

Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf

**What the good news is  
and what it means for us**

Simple.  
Clear.



# **GOD'S GOOD GOSPEL**

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Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf

# Contents

|                                                 |    |
|-------------------------------------------------|----|
| Three Words and One Story .....                 | 6  |
| The Gospel.....                                 | 6  |
| God's Gospel.....                               | 8  |
| Do We Need the Gospel?.....                     | 9  |
| Sin – What Is It? .....                         | 10 |
| Freedom – No Coercion.....                      | 12 |
| How It Could Come to This .....                 | 13 |
| It Should Not Stay as It Is .....               | 15 |
| The Gospel of the Kingdom.....                  | 15 |
| What Is God's Royal Reign? .....                | 17 |
| God's Reign – the Best We Can Imagine .....     | 18 |
| The Gospel of the Son of God.....               | 19 |
| The King and the Cross .....                    | 22 |
| The Regicide.....                               | 22 |
| Other Than Expected.....                        | 24 |
| The Cross from God's Perspective .....          | 25 |
| Sacrificed for Us .....                         | 26 |
| Does God Need a Sacrifice? .....                | 28 |
| Evil Was Overcome with Good .....               | 31 |
| The Cross: God's Infinite Wisdom and Power..... | 32 |
| What the Cross Gives Us.....                    | 33 |
| The Cross, a Foolish Thing.....                 | 34 |
| Returning Home.....                             | 35 |
| The Gospel of God's Grace.....                  | 36 |
| Grace at the Beginning and at the End .....     | 37 |
| God Is Love .....                               | 40 |
| The Unseen Realm – Powers of Darkness .....     | 42 |
| The Powers and Humankind .....                  | 43 |
| The Gospel and the Powers .....                 | 44 |
| The Powers and God's Plan of Salvation .....    | 45 |
| The Triumph of the Cross.....                   | 47 |
| Freedom Is Possible .....                       | 47 |
| The Gospel of Peace .....                       | 48 |
| The Gospel – The Fulfilment of the Promise..... | 49 |
| The Hope of the Gospel.....                     | 51 |
| The Dream of God's New World .....              | 53 |

The Gospel – The Power for Salvation..... 55

Obedience to the Gospel ..... 56

Becoming Disciples of Jesus..... 57

The Start of Discipleship..... 58

What Does Discipleship Look Like?..... 58

Ignoring the Gospel..... 61

Everything Comes to Light ..... 62

How Real Is God’s Wrath? ..... 64

Eternal Life and Hell..... 65

The Other Gospel ..... 67

What the Gospel Is Not ..... 68

Finally ..... 70

What’s Next? ..... 70

Congratulations! This book has managed to capture your attention. Keep it. Read it. It is quite possible that God wants to meet you. Even if you already know the gospel – or think you do. God bless your reading. It's worth it.

Read it through once. The second time, you can look up the Bible passages given in the footnotes.

The Bible alone shows what the gospel is. I have worked this out as well as I could, in a short form.

## Three Words and One Story

The gospel is a story. Not ours. It's the story of Jesus of Nazareth. A story that begins in Bethlehem and ends in Jerusalem. A story that is incredible. Yet believed by many. Because this old story has written countless new life stories. Many people testify to what this Jesus story has done for them. If this were not so, nobody would know the Jesus story today.

The gospel is indeed the Jesus story. It comes down to three words:

*Jesus is Lord.*<sup>1</sup>

*He is King.*<sup>2</sup>

Of the universe. Over everybody and everything. A king who rules in love, who forgives and who will make everything new. That's the good news! That's what the apostles proclaimed. To Israel and to the whole world.

There is more to say about it. You will find it on the following pages. Keep these three words. That is the central message. This is the heart of the good news.

It concerns us all. Personally. Not others. Us. Me. And it affects our whole planet, our home. You will see.

Read this book as a message to you personally.

## The Gospel

Christians speak of the gospel. That is what defines them. Or should. It is part of their identity. Without it they would be nothing. Meaningless. Like salt that is not salty.

The gospel is their secret. Their treasure. Their medicine. Their spiritual, non-violent weapon. No one has a comparable message. Read on to see why.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 2:36; 4:24; 11:20; 15:17

<sup>2</sup> Acts 17:7; 1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 17:14; 19:16

The word occurs often in the Bible. Especially in its second part, the New Testament. But that is not where it first appears. It is not a pious invention of the Bible or the Church.

At the time of Jesus and even earlier, it was part of everyday language. As good news. As good news that brings joy and relief.<sup>3</sup> On various occasions people brought “gospel”: good news that was eagerly awaited. In 63 BC Emperor Augustus was born. His birthday was later celebrated throughout the Roman Empire as good news. The birth of this emperor was expected to bring security, stability and prosperity. He called himself a son of the Divine – a title that would be held by many emperors.

Seven hundred years earlier, the prophet Isaiah had said: “What joy! Over the mountains the messenger of victory is coming! He brings good news, he proclaims peace and salvation, he says to the city of Zion: ‘Your God is King of the whole world!’”<sup>4</sup>

Isaiah speaks of the living God. The Eternal One. The one who created all things. The Lord of history. Not of a man. Or of a self-appointed son of God. The emperor’s announcement was joyful news. But which ruler will bring the world what it really needs? What our hearts long for?



The gospel was also a message from the war front. When a victory had been won and the enemy defeated. This corresponds exactly to the Christian gospel. It is the good news of a victory. The victory of God through

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:19

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 52:7

his Son, the Crucified and Risen One: Jesus Christ. God did not capitulate. He is fighting for his world!

Death on the cross, resurrection and exaltation to the throne of God make Jesus the Lord and Saviour of the world. All authority is given to him:<sup>5</sup> *The King over all kings, who offers forgiveness and eternal life to all!*<sup>6</sup>

This is the gospel. The key message. Consider it. Keep it.

For Christians it is still risky today to proclaim Jesus as King. To honour this king<sup>7</sup> can mean questioning rulers, emperors and kings. Without political intent. Out of obedience. Loyalty to Jesus often brought them persecution and death.

But the good news could not be killed. In it lived the risen Lord and Christ. It had the power to bring the Roman Empire to its knees. Not with the sword, but with the transforming grace and power of the gospel.

## God's Gospel

Where does the gospel come from? It all starts with God. With the triune God: Father, Son and Spirit. He is its inventor. It was born in his heart. Out of his eternal love. Even before the earth and humankind existed.<sup>8</sup> Everything it contains comes from him.<sup>9</sup> From him alone. It is his gospel. That is why it is the truth. Solid. Trustworthy. You can build your life on it.<sup>10</sup> For God is faithful.<sup>11</sup> He does not lie.<sup>12</sup> Everything he promises in the gospel holds true and comes to pass. His promise, which we can trust without reservation. It is freely given. Motivated by boundless love. He wanted it. It pleases him to give himself. It is his joy.<sup>13</sup> All glory belongs

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 28:18; Acts 2:36; Ephesians 1:20-23

<sup>6</sup> Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18

<sup>7</sup> Acts 17:7

<sup>8</sup> Romans 16:25; 2 Timothy 1:9

<sup>9</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:18

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 7:24

<sup>11</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:24; Hebrews 10:23; 1 Peter 4:19

<sup>12</sup> Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18

<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 1:6, 9, 12, 14

to him.<sup>14</sup> God himself brings the good news. *It is God's mission.* He acts, works and speaks. The good news comes to a world that needs exactly that. God himself needs nothing. He lacks nothing. He is perfect. And yet his heart overflows. He loves because he is love. *He is launching the greatest recovery mission of all time.* He wants us humans back! He wants to have a family!<sup>15</sup> For as we are born, we are not his children. We are all meant to become his children. That is why he wants to give us his love and care. So that we may live with him forever.

## Do We Need the Gospel?

God's message meets a world that is no longer as God created it in the beginning. And as he envisioned it. So, what do you think? *Is God's intervention in our world necessary? Or can we manage without God?*

Let us take a twofold look at our world. First, let us look at it without "Christian glasses". Then from a biblical perspective.

God's message often meets people who are broken inside and without hope. Who often see no way out. Whose consciences are plagued by guilt. Who know what ought to be different. Who are afraid, restless, empty, sick and in bondage. It meets people who are all going to die.<sup>16</sup> People who are afraid of the future.

A large part of humanity lives in poverty. In a daily struggle for survival. Many fall by the wayside.

God's message meets people who have failed in marriage, family, work and society. People who see suicide as a last resort. It also meets people who have few or no problems. People who are lucky enough to grow up in a rich country or a rich family. Financially independent. But still plagued by meaninglessness and inner emptiness.

Unconquered diseases and viruses threaten our lives. Nature shows its life-threatening side.

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<sup>14</sup> Revelation 5:11-14

<sup>15</sup> Psalm 103:13; Isaiah 64:7; Malachi 2:10; John 14:2; Hebrews 2:10; 1 John 3:1-3

<sup>16</sup> Romans 5:12-14; 6:23

Every human being is a small universe of questions, worries and needs that cries out for love, meaning, forgiveness and security. Even if this is hidden or stifled by busyness and distractions. The gospel meets nations at war with one another. People who live in strife and discord with one another. It meets a world where injustice is at home. Where people still enslave and exploit others today. Discriminate against each other. Where the weakest are the victims. Where children have to work and women are exploited. Where human rights are systematically violated by governments.

The world remains a place of suffering for many.

As you read this list, you may have thought that things are not all that bad, that there is a lot of good in the world. Many things are getting better, too. You are right. *This is not about a biased or pessimistic view of the world. It is about the question of whether we need God and his gospel.*

You can come to that conclusion at any time. Many people have come to this realisation. Sometimes the hard way. Often it was failure, brokenness, illness and suffering that brought them to it. God is not silent. These difficult, often life-threatening experiences are God's megaphone to reach us.<sup>17</sup> Or to wake us up.

## Sin – What Is It?

An unattractive and misunderstood word. It belongs to the perspective of the Bible and its explanation of origins. How do we explain the causes of everything that is unwanted, broken, hostile and chaotic?

The Bible is clear when it describes man. The state in which he is born, how he develops and lives. How he behaves towards his fellow human beings. And towards God. It speaks very plainly. It is not squeamish. It is straightforward. It says that we are sinners.<sup>18</sup> All of us – without exception. We all sin because we are sinners. This universal, indiscriminate

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<sup>17</sup> The image of the megaphone comes from C. S. Lewis, "The Problem of Pain".

<sup>18</sup> Ephesians 2:1

verdict exists only in the biblical world view! No religion claims that everyone without distinction is a sinner. Who could be proud of that?

Sin does not only describe what we do. It also describes what we are. It cannot be isolated and removed like a tumour. It could hardly be worse: we are trapped in its power. That is more serious than wrong behaviour. Sin is not just a collection of individual wrongdoings. It is an active, malevolent force that has penetrated and occupied our being.

It is a catastrophe. For it separates us from God's eternal love. That love is beyond our reach.

With sin came death. As an inevitable consequence. Like wages we have earned. We reap what we sow. Sin and death are universal forces that no one can escape. Sin as a ruling principle shapes our personality in a harmful way. It makes us perfectionists, cowards and ditherers when it comes to the welfare of others, both our neighbour and the dying person in Africa. But it also makes us selfish when it comes to our own advantage. It turns us into narcissists, cheats, addicts, schemers, fanatics, adulterers, rapists. The list could go on and on.

But we are not just prisoners or sick people. We are not just passive victims. We have become active, conscripted agents of sin. We have signed up as its agents, as its tools. It is not just imprisonment, it is active complicity.

The nature of sin remains hidden from us as long as we ignore the relationship between sin and God. Sin is not just a phenomenon of human life that can or must be suppressed or kept in check. The Bible describes sin as anarchy, hostility, rebellion, disobedience to God. *Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature in need of improvement. He is a rebel who must lay down his arms. Surrender is the only way out.*

Please read on despite these grave accusations!

The fundamental relationship of human life – our relationship with God – is broken. This brokenness shows in all our other relationships. We are sinners not only personally. We belong to a global humanity that is caught in sin.

*This diagnosis of the Bible is our salvation! Not condemnation!*

Would you appreciate it if your doctor hid an honest diagnosis of your terminal illness from you? Especially if, in the same breath, he could promise you a drug or an operation that would defeat the disease?

It is almost impossible to see and accept God's diagnosis. We tend to consider ourselves the exception. So the gospel meets a world that, despite its problems, is strangely uninterested in God's message of salvation. A paradox. Nevertheless, God does care what is going on on this planet, his planet. The gospel is the proof that God is fighting for this world. Suffering, evil and death shall not have the last word. For God is love!<sup>19</sup> The answer to our initial question is: *We need the gospel to become God's children.*

God's abhorrence of sin, of the evil that human beings think and do – on a large and a small scale – is great. Because he is love. This aversion and condemnation is “God's wrath”.<sup>20</sup> As much as he condemns the evil with which we are identified as perpetrators, so much does he want to set every human being free from it.

## Freedom – No Coercion

In spite of this glorious gospel,<sup>21</sup> God does not force a yes from anyone. True love exists only where there is freedom! Freedom of choice and responsibility remain. That, and nothing else, is how he created human beings. But as a sinner, man is no longer neutral. Sin makes him helpless, even incapable of receiving the gospel by his own strength. Humanly speaking, it is impossible to recognise oneself as a sinner. But the gospel has power. It opens our eyes to ourselves and to God. It brings light to heart and conscience. God does not leave us alone in this decision. The human heart is a fiercely contested war zone. God seeks to win hearts. And to convince them with his readiness to be reconciled.

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<sup>19</sup> Romans 5:8; 1 John 3:1; 4:7-11

<sup>20</sup> John 3:36; Romans 1:18; 5:9; Ephesians 2:3; 5:6; Colossians 3:6; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

<sup>21</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:4

God's saving resourcefulness and creativity are immeasurable. God can use every situation, every moment and every place to awaken, by his holy presence, an awareness of sin and lostness, and at the same time to give salvation and deliverance. There are neither rules nor templates for these great moments.

