

HEAVEN
HERE
&
NOW

What It Means
to Say Yes to God

HEAVEN HERE & NOW
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Introduction

How wonderful it is to see a messenger coming across the mountains, bringing good news, the news of peace! He announces victory and says . . . “Your God is king!”

Isaiah 52:7

I have complete confidence in the gospel; it is God’s power to save all who believe . . .

Romans 1:16

The Christian message is about a new age and a new world order—a very different new age than some have in mind—and a very different new world order. In the Bible, God’s new world order is called “the Kingdom of Heaven,” or “the Kingdom of God.” The message is called “the Gospel.” *Gospel* is a contraction of “good spell.” *Spell* is an old way of saying “news.” A gospel is good news.

The Gospel is the great good news of God’s victory over violence, corruption, oppression, and every kind of evil. The Gospel is the announcement of that victory and the story of how that victory was won. It is a story that centers on the life of one man—Jesus of Nazareth, known to his followers as Jesus Christ. The Gospel of the Kingdom of God is the story of Jesus Christ.

What follows is a brief report of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and what it can mean for you. A few Bible passages are quoted. Several others are cited as references for you to check if you like. The best way to read this report is in conversation with a Christian friend, who can answer any questions you may have. Be warned: if you take this message to heart, it will change your life!

Part One

HOPE

[Jesus] preached the Good News from God. "The right time has come," he said, "and the Kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!"

Mark 1:14 & 15

. . . we wait for what God has promised: new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness will be at home.

2 Peter 3:13

Because of Jesus Christ, you can have joy for today and hope for tomorrow. Part One introduces the story of Jesus Christ, the good news of God's kingdom.

THE PROMISE. In an age of violence, corruption, and oppression, God has promised a new age of peace, justice, and abundance.

Isaiah 2:1-4, Isaiah 11:1-9

WHAT WE CAN DO. If the dawn of a new day depended on human effort alone, we would be waiting forever.

Psalms 14:2-3, Galatians 5:19-21

WHAT GOD CAN DO. What is impossible for humankind is possible for God. A new age of peace, justice, and abundance is being prepared for us by the one who created you and me, and all that is.

Isaiah 40:28-31, Revelation 21:1-4

GOOD NEWS. All history is moving toward a day when God will make all things new. The dead will live again. All the living will be changed. Our bodies will be transformed. The new age will be a new creation.

1 Corinthians 15:51-54, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

REASON FOR HOPE. Many no longer hope in God, or even believe in God. But, hope in God will not disappoint. That is God's message through Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 1:17-18, 1 Peter 1:3-5

GOD'S KINGDOM

Jesus would encourage people, when they called on God, to say, "May your Kingdom come; may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

The Kingdom of God is wherever God's will is done. When God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven, we know God as the God of life and love; we enjoy direct open communication with God; we enjoy life together with God and with people from every nation in a community of grace and gratitude.

Part Two

JESUS

Jesus went all over Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, preaching the Good News about the Kingdom, and healing people who had all kinds of disease and sickness.

Matthew 4:23

[Our Lord Jesus Christ] was shown with great power to be the Son of God by being raised from death.

Romans 1:4

Jesus is God's man. Part Two is about the life of Jesus Christ and God's decisive victory over evil. God sent Jesus to call us out of this old world of violence, corruption, and oppression to begin living into a new world of peace, justice, and abundance.

HIS LIFE. In the early days of the Roman Empire, Jesus of Nazareth was known as someone who spoke for God with authority.

Matthew 7:28-29, Acts 10:36-38

► **HIS MESSAGE.** He announced the coming of God's kingdom.

Matthew 4:12-17, Matthew 6:9-10

► **HIS MISSION.** He woke people up to the reality of God and to their need for God's compassion and forgiveness.

Luke 19:10, John 3:16-17

► **HIS POWER.** He demonstrated God's compassion, and he spoke God's forgiveness.

Mark 2:1-12, Mark 5:21-43

► **HIS PEOPLE.** He gathered a people who were saying yes to God.
Mark 1:16-20, Matthew 16:13-18

► **HIS INSTRUCTIONS.** He taught people how to live as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.
Matthew 5:1-12, Matthew 7:1-5

HIS DEATH. Jesus was innocent of any crime, but he was arrested, beaten, and executed in a kind of legally sanctioned lynching.
Mark 14:43-50, Mark 15:16-32

HIS RESURRECTION. That was not the end of Jesus. God raised Jesus from the dead. Death does not have the last word after all.
John 20:1-18, 1 Corinthians 15:1-8

HIS ASCENSION. God has given Jesus full divine authority. That means Jesus is someone to listen to.
Philippians 2:5-11, Colossians 1:15-20

HIS RETURN. A day is coming when Jesus will appear openly to all the peoples of the earth.
John 14:1-3, Philippians 3:17-21

WHEN JESUS RETURNS

The life Jesus lived reveals God. The death Jesus died exposes evil. Jesus risen from the dead is God's yes to Jesus—and God's no to death. Jesus' ascension to heaven means Jesus' will is God's will. When Jesus returns, what will that mean for you?

