

# “THE BEAUTIFUL GOSPEL”

Multiple texts <sup>1</sup>

In the Beginning, God created humankind in God’s own Image, to reflect God’s glory and to have fellowship with God. God placed humankind in the Garden of Eden to care for the animals, to steward the Garden, and to represent God in the world. <sup>2</sup>

But then the unthinkable happened. Adam and Eve turned away from God in Sin. By their sinning, they, and all of Creation with them, became subject to futility and Death. <sup>3</sup> Enslaved by fear, Adam and Eve fled away from God into the shadows of the Garden and tried to hide.

**And what does God do?** God comes looking for them!

“Adam! Eve! Where are you?”

“Hiding. From You.”

“I see. And what’s that on your genitals?”

“Fig leaves.”

“What are you wearing those for?”

“To cover our nakedness.”

“Who told you that you were naked?”

And then the blaming started, and it has never stopped:

“She did it!” “He did it!” “It told me!” (Genesis 3).

**And what does God do?** God sends them away from the Garden to protect them from eating of the Tree of Life and from remaining in this state of shame forever. But God not only sent them from Paradise—God went with them. And God clothed them. God covered their shame: “Here, folks, try these furs. They’ll keep you warmer.”

Adam and Eve have sons—Cain and Abel. And Cain doesn’t care much for Abel’s worship style. Call it jealousy. He starts plotting.

**And what does God do?** He comes looking for him.

“Cain, what’s on your mind?”

“Nothing!”

“Cain, be careful. Sin is crouching at the door. It’ll eat you alive!” But Cain turns from God and murders his brother.

**And what does God do?** He goes looking for Abel.

“Cain, have you seen Abel around?”

“Am I my brother’s keeper?”

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon delivered by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 10, 2020. Good Friday.

<sup>2</sup> This sermon is a slightly edited version of “The Beautiful Gospel,” found in Bradley Jersak, *A More Christlike God: A More Beautiful Gospel* (pp. 282-295). CWR Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> The great problem the Gospel addresses is not primarily our guilt or God’s need to punish it. Rather, it is about saving us from death and the fear of death through which the devil has held us in bondage all our lives (Hebrews 2:15).

“Cain, I know what you did.”

Off Cain goes, east of Eden, where he will found civilization as we know it on lies and murder. So it is to this very day (Genesis 4:1-16).

**And what does God do?** He protects him. God gives him a mark—a sign of God’s covenant protection, warning others not to touch this son of God.

A long time passes, and along comes a man who finds God’s favor and receives God’s promise: “Abraham, I will give you and Sarah a miracle child and through his seed will come a mighty nation” (Genesis 17:17).

But Abraham is impatient. He takes matters into his own hands. Maybe he doesn’t believe. Or maybe he notices that Sarah’s slave Hagar is less wrinkled, has a better complexion, is a little perkier. He takes her. And really, how consensual was that arrangement?

Hagar bears a son, Ishmael, the Son of the False Promise. Talk about a modern, blended family! Or talk about “monster-in-law,” and family dysfunction!

**And what does God do?** He honors the Promise! Not only does God honor the promise to give Abraham the Child of Promise, Isaac, but God also establishes a covenant with Ishmael who will father twelve princes of his own! (Genesis 17:20).

Eventually, along comes another man who finds God’s favor and receives God’s promise. “Moses, I will make of you a mighty deliverer, and you will lead your people out of slavery in Egypt” (Exodus 3:1-4:17).

But Moses is impatient. Maybe he has anger and rage issues. He takes matters into his own hands and, seeing an Egyptian taskmaster abusing a Jewish slave, murders him. Things go sideways and he becomes a fugitive, lying low as a shepherd in the wilderness for the next forty years.

**And what does God do?** God comes looking for him! God shows up in shrubbery, actually. It’s time to set God’s people free. God gives Moses some pretty amazing powers, a magical staff and a spokes-brother to cover the stuttering problem. They’re good to go, and, sure enough, ten plagues later they are crossing the Red Sea, homeward bound.

Centuries pass, and along comes another man who finds God’s favor and receives God’s promises. “David, I will make you a great king over a mighty empire. We’ll call it ‘the kingdom of God.’ And from your seed will come a royal line whose throne will never pass away” (2 Samuel 7:16).

But David is a bit of a voyeur. He likes hot tubs. And he fancies an especially striking woman who enjoys rooftop bathing. Since the dancing-in-his-underwear incident, David regards his own wife as a bit of a hag (or was it wives, plural, by now?) and takes Bathsheba for himself. He gets her pregnant, botches the cover-up, and ends up having her husband sent to certain death on the front lines of battle.