This is how it happened. This is how it happens today. That is how it can happen to you now. Many people tell of the wonderful, unexpected, mysterious, loving or radical ways in which God has come into their lives. God's message is an urgent command to repent.<sup>22</sup> For our own good. People themselves are responsible for how they respond to it.



## How It Could Come to This

Human beings were created as God's representatives on earth. In his own image. To care for and govern the earth together with its Creator. The garden paradise, a limited place, was to be extended over the whole earth. He, the Father, and they, all people, his family.<sup>23</sup> This is how it was meant to be from the very beginning. Human beings, created with real freedom of will. To receive, return and pass on God's love. A dream: to live and work like this with the Creator. In close fellowship. Under his protection and blessing.

But back then, in the beginning, people decided differently. They did not keep their privileged living space, the garden paradise. The seducer came in. The crafty serpent. Behind the serpent hid a once radiant angel

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<sup>22</sup> Acts 17:30

<sup>23</sup> Isaiah 63:16; 64:7; Luke 3:38; Acts 17:28-29

of God. One who had turned away from God. Rebelled and fallen into sin. This idea is what Satan, the devil, wanted to sell them as enlightenment and progress towards a better, freer and modern life. They did not follow the good instruction of their Creator. To become like God – that is the temptation and enticement of the devil. So they disobeyed a simple commandment of their good Creator God. Were they afraid that he had withheld something good from them?<sup>24</sup> They paid a high price for this step. Things were no longer as they were meant to be. They lost paradise.

Death, decay – both spiritual and physical – entered their lives.<sup>25</sup> It spread. Like a hereditary disease it passed on to all their descendants. *To whom we also belong.*

That was a long time ago. Somehow it has remained so. Until today. Many thousands of years later, we humans live our lives without the Creator. Self-determined. As if God did not exist. We think we know better. We have simply forgotten our Creator. Found more attractive gods. With God gone, we have to satisfy our needs ourselves. Insatiable greed on both a large and a small scale is the expression of hearts that are lost in themselves. Trapped within ourselves, aware that something essential, something that gives meaning, has been lost. We have left the source of life,<sup>26</sup> our Creator.<sup>27</sup> Without a relationship with him, our healthy relationship with creation is also disturbed. In many places people are destroying the house they live in. Planet Earth.

We reject God's good commandments, which are given to us for a flourishing, blessed life with God, with each other and with creation. Laws and commandments come from a tyrant, people often conclude. From a God who wants to control, dominate and restrict us. But many do not know God as he really is.

*A good father who wants the best for us.*

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<sup>24</sup> Genesis 3

<sup>25</sup> Romans 5:12-21

<sup>26</sup> Psalm 36:10; Proverbs 14:27; Jeremiah 2:13; 17:13

<sup>27</sup> Psalm 27:1; 43:3; Isaiah 9:1; 60:1; Matthew 4:16; John 1:4-9; 3:19-21

## It Should Not Stay as It Is

God goes after the fallen world. With all its problems and sorrows.<sup>28</sup> He does not give up on his world. Evil in its many intensities, large and small, is not just one problem among others. It has been an existential crisis from the very beginning. To be or not to be. Survival east of Eden is our existential horizon. We have been living in this crisis, with all the consequences of our actions, ever since. Every day we see what that means. Without God it cannot end well. Without God it leads into darkness. We stumble around in spiritual and moral darkness. Knowing neither the way nor the destination.

*The gospel – not judgement and condemnation – is God's answer in Jesus Christ.* The gospel is his master plan to overcome evil. To stop the downward spiral and bring light, life and hope into the darkness, so that freedom, peace and joy may return.<sup>29</sup> For all. And so that out of all misery good may still come.<sup>30</sup> So that God will have a family again. And we can become his children. The best thing that can ever happen to us.

The gospel is God's promise that things will not stay as they are today. This promise is still valid. It has never been withdrawn. It applies to all his people. In every place in the world.

## The Gospel of the Kingdom

The gospel is indeed simple. Everyone should be able to understand it. It has different dimensions and aspects. Too big to grasp all at once. There is more to it than you realise at first. Imagine a diamond. The biggest there is. Cut. It refracts light not only in one plane, but in every facet. The gospel shines in many ways and with a wonderful radiance. This is the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> John 3:16

<sup>29</sup> Luke 2:10

<sup>30</sup> Genesis 50:20

<sup>31</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:4

How did this message come to us? The message came in a person. Yes, the message is a person. It is not a law. Not a creed. Not a catechism. It is a person.

He became one of us, and yet he was completely different: one who is God and man at the same time. But who sets aside his divinity and comes to us in lowliness, yes, in weakness. God comes down to us. He made himself very small.<sup>32</sup> The infinite one, whom we cannot fathom. Who, unlike us, has no beginning. He became man. He came very close to us.<sup>33</sup> Closer than ever before. Down to our eye level. The Creator with his creatures.<sup>34</sup> He was seen, heard, touched, embraced.<sup>35</sup> He saw, spoke, was moved in his heart, wept, loved and touched people with compassion.

So that we would finally understand. He did not come in the splendour of a ruler. A craftsman from Nazareth. From the poor Galilean underclass. God comes to us in Jesus. He is fulfilling his promise: *The Spirit of the Lord has taken possession of me. For the Lord has anointed me and so empowered me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to give new courage to the desperate, to proclaim to the captives: "You are free! Your chains are loosed!"*<sup>36</sup> Jesus applies this to himself in the synagogue at Nazareth: *This prophetic word has come true before your eyes today.*<sup>37</sup> His whole life, his words and deeds, are the perfect expression of this good news. Jesus is the image of God.<sup>38</sup> Whoever saw him saw the heavenly Father.<sup>39</sup> He is God's mission. Jesus is what God has to tell us.<sup>40</sup> If we want to understand who God is and what he is like, we must understand him in the light of Jesus. Jesus is our image of God. As described in the gospel accounts. This is God.

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<sup>32</sup> Philippians 2:6-8

<sup>33</sup> John 1:14

<sup>34</sup> Philippians 2:5-11

<sup>35</sup> 1 John 1:1-3

<sup>36</sup> Isaiah 61:1-2

<sup>37</sup> Luke 4:16-22

<sup>38</sup> Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:1-3

<sup>39</sup> John 14:9

<sup>40</sup> Hebrews 1:2

That is why the four accounts of Jesus' life by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are called Gospels. Mark begins like this: *In this book is written how the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, began.*<sup>41</sup> With Jesus the good news begins. It says of him: Jesus came back to Galilee and proclaimed in the name of God: *The time has come: now God will establish his reign and complete his work. Repent and believe this good news.*<sup>42</sup>

## What Is God's Royal Reign?

God's reign is his government of love and justice. The only lasting option for our world. Its only future.

Many Jews understood this to mean that the Roman occupiers would be defeated and their tyranny would end. But in Jesus comes a simple man, not a king with political power. Not a war hero. His kingdom, God's kingdom, does not begin, as expected, on the throne of David in Jerusalem, but with an itinerant preacher who ends up on a cross. It begins in the hearts of people who confess their sins and change their lives. His kingdom is not of this world.<sup>43</sup> It comes from God. It is different. Without violence, without oppression, without military conquest. It starts in Israel, but its focus is the whole world. Intended for all people.

In Jesus, God's royal rule is not directed against the existing political order. It has another goal. Jesus travels around the land preaching repentance and turning to God. The reign of God becomes reality through the coming of Jesus and in the people who follow him. He heals countless sick people. He casts out demons. God's royal rule is directed against evil, invisible forces that torment people. There are not only visible authorities like kings or soldiers. There are invisible forces that afflict humanity. Remember the seducer in the garden paradise, at the very beginning. More on that later.

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<sup>41</sup> Mark 1:1

<sup>42</sup> Mark 1:14-15

<sup>43</sup> John 18:36

Jesus does not answer the question of where evil comes from and why it exists. He acts. He takes up the fight against it in the authority of his Father. God's royal rule breaks into this world and changes something that is far more deeply opposed to God's rule than the Romans were at that time. God's kingdom meets people at the level where they suffer most. The greatest enemy is evil, injustice, hypocrisy and lovelessness. In one word: sin. It has made man spiritually sick. It has gained power over man. Then as now.

*God himself comes to the scene of sin, pain and fear, suffering and death. He comes to take all these things upon himself and so to establish the new kingdom.*

## **God's Reign – the Best We Can Imagine**

After 30 years in obscurity, Jesus works publicly for three and a half years. He heals, sets free and teaches what really matters. He exposes hypocrisy and feeds the hungry. In this way he shows who God is and what God wants. He makes visible to us humans what God's eternal kingdom will one day look like. The work of Jesus is only the beginning. *And a promise: God's master plan contains the great goal that already shines out in Jesus. A new heaven and a new earth, where nothing Jesus fought against will be left.* A new earth, where God lives with his family.<sup>44</sup> A new earth, which will be lovingly governed by changed and renewed people. Not by tyrants and despots. The good news is: the empires of the world with their emperors and presidents are passing away. God's kingdom is coming and will remain forever.<sup>45</sup>

It began with Jesus. It is here today. Hidden from outside view. Without a visible king. The King has gone away for a time, like the master in the parable who travels abroad. His kingdom is waiting for his return.<sup>46</sup> Today it is an "undercover" kingdom without borders. Without a capital. It lives alongside empires and political structures. Wherever people have

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<sup>44</sup> Revelation 21:3-5

<sup>45</sup> Daniel 2:44-45; 7:26-27

<sup>46</sup> Matthew 25:14-30

sworn their loyalty and allegiance to the absent, invisible but true King Jesus. They establish this kingdom without any violence.<sup>47</sup> Their weapon is love. They are waiting for their risen Jesus, who has withdrawn to heaven, to return. This is what he promised when he left the earth.<sup>48</sup> The return of the King: public, visible, powerful. Then all world empires will come to an end. Even the invisible powers that maliciously influence world affairs.

The good news proclaims God's victory over everything that resists his rule of love and justice. It began in the life of Jesus. God's final victory is yet to come. It is unstoppably on its way. His kingdom is already here, but not yet complete. Not yet visible. Until Jesus returns, it exists in a provisional, mysterious form. But there is already a foretaste of what is to come. Peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.<sup>49</sup> The spread of the gospel throughout the earth, and people who daily submit to the King with thankfulness, bear witness to the invisible existence of this kingdom. So do the signs, wonders and healings that continue today.

The gospel is the proclamation that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ and has been made Lord over all.<sup>50</sup> The Son was sent by the Father. He fulfilled all the old prophecies, as you can read in the Old Testament. He became man as a descendant of David. He died for us and our sins. He was buried, raised and crowned on God's throne. From there he reigns. All power is given to him. Jesus is the Christ!

## **The Gospel of the Son of God**

Jesus Christ is the gospel. The New Testament calls it the gospel of Christ.<sup>51</sup> It was proclaimed by the apostles and by all who became

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<sup>47</sup> Matthew 5:43-48

<sup>48</sup> Acts 1:10-11

<sup>49</sup> Romans 14:17

<sup>50</sup> Acts 2:36; 3:20-23; 10:36

<sup>51</sup> Romans 15:19; 1 Corinthians 9:12; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Philippians 1:27; 1 Thessalonians 3:2

disciples and followers of Jesus.<sup>52</sup> Him they preached.<sup>53</sup> This is the gospel of the kingdom. He is the King. But he is even more. We do not just need a king. We also need a redeemer.

The four accounts of his life are called Gospels because they are the good news. What stands out in them is that he himself does nothing to make himself known. He does not want to be made king.<sup>54</sup> The people he heals are not to tell anyone.<sup>55</sup> He forbids the possessed – more precisely, the unclean spirits living in them, who knew his true identity – to speak.

On closer inspection, no one really understood who he was. Not even his closest circle. Even though Peter says, “You are the Christ,”<sup>56</sup> he does not know that only a Christ who has died and risen again fulfils what was foretold.

After about two years with his disciples, Jesus announces, to their astonishment, that he will be killed. In Jerusalem, the city of the great King.<sup>57</sup> Brought about by the hatred of the Pharisees, high priests and scribes. But at the same time he says that he will rise again after three days.<sup>58</sup>

Should it all end in an unimaginable tragedy? Could this be good news? A king who is killed?

*But Jesus says that he is to give his life as a ransom for many.<sup>59</sup> His life exchanged as a purchase price. To redeem many. To buy them free from slavery. From the prison of sin and death. From selfishness and self-love. Out of addictions. From the power of the unseen forces.* This death was to be a universal, world-changing event of salvation. Not an accident, not a defeat. His life was directed towards

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<sup>52</sup> Acts 8:4, 12, 25, 35, 40; 10:36; 11:20; 13:38; 14:7, 15, 21

<sup>53</sup> Acts 5:42; Ephesians 3:8; Philippians 1:17-18; Colossians 1:28

<sup>54</sup> John 6:15

<sup>55</sup> Mark 1:34, 43-45; 5:43; 8:26

<sup>56</sup> Matthew 16:13-20; Luke 9:18-21

<sup>57</sup> Psalm 48:3; Matthew 5:35; 21:5

<sup>58</sup> Matthew 16:13-21; Mark 8:27-32; Luke 9:18-22, 44-45; 18:31-34

<sup>59</sup> Psalm 49:8; Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:6

fulfilling<sup>60</sup> what sounded so contradictory.<sup>61</sup> He knew it in advance.<sup>62</sup> He was ready to pay the price for the salvation of humankind. With his own life. He became man in order to die for them.<sup>63</sup>

One who did and said only good. One who was without any sin.<sup>64</sup> Quite unlike all of us. A life of devotion and service. Without a trace of selfishness. A life so precious, pure and holy that it should never have ended. The gospel is the life and work of Jesus. Not just his moral perfection. Also his resistance, his struggle and his victory over sin, sickness, demon possession and death.