Part Three

GOD & YOU

[God] has fixed a day in which he will judge the whole world with justice by means of a man he has chosen. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising that man from death!

Acts 17:31

If you confess that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised him from death, you will be saved.

Romans 10:9

Who is God to you? And who are you to God? And if you find yourself believing that God raised Jesus from the dead, what then? Part Three invites you to listen to your own heart—and to God's.

YOUR GOD. When you find the God who raised Jesus from the dead, you find your God. You find the one who gave you form and breath and a world to explore and people to love.

Psalm 139:13-16, Acts 17:24-28

JESUS' GOD. You find Jesus' God. Jesus' God is not the god whose law is the survival of the fittest. Jesus' God is the God of generosity, compassion, faithfulness.

Matthew 7:9-11, Luke 4:17-21

GOD'S MAN, JESUS. You find the God who is represented most faithfully by a carpenter's son from Nazareth. Jesus is God's man—so much so that to know Jesus is to know God, and to trust Jesus is to trust God.

John 5:19-23, 1 John 2:23

WHO FINDS WHO? You find that God has found you. All along, it was God who was searching for you! God calls to your heart, “Where are you?” Your faith is the answer, “Here I am!”

Luke 15:3-7, 1 John 4:10

YOU. When you find yourself believing that God raised Jesus from the dead, you find yourself. Your true self is revealed in the light of God’s compassion and forgiveness. You discover your need for God’s compassion and forgiveness. You discover that you belong to God.

Isaiah 55:6-7, Matthew 9:10-13

Do you believe that Jesus is God’s man? Do you believe that God raised Jesus from the dead? Do you know that you stand in urgent need of God’s compassion and forgiveness? Tell a Christian friend. It is time to say aloud what is in your heart.

FINDING THE KINGDOM

(Matthew 13:44-46)

[Jesus said,] “The Kingdom of heaven is like this. A man happens to find a treasure hidden in a field. He covers it up again, and is so happy that he goes and sells everything he has, and then goes back and buys that field.

“Also, the Kingdom of heaven is like this. A man is looking for fine pearls, and when he finds one that is unusually fine, he goes and sells everything he has, and buys that pearl.”

Part Four

A NEW BEGINNING

There is no condemnation now for those who live in union with Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:1

When anyone is joined to Christ, he is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come.

2 Corinthians 5:17

When you say yes to God, your life begins anew. Part Four describes Jesus' way to celebrate the beginning of your new life with him.

CELEBRATION. A new beginning calls for celebration. Jesus himself gave us a way to celebrate.

Matthew 3:13-17, Matthew 28:16-20

IMMERSION. Together, you and a Christian step waist-deep into a pool of water. The Christian announces that what you are doing is by the authority of Jesus Christ. You then allow the Christian to lower you below the surface of the water and to lift you up again.

Acts 8:36-39, Acts 19:1-5

SURRENDER. When you allow the Christian to lower you below the surface of the water, you are showing your complete surrender to God. You are not immersed into water only, but you are immersed into a new life with God.

Galatians 3:26-27, 1 Peter 3:21-22

AGREEMENT. Your immersion looks like a rescue, a bath, a burial, a resurrection, a birth. You are showing that you agree with Jesus.

Mark 8:34-36, John 3:1-3

▶ **RESCUE.** You need to be rescued.

Acts 2:36-38, Titus 3:3-5

▶ **BATH.** You need to be washed clean in God's forgiveness.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Hebrews 10:22

▶ **BURIAL.** You need to die to your old, self-centered life.

Romans 6:1-4, 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

▶ **RESURRECTION.** You need a new, God-centered life.

Ephesians 2:1-7, Colossians 2:11-12

▶ **BIRTH.** You need to be reborn as a child of God.

John 1:10-13, 1 Peter 1:22-23

CITIZENSHIP. When you begin your new life with Jesus, you begin your new life as a citizen in God's kingdom.

Ephesians 2:19-20, 1 Peter 2:9-10

Have you said yes to God? Tell a Christian friend. It is time to celebrate the beginning of your new life.

Part Five

NEW LIFE

The Spirit is the guarantee that we shall receive what God has promised his people . . .

Ephesians 1:14

God poured out the Holy Spirit abundantly on us through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that by his grace we might be put right with God and come into possession of the eternal life we hope for.

Titus 3:6 & 7

Your new life is life lived under the direct influence of God. Part Five is about the Holy Spirit—what it means to receive the Holy Spirit, and how you can know, without any doubt, that you have truly received the Holy Spirit.

GOD IN YOU. When you say yes to God, you allow God to get inside you. That is called, “receiving the Holy Spirit.”

John 14:15-17, Romans 8:11

YOU IN CHRIST. You do not receive the Holy Spirit as an individual in isolation, but as a person in relationship. You become a member of a body, the Body of Christ.

John 15:4-5, Romans 12:4-5

ONE IN CHRIST. The Body of Christ is all the people worldwide who have said yes to Jesus’ God.

