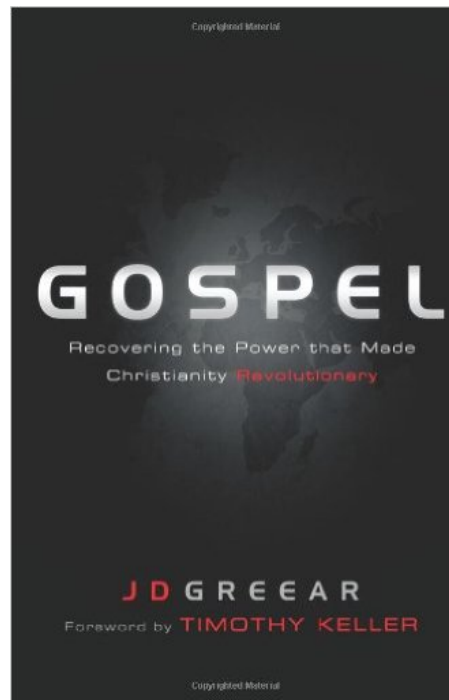


BOOK REVIEW

GOSPEL, RECOVERING THE POWER THAT MADE CHRISTIANITY REVOLUTIONARY

Review by Cas Monaco

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J. D. Greear, lead pastor at The Summit Church in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, holds a PhD in Systematic Theology from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and has written a variety of books on topics ranging from sharing the gospel with Muslims to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. *Gospel, Recovering the Power that Made Christianity Revolutionary* traces J.D.'s journey from religious drudgery to a joy-filled discovery of the gospel. His book is divided into three parts: Part 1 explains why the gospel is the only means by which followers of Jesus change; Part 2 introduces the “Gospel Prayer” – a four part prayer unpacking the fundamental truths of the gospel and practical way to “preach the gospel to yourself, daily” (6); Part 3 deals with the typical questions that arise when the gospel is preached and understood.

This section provides sound, understandable biblical answers for each question raised. With characteristic transparency and rugged sarcasm Greear paves the way to a deeper understanding of the gospel and a revolutionary way of life.

Greear contends that a Christianity not centered on a growing and deepening love for God is merely religious righteousness, a false Christianity that focuses not on Christ but on the believer's deeds. In fact, religious attempts to improve behavior or obey the rules miss the heart and purpose of the gospel. True conversion "is learning to so adore God that we would gladly renounce everything we have to follow Him" (10). In order to love God it is necessary to experience his love, and the only way to experience and understand this love is to "abide" or "make our home" in Christ, and to embrace his perfect love and acceptance. The result of abiding is spiritual fruit and growth, and ultimately, a desire to obey that rises from the depths of a growing love for God.

Greear artfully describes the emptiness of "religious change" and contends that behavior modification leads only to resentment and drudgery. According to Greear, religious change is inadequate for three basic reasons: because "religious activities fail to address the "root" idolatries that drive our sin" (30); because functional saviors base acceptance on performance and highlight the root sins of pride and fear; because there is never an assurance of acceptance, resentment toward God grows and love for God fades. The good news of the gospel, however, presents a Savior "who is better than the approval of others and a God more valuable than their praise." This section ends with a brief introduction of the Gospel Prayer, the crux of the book, discussed more fully in Part 2.

Part 2 expounds in full the four elements of "The Gospel Prayer" beginning with, "*In Christ, there is nothing I can do that would make You love me more, and nothing I have done that makes You love me less*" (46). Here Greear discusses how the gift of God's righteousness

provides complete salvation, based upon Christ's obedience, for the repentant sinner and underscores God's complete and utter love and acceptance. Even though the believer is "'hard-wired' for 'works-righteousness'" (48) and is tempted to believe Satan's lies, the pathway to transformation comes simply by abiding in the truth of the gospel.

The next part of the prayer, "*Your presence and approval are all I need for everlasting joy*" (70), deals with the believer's tendency to worship false idols. Greear exposes idols by administering the "idol detector test" and asks various questions in order to expose hidden idols – attitudes, fears, longings – that keep the believer from enjoying God's presence and approval. Greear states, "Jesus is the one essential thing that we must have. He is life itself" (79) and explains how worship, doctrine, and application enables the believer to gain spiritual sight much like the Israelites did in the book of Exodus. Spiritual sight produces obedience, Greear encourages, "when you have seen the beauty of God and felt the weightiness of God's majesty in your soul, sin's power over you will be broken" (98).

The third portion of the prayer, "*As you have been to me, so I will be to others,*" expounds the effect of the gospel on relationships and zeroes in on the radical nature of forgiveness, kindness, grace, and generosity first demonstrated by God through Christ and extended by God through the believer toward others. Notably Greear spends a great deal of time on the importance of extravagant generosity, especially for those living in wealthier parts of the world, and addresses this touchy topic with biblical insight and gospel focus. He carries the discussion of extravagant generosity beyond finances to the mission field and calls believers to give everything to God as followers of Jesus. The final aspect of the prayer, "*As I pray, I'll measure Your compassion by the cross and Your power by the resurrection,*" moves the believer toward "audacious faith and great attempts on behalf of the Great Commission" (161). Once again Greear reflects back to Old Testament examples and stories of faith and, more importantly,

of God's faithfulness, power, and answers to prayer. He encourages "intercessory faith" and a willingness to ask God for great things; he also provides perspective for those times when God's answers are different than expected.

Part 3 concludes with three common questions which Greear seeks to answer in a way that leads to the chapter on "Toward a Gospel-Centered Understanding of Life." He addresses the purpose behind Scriptural commands, with characteristic grace, and explains the importance of obedience and discipline. He states, "If you understand the gospel, you can practice the spiritual disciplines as God intends" (202). This understanding of the gospel spills over into work habits as well. The more the truth and beauty of the gospel sinks in, the more work and service becomes an outpouring of awe and thanksgiving. This chapter also provides some simple guidelines to help believers begin to figure out how to best serve and work for God. The book concludes with a description of a gospel-centered church whose priority is to preach the gospel message. When the work of Jesus Christ is on display everything else pales in comparison, and when the gospel message is preached church members demonstrate grace and truth in community, just like the early church in the book of Acts. The final chapter sounds a clarion call to a revolutionary way of life, and an invitation, "The gospel is not merely the diving board off of which you jumped into the pool of Christianity; the gospel is the pool itself. So keep going deeper into it. You'll never find the bottom" (248). In addition, the first appendix provides a simple forty-day reading plan through the Gospels. And, the second provides a warning for zealous, young theologians: beware of a gospel-centered self-righteousness and cultivate an ongoing appreciation for the deeper message.

Gospel, Recovering the Power that Made Christianity Revolutionary is an important book for 21st century Christ-followers because it provides a simple (yet profound) explanation of the gospel, and draws a clear line between religious drudgery and the joyful pursuit of an

extravagant and generous God. Greear, through his candid and relatable style makes complex doctrinal truths accessible, while maintaining a rich and sound theology, and his personal journey adds texture to his teaching. Although, there are times when the term “gospel” is used to such an extent that Jesus, the cross, and the resurrection get lost in the rhetoric. However, by emphasizing and explaining *The Gospel Prayer*, Greear more than makes up for the redundancy. In fact, this simple, profound prayer, as a stand-alone, helps believers recover the power that made Christianity revolutionary.