*In death it was to reach its climax, its fulfilment, even its ultimate victory. A death that changed everything. A shift of power in the universe.*

His love is convincing. The way he meets people, goes after them, raises them up, heals them, values them. Without distinction: the small and the great, the sick and the sinners. This Jesus is proclaimed. He died and rose again and lives forever. And today he is invisibly, yet tangibly and powerfully, present in the gospel. The one who meets people today in the gospel.

*Whoever discovers the gospel encounters Jesus. He lives today, as real as when he walked through Israel. Now as the Risen One who lives in God's heavenly glory. On God's throne. But through his Spirit he is present wherever the good news is proclaimed. The proof is that every day people turn to Jesus in allegiance and follow him. The Father sent the Son as atonement, that is, as forgiveness for our sins. This is the proof that he loves the world. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are united in the salvation of the world.*<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Luke 9:51

<sup>61</sup> Luke 12:50; John 17:4; 19:28-30

<sup>62</sup> John 18:4

<sup>63</sup> Hebrews 2:14

<sup>64</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:22; Hebrews 4:15; 1 John 3:3, 5

<sup>65</sup> John 3:16; 1 John 4:9-14

## The King and the Cross

Jesus focused on his end. An end that came too early.<sup>66</sup> But at the same time it was the beginning of something new. Of something much greater. He had come to give his life as a ransom. Redemption for many! This was the heart's desire and the will of his Father.<sup>67</sup> And Jesus did everything to fulfil this will. Let us approach the last act in the life of Jesus. It is so inexplicable that we do so with care and restraint.

## The Regicide

He walks with his disciples to Jerusalem for the Passover. On the way, and as he enters the city, he is welcomed like a king, indeed as king. Is the reign of the king beginning at last?

The city is crowded. Countless pilgrims are on their way. He is there for a whole week.<sup>68</sup> Today we call it Passion Week. He teaches and is in constant dispute with the scribes. They want to trap him, but again and again they are refuted by his wisdom. He exposes the hypocrisy and lovelessness of the religious leaders. The public impact is great. His action in the temple, when he overturns the tables of the money-changers in the temple court, is too much for the leaders of the people. They hatch a plan to get rid of this offensive Nazarene.

On Thursday evening Jesus celebrates the Jewish Passover with his disciples. During this Passover meal he introduces something new. He takes bread, breaks it and shares it with his disciples, saying, *"This is my body, which is given for you."* Then he takes a cup of wine and says, *"This is my blood, the blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins."*<sup>69</sup> At that time the disciples did not realise how far-reaching and deep these words were.

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<sup>66</sup> Psalm 102:25

<sup>67</sup> Luke 22:42

<sup>68</sup> Matthew 21–27

<sup>69</sup> Matthew 26:26–30; Mark 14:22–26; Luke 22:14–20

Then everything takes its course. Jesus is betrayed by one of his own disciples.<sup>70</sup> Arrested.<sup>71</sup> Brought before the high priests.<sup>72</sup> He is handed over to the Roman governor Pilate and condemned, though innocent.<sup>73</sup> He is tortured. Everything seems to be out of control. Jesus becomes the plaything of the powers. He had said, with deep meaning: *This is your hour – and the power of darkness.*<sup>74</sup> In the events of the cross not only the well-known religious and political leaders were at work, but also invisible powers. Everything united against the Son of God and against God's kingdom.

The inhuman spectacle ended with the crucifixion. Jesus was executed in one of the most brutal ways of killing. On that memorable Friday.<sup>75</sup> He was crucified with two criminals, one on his left and one on his right. From twelve noon to three in the afternoon, when the sun is at its highest, darkness fell.<sup>76</sup> The crucified Jesus cried out: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*<sup>77</sup> Something extraordinary was happening there. At the end Jesus cried out the most important words ever heard: *It is finished!*<sup>78</sup> The Greek word *tetelestai* – Jesus probably cried it out in Aramaic – means: The mission is accomplished. Everything he came for is done. The ransom has been given. He died immediately after these words. He gave his spirit into the hands of his Father.<sup>79</sup> The Roman centurion who carried out the crucifixion, who witnessed everything at close quarters, was deeply shaken. He said: *Truly, this man was the Son of God!*<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Matthew 26:14; Mark 14:10

<sup>71</sup> John 18:1-11

<sup>72</sup> John 18:12-24

<sup>73</sup> John 18:28–19:16

<sup>74</sup> Luke 22:53

<sup>75</sup> John 19:17-24

<sup>76</sup> Luke 23:44

<sup>77</sup> Matthew 27:46

<sup>78</sup> John 19:30

<sup>79</sup> Luke 23:46; John 19:30

<sup>80</sup> Mark 15:39

At last, what many had long wanted was done. People revealed what was in their hearts. It could not have been worse, uglier, more brutal. Violence, hatred and the forces of darkness had triumphed.

Nothing could be held against Jesus. The innocent one died the death of a criminal. In all his suffering Jesus did not resist.<sup>81</sup> His plea was unprecedented: *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*<sup>82</sup> The Father walked the path of suffering with him. That did not save him from death. The Father did not spare his Son.<sup>83</sup>

Jesus died very soon, earlier than those crucified with him. It was Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish Council, who laid the body in his own tomb.<sup>84</sup> For all who had put their hope in him, a world fell apart. Hope dies last. Now it had died.

It was women who came to the tomb on Sunday morning to anoint Jesus' body. They were perplexed: the stone, weighing tons, lay beside the tomb. They did not find Jesus' body in the open tomb. It was empty. His body was no longer there. Instead, there were angels who said: *He is not here. He has risen, just as he said!*<sup>85</sup>

## Other Than Expected

Only slowly do the disciples realise that their Master has risen. Until Jesus shows himself to them and they see and touch him. It is really him. The same and yet somehow different. Risen. A new body. But the nail marks in his hands and feet and the wound in his side are clearly visible. He eats with them, but walks through locked doors. Is here one moment and there the next.<sup>86</sup> Shows himself to many disciples. Also to his brother

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<sup>81</sup> Isaiah 53:7; 1 Peter 2:23

<sup>82</sup> Luke 23:34

<sup>83</sup> John 3:16; Romans 8:32

<sup>84</sup> Isaiah 53:9; Luke 23:50-56

<sup>85</sup> Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-10

<sup>86</sup> Luke 24:13-49; John 20:11-31; 21:1-14

James.<sup>87</sup> As the Risen One in a new existence he is different, and at the same time their Jesus as they knew him. They begin to understand that he had foretold everything to them. For forty days they are together with Jesus, the Risen One. He answers many questions. Takes away their doubts. Gives them new direction. For their new mission. He teaches them about the kingdom.<sup>88</sup> About his death. Why he had to die. He had said it before, but now it became clearer and clearer. *It was not a senseless tragedy. It was God's master plan, with Jesus' death and resurrection at its centre. The turning point of a new age. The epicentre of a spiritual earthquake that shook the world. A change of front and of power in the universe.*

You may wonder why a cross should have this cosmic significance. Surely it stands for anything but that. Death on a cross was meant to dehumanise a person, to humiliate him to the utmost and to erase him from memory.

## **The Cross from God's Perspective**

We see the cross from a distance. An event that took place long ago. In a world and culture that in many ways seems foreign to our own. *But if we understand this cross rightly, we discover in this distant cross that God is close to us.*

The disciples began to understand that the death of the Messiah was not an accident. It was the price of our redemption. They recognised and proclaimed that this was exactly how it was meant to happen.<sup>89</sup> It was obviously necessary. For Christ died for us.<sup>90</sup> They did not try to give the incomprehensible an artificial meaning after the event. To reassure themselves and others. For they had understood through what Jesus had said before and after his death. God raised Jesus and exalted him. The future

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<sup>87</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:5-7

<sup>88</sup> Acts 1:3

<sup>89</sup> Acts 2:22-24; 3:18, 24; 8:35; 9:22; 13:32, 38; 18:28; 26:23

<sup>90</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:3; Galatians 1:4; 3:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:10; Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 2:24; 1 John 3:16; Revelation 1:5

of the world now depends on him. In the events of the cross, in his self-sacrifice, they recognised God's reconciliation with the world.<sup>91</sup> That Jesus, as a sacrifice, bore the sins of the world and took them away.<sup>92</sup> Because Jesus gave himself up without defending himself, it became clear how great God's love was. In the disfigured and tortured Jesus on the cross, God's hand is stretched out in reconciliation.

## Sacrificed for Us

Israel had a system of animal sacrifice. Many other nations did too. Some of these still exist today. The New Testament describes the death of Jesus as a sacrifice.<sup>93</sup> This is a metaphor, a help for us to understand what Jesus did. The idea of sacrifice is familiar even outside religious ritual. It applies when a person gives himself for others in order to save them.

Sacrificial animals were killed calmly at the altar. But people killed Jesus. He did not die easily or quietly. He was killed violently. The essence of sacrifice includes the shedding of blood and death, but not suffering or cruelty. Jesus' death was a deliberately violent and evil event. Death on the cross was meant as a deterrent. Whether people realised it or not, their violence against Jesus was violence against God.

*God's own response to the violence of the world was that the powers of evil were reduced to nothing. By enduring and absorbing them. That is why it is so important that Jesus did not defend himself when he was tormented.* Forgiveness involves bearing and absorbing inner pain. And refusing to let bitterness, resentment, hatred and revenge arise. God comes into the world as the innocent victim. In the end, the death of the sacrifice had to be unique. Not just a ritual animal sacrifice. In the end, the Old Testament sacrifices were indeed only models of the one true sacrifice.

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<sup>91</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:19-21

<sup>92</sup> John 1:29, 36

<sup>93</sup> Ephesians 5:2; Hebrews 7:27; 9:14, 26; 10:12, 14

Jesus died because of our sins, but above all for our sins.<sup>94</sup> He was the sacrificial Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.<sup>95</sup> As a sacrifice, he is the only means by which we can be cleansed from our sins, from our impurity. So that we can come into the presence of a holy God.

By laying or pressing his hands on the sacrifice, the one making the offering identified himself with it. Something passed over to the offering. The stain, the impurity, passed to the sacrifice and was thus destroyed. The sacrifice became a kind of substitute. A sacrifice, more precisely the blood of the sacrifice, could atone for sins. Atonement means that our sins are blotted out. And that what they have caused is undone. Sin is covered, its power broken. What was shattered is made whole.

Jesus fulfilled the role of all animal sacrifices. And at the same time ended them.<sup>96</sup> Made them obsolete. Now a man without sin died for our sins. A perfect man for sinners. Our sins, transgressions and iniquities, our countless offences against God and people, our disobedience – he took them upon himself. As if he had committed them himself. And took them away forever.<sup>97</sup> Into his death. On the cross he carried the burden of our sin and our sins. There on the cross God condemned, indeed judged, sin in the person of his Son.<sup>98</sup> So his death was not like that of others who were crucified.

*Here one died the death of a sinner. Although he was not one. As a sacrifice laden with our sins and injustices. To be identified with the sins of the whole world is an unbearable thing. To endure in oneself the condemnation of sin for others<sup>99</sup> cannot be compared to any pain or experience in the world, past or future. It is an unfathomable event. In the most inhuman setting of a traumatic crucifixion. That was the price. On this cross between two other crosses the greatest suffering of all time took place.*

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<sup>94</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:3

<sup>95</sup> John 1:29, 36; 1 Peter 1:18-21

<sup>96</sup> Hebrews 7:27; 9:26, 28; 10:10, 14

<sup>97</sup> Hebrews 8:12; 10:17; Micah 7:19

<sup>98</sup> Romans 8:3

<sup>99</sup> Romans 8:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21

This suffering is the guarantee that the future lies in the hands of the Son of Man. The depth of the suffering that God himself took upon himself remains a mystery. God himself creates the only possible solution: the unique sacrifice of his Son. It accomplishes what we could never undo or achieve. Jesus' offering of himself as a sacrifice for us and for God is the proof and the basis of boundless love, generosity and favour towards us.

A dead Christ cannot help us.<sup>100</sup> The all-important question remained: *Did God really accept the sacrifice of his Son? Yes! He raised him up.* The raising of Jesus is more than a miracle. More than an exclamation mark. It proclaims that God joyfully accepts this unique sacrifice and can now declare sinners righteous.<sup>101</sup> It means that he shows grace unconditionally. And forgives. And makes sinners righteous.<sup>102</sup> As if they had never sinned.

## Does God Need a Sacrifice?

You can think endlessly about the cross of Christ. Have you ever asked yourself: Does God need a sacrifice? Or: How is it possible that a God of love demands a sacrifice to appease his anger?

First of all, we should realise that *we* needed a sacrifice. Not God. We had a problem. Not God. We have sinned, and we would have to bring a sacrifice to atone, to make things right. For atonement is the responsibility of the one who has done wrong. But the only one who can put the situation right is God himself. He pays the price. To restore the relationship. By being ready and willing to forgive. That is what God does in Jesus.

I, too, wondered whether it could not be done without a bloody sacrifice. Above all, without Jesus' horrible death on the cross. In the Garden of Gethsemane, shortly before his crucifixion, Jesus prays and pleads. Horrified and stunned. He asks his Father, for whom everything

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<sup>100</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:17

<sup>101</sup> Romans 4:24-25; 1 Corinthians 15:3

<sup>102</sup> Romans 3:21-26; 5:1, 9

is possible, whether he can be spared the cross. Whether the cup of suffering may pass him by. But Jesus does the will of the Father. Without resistance he goes into his false condemnation and into the event of the cross.<sup>103</sup>

The words in the garden answer our question: *It was not possible to fulfil God's will to save without the cross and the death of Jesus*. Indeed, everything is possible for God – but he has his own way to salvation. It is his universe and his world. He sets the rules and conditions of life. We needed a substitute. We needed a liberator who would rise from the dead and pull us with him into life. We needed a liberator who would defeat the power of death – through his death. Who would break into the stronghold of the enemy, death, and burst the chains and gates.