**And what does God do?** God honors the Promise. After their baby dies—no, God didn’t kill the baby—God gives that same woman a second son, Solomon, who will be the first installment of God’s royal Promise. Even better, Jesus of Nazareth, a descendent of David and Bathsheba, will carry the royal Davidic bloodline into eternity! (2 Samuel 12:24).

So here is the nation of Israel, chosen by God to enjoy God’s favor and to reflect God’s glory for the world to see. But instead of being glorious, Israel becomes corrupt and unjust.

They exploit the poor and oppress the marginalized. God sees their moral and spiritual decline and confronts it through a scandalous act of performance art that we might call “The Prophet and the Prostitute.”

God tells the prophet Hosea, “*Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the LORD*” (Hosea 1:2). God indicts the nation of its crimes and describes the national destruction they deserve.

**And what does God do?** God remembers. Hosea 11 goes something like this: “Oh Israel, my heart is turned within me. I remember when you were just a baby and I first spoon-fed you. You were adorable! And then you were barely a toddler and you took those first steps, right into my arms! Listen, I can’t do it. I won’t do it. Here’s the deal: if you won’t repent (turn), I will. For I am God—I’m not a man—I won’t come in wrath! And then you will follow me!”

This drama is repeated again and again throughout what we call the Older Testament. God makes a Promise, the recipients of the Promise turn from God, experience the tragic results of that turning, and God comes to find them. Finally, because God loves humanity and doesn’t want creation to be spoiled by sin and subject to death, God becomes human, in order that humanity might be healed.

In what is now the New Testament, we see a woman whose heart has been broken again and again. A marriage, a divorce. A second marriage, it doesn’t work out. A third, a fourth, a fifth—by now we’re getting the picture. “Damaged goods,” they mutter behind her back. And now the man she’s with isn’t her husband. She is never able to find the love she’s looking for.

**And what does God do?** God comes and sits with her beside a well and says, “I know who you are, what you’ve done and why. Your problem is not promiscuity; your problem is that your soul is withering of thirst for real love. Well, I’m the water of life and I will love you and I will install a fountain of life and love in your spirit that will gush up and you will never thirst again.” And she didn’t! The woman became an evangelist that very day and shared the Beautiful Gospel for the rest of her life (John 4:1-42).

Or here is a man, who for the sake of greed and ambition—and probably a good dose of “short man syndrome”—became a tax collector, colluding with the Roman occupiers, participating in the system as an oppressor of his own people, ostracized, rejected, without friends.

**And what does God do?** God walks beneath a tree, looks up and says, “Zacchaeus, come down from there. I will do what no one else will do. I’m going to come to your house, eat at your table and become your friend.” That day, Jesus says, “Salvation has come to this house.”

And Zacchaeus was so touched that he paid back anyone he had defrauded 400%, and of his remaining wealth, 50% went to the poor. Jesus had not only restored him to his family and his community, but had broken the chains of obsessive greed that had ruined his life. He was transformed into the most generous man in town! (Luke 19:1-10).

Later, we see a woman caught in the act of adultery, dragged to the Temple where the religious leadership has condemned her and wants to stone her. By the way, where’s the man? Why only her?

Oh, there’s probably some ‘legal’ reason he’s not there, but the illegal reason is more important: this was a set-up. John 8 tells us that it was a trap. She was trapped so that the leaders could set a trap for Jesus.

“Okay, Jesus, shall we stone her or not? Will you even defy the Law of Moses for the sake of your love message?”

**And what does God do?** God kneels beside her and begins scribbling in the dust. One by one, from oldest to youngest, the accusers disperse. Jesus asks, “Where are your accusers?”

The woman replies, “They’re gone my Lord.”

And Jesus answers, “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.”

Did Jesus then say, with a sinister tone, “Sin no more, because if you sin again, you’re toast!”? No, Jesus didn’t say that. He probably said something more like this:

“Listen daughter, today the slate is clean. You get a fresh start. You’re completely forgiven—even the adultery you were just caught in. Don’t give it another thought. In fact, whatever pain or loneliness or addiction was in your heart that drove you there, all that pain is gone now, too. Welcome to your new life!” (John 8:1-11).

On another occasion, we a man who has lost his mind and been so captured by the powers of darkness—possessed by a legion of demons—that he seems no longer human. He’s a madman living chained in a graveyard, his clothes torn off, his body covered in scars from self-mutilation.

**And what does God do?** God comes looking for the demoniac. God climbs into a sailboat and crosses the Sea of Galilee, and the moment His foot touches dry land, the principalities and powers throughout the region shake in their boots. “Oh @#\*&! The Son of God has arrived!” And God says to this wild man, “I have come to you, and I will set you free. I will give you your mind back, your clothes back, your family back.”

