commanding them not to tell anyone (*Matthew 16:20, Mark 8:30, Luke 9:21*). This all happened *after* the disciples were sent out to preach around Judea.

People later start to think that perhaps He is the Christ, but not because He is saying so. When Peter declares it, the reason is due to divine revelation (*Matthew 16:17*), and the disciples don't indicate the crowds had drawn that conclusion from all the teachings and healing they had seen up to that point (*Matthew 16:13–15*).

This last verse is revealing in another way. Jesus was calling Himself the **Son of Man**, but that was not understood as a title for the Christ. *Matthew 16:13–14* and *John 12:34* both show this. Thus, Jesus' long dialogue with the Pharisees in *John 10* cannot be considered declaring Himself as the Christ. It isn't until seven months before His death that people start thinking He might be the Christ or someone as powerful.²

Other than during the trial before the Sanhedrin, the only time Jesus directly indicated He was the Christ to a Jewish crowd was out of exasperation with the Pharisees four months before His death (*John 10:36*), after they had misconstrued His claim in *John 10:30*. In all other instances, He gave indirect answers. And the fact that He had to be asked about it indicates that it was not the focus of His teachings. After all, if Jesus' message had anything to do with His being the Christ, the Pharisees would not have been so frustrated in *John 10:24*. Note His answer **I told you and you do not believe. The deeds I do in my Father's name testify about me**. This is one example of many where Jesus does not make a claim but wants people to decide one way or the other about Him based on the commands He gave (*John 7:17*) and His works (*Luke 7:22*), but primarily on the former (*John 10:38*).

We read His words and see things that look like direct claims to Messiah that were not. For example, we take His use of the title **Son of Man** as a claim to Messiah, but the Jews did not understand it that way. Similarly, He says the scriptures speak of Him in *John 5:39*. We take that as an indication that He is the Christ, but the scriptures also speak of Elijah (the one who comes before Christ). Indeed, it appears that most people (up until the very end) thought that Jesus was Elijah.³

This observation also proves Jesus' general message could not have been that He was the Messiah. Had He been telling people He was the Christ, people would not have declared He was **the prophet** (*John 6:14, John 7:40*) instead or believed He might be Elijah.⁴ Once we accept that Jesus was not telling people He was the Christ, it becomes much easier to understand why people thought He might be Elijah. Elijah has to come first, and John the Baptist told people (*John 1:21*) he was not Elijah. Jesus was doing the things great prophets, like Elijah, had done in the past: give God's Word and perform powerful miracles. Since Jesus

²*John 7:26–52* occurred around the Feast of Tabernacles (*John 7:2*) the August before Christ's death.

³*Matthew 16:14, Mark 6:15, Luke 9:8*

⁴Note the Jews evidently saw **the prophet** as someone different from both the Christ and Elijah — see *John 1:20–21* and *John 7:40–41*. In any event, it would be impossible for people to think He were Elijah if He were claiming to be the Christ.

wasn't claiming to be the Christ, Elijah had to come first, and Jesus was doing the things a great prophet like Elijah did, it's no wonder the Jews thought Jesus was Elijah.

The above points are illustrated in the apostles' own confusion. Right after Jesus confirms Peter's confession, the disciples wonder (*Matthew 17:10*) how it is possible that Jesus can really be the Christ when **the scribes say that Elijah must come first**.

Final Reminder

I'm certainly not suggesting Jesus was not the Christ or that Jesus did not rise from the dead. My point is that nothing like the modern gospel was preached to the crowds Jesus ministered to, and we absolutely must keep this in mind when interpreting His teachings during that time.

Furthermore, since Jesus *did* have a gospel message, but that message did not include anything we normally associate with the gospel, we should be very curious what that message was and why it could be called **the gospel**. This information is critical if we are to really understand Christ's purpose and the reason for His death.