God's love and Jesus' love are stronger than suffering. What was Jesus so terribly afraid of? Of being executed by the Romans on a cross? Certainly. But also of being identified with our sin. Of bearing our sin. As if he himself were its author and perpetrator. Here lies the deepest mystery. Something that no one at Golgotha understood or even suspected that day. *On the cross, the boundless love and holiness of God, the countless sins of the world, the hatred of humankind and the powers of darkness collided. They melted together. In him. In his body and soul Jesus had to endure this. To bear it and to absorb it. And to take it with him into his death.*

If God's will to save had been possible without the cross, there would not have been this end on Golgotha! As the turning point of history, the cross remains a paradox. But for us it proves to be God's power and wisdom. Once again: this is his way. It is not a human invention. *The cross of Jesus Christ is God's answer to a broken world*. Christians, the followers of Jesus, do not have to apologise for the cross. It remains a scandal. For those who do not believe, it cannot be put into an acceptable form or logic. The question whether God needs a sacrifice to be appeased or to satisfy his anger can be answered like this: We are all under God's

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<sup>103</sup> Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32; Luke 22:39

wrath.<sup>104</sup> God's wrath is revealed<sup>105</sup> and it will be revealed in the coming judgement.<sup>106</sup>

But God is slow to anger.<sup>107</sup> He holds back his anger. He takes the evil upon himself and forgoes punishment. Forgiveness has to do with bearing and enduring. God himself has often endured the injustice of his people Israel. Golgotha is the climax. There God bears the sin of his people and holds back the answer that we humans would have given if we were almighty. But God is silent. He does not grant the prayer in Gethsemane, but he does grant Jesus' prayer on the cross: *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*<sup>108</sup>

*On the cross God ends his wrath. He holds it back! The cross is the place where God's wrath comes to an end. Not the place where his righteous anger burns, but where it goes out. The proof is his defenceless surrender. As the crucified God.*

A scandal. But for us, the meltdown in which wrath and violence disappear. The draining away of the power of sin and death.

When a nuclear reactor exploded at Chernobyl in 1986, an even greater catastrophe threatened. Beneath the glowing reactor was a pool full of water. If the molten core had flowed into it, a huge steam explosion would have released far more radiation. Three men volunteered. They went down into the contaminated, flooded basement. There they opened the valves by hand so that the water could drain away. They did not expect to come back alive. They went anyway. For Ukraine, for Europe. Their mission averted the catastrophe. All three survived.

So Jesus, in an unimaginable way, became for us what caused the catastrophe: sin.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> John 3:36; Romans 3:5; Ephesians 2:3

<sup>105</sup> Romans 1:18

<sup>106</sup> Romans 2:5, 8; 5:9; Colossians 3:6; 1 Thessalonians 1:10

<sup>107</sup> Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18

<sup>108</sup> Luke 23:34

<sup>109</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21

## Evil Was Overcome with Good

In Christ, evil comes to its end because he takes it upon himself. He endures the evil of men.<sup>110</sup> But the weakness of God is stronger.<sup>111</sup> His love could not be extinguished by evil. He overcame evil with good. Through love of his enemies. It was stronger and won! Evil raged to the full and still lost. In the Risen One, God's hand remains outstretched for reconciliation.

In Christ, in his self-sacrificing love, God took our violence upon himself. To redeem us from our depraved, sinful nature and from a heart shaped by power, revenge and retaliation. God is present on the cross to save and to reconcile.<sup>112</sup> In the Crucified One. The triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – created eternal salvation through the cross.<sup>113</sup> Atonement came through the blood of Jesus. It covers our sins.<sup>114</sup> On the cross, sin as a power was condemned to death,<sup>115</sup> so that we can live a new life. So that not only are our sins forgiven, but the power of sin is broken too. So that it no longer dominates our lives.

This is the good news of the cross. On the cross, the triune God does in himself everything that is needed – for us!



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<sup>110</sup> 2 Corinthians 13:4

<sup>111</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:25

<sup>112</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:19

<sup>113</sup> Hebrews 9:14

<sup>114</sup> 1 John 2:2

<sup>115</sup> Romans 8:3

## The Cross: God's Infinite Wisdom and Power

God's greatness shows itself in his humility. In a love that serves and gives itself. When God in Christ goes to the cross, he does not act against his nature. He acts as he is. *Since Golgotha his love has had a shape: the shape of the cross.* A love that seeks the good and gives itself up. If the cross is the greatest revelation of his love, then God has always been like this. And he always will be.

On the cross God shows his wisdom. And he appears foolish. On the cross God shows his power. And he makes himself powerless. On the cross God shows his beauty. And he lets himself be disfigured. On the cross God shows his love. He makes himself one with the consequences of our sin. There is no place further from God. That is exactly where he stoops down.

*The cross is the power of God.*<sup>116</sup> That is astonishing. When God shows his power, says Paul, it looks like this: Jesus lays aside the privileges of being God.<sup>117</sup> He becomes a vulnerable human being. He takes upon himself the guilt and shame of the very people who crucify him. *That is not how we think about power. Many Christians, too, have not taken this seriously.*

When we think of power, we think of coercion and force. That is how people imagine their gods. The cross shows the opposite. On the cross, God's power is his wooing of our hearts. Through his completely different nature. Through love that gives itself.

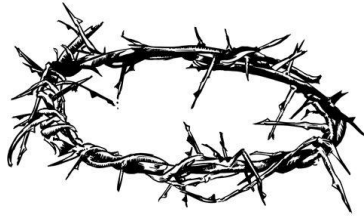
He was crucified in weakness. But the weakness of God is stronger than the strength of men.<sup>118</sup> Not according to the laws of power, but according to the law of love! The love of enemies.

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<sup>116</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:18

<sup>117</sup> Philippians 2:6-8

<sup>118</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:25; 2 Corinthians 13:4



## What the Cross Gives Us

The cross shows what we humans are capable of. In our rebellion against God, in the conscious or unconscious anarchy of our lives.<sup>119</sup> Where God has no place. Or plays only a minor role. But even for those who face him as enemies, God is willing with all his heart to go so far as to give his Son up to death.<sup>120</sup> To turn enmity into reconciliation and peace.

To free us from death and sin, the only sinless one died and came back to life. Faith in Christ gives us what he accomplished. God transfers to us what Christ did. His death is our death, and his resurrection is ours. With him we died and rose again.<sup>121</sup> He made himself one with us on the cross. We are united with Christ. His death is our death. The end of our old, sinful and failed life. And his resurrection is our resurrection. Raised from spiritual death<sup>122</sup> to new, eternal life. *A new beginning is possible only through the cross, through Christ.*

If God wanted to remove sin and evil from the world, he would have to remove people from the world. For sin is not a part of us that can be isolated and cut out. We are sinners through and through. But God does

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<sup>119</sup> 1 John 2:15-17; 3:4

<sup>120</sup> Romans 5:6-10

<sup>121</sup> Romans 6:1-14; Ephesians 2:1-10; Colossians 2:11-14; 3:1-4

<sup>122</sup> Luke 15:32

not want the death of the sinner!<sup>123</sup> In his death our old, godless life died. Buried in his death. We are raised to new life.

## The Cross, a Foolish Thing

The cross divides people. For some, it is foolishness. A saviour of the world who dies in agony on a cross can bring neither God's kingdom nor salvation. No religion in the world celebrates its founder because he departed this life in disgrace. But for those who believe, it is the greatest thing: God's power and wisdom. For them, the cross means salvation, reconciliation, forgiveness, freedom.<sup>124</sup>

Only God can bring about this understanding of the cross in a person. Without the offensive cross, the gospel is not good news. Only with the cross is it God's power for salvation. The Crucified One alone becomes for us wisdom from God, righteousness, holiness and redemption!<sup>125</sup>

It is God's wisdom to bring about great salvation through a death, through a public execution:

- *Victory and deliverance, a change of power*<sup>126</sup>
- *Atonement*<sup>127</sup>
- *Reconciliation*<sup>128</sup>
- *Forgiveness*<sup>129</sup>
- *Eternal life*<sup>130</sup>
- *Ransom*<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Ezekiel 18:23, 32

<sup>124</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:18, 23-24

<sup>125</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:30

<sup>126</sup> Acts 26:18; Colossians 1:12-13; 2:15; Hebrews 2:14-15

<sup>127</sup> Romans 3:24-26; 8:3, 32-34; Galatians 3:13; Ephesians 5:2; Hebrews 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10

<sup>128</sup> Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; Colossians 1:20-22

<sup>129</sup> Acts 2:38; Ephesians 1:7; Hebrews 10:18

<sup>130</sup> John 3:14-16; 6:51-56

<sup>131</sup> Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 6:20; 1 Timothy 2:5-6

- *Redemption*<sup>132</sup>
- *Healing*<sup>133</sup>
- *The ultimate proof of love*<sup>134</sup>
- *Example*<sup>135</sup>
- *Unity*<sup>136</sup>

Even for Christians, God's wisdom is sometimes too high. What matters is not what they understand and believe about the cross. *It is much more important that they trust in the God who gives salvation to the world through the cross.* It is not knowledge that saves us, but faith that Christ put everything right for us.

Do you trust in the God who meets us at the cross?

## Returning Home

Whoever trusts in the crucified Christ will be saved. Everything changes for him. He is taken into the arms of the heavenly Father as a prodigal son or daughter. He becomes a son or daughter of God.<sup>137</sup> Beyond the cross, the great riches of the Father's blessing are waiting.<sup>138</sup> He will give us everything with his Son.<sup>139</sup> Through the cross, Jesus leads us back to God.<sup>140</sup> Back to his Father's heart.<sup>141</sup> Back into fellowship with him.<sup>142</sup> He took our place of his own free will. With all the consequences. For the wages, the consequence of our sin, is death.<sup>143</sup> So the righteous one

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<sup>132</sup> Ephesians 1:7; 5:25; Titus 2:14; Hebrews 9:12; 1 Peter 1:18-19; Revelation 1:5-6; 5:9

<sup>133</sup> Isaiah 53:5; 61:1; Luke 4:18-19, 23

<sup>134</sup> John 3:14-16; 10:11; 15:13; Galatians 2:20; 1 John 3:16; 4:10

<sup>135</sup> Ephesians 5:2; Philippians 2:5-11; 3:10-11; 1 Peter 2:21-24; 1 John 3:16

<sup>136</sup> John 11:52; 12:24; Ephesians 2:16

<sup>137</sup> Romans 8:14, 19, 29; Galatians 4:6

<sup>138</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:9

<sup>139</sup> Romans 8:32

<sup>140</sup> Hebrews 10:19-22; 1 Peter 3:18

<sup>141</sup> Luke 15:11-24; Ephesians 2:13, 18

<sup>142</sup> 1 John 1:3-4, 7

<sup>143</sup> Romans 6:23

died for the unrighteous. As our representative. So that we may live for ever. The way to God is open. By way of the cross we come home. As prodigal sons and daughters.

*Have you come home yet? Are you still hesitating? The Father looks out for you every day. He is waiting for you.*

## The Gospel of God's Grace

Can you still bear reading so often that we are all sinners? Isn't that rightly offensive? Believe me: this is not about running us down. The Bible makes this diagnosis. It speaks the truth. And the truth sets us free.

Recognising and admitting that we are sinners means: we have thoroughly messed everything up. It cannot be repaired. There is no way out. Our situation is dramatic. We will not escape death. *If the cross of Golgotha and Jesus' terrible death were necessary to free us from our situation, then we can imagine a little how fatal our situation must be.* I assure you, you will only grasp this when you have truly met the Saviour. When you are on the safe side.

Perhaps you know the story of the rider who rode across the frozen Lake Constance. Without knowing it.<sup>144</sup> When he reached the other shore, he was told where he had come from. Horrified, he collapsed. He realised the deadly danger he had been in on the frozen lake. This is exactly what happens when heaven opens for a person and God's grace shines into his heart. When he hears the words: *Saved by grace!*<sup>145</sup> He looks back and asks himself: Where was I? Over an abyss! In mortal danger. The stupidest thing I could have done. I was doomed, and now I am safe. You may ask: Do we really live in such great danger? Yes, we live on the threshold of death, doomed.

There is rescue: Look at our Saviour! On the cross! Burdened with your sins. Our lost, forfeited life was nailed to the cross in Christ. So that we can be rid of it. Anyone who is not shaken by this news has not yet

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<sup>144</sup> After the ballad "The Rider and Lake Constance" by Gustav Schwab (1826).

<sup>145</sup> Ephesians 2:1-10

understood the word of God. Not the lost but the saved can understand that he is a sinner. The knowledge of being a sinner turns into the joy of salvation when God's grace unexpectedly breaks into a person's heart. The truth about ourselves and the grace of God set us free.<sup>146</sup> Perhaps you know the song and love its melody. But pay close attention to the words, which sum up our theme:



*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound  
that saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
was blind, but now I see.*

This is the first verse of the hymn. I also recommend reading the following verses. The hymn was written by a former slave trader (John Newton, 1779) who had found Christ as his Saviour. Or, better still, who had been found by Christ.

## **Grace at the Beginning and at the End**

Jesus spoke words of grace.<sup>147</sup> Not words that condemned and broke people. But words that lifted them up, gave them courage and granted

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<sup>146</sup> John 8:32

<sup>147</sup> Luke 4:22

forgiveness. So the gospel can be nothing other than the good news of grace.<sup>148</sup> Grace is the condescension and kindness of the Eternal One towards us human beings, even though we have turned our backs on him. Grace that cannot be forced, but is freely and willingly given.

Grace saved us. We had nothing good to offer God. For we are incapable of making amends. We could only recognise and accept who we are. And who God is. To acknowledge God's righteousness means admitting that we are not righteous.