And God does! The man is so grateful that he wants to follow Jesus and become a disciple, but to our surprise, Jesus says “No. Instead, I want you to fill the whole region with the Beautiful Gospel.” And that’s what he did! (Mark 5:1-20).

Here is a man who has either contracted a disease or been born paralyzed, unable to walk. In that culture, having such a disability means that he was considered cursed by God, punished for some sin committed by either himself or his parents, perhaps up to ten generations previously. Regardless of whose fault it was, the curse was on him, and that meant exclusion from community worship. He could never enter the Temple to worship God.

**And what does God do?** God—Jesus—is telling parables of the Kingdom in the crowded living room of a packed house. Plaster falls into His hair and He looks up. Ceiling tiles are being pulled back. Up there are four men who’ve heard about this Beautiful Gospel—of the God who removes curses rather than inflicting them, and they begin to lower the mat that’s holding their friend.

**And what does God do?** First, God clears the air of this curse business. “Son,” He says, “your sins are forgiven.” Then, seeing the skeptics’ raised eyebrows, He adds, “Take up your pallet and walk.” And so he does. The legs straighten, the muscles strengthen and the man slowly stands. He stretches, gives a little hop, then grabs his cot and marches out, right through the crowd—no doubt breaking into a run long before he arrives home! (Mark 2:1-12).

Fast forward to our own time. Here is a woman who, through childhood trauma and family dysfunction, struggled with alcoholism from her early teens. By her early twenties she had to be rescued from a drug-house by a friend who would become her husband. Now, into her thirties, she could not break the habit and was unable to stay sober for more than three months.

**And what did God do?** God saw the real thirst in her heart and drew her into God's family. She joined a faith community and learned to pray. She discovered how to treat prayer as a face-to-face meeting with a Living Friend. She became a powerful intercessor and taught others to meet Christ in the same way. She had two children and brought them to her local church as well, although her husband tended to remain more on the margins.

Still, she struggled with alcohol, sometimes showing up at her home Bible study quite loaded, as if to test her acceptance. She tried with all her might to stay clean and sober, only to stumble yet again. Eventually, she fell completely off the wagon and left her family.

Over the months, she ended up on the streets, sometimes finding a cardboard box for shelter or living with her new boyfriend in his vehicle. Even then—even while stoned—she would pray and teach other addicts to meet Jesus.

Things got worse. Her marriage ended in divorce, she began injecting drugs and contracted Hepatitis C. Her mental health was ailing, she was having run-ins with the police and barely survived a series of overdoses.

**And what did God do?** God came looking for her. Like the Good Shepherd looking for the lost, entangled lamb, God pursued her. God began this quest from inside her heart, for God had never really left her. First, God inspired her ex-husband to welcome her *and her boyfriend* into his home, where he and the kids detoxed the couple for several weeks. Then they were admitted into recovery homes for drug addicts.

During the recovery phase, one day she sat down and had a heart-to-heart with Jesus. In effect, she said, "I'm so sorry. You gave me a faith, a family, a home and a church family. And I lost it all. I've lost my husband, my children, my house and my health. I ruined it. I'm not even asking you to fix this. I just want you to know that I'm so, so sorry."

**And what did God do?** In her heart, she saw Jesus take her needle kit, fill the syringe with drugs, tie off His arm and empty the contents into His own veins!

What?! Jesus can't do that! And she told him so! But is this not exactly what Jesus has done for every one of us? On the Cross, has he not drawn all our sin and sorrow and sickness into Himself, assuming the entirety of the human condition precisely in order to heal it?

She heard Him ask, "Do you feel the grief as I do this? That's what I felt for you every time you used." Not anger. Not disgust or disdain. No shaming or guilt-tripping. Only grief.

And something amazing happened: the cravings left. The need to self-medicate was gone. God gave her the gift of sobriety, gave her a path to recovery and, without going into another full chapter, healed her hepatitis! The doctors cancelled her interferon treatments and signed off her file with the words, "Healed by the power of faith." Over ten years later, she is still clean and sober. Still, she really *had* lost her husband, her home and her family.

**And what did God do?** Fasten your seatbelts. God's about to pull a Hosea on us! First, her new boyfriend also met Christ in recovery. He, too, was given the gift of sobriety. He asked her to marry him—and she asked her ex to give away the bride! Is that allowed? Can grace be that kind? Could her ex be that forgiving?

The Way of Jesus is not complex. It boils down to this cardinal concept: if the Way of Jesus means anything, it is the call to forgiveness. Missing her children, she would phone them every night to pray with them before they went to bed. They would pray that, somehow, God would make a way for them to be together again, even though it was impossible.