Ephesians 4:4-6, Revelation 7:9-10

THE GUARANTEE. The Holy Spirit is your guarantee of a share in God's promised new age. The evidence of God in your life is your title deed to the promises of God.

2 Corinthians 1:21-22, 1 John 4:13-14

FIVE SURE SIGNS. There is no mistaking the evidence of God in your life. You have a new father, a new family, a new allegiance, a new presence, and a new power.

Romans 8:5-9, 2 Peter 1:3-4

- ▶ **YOUR FATHER.** God is very near to you. When you call on him in prayer, he welcomes you. When he speaks, you listen. You know and savor his affection for you.

Romans 8:15-16, 1 John 3:1

- ▶ **YOUR FAMILY.** God has faithful children and rebellious children. You know them now as your sisters and brothers. With the faithful, you share life together. For the rebellious, you know compassion.

Mark 3:31-35, Luke 6:27-36

- ▶ **YOUR ALLEGIANCE.** There is no doubt about it. Your first and highest loyalty is to God's man, Jesus.

John 6:63-69, 1 Corinthians 12:3

- ▶ **YOUR PRESENCE.** When you walk into a room, you enter with a presence of life, healing, nurture, hope.

Galatians 5:22-23, Ephesians 4:22-25

- ▶ **YOUR POWER.** You experience a new vitality. Even when your body begins to weaken toward death, your spirit continues to grow stronger toward new life.

John 7:37-39, 2 Corinthians 4:16

As you begin living your new, God-centered life, you will run into difficulties. The new age is dawning, but the old age has not passed away. Remember, you are no longer an individual in isolation. You are a person in relationship. You have a new father and a new family. Don't try to make it on your own. It is time to walk in the freedom of God's compassion and forgiveness, in the company of Jesus and his people, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Good News!

News is good if it is gladly received. But, if it isn't the truth, it isn't good news after all. It is only a good line. The Christian message is not a good line. It is good news. We Christians are reporting what we know to be the truth.

- ▶ We heard the story of Jesus Christ.
- ▶ We came to realize our participation in evil, that we fully deserved God's judgment against us, that we were utterly powerless to save ourselves.
- ▶ We came to believe that Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ alone, could reconcile us to God.
- ▶ We placed our full trust in Jesus. We gave ourselves over to Jesus, to follow his instructions.
- ▶ We have received from Jesus the gift of God's compassion and forgiveness. Because of Jesus, we now enjoy intimacy with God. We have the promise of eternal life with God. Day by day we are refreshed and renewed.

Jesus Christ

Jesus of Nazareth was born in Israel when Israel was under Roman military occupation, a little more than two thousand years ago. Our Western calendar counts the years from an old calculation for the date of Jesus' birth. Nazareth was Jesus' hometown, a village in northern Israel, in the region of Galilee.

Throughout Galilee and beyond, Jesus became famous as a prophet and a healer, and many people came to believe that he was the Lord's Anointed, the Messiah, the Christ. "Messiah" is from a Hebrew word for "anointed," and "Christ" is from the Greek translation of that Hebrew word. The Lord's Anointed is God's choice for the leader of God's people.

But to the Romans, a christ was a rebel who opposed Roman authority. The Roman governor in Israel had Jesus arrested and crucified. And that should have been the end of Jesus. But three days later, word went out that God had raised Jesus alive from the dead.

Saved by Faith

Jesus Christ risen from the dead is not a myth or a metaphor. Jesus is very much alive, and he can lead you out of a dying world into eternal life with God. He can do that for you if you have faith in him.

To have faith in Jesus means trusting him with your life. It means following his instructions for how to live as a child of God. To follow Jesus is to share his way of life, his work, his friends, and his intimacy with God.

The way of Jesus is total surrender to the God of life and love, whose spirit nurtures compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, generosity, and truth telling, extending even to outsiders, even to the enemy, even in the face of violent opposition.

The Blood of the Lamb

When you hear Christians talking about the blood of Jesus washing away sin and making atonement with God, they are using biblical language that is never explained in the Bible. For some time, there was no need for any explanation, because the Bible was written in a day when offering up the blood of a lamb to make atonement with God was a common experience, and people could be expected to make the connection between sin and bloodguilt.

To sin is to offend someone. If you have offended God, the problem is not religious bad manners. The problem is that you have been playing God. Playing God is never an innocent mistake. It is always a deadly mistake. Someone always suffers real harm. To sin against God is to sin against life and love. It is not always obvious, but it is always true: to play God is to have blood on your hands.

To know Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is to know that God has forgiven you of bloodguilt—that God has forgiven you of the death-dealing love of self, the death-dealing human propensity to play God, that hung Jesus on the cross.

What Would Jesus Do?

In the Bible, the entire New Testament is based on the instructions of Jesus Christ. The first four books of the New Testament, the Gospels, focus on Jesus' mission, his ministry, and his instructions during the very brief time (maybe three years) from when he began to minister in Galilee until his death and resurrection in Jerusalem. In the first book of the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew, three chapters (5, 6 & 7) are a summary of Jesus' instructions for living as a citizen in the Kingdom of Heaven.