God is the righteous judge.<sup>149</sup> In today's legal system, judges condemn breaches of the law and impose penalties and sanctions on the basis of laws. However, the crimes are not directed against the judge himself. With God it is different: it is against him, our Creator – who is also our judge – that we have become guilty.<sup>150</sup> What can we expect?<sup>151</sup> But it is the judge who did everything to avert the condemnation.<sup>152</sup> In his love and saving righteousness he met us in Jesus. In his life and in his death. His sacrifice on the cross, the blood of Jesus, covers our sin for ever.<sup>153</sup> This applies to all who accept the gospel and believe<sup>154</sup> what God has done for them.<sup>155</sup>

That is God's grace.<sup>156</sup> When a just condemnation is turned away from us. Because another takes our place. He carries our sins and our sinful being into his death.<sup>157</sup> Grace is something we have not earned. A grace

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<sup>148</sup> Acts 20:24

<sup>149</sup> Acts 10:42; 17:31; Romans 2:3, 16; 3:6; 14:10; 2 Timothy 4:1; Hebrews 10:30; 1 Peter 1:17; 4:5; Revelation 11:18; 20:12

<sup>150</sup> Romans 3:23

<sup>151</sup> Luke 18:13

<sup>152</sup> John 3:17

<sup>153</sup> 1 John 1:7; Revelation 1:5-6; 5:9-10; Hebrews 9:12-15

<sup>154</sup> Romans 1:16

<sup>155</sup> Romans 5:8-10

<sup>156</sup> John 1:14-17; Romans 5:9, 15; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Ephesians 1:7; 2:5, 13; Titus 2:11

<sup>157</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:10; Titus 2:14; 1 John 2:2; 3:16; 4:10; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:18

that gives us much, much more than we deserve.<sup>158</sup> This is the God<sup>159</sup> who is proclaimed in the gospel of grace.<sup>160</sup>

The gospel of grace is different from all religions. Even from what is called the Christian religion. Grace is the end of all religion. Of religion where you are obliged to do good. Obligated to perform in order to be rewarded with salvation or eternal life. In Jesus this performance is accomplished for us. In Jesus everything is given to us. We cannot do it ourselves.

Grace is free. It costs nothing and cannot be earned. Some people are held back by their own, often unconscious pride. They find it hard simply to accept this great gift of grace in faith. We are steeped in the principle of achievement. It is a breakthrough, a liberation, when a person accepts grace and no longer trusts in himself and his achievements. And no longer points, before God and people, to the good he has done.

*The gospel is unique. It is scandalous. It is the opposite of every religion and every offer of salvation. It proclaims: All are sinners. A crucified man is our salvation. Salvation exists only as undeserved grace. Free of charge. This is God's wisdom and answer.*

Grace is not given to a person only at the moment he first asks God for it. From then on, grace follows him every hour of his life. Grace is a hallmark of Christianity. Without it nothing works. Grace fills and surrounds discipleship on all sides. Grace carries us. Not the demands of a law or a slave driver. Grace does not demand; it gives itself. Discipleship works through grace. As those who have received and keep on receiving. Grace surrounds the beginning and the last day of discipleship. Without it, discipleship is unthinkable.

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<sup>158</sup> Luke 15:22; Ephesians 2:7

<sup>159</sup> 1 Peter 5:10

<sup>160</sup> Micah 7:18



## God Is Love

Of whom could you say that his whole being is love? Radical, selfless and self-sacrificing love. Have you ever met anyone like that? I haven't, although I know good and noble people.

*It is said of God. In Jesus we have the proof that this transcendent, otherworldly and eternal love really exists.* And that it has revealed itself in our world. Do we deserve to get to know such a God?

We have just been talking about God's grace. He is gracious. An attribute of God that means our salvation! But why is he gracious? Because he is love in person.<sup>161</sup> The source of grace is his love, which flows to us like a river and only stops when it reaches the lowest point.

He has always been love. Love needs someone to love. The Father loved the Son<sup>162</sup> before the universe existed. In eternal love, turned towards one another, the Father, the Son and the Spirit were there – the triune God. Without beginning. Not lonely or alone. He is more and greater than we can think. So is his love.

If we assume that the depth of a person's love can be measured by what he is willing to sacrifice for his beloved, then the love expressed in the story of the gospel is incomparable. It is the story of a God who, out of unfathomable love, was ready to go to the very limit. To save and restore people who had made themselves God's enemies.

*Out of love for us, the holy God went to the very limit.* The Son bore our sin.<sup>163</sup> He experienced the forsakenness by God that lies in sin. That is why

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<sup>161</sup> 1 John 4:7-11

<sup>162</sup> John 17:24

<sup>163</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21

Jesus cried out on the cross: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*<sup>164</sup> God cannot go further than this. He cannot give more than he gave at Golgotha. *That is why the cross is the greatest revelation of God.* No story tells of a lover who gives more. And that for people who did not deserve it.<sup>165</sup>

How can this love be understood or explained? Our society uses the word all the time. Almost to the point of inflation. But what exactly does it mean by it? Love that accepts everyone as they are. Unconditionally. Love that neither judges nor condemns. That tolerates everything and seeks harmony. That has no expectations. Romantic and sentimental.

Does this description match the Bible's concept of love?

Let us imagine that it does. God would tolerate everything people do. He would not criticise or judge. Where would that end, and how loving is such a love in truth?

If you believe that God's love accepts us as we are, you forget that the Fall happened. You forget that today we do not live as God wants us to live, in the way that is best for us.

Put yourself in the role of a parent. Maybe you are a mother or a father. Imagine your child, who has grown up. Your child does things that are not good. Things that harm themselves and others. They have also cut off contact with you. They hate you and accuse you without reason. They remain your child. You do not stop loving them. But you reject the evil in their life. You are angry and sad that things are the way they are. You would never approve of what is wrong. Even in our human experience, love and rejection somehow belong together. *It is love that rejects and condemns evil.* Could we say that God has to accept us as we are, so that we can stay as we are? Should God really accept our lifestyle, even if others suffer or are harmed by it?

As limited people, unfree in many ways, we long for a world where peace and justice are normal. How much more, do you think, does the one who created the earth and human beings long for this? If God were not angry about hatred, injustice, violence and the misery that sin inflicts

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<sup>164</sup> Mark 15:34

<sup>165</sup> Romans 5:8

on people created in his image, he would not be a loving God. Just an uninvolved bystander. If God did not condemn and judge sin, the evil of human beings, he would be accepting, excusing and approving of it. *His reaction to the destructive power of sin will always be wrath and judgement. God's love is a holy love.* It is different from what we often understand by love. It is divine, boundless, unconditional. It is pure. Not an idle, romantic, sentimental love, but a strong-willed love that saves.

*God's love does not exclude his wrath and his judgement.* Thank God. We do not get a cosy God who takes us as we are because he has to be happy with us. The God of the Bible wants to change us, to love us out of our old life, to draw us to himself. He loves the sinner before he changes. He loves him in the midst of his sin.<sup>166</sup> But he wants to change him, sanctify him and make him like Jesus.



## The Unseen Realm – Powers of Darkness

Let us come back to the crucifixion once more. Invisible, evil powers also played a major part in it. Jesus had confronted them during his lifetime. As the strong liberator<sup>167</sup> he drove out demons, unclean spirits, and put them to flight. In this way he proclaimed that their power is coming to an end. The gospel has a concrete connection with these powers. More than many people think.

Who are these powers, and why did they want Jesus' death? Before the creation of the earth and of humankind, God created angels.<sup>168</sup> They

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<sup>166</sup> John 3:16; Romans 5:8; 2 Corinthians 5:14; Ephesians 2:4-5; Titus 3:4-5; 1 John 4:7-10

<sup>167</sup> Mark 3:27

<sup>168</sup> Job 38:4-7; Psalm 148:2, 5; Colossians 1:16

are sometimes called the sons of God.<sup>169</sup> This is his heavenly family. Different angels in different hierarchies, with different tasks. God created them for himself, to rule the universe with them. They are his servants.<sup>170</sup> Like us humans, they too had the freedom to remain faithful to their Creator. Some of the angels chose otherwise. An existence without God.<sup>171</sup> Their leader was the devil, Satan.<sup>172</sup> When this revolt took place in the invisible world, God did not destroy them. Since then these angels and sons of God have been working under Satan's leadership against everything God does.<sup>173</sup> Opposing them are the angels who have remained faithful.<sup>174</sup>

## The Powers and Humankind

Soon after the creation of man, the deceiver and murderer of humankind<sup>175</sup> is on the scene.<sup>176</sup> Satan, appearing as a serpent,<sup>177</sup> tempts the first humans to stop trusting God and to doubt his goodness.

Satan envied the people who were created in God's image and likeness to rule the earth. He only wanted to destroy. To prevent God from having a family of people on earth. He wanted people for himself. Not as a good father, but as a slaveholder and tyrant. He succeeded in this robbery. Since the incident in the Garden of Eden, man has been out of God's visible presence.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Job 1:6; 38:7; Psalm 82

<sup>170</sup> Psalm 104:4; Daniel 6:23; Matthew 1:20, 24; 16:27; Luke 2:13; Acts 8:26; 10:7; 12:8; Hebrews 1:7; 13:2

<sup>171</sup> 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6

<sup>172</sup> Matthew 25:41; Ephesians 2:2; 1 John 3:8; Revelation 12:7-9

<sup>173</sup> Romans 8:38; 2 Corinthians 11:14; 12:7; Ephesians 6:10-17; Revelation 12:13; Revelation 13

<sup>174</sup> 1 Timothy 5:21; Revelation 5:11; 7:11; 12:7

<sup>175</sup> John 8:44; 1 John 3:8, 12

<sup>176</sup> Genesis 3:1-7; 2 Corinthians 11:3-4

<sup>177</sup> Revelation 12:9

<sup>178</sup> Genesis 3:23-24

In the course of human history you can see the influence of these invisible powers. It is unmistakable in the countless idolatrous cults of all peoples, some of which continue today.<sup>179</sup> The New Testament makes plain that people without God and separated from him are in spiritual captivity and bondage to the devil.<sup>180</sup> Outwardly this is not visible. People do not perceive it themselves. They feel free. If they could look into the invisible world that surrounds us and is among us, their eyes would be opened. Their thinking about God, about themselves and about the gospel is darkened.<sup>181</sup> The world is indeed still Satan's kingdom.<sup>182</sup> Jesus calls him the prince of this world.<sup>183</sup> Paul even calls him the god of this world.<sup>184</sup> He has great power and a destructive influence on world affairs. Otherwise the state of the world can hardly be explained. The fact that man himself is evil makes it worse and more hopeless.<sup>185</sup>

Did you ever think that the unseen world was so real? And that it has so much to do with us?

## **The Gospel and the Powers**

When Jesus came, God's kingdom broke into the world, the domain of the evil powers. That was the beginning of the end for the devil and his angels. God's master plan was set in motion. When Jesus was travelling in Galilee, the demons knew who they were dealing with.<sup>186</sup> Unlike the people. They knew him from the unseen world. He was their Creator.

Immediately after Jesus' baptism, Satan confronted him in the desert to tempt him. He offered him the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would

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<sup>179</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:20-22

<sup>180</sup> Acts 26:18; Ephesians 2:1-3; Colossians 1:13

<sup>181</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:3-5

<sup>182</sup> Matthew 4:8-10

<sup>183</sup> John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11

<sup>184</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:4

<sup>185</sup> Mark 7:20-23

<sup>186</sup> Mark 1:23-24; 3:11; 5:7

worship him. Satan seeks his own glory, his own worship. That is his nature.<sup>187</sup> But Jesus resists him. Unlike Adam in Eden.<sup>188</sup>

Jesus also gave his disciples authority over demons and the power to cast them out.<sup>189</sup>

No, these are not horror stories, not purely psychological phenomena, but the reality of everyday life. That is where such powers show themselves. All the more where people actively open themselves up and surrender to them.

## The Powers and God's Plan of Salvation

*God's plan of salvation was unknown to the devil and to people as well.* Despite many prophecies in the Old Testament, it was hard to recognise.<sup>190</sup> Even the disciples and the scribes did not understand it. The appearance of the Son of God as a man, without power, without a throne, confused the powers. Their only option in this situation was to manipulate people into killing Jesus.<sup>191</sup> For as a human being he was vulnerable and mortal. So they had only one goal: his death. They achieved it! But they were mistaken. For his death became his victory.<sup>192</sup> His death was a cosmic change of power for us humans. His death is the ransom that sets people free from the power of darkness. His death brought grace and forgiveness to people. Liberation. The slave market of that time provides the picture. Redemption meant being bought out of slavery and released into freedom. His resurrection and exaltation to God's throne are the door to freedom from slavery to sin, death and the devil.

*We needed forgiveness of our sins and deliverance from the power of sin. Both are given to us through the cross.*

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<sup>187</sup> Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

<sup>188</sup> Romans 5:12-21

<sup>189</sup> Mark 6:7

<sup>190</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:6-9

<sup>191</sup> Luke 22:53

<sup>192</sup> Hebrews 2:14

The devil has no mercy. He himself does not receive God's grace,<sup>193</sup> and he shows no mercy towards people. It is alien to his nature. His rebellion against God has made him utterly bitter.

Now a man sits on God's throne. For us humans. And we are united with him.<sup>194</sup> We are in Christ!<sup>195</sup> The powers are defeated. Their time is up. Their days are numbered. But they still resist and fight a losing battle to stop the gospel. Every day, these powers see people set free. Everyone who believes the gospel reminds them that God's plan of salvation is reaching its goal. He will have his family from all the nations of the earth. Through Jesus, in whose death they played a decisive part. At Golgotha, without knowing it, they practically dug their own grave.

The record of debt, the indictment to which the powers hostile to God and humankind appeal, has been nailed to the cross and cancelled.<sup>196</sup> Through the cross he disarmed the powers and put them in the pillory. Christ, the Risen One, is now the Lord of the universe.<sup>197</sup> The good news is: he is Lord over all people and all things. Whoever believes in Christ is free.<sup>198</sup> He comes home to the kingdom of God.