**And what did God do?** God inspired the ex to invite the new couple to move into the first floor of his home and raise the children with him! The two men began doing morning devotions together out on the deck. Unreal!

Eventually, the first husband sold his half of the home to them, moved out, and was remarried himself. The two couples love each other and often come together for family events. The new husband started a landscaping business that hires and trains addicts in a new trade. He just passed the ten-year mark of sobriety. The young woman went back to school.

You won't even believe this, but it's true: this same woman has already completed her MA in marriage and family counseling and is now hard at work in that field! Together, the couple serves meals to the homeless and ministers hope to addicts who need to hear their story of redemption. This is truly the God who never turns from us, never abandons us and will walk with us through the mess of life.

Finally, here is the whole human race, chosen and dearly loved by the God who is always for us, always toward us and always in pursuit of us. Driven by fear and pride, our need to maintain our systems of power, enforced by violence—we arrest, condemn, torture and crucify this God, the Lord of Glory, Who had come to seek and to save and to love the world.

**And what does God do?** God says, "I forgive you. While you hated Me, I loved you. You who took My life, I give you My life. While you were My enemies, I made you My friends" (Romans 5:8).

Some will resist and reject God's love and forgiveness to the bitter end. And when humanity experiences the penalty of its own sin, when it falls away into death to be forever separated from God, **what does God do?** God says, "*Even if you make your bed in Sheol, I am there*" (Psalm 139:8).

As we sit here tonight, my friends, there is no place where God is not. God is in all places and fills all things with His love, for God IS Love and from the heart of God's throne of grace flows a river of fire (Daniel 7:10).

This love is always toward you; this love never turns from you. To those who respond to God's love with love, they experience this river of fire as warmth, as comfort, as eternal joy and peace. To those who respond to God's love with hatred, they experience this river of love as a consuming fire (Isaiah 33:14; Hebrews 12:29).

Even in this life, we know that love "burns" for those who make themselves its enemy: "*If your enemy is hungry, feed him, give him drink, continue to love him, it will be like burning coals on his head as long as he hates*" (Romans 12:20). But all they must do is turn and receive that love as love and, becoming friends, the former enemy no longer experiences torment but, rather, the joy of a shared meal. This is the Beautiful Gospel.

The Beautiful Gospel stands on two Truths: (1) that **God does not change**; and (2) that **God is perfectly revealed in Jesus**. Jesus did not come to change the Father, or to appease the wrath of an angry judge, but to reveal the Father.

**God is like Jesus, exactly like Jesus.**

**God has always been like Jesus.**

**We did not know that before, but now we do.**

Paul said God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself. It's not the Father that needed to be reconciled to the world. It's the world that needed to be reconciled to the Father

(2 Corinthians 5:19). Jesus, perfectly revealing the heart of the Father, confronts the sin of the world this way: **“I forgive you.”**

Even when we turn away from God, God is always there, confronting us with love. God is always toward us. Always for us.

God comes, not as a condemning judge, but as a Great Physician. Jesus was saving us from Satan, sin and death; not saving us from God.

God is perfectly revealed in Jesus, and God never turns away from humanity. When did Jesus ever turn away from sinful humanity and say, “I am too holy and perfect to look on your sin?” Did Jesus ever do anything like that? No. The Pharisees did that. They were too holy and turned away.

God is like Jesus, not like a Pharisee. The Gospel is this: when we turn away, God turns toward us. When we run away, God pursues us with love. When we murder God, God confronts us with mercy and forgiveness.

We often have a hard time believing this, because somehow we conclude that if we are “bad,” God will not listen to us or speak to us or care for us. And we don’t have to be told that we are “bad.” We all know there is darkness within.

God calls to us and says, “Hey, friend, what are you doing?”

And we say, with Adam and Eve, “Nothing!” And we turn away and try to hide from God.

**And what does God do?** God comes closer. God gets louder and more intrusive. “Are you sure you’re doing *nothing*?”

“Can I get back to you in twenty minutes?”

“Why is that? What are you into?” And if God is quiet at all, it’s because I’ve jammed fingers into the ears of my heart.

Yet somehow, I can’t shake the feeling that God is still there, watching, waiting, perhaps grieved, but if God ever seems “mad” or “absent,” I keep finding that the real problem has to do with my own pride and shame that distort the presence of Love. The Truth is, God is always there. And *here*. Right now.

My friend, the pure fire of divine Love is longing for you, God’s beloved—not merely waiting, watching or even following, but in vigorous, stalking pursuit. This God sold it all to buy the field of the world in order to obtain the pearl of great price. And you, my friend, are that pearl.

**And what does God do?** God comes to claim you, in Love.

This is the Beautiful Gospel. This is the Good News. Let your heart be glad!