The gospel is God's good news that he is bringing his people back and wants to have his family. Freed from death and from the evil powers. It is the good news that Jesus made all this possible through his death on the cross. Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil.<sup>199</sup> With him came God's reign of love. We are rescued into his kingdom of love.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Hebrews 2:16

<sup>194</sup> Ephesians 2:6

<sup>195</sup> Romans 8:1; 1 Corinthians 1:30

<sup>196</sup> Colossians 2:14-15

<sup>197</sup> Matthew 28:18

<sup>198</sup> John 8:33-36; Romans 6:7, 18, 22

<sup>199</sup> 1 John 3:8

<sup>200</sup> Colossians 1:13-14

## The Triumph of the Cross

In a solemn triumphal procession, the Roman generals entered Rome. The defeated leaders were led along in chains. Before their execution they were put on public display. This is how Paul describes the irresistible power of the cross over the powers and authorities from the domain of the prince of this world.<sup>201</sup> Disarmed and exposed. Their power is gone. The Crucified One sets us free from the magical forces of the invisible intermediate world. Satan has been judged. His power is broken. He no longer has any power over Jesus' people.

God's plan of salvation is like a long game of chess. The outcome is uncertain until one of the players makes a move that the expert knows is decisive. Even if the game is still being played. So it is with the struggle between light and darkness. The decisive move with the king has been made. The king with the crown of thorns on the cross of Golgotha. The victory is complete. The adversary's activities are now only a rearguard action. He has little time left. His end is settled.

## Freedom Is Possible

So be sure of this: if you belong to Jesus, demons must flee! If you have become involved in magic and the occult, in spirits and angels, there is freedom. And forgiveness. These powers do not want to let you go, and they try to nip any attempt to break free in the bud. Pray to Jesus Christ – call out his name! Look for Christians who will pray for you and help you.

Get rid of everything that connects you with these magical, occult things. Break off all contact with people who introduced you to such practices and relationships.

The invisible world is a powerful reality that must not be underestimated. But Jesus is stronger.

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<sup>201</sup> Colossians 2:15

## The Gospel of Peace

Peter had seen his Master proclaim peace.<sup>202</sup> Jesus brought peace to the Jews and to the nations, the non-Jews. And between the two. Peace is a central and essential aspect of the gospel.<sup>203</sup> This is God's shalom. That is the word in the Hebrew Bible. God's heart is big and wide. Peace comes from this heart. It means being whole, healthy, healed and saved. The gospel leads people into peace with God.<sup>204</sup> This means reconciliation with God and the end of all hostility.<sup>205</sup> The gospel leads to the certainty of being accepted by God as his child. This certainty is anchored in God. In who he is and what he has done. On this basis, a real and lasting peace spreads in the heart. Peace instead of restlessness. Peace instead of strife and fear.

Our world of wars and strife, great and small, needs peace.<sup>206</sup> Not only the absence of war, not only a ceasefire, but peace that brings people together and unites them.<sup>207</sup> The gospel creates peace among people.<sup>208</sup> Could the preaching of the cross, where God absorbs human violence once and for all, be the key to world peace? And first of all in the church itself?

If people want to know what peace is, they should learn it from those who have received the peace of God through the gospel. And who radiate it. Who pass it on. As peacemakers. As far as they can,<sup>209</sup> they live at peace with everyone.

Through Jesus all things were reconciled to God and brought back into the right relationship with him. Through the price of his blood.

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<sup>202</sup> Acts 10:36

<sup>203</sup> Colossians 1:20; Ephesians 2:17; 6:15

<sup>204</sup> Romans 5:1

<sup>205</sup> Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:18

<sup>206</sup> Titus 3:3

<sup>207</sup> Matthew 5:44; 1 John 4:19

<sup>208</sup> Ephesians 2:14-22

<sup>209</sup> Romans 12:18

Through his death on Golgotha. The cross was necessary so that peace with God and God's peace could become a reality.<sup>210</sup>

How have you experienced this peace? What has it changed in you and in your relationships?

## The Gospel – The Fulfilment of the Promise

The gospel is not God's frightened or desperate reaction to a human history that has got out of control. It comes from the heart of God and was promised before the beginning of time.<sup>211</sup> So it is no surprise that it is already deeply rooted in the Hebrew Bible, that is, in the Old Testament. There it is promised.<sup>212</sup> There it is described how God's history of salvation moves towards the point it calls the fullness of time. The time when God sent his Son.<sup>213</sup> Most of his contemporaries in Israel did not recognise Jesus as the fulfilment of the promise.<sup>214</sup> But the twelve disciples, the apostles, soon realised it. Though only really after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Their proclamation of the gospel in Acts and in their letters is full of quotations from the Old Testament.<sup>215</sup> There are many examples. Jesus himself said that the Scriptures, the Old Testament, speak of him.<sup>216</sup> Here are three short examples from the Old Testament and some Bible passages.<sup>217</sup>

On the very first pages of the Bible, after people had disobeyed God's commandment, there is a promise known as the original gospel: *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed: he will*

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<sup>210</sup> Colossians 1:20

<sup>211</sup> Romans 16:25-27; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 1:2

<sup>212</sup> Romans 1:1-3; Galatians 3:14-16

<sup>213</sup> Galatians 4:4

<sup>214</sup> Acts 13:27, 32

<sup>215</sup> Acts 2:25-31; Romans 1:17; 3:21-26; 4:17; 10:8-13; 15:9-13; 1 Corinthians 2:9; 2 Corinthians 6:2; Galatians 3:16; 1 Peter 1:19; 2:6-9

<sup>216</sup> John 5:39; 7:42

<sup>217</sup> Psalm 16:8-10; 22; 31:14; 35:11; 69:5; Isaiah 9:1-6; 11:1; 35:4-6; 50:6; 53; Micah 5:1; Zechariah 11:12; Daniel 9:25-26

*crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*<sup>218</sup> What could hardly be recognised at that time becomes obvious in the light of Jesus, his life and his death. Jesus defeated the devil by dying!<sup>219</sup>

Many years later on the timescale of human history, *Abraham* appears with his wife Sarah. This old, childless couple receives the promise of a son. Not only so that they will be happy. No, in this boy, Isaac, all the nations of the earth are to be blessed.<sup>220</sup> This is a promise that is fulfilled in Jesus.<sup>221</sup>

Centuries later, *David* becomes king of Israel. A man after God's own heart. Although he broke God's commandments, he always remained faithful to God and never worshipped an idol. God promised him a son who would have an eternal throne.<sup>222</sup> This was not only Solomon. It was completely fulfilled in Jesus, the son of David. In him a centuries-old prophecy is fulfilled. A king, a direct descendant of the royal line of David, will be the Messiah-King of Israel. For ever. And so it has come to pass.<sup>223</sup> He is now on God's throne and will soon rule the world for all to see.



*No one else can say that there are so many prophecies about him. Many of them have already been fulfilled exactly. The whole Old Testament points to Jesus. The Old Testament is the most important witness to the gospel of the Son of God.*

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<sup>218</sup> Genesis 3:15

<sup>219</sup> Hebrews 2:14; Romans 16:20; Revelation 12:9-11; 20:10

<sup>220</sup> Genesis 12:3; 22:18; 28:14

<sup>221</sup> Galatians 3:16

<sup>222</sup> 2 Samuel 7:12-16

<sup>223</sup> Luke 3:23-31; Genesis 49:10; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Psalm 132:11; Romans 1:3; 2 Timothy 2:8; Revelation 5:5

## The Hope of the Gospel

If a crucified man can rise from the dead, then we all have hope! It is a firm hope, because a crucified man has risen from the dead for us: the Son of God. He has given us hope again!

We all have hopes and dreams. Take a moment. Is there a future you long for, a vision of something better than what you experience now? A hope that you wish would one day become reality?

The gospel opens up a new horizon. We will live! Forever. Death does not have the last word. The gospel spreads hope.<sup>224</sup> That is why I like to call it the gospel of the New Creation. It promises that things will not stay as they are.<sup>225</sup> God is serious about the whole creation.<sup>226</sup> *It is not only about people, but about the whole planet.* On the one hand, God's kingdom consists of people who serve the King. But there is also a place where this kingdom is located. That place is our earth.<sup>227</sup> To this earth, a tiny speck of dust in the universe, God came in Jesus.

God had created it. It is the project closest to his heart: everything was very good.<sup>228</sup> So God is not going to think up something completely different or new for the future. No, he will restore the earth to what it should be. In other words, he will make it new.<sup>229</sup> One day there will be no more death, sickness or hunger on it.<sup>230</sup> Everything that humans destroy, including an unleashed nature that harms humans, will be gone.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> 1 Peter 1:3-4

<sup>225</sup> Romans 8:18-24

<sup>226</sup> John 3:16

<sup>227</sup> Revelation 5:9-10

<sup>228</sup> Genesis 1:31

<sup>229</sup> Isaiah 65:17-19; 66:22

<sup>230</sup> Revelation 7:9-17; 21:1, 4-5

<sup>231</sup> Revelation 7:16; 22:3

*In a broken world without hope,<sup>232</sup> it is the gospel of hope<sup>233</sup> that promises an eternal and unshakeable kingdom.<sup>234</sup> A new heaven and a new earth will become our new home.*

Hope is firmly anchored in the Risen One. In him who was dead and lives forever.<sup>235</sup> He has broken the power of death.<sup>236</sup> Through him true life and immortality have come to light.<sup>237</sup> In Christ we have received his resurrection life as our own life, a life that never dies again.<sup>238</sup> This is real life, the inexhaustible power of the new creation. It has already begun in the lives of Jesus' followers.<sup>239</sup> They have been born again to new life and a living hope.<sup>240</sup> They are already a new creation in Christ. One day they will live in the new creation.<sup>241</sup> They will have a transformed, immortal and glorious body.<sup>242</sup> But they will still be the distinctive personality God intended, the person they were in their mortal life.

The gospel speaks of a time set by God.<sup>243</sup> Then Jesus will come again, visible to all people.<sup>244</sup> In great glory and power.<sup>245</sup> This will be a day of great joy for all who wait for him. For then the eternal reign of God will begin. A time that never ends. When God himself will live among people.<sup>246</sup> We will see God. And experience unimaginable joy.<sup>247</sup> Exactly what the eternal God of love, the triune God, has always wanted. Then it will be even better than it has ever been. Heaven, God himself, will

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<sup>232</sup> Ephesians 2:12; 1 Thessalonians 4:13

<sup>233</sup> Ephesians 1:18; Colossians 1:5, 23

<sup>234</sup> 2 Peter 1:11; Hebrews 12:27-28; Daniel 2:44; 7:14, 27

<sup>235</sup> Revelation 1:17-18; John 14:19

<sup>236</sup> Hebrews 2:14-15

<sup>237</sup> 2 Timothy 1:10

<sup>238</sup> Romans 6:9-10

<sup>239</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17

<sup>240</sup> 1 Peter 1:3

<sup>241</sup> 2 Peter 3:13

<sup>242</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:35-58; Philippians 3:20-21

<sup>243</sup> Acts 17:30-31

<sup>244</sup> Revelation 1:7

<sup>245</sup> Mark 8:38; 13:26

<sup>246</sup> Revelation 21:3

<sup>247</sup> Revelation 22:4

come to earth to live visibly with his people, with his family. Forever. We will be the image of God by being like Jesus.<sup>248</sup>

The earth will then be a single, vast, even global paradise. A new and better Garden of Eden.<sup>249</sup> A place the tempter will never enter again. There will be no more temptation to sin.

## **The Dream of God's New World**

Let us dream for a few moments about this New World of God. Although we do not know very much about it, everything bad, negative and destructive will be gone. At the same time, there will be much that we already know from the present earth as God created it.

A world in which there will be no more poverty, no more hunger, no more struggle to survive, no fear of the future.

No slavery, no oppression, no violence, no manipulation, no discrimination, no humiliation, no crime, no war.

No illness, no death, and therefore no grief and no tears – or if tears, then tears of joy.

No pollution, no disasters.

No police, no lawyers and courts, no hospitals, no psychiatrists and psychologists.

No boredom, no futile search for meaning, no feelings of inferiority, no shame, no emptiness, no destructive dependencies and addictions, no disappointments!

Instead, there will be this:

Peace, selfless love among people, perfect justice, complete mutual acceptance, appreciation and attentiveness.

A place where everything is as it should be. A place of sparkling life, diversity, progress, freedom, adventure, creativity and constant discovery, a place where everything is always new and fresh.

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<sup>248</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:49-50; Philippians 3:20-21; 1 John 3:2

<sup>249</sup> Revelation 2:7; 22:1-5

Strength, vitality and motivation that last forever, instead of tiredness, weariness and lethargy.

A place of unimaginable and varied beauty, waiting to be explored and discovered.

A place to meet new people and celebrate with them. Everyone who will live on the new planet earth.

A place where time stands still or never passes! A place where beauty is not a thing of the past, but always present! A place where we miss out on nothing.

A place we always thought must exist, a place our hearts have always longed for.

A place of abundance, of the best food, the most beautiful art and music, the best technology. Everything that makes up life today can be found there in perfect form.

A place of joy, because the Creator lives among people, visible to all. And they live in his protection, in his blessing, in his love. To rejoice in God, the Father, Son and Spirit, to worship him and know him. To love him.

To look the Eternal One in the eyes, to see God face to face, is the greatest joy that people can experience. Then, if not before, we will understand how true this is. To live forever without fear and shame, set free and full of trust in God's loving care, is beyond compare. *When his gaze meets us, touches and moves us, infinite love will flow through us and embrace us – the love we have always longed for.*

To drink from the spring of the water of life and to eat constantly from the tree of life. This is a picture of eternity, which Christians today call heaven.

There, in his presence, we will be who we were always meant to be. Ourselves. As individual and unique as God wanted us to be and allowed us to become. Undisguised there. Real. In the best sense, all human beings will reign there lovingly and caringly over the earth<sup>250</sup> and so carry out the mission of the first humans. In such a way that the potential of

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<sup>250</sup> Romans 5:17; Revelation 5:10; 22:5

creation will unfold as never before. In unimaginable creativity, diversity, richness and delight. All of it permeated by the love of God. Together: the Father with his family, for whom he has prepared everything.<sup>251</sup> Heaven and earth become one. We will not be able to grasp our happiness. Not even after 10,000 years. We will be with Jesus forever. Real, deep, jubilant joy will have no end.<sup>252</sup>

The gospel is the invitation to be there and to join in the great, eternal feast.<sup>253</sup> This message goes out to all people.<sup>254</sup> Everyone is invited.<sup>255</sup> There is no entrance fee. Jesus has made everything right!<sup>256</sup>



## **The Gospel – The Power for Salvation**

No disciple of Jesus has to be ashamed of the gospel. Even if the cross is foolishness to many. This message has power. It is like dynamite.<sup>257</sup> People who believe it, whose hearts the gospel opens, experience this power of God at work in them. There is a conversion, a new life. A change of life that only God's power can bring about and that affects every area of life.<sup>258</sup> This power saves and sets people free from occult bonds and addictions. Many have been healed. Relationships are restored. The power of God in the gospel cannot be compared to anything else. No ideology, religion or philosophy has effects like the gospel.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:9

<sup>252</sup> Psalm 16:11

<sup>253</sup> Revelation 19:6-10; 21:6; 22:14-15, 17

<sup>254</sup> Matthew 28:19-20; 2 Corinthians 5:15

<sup>255</sup> Matthew 22:1-14

<sup>256</sup> Romans 3:24; Revelation 21:6; Isaiah 55:1

<sup>257</sup> Romans 1:16-17

<sup>258</sup> 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10

<sup>259</sup> John 8:36; Romans 6:18

Where we humans are powerless and helpless, unable to help ourselves or others,<sup>260</sup> this gospel works miracles. The miracle of being born again.<sup>261</sup> The gospel creates new life. Comparable to the birth of a child.<sup>262</sup>

An atheist once challenged a well-known evangelist to a debate about the existence of God. He agreed, but on condition that the atheist bring along people whose lives had changed for the better through atheism. The debate never took place, because nobody had become a new person through atheism or been set free from addictions and dependencies. The evangelist, on the other hand, knew many people who had been set free and had become new people through his preaching of the gospel.

No one is beyond the reach of the gospel. It is there for everyone. And so is the power that lives in this message. It is God's power, the same power that was revealed when he raised his Son.

This is the real power for salvation!

## Obedience to the Gospel

The gospel changes people. Have you ever experienced that? Or seen it in others? A true joy. Suddenly people become hungry to read the Bible. They become hungry for God's presence.<sup>263</sup> They want to know more about God. Before they knew the gospel, there was no such interest. Suddenly they ask what God wants.<sup>264</sup>

The response to the gospel is indifference or rejection on the one hand.<sup>265</sup> On the other hand, it is faith: not just an intellectual acceptance of the gospel,<sup>266</sup> but a personal response of the whole person. In a word:

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<sup>260</sup> Romans 5:6

<sup>261</sup> John 3:3; 1 Peter 1:3; Titus 3:4-7

<sup>262</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:15; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23-25

<sup>263</sup> 1 Peter 2:2

<sup>264</sup> 1 Peter 4:2-3

<sup>265</sup> Acts 2:37-41

<sup>266</sup> James 2:19

the obedience of faith.<sup>267</sup> People obey the call of the gospel by believing what this message tells them. Even if they themselves do not experience it as a step of obedience, but rather as accepting a gift.

They turn to God. Away from everything that marks a life without God. Away from idols, visible or invisible.<sup>268</sup> They recognise sin in their lives and confess it to their heavenly Father.<sup>269</sup> They lay hold of forgiveness through the grace of God. They experience salvation and healing. When the gospel is proclaimed in power and with great certainty and clarity, it brings people into the light.<sup>270</sup> They realise who they are and who God is. They see the reality of life in a completely different way. A change takes place, brought about by God himself – like passing from death to life.<sup>271</sup>

## Becoming Disciples of Jesus

Turning to Jesus often happens as a process. The person who comes into contact with Jesus through the gospel begins to take small steps of faith. He begins to listen to Jesus and to trust him. A journey begins, a process of becoming and learning. To be a disciple means to be a student, a learner. It is a process that never ends in this life.

Jesus' disciples followed him wherever he went. There were more disciples than the Twelve. Jesus was the Master from whom the disciples learned. The disciples wanted to become like him by doing what he said.<sup>272</sup>

When Jesus was no longer there, all believers in Jesus were still called disciples. Only later were they called Christians.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Romans 1:5; 16:26; 1 John 2:3-4; 3:24; 5:2-3

<sup>268</sup> Acts 11:21; 14:15; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; 1 Peter 4:3

<sup>269</sup> Acts 19:18-20; 1 John 1:9; Proverbs 28:13; Psalm 51

<sup>270</sup> 1 Thessalonians 1:5

<sup>271</sup> Colossians 2:13; 1 John 3:14

<sup>272</sup> John 8:31

<sup>273</sup> Acts 11:26

## The Start of Discipleship

Discipleship is God's goal for us! It sometimes begins strikingly, but often cautiously and quietly. God's Spirit helps such disciples to do what Jesus says and to grow in faith. In them the gospel works like a seed that falls on the fertile soil of the heart and grows and bears fruit.<sup>274</sup> With one disciple it happens quickly, with another it takes longer.<sup>275</sup> Understanding the gospel better and better remains a learning process. This does not happen as a purely intellectual matter, but by doing it and living it.

*Following Jesus and becoming a disciple is the goal of the gospel.* The gospel is not just a ticket to heaven, nor does it merely promise an afterlife. It is something that changes this life already, here and now, and that will one day be continued and completed in eternity and glory. *We are already living eternal life now!*

There is an outward sign by which a person testifies that he now belongs to Christ: baptism.<sup>276</sup> It confirms and seals publicly, before people and before the powers of the invisible world, that from now on Jesus Christ is the Saviour and Lord of his life. Water baptism makes a big difference. It stands at the very beginning of life with Jesus. In water baptism, allegiance to Jesus is confessed.

## What Does Discipleship Look Like?

What does life as a disciple look like? A disciple will continue to do all the things that make up life: sleeping, eating, working, going to school and so on. But his inner attitude and motivation, and his view of life as a whole and of his neighbour, will be different.

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<sup>274</sup> Mark 4:20; John 15:8

<sup>275</sup> Romans 6:21-22; 7:4; Ephesians 5:9; Colossians 1:10; Titus 3:14; Hebrews 13:15; 2 Peter 1:8

<sup>276</sup> Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38-41; 8:12, 36-38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27; Ephesians 4:5; Colossians 2:12

I list the essential characteristics, not as God's commandments, but as fruits of the new life from God. Everything I mention is and remains under attack. God works in us. But we ourselves can be the reason that these things are not present in the fullness God wants to give. Disciples of Jesus love God, their neighbour and one another!<sup>277</sup> *Divine love remains the greatest forever.*<sup>278</sup> There are no limits to it. Disciples of Jesus are recognised by the love they have for one another!<sup>279</sup>

Disciples take care of one another.<sup>280</sup> They are one family. They are one community. This shows not only in regular attendance at church services, but in all of life, in everyday life.

Disciples of Jesus remember together what Jesus has done for them: in the Lord's Supper, in the breaking of bread, in the Eucharist. They do this regularly, or as often as they can.<sup>281</sup> They do not depend on church buildings for their services. They also meet in homes, as a spiritual family.

Disciples of Jesus pray to the heavenly Father, alone and together!<sup>282</sup> They talk to God as if they could see him. Worship and praise, alone and together,<sup>283</sup> are a great joy to them.

Disciples of Jesus read the Bible,<sup>284</sup> so they get to know God and his will. And all the blessings he has already given them.

Disciples of Jesus hear God's voice and experience his guidance and instruction in everyday life, in small things and in great.

Disciples suffer for Jesus' sake.<sup>285</sup> Just as Jesus was persecuted, the same can happen to them. It starts with being laughed at and bullied, and today, in some countries of the world, it can even mean death.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Matthew 22:36-40; John 13:34-35; 15:13-17; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

<sup>278</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:13

<sup>279</sup> John 13:35

<sup>280</sup> Acts 11:29

<sup>281</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:23-27

<sup>282</sup> Matthew 6:5-15; John 16:26-27; 1 Thessalonians 5:17

<sup>283</sup> John 4:23

<sup>284</sup> Colossians 3:16; 2 Timothy 3:16; 1 Peter 2:2

<sup>285</sup> Acts 14:22

<sup>286</sup> John 15:18-20

Disciples of Jesus make disciples of other people.<sup>287</sup> The gospel does not make Christians who believe something specific, but disciples who follow Jesus in everyday life. Who are ready to renounce everything, take up their cross daily and make it their goal in life to make disciples of other people. This and nothing else is what Jesus wanted.<sup>288</sup> Disciples of Jesus go out to people. They do not shut themselves off. Faith is not a private and silent matter.

The Bible speaks of a process of growth and knowledge.<sup>289</sup> *Christians are not perfect. Christians still sin, but sin no longer rules over them.*<sup>290</sup> They no longer sin or want to sin. They live in the full forgiveness that God has given them. Even for sins they will still commit.<sup>291</sup> They recognise their sins and confess them to their heavenly Father. They also confess to one another when they have sinned against each other.<sup>292</sup> They live under grace,<sup>293</sup> not under law.<sup>294</sup> Their goal is not to keep the Ten Commandments. A life with Jesus goes much further than these commandments require.

This becomes possible because the Holy Spirit lives in the disciples of Jesus. They have received the Holy Spirit,<sup>295</sup> who lives in them and leads them. It is his aim that the fruit of the Spirit becomes visible.<sup>296</sup> This fruit shows most clearly in how they treat one another: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. In sum, it is what Jesus lived. Becoming like him is the new goal of life.<sup>297</sup> It is God's fruit, which he makes grow in our lives as we trust in him. The

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<sup>287</sup> Luke 14:26-27, 33; Acts 14:21

<sup>288</sup> Matthew 28:18-20

<sup>289</sup> John 3:30; Colossians 1:10; 2 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Peter 3:18

<sup>290</sup> Romans 6:12-14

<sup>291</sup> Hebrews 10:14; 1 John 1:5-2:2

<sup>292</sup> James 5:16

<sup>293</sup> Acts 13:43

<sup>294</sup> Romans 6:14

<sup>295</sup> John 7:39; 14:17; 1 Corinthians 2:12; 6:19

<sup>296</sup> Galatians 5:13-26

<sup>297</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:18

Holy Spirit is the power to follow Jesus.<sup>298</sup> This Spirit is God's own personal presence in our lives.

This cannot be emphasised enough. *The Spirit is our adviser, coach, trainer, helper and guide all in one.* He does exactly what Jesus would do if he were still here with us on earth. The Spirit of God equips the disciples with talents and spiritual gifts with which they can serve one another.<sup>299</sup>

Discipleship is not a soft option, not a stroll in the park, not armchair Christianity. It means living and serving like Jesus. A new motto for life, one that also commits us. His kingdom and his righteousness always come first for a disciple of Jesus. Everything else, says Jesus, our Father will take care of.<sup>300</sup>

*No one but Jesus has the authority to say: "Follow me!" What is your answer?*

It will not be an easy road. Jesus says we should count the cost before we start<sup>301</sup> so that we can make a robust, genuine and informed decision that will not be blown away by the first headwind. The road that leads to life is narrow, and it goes uphill. The broad road to ruin takes care of itself. You need do nothing but stay as you are.<sup>302</sup>

*For our whole contested and challenged life as followers of Jesus, this is true: God loves his children at every moment just as much as he did when he gave up his Son for them.*<sup>303</sup>

## Ignoring the Gospel

The gospel is not a message of threat. It is good news! Through repentance and faith it opens the way to God, to forgiveness, to freedom, to life, to meaning.

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<sup>298</sup> Acts 13:52; Romans 8:12-17

<sup>299</sup> 1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12:3-8

<sup>300</sup> Matthew 6:33

<sup>301</sup> Luke 14:28

<sup>302</sup> Matthew 7:13-14

<sup>303</sup> John 16:27; 17:23

But the gospel is not something to take or leave. Not one truth among many. Whoever hears the message is challenged to make a decision. It should not be taken lightly. It wants to save and preserve us. The good news comes from the heart of God, from his love. But it also comes from a God who takes sin seriously. He hates sin! It contradicts his holy and good nature. It is destructive, an enemy of all that is good. Imagine a message that warns of a forest fire, or of a hurricane, or of contaminated drinking water, or of a dam about to break. A message that not only warns, but shows the way out and offers protection. How seriously should this message be taken? What if you think it is exaggerated, untrue, or meant only for others?

## Everything Comes to Light

The disciples of Jesus preached the gospel by proclaiming the risen Lord of the world.<sup>304</sup> They proclaimed that in him forgiveness is possible if you trust in him, confess your sins and change your life. At the same time, they always stressed that a day is coming, firmly fixed, on which every person will have to give account to this Lord. *Jesus is the judge of all people.* Everyone will meet him. Face to face. God, his Father, has entrusted all judgment to him.<sup>305</sup> *We will answer for everything we have done, said and thought.* A warning, then, to think about our lives! To consider whether God is pleased with what we do. What do you feel when you think that everything will come to light – everything without exception? What we have secretly thought and done, what we have done to people, and what we failed to do that we should have done.

Deep inside us, in our hearts and consciences, we are all aware that we have sinned a great deal. We know what God never approves of. *Imagine: would we be willing to show our thoughts and emotions of the past week publicly on a screen, in front of everyone we have dealt with that week?* We would rather not,

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<sup>304</sup> Acts 4:2; 8:12, 25, 35, 40; 11:20; 17:18

<sup>305</sup> John 5:22-29

as there would be some things we would rather keep to ourselves. If we are ashamed of some things in front of people, what about in front of the holy God? The question of sin in our relationship with God is never trivialised in the Bible. You can twist and turn it however you like: *sin is the core problem*. The joyful message is: whoever is in Christ need not fear condemnation.<sup>306</sup> If we are forgiven, we no longer need to be afraid of meeting God. In Christ he has made us his children, his sons and daughters.<sup>307</sup> The perfect love of God drives out all fear.<sup>308</sup>

But what if I reject the gospel? God does not force his message on anyone. He leaves it to each person to decide. Even though he does everything to convince them of this message.

He searches and he fights to win people's hearts.<sup>309</sup>

Think of a drowning person who is thrown a lifebelt. No one would say that the drowning man is being forced to be rescued. If a person does not see himself as lost, the gospel will mean nothing to him. But God's Spirit works through the gospel by convicting people.<sup>310</sup> God's Word has the power to open hearts.<sup>311</sup>

*But we should not delude ourselves: without the gospel, without Christ, we are lost and already under the wrath of God. There is no neutral zone. In Christ there is no condemnation – without Christ we will be justly condemned.*

If we keep saying no, we will live with the consequences. Then we are left alone with our sin and guilt.

God is love.<sup>312</sup> He is also light. Absolutely holy.<sup>313</sup> Whoever decides against his message says no to God, to Jesus and to everything he has

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<sup>306</sup> Romans 8:1

<sup>307</sup> John 1:12

<sup>308</sup> 1 John 4:16-19

<sup>309</sup> Luke 19:10

<sup>310</sup> John 16:8

<sup>311</sup> Hebrews 4:12-13

<sup>312</sup> 1 John 3:1; 4:7-8, 16

<sup>313</sup> 1 John 1:5; Revelation 4:8

done for them out of love. And which he offers freely to everyone. Jesus once said: “Whoever is not with me is against me!”<sup>314</sup>

## How Real Is God's Wrath?

It would be wrong not to point to the reality of God's wrath.<sup>315</sup> To God's total abhorrence of sin. His innermost being is affected by sin. He is grieved<sup>316</sup> when his people live godless lives and do not see that without him they are heading for misery. Just as God's love cannot be conceived and understood without emotion, so it is with his wrath. *But this wrath, too, is pure and holy. No emotional outburst, no irrational and excessive reaction to the sins of humankind. God is slow to anger!*<sup>317</sup> *Unlike us humans.*

The wrath of God means that God leaves people to themselves, with the consequences and effects of their sins.<sup>318</sup> Wrath means meeting God's glorious holiness on the day of judgment with my sin. The wrath of God is God's answer to the sins we inflict on people and on him. If God were not angry, he would not be God. Ultimately, no one wants a God who says yes to everything. If people cannot guarantee justice, then we can only hope in God. But then it will not only affect others – each of us will have to give an account.

Christians bear witness to God's will to reconcile,<sup>319</sup> because they have come to know him in this way.<sup>320</sup> But he is not a tame God who adopts our standards. He will not keep silent about our injustices. Or simply ignore them. He will ensure justice. In his own way, which goes beyond our abilities and our imagination.

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<sup>314</sup> Matthew 12:30

<sup>315</sup> John 3:36; Romans 1:18; 2:5, 8; 3:5; 5:9; Ephesians 2:3; 5:6; Colossians 3:5-6; Revelation 6:16-17; 11:18

<sup>316</sup> Mark 3:5

<sup>317</sup> Exodus 34:6

<sup>318</sup> Romans 1:26

<sup>319</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:19-20

<sup>320</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:11

Whoever says no to God and his good news, perhaps even several times, hardens himself. That is how one is lost.<sup>321</sup> Lost because God accepts this no with a heavy heart. To be lost means not being where you should be. Not at home, but lonely and outcast. The connection to God is broken. To a God who sought him and went after him to bring him home.<sup>322</sup>

Anyone who rejects the gospel will receive righteous condemnation for his sins.<sup>323</sup> The judgment will be perfectly just.<sup>324</sup> A man reaps what he sows, for God is not mocked.<sup>325</sup> Those who have disobeyed the truth and the gospel, who have stubbornly resisted, will experience wrath, fury, distress and anguish.<sup>326</sup> Sometimes in this life, but certainly after death. This is how it will feel to face your unatoned sin and to meet your own sin once again. This time from God's perspective. And from the perspective of the people we have sinned against.

## Eternal Life and Hell

Jesus speaks of eternal life in glory<sup>327</sup> and of eternal fire and eternal punishment.<sup>328</sup> He speaks of outer darkness, where those will be who do not obey the gospel.<sup>329</sup> Of weeping and gnashing of teeth.<sup>330</sup>

It is indeed Jesus who often speaks of hell. He who is love in person spoke of it more than anyone.<sup>331</sup> The word for hell in the original Greek of the New Testament is *Gebenna*. At that time it was a real place, a valley

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<sup>321</sup> Romans 2:12; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 15:18; 2 Corinthians 2:15; 4:3; 2 Thessalonians 2:10; 2 Peter 3:9

<sup>322</sup> Luke 15:4, 24; John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:9

<sup>323</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:10

<sup>324</sup> Revelation 20:11-15; 21:8

<sup>325</sup> Galatians 6:7-8; Numbers 32:23

<sup>326</sup> Romans 2:5-11

<sup>327</sup> John 3:36; 5:24; 6:47, 51; 10:28; 11:26; Romans 5:21; 6:23; 1 John 2:25; 5:11, 13

<sup>328</sup> Matthew 25:34, 41, 46

<sup>329</sup> Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; John 8:12; 12:46

<sup>330</sup> Matthew 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28

<sup>331</sup> Matthew 5:22-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:33

near Jerusalem. In Jesus' day it was a rubbish dump where the fire was always burning. Jesus also refers to the prophet Jeremiah, who calls the same valley Ben-Hinnom.<sup>332</sup> This place was known for its idolatry, in which children were sacrificed. An embodiment of idolatry, shame and sin. And therefore of judgment and corruption. Of destruction and death.

Anyone who wants to remain in his sin, who chooses against life, remains excluded from the glory of eternal life that all the children of God will share in God's New World.<sup>333</sup>

Hell is described in drastic pictures, as a warning. The Bible is not silent about this. On the contrary, it warns us urgently. Hell is not only for "great sinners". Let us not think only of mass murderers like Hitler, Stalin or Mao. Sadists, child molesters ... God determines their punishment just as justly as that of a person who, by our standards, is guilty of little or nothing. The Bible says it clearly: all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.<sup>334</sup> What hell means for people in detail, Jesus and the Bible do not say. Speculation is therefore out of place. Jesus' statements are warning enough.

You will hear different opinions about hell. Some people say that it does not exist. Others think that people will be destroyed there. Still others say that people will be there only for a limited time, for purification, and will then enter eternal life after all. Read what the Bible says about this and look up the texts in the footnotes. Assume the worst.

God respects people's no. Even though it hurts him, and he laments as Jesus did over Jerusalem.<sup>335</sup> They will be separated from God and bear the consequences of their rejection and their sins. This is what the Bible calls the second death.<sup>336</sup> *They wanted to live without God, and now they will –*

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<sup>332</sup> Jeremiah 7:31; 19:2-7; 32:35; Isaiah 66:24

<sup>333</sup> Revelation 21:8, 27; 22:15

<sup>334</sup> Romans 3:23

<sup>335</sup> Matthew 23:37

<sup>336</sup> Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8

*forever*. The saying “There will only be volunteers in hell” is true.<sup>337</sup> People face the choice between death and life.<sup>338</sup>

The reader will understand that the time for conversion, for repentance, for prayer in turning to God, is coming to an end. With death, the time is over. God’s goodness and patience give much time. Generation after generation. *Today is the day of salvation – not tomorrow!*

## The Other Gospel

The gospel is the word of truth.<sup>339</sup> God’s truth. The more the gospel spread, the more versions appeared that no longer represented the original. Already in the first century, the apostles, who had been commissioned by Jesus to preach the gospel, warned against falsifications of the gospel.<sup>340</sup> They look similar to the original; they can look deceptively genuine.

Likewise there are *shortened versions* that leave out essential things or add to them. There are many false and misleading versions. Here are some examples for orientation. The gospel consistently shows that we cannot save ourselves. Every attempt to improve ourselves is futile. The attempt to keep God’s law and be accepted by God through good works fails.<sup>341</sup>

Nor does it work to take a little of God’s grace and add our good works as a necessary supplement. A mixture of grace and works-righteousness. Somehow it is part of our human nature to want to earn something. It is hard simply to accept grace. But that is exactly what the gospel is!

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<sup>337</sup> The thought goes back to C. S. Lewis: the doors of hell are locked on the inside (“The Problem of Pain”).

<sup>338</sup> Deuteronomy 30:15-19

<sup>339</sup> Galatians 2:5, 14; Ephesians 1:13; Colossians 1:5; 1 Timothy 2:4

<sup>340</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:1-4; Galatians 1:6-9

<sup>341</sup> Romans 3:20, 28; Galatians 2:16; 3:10

On the other hand, *this grace of God can also be devalued and made cheap*. Whoever claims the gospel but does not change his life – the Bible calls this repentance and conversion – has got it wrong. The gospel is not a free pass to a life of selfishness and sinful self-realisation.<sup>342</sup> Living faith always leads to a profound change of life.<sup>343</sup> It leads to a new life in which Christ is Lord and King.<sup>344</sup> This new life, though, is not sinless. It will never be sinless in our earthly existence. But there is a before and an after, a change that becomes visible in deeds and words, small or large.

The true gospel needs no additions. *Jesus and nothing else – that is the message*. One does not need the sacraments, baptism or the Eucharist to be saved. Salvation is received by faith alone.

It does not need mediators standing between God and man. Jesus is the only mediator between God and man.<sup>345</sup> But it does need preachers to spread the gospel.

Therefore we should hold fast to the gospel<sup>346</sup> as the New Testament describes it. A falsified gospel does not save!

## What the Gospel Is Not

The gospel is not an advertisement for a church or denomination. Not that the church does not matter. Christians of all denominations pass on the gospel, more or less. The churches are a home, a homeland, for those who come to faith. The gospel does not see itself primarily as a programme for improving the world, although in many places it contributes massively to that. *It is rather a programme for changing hearts*. Through the love of many of Jesus' disciples, many people are helped. Hospitals, orphanages and the abolition of slavery are proofs of God's love taking

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<sup>342</sup> Romans 6:1; 2 Peter 1:9-11

<sup>343</sup> James 2:18-26

<sup>344</sup> 2 Peter 2:1; Jude 4

<sup>345</sup> 1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 8:6; 9:15; 12:24

<sup>346</sup> Jude 3

shape in people. Christians should act like salt.<sup>347</sup> Naming injustice – including global injustice – and standing up for justice. *The salvation of the individual through the cross of Christ releases a revolutionary force that transforms society at its core.* The message of the cross is the only force that can change the world for the better, and the only force that has actually proven that it can do so.

It is time for the cross of Christ to be proclaimed loud and clear once again.

In practice, the gospel shows itself in acting as Jesus did. Being ready to give, to help, to protect, to set free, to confess. To love! In many places things are changing for the better. Through people whom the gospel has changed. God works in the world through his people, and one day he will make everything new. Changing and transforming the world and solving its political, social and financial problems does not rest on the shoulders of the disciples. That is not the mandate and mission Jesus entrusted to us. In the disciples of the kingdom, in their community, God's New World has already begun. They proclaim the gospel of the kingdom and make disciples. This is the most effective influence on the society in which they live.

Nor is the gospel a programme for improving one's personal life. Or for getting rich. It is not self-improvement. It is the message that God has done and accomplished something we could not. On this rock we build our lives. Our salvation rests on what Jesus cried out on the cross: It is finished! We say yes to it; we accept it gratefully. We have nothing to add.

Prosperity or wealth, however, is never the promise of the gospel. Because of discrimination and persecution, Christians can be worse off than their neighbours. But they can rely on their God, who has promised to be with them always.

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<sup>347</sup> Matthew 5:13

## Finally

That was just an overview of the best message in the world. A message that lifts us up. That gives forgiveness and acceptance. That sets us free and encourages us through Jesus.

What does this message say to you personally? To your heart? Maybe you have never been as close to it as you are now. Today is the day of salvation – not tomorrow; tomorrow it could be too late.

The gospel is like a large banknote that is paid out in coins and small notes. It takes time to grasp the content of this message and to enter into it more and more deeply. This happens in small steps, sometimes in large ones. As we follow Jesus. In everyday life. True knowledge grows only with each step of faith and obedience. That is, only if we do what Jesus says.

*The gospel is at the centre of world history, which God has turned into the history of salvation.*

Paul wanted to preach the gospel to the believers in Rome,<sup>348</sup> although they had been walking in faith for a long time. He wanted to show its greatness, its reach and its consequences for our earthly life and for eternity. He wrote it down: the letter to the Romans. A monument to the gospel.

Read this letter!

## What's Next?

Thank God for all the good things he has said about you and also directly to you.

If you have any questions, please write to me: [hj-ronsdorf@t-online.de](mailto:hj-ronsdorf@t-online.de)

You will find more books, texts and sermons on my homepage: [www.hans-joerg-ronsdorf.de](http://www.hans-joerg-ronsdorf.de)

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<sup>348</sup> Romans 1:1-5, 9, 15-17



Here are a few important tips:

- Read the Bible. Regularly if possible.
- Read the Bible together with other people – and share what you discover.
- Pray that God will bring his Word to life for you – as if he were speaking directly to you.
- Read the text, preferably out loud and several times.

Ask the following questions about the text:

- What title would you give this text?
- What does the text say about God and Jesus?
- What does the text say about people?
- What do we learn from the text?
- What should we do?
- How does the Word encourage us?

Pray together. When you meet again, talk about your experiences.

Seek contact and fellowship with Christians who love and honour Jesus Christ and who value the Bible, read it and take it seriously.

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## **Is the gospel of Jesus good news? Why? And is it really good?**

Take some time and discover the originality of the gospel from different perspectives.

Simple and easy to understand. It is all about the big picture – and everyone can belong.

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