

John Writes A Letter

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“God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we’re free of worry on Judgment Day – our standing in the world is identical with Christ’s. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life – fear of death, fear of judgment – is one not yet fully formed in love. We, though, are going to love – love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. He loved us first. If anyone boasts, “I love God,” and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won’t love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can’t see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You’ve got to love both.” – 1 John 4:17-21, MSG

Authentic Christianity

Loving God includes loving people. You’ve got to love both.

John’s words on this subject are blunt and straight to the point. *“You cannot be a Christian and hate other people“*. It’s incompatible and hypocritical. Not only that, it’s a blatant subversion of everything that is intrinsically bound up in a Christian’s salvation by God’s grace. We love God, because He **first** loved us and, despite our complete unworthiness, He sent His son to die for us. There is no greater love than a man dying for his friends, and there could be no greater demonstration of what love looks like, to die, even for those who were your enemies.

“What marvellous love the Father has extended to us! Just look at it – we’re called children of God!” – 1 John 3:1, MSG

Of all the people on this earth, it would seem obvious that Christians would understand the implications of this. We are the recipients of a love so deep and vast and completely undeserving, it should be impossible for us to not respond to this in our relationships with others. We haven’t received from God what we should have. And what we shouldn’t have received, we have. Grace, freely given, has been demonstrated by a love lavished on us in abundance. This recognition of grace should empower and transform us to demonstrate the same kind of love in all our relationships, and especially to our Christian family.

Grace is, perhaps, the easiest concept to speak about in the enthusiastic language of a born-again believer ([John 3:1-21](#)) but, in reality, the hardest virtue to assimilate into our Christian lives. Legalism, not grace, is one of the first lessons we learn in life; that all things come with a price and that nothing is given for free. We can tend to persist in this mentality after our conversion, even on an unconscious level, viewing God and each other in this light.

“The one who won’t practice righteous ways isn’t from God, neither is the one who won’t love a brother or sister.” – 1 John 3:10, MSG

Are We Really Born Again?

There’s a serious crisis amongst Christians. It seems we can talk a lot about love, but we’re actually woefully inadequate at demonstrating it. Instead of showing real, authentic love, demonstrated in graceful, multi-faceted ways, we see the opposite in many of our Christian communities. We’re often religiously wealthy but morally bankrupt; devoid of any real expression of a grace-led life. We say we’re born again but

are we really? Has grace really touched our hearts?

Jesus told a story to illustrate what a life untransformed by grace looks like – that of the *ungrateful* servant ([Matthew 18:21-35](#)). Despite having been forgiven a massive debt of some several million dollars by his master, the servant proceeded to demand repayment of a debt owed to him by a fellow servant, of only a few dollars. When the fellow servant was unable to immediately repay, he had him thrown into prison, ‘until he could repay the debt’ – which would have been practically impossible from his prison cell. The master soon heard of the ungrateful servant’s behaviour and the conclusion of the tale is sobering:

“Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” [Matthew 18:32-35, ESV](#)

The parable was designed to impress upon the listeners the importance of their attitude towards each other in response to the forgiveness they had received from God. In fact, there is a direct connection between our professed love for God and our love for our ‘fellow servants’. John puts it this way:

“Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.” [1 John 4:20, NIV](#)

What Does Real Love Look Like?

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it

is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” – 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, ESV

These are all attributes of a life that is lived walking with God; [led by the Spirit](#). The implications of a Spirit-led life find their way into every aspect of our lives: affection for others, understanding and compassion for their failings, forgiveness of their mistakes (and our own!), confidence in God’s love and kindness, a commitment to cultivate close and loving relationships built on mutual respect and sacrifice.

These are attributes of a person who has fully grasped the weight and implications of saving grace and whose life is being transformed, day by day, following the example of the One who went before – Jesus Christ. They are choosing every day to put aside the unfruitful works of darkness and to walk in the Spirit, producing the fruit that comes from living God’s way (Galatians 5). The bright light of Christ makes their way plain.

Hate Will Destroy Us

The opposite of love is hate. And let’s get real. Hate, in all its forms, whether displayed passively or aggressively, is like a poison that destroys our soul. It will ruin our life – and not just ours. It causes havoc in our families, our relationships, our churches and, critically, to our witness of the Gospel. We may think that we have never been guilty of ‘hating our brother or sister’, but when we harbour bitterness in our heart, when we gossip about them to others, when we withhold doing good on the basis of preference, when we are angry at them, when we don’t treat them with dignity and honour, ‘esteeming all better than ourselves’, we are hating them.

So heinous is the position of hate before God that John says that a person who hates is said to be walking in darkness and not the light ([1 John 2:9, 11](#)). It's entirely possible for a person to continue professing religion but remain at enmity with their Christian brother or sister. The Bible states unapologetically that such a person is a liar ([1 John 4:20](#)).

They may fool everyone else but they cannot fool God.

Hate Is An Issue Of The Heart

We need to be on our guard in our Christian communities that we are not unwittingly or, worse, complicit in allowing lives to be ruled by hate, in all its insidious forms. While we may be vocal on what are perceived to be more serious sins (such as murder or immorality), we tend to overlook or excuse things like slander, gossip, envy, enmity, strife, jealousy, bitter disagreements, divisions or backbiting. Do we speak against these things and model a better way? We are all capable of such things and we are all responsible for preventing the spiritual disease that results from overlooking these things in our Christian communities.

We are warned over and over in the Bible of how hatred and bitterness can destroy us. We are encouraged to love one another, keep short records of wrongs, and forgive others, not harbouring bitterness or anger in our hearts.

We know that all these issues find their source in the darkness of the human heart.

“For from within the hearts of people come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery.” – Mark 7:21, ESV

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. – Ephesians 4:31, ESV

When we struggle with issues like gossip, slander, bitterness, anger or envy, the problem lies inside us, deep in the recesses of our heart. The issue is not with the person at whom our hate is directed but with us. And if it were not a problem that all Christians face, the many writers of the epistles, especially John, wouldn't have taken the time to warn us of it.

If we can't love our Christian brother or sister, then, quite simply, we don't [understand grace](#).

How Can We Change The Narrative?

The imperative first step for anyone struggling with these issues is to spend some time considering God's grace and work of salvation in their life. Make it personal. Consider what it meant for God to give His Son for you, that you might live. Consider the weight of your guilt and inability to fully satisfy God's righteousness, and comprehend the fact that, in Jesus, you are forgiven and set free, fully reconciled and made right with God.

Perhaps you don't truly believe this to be true for yourself and this is the root cause of your fear and judgment of others. Make it a priority to [find peace and true reconciliation](#) with the God who is for you and not against you. Allow the dark places of your heart to be flooded with the light of Jesus. Ask for God to soften your heart, for Him to remove the bitterness, envy and hate. Confess to Him how ashamed you are of allowing that root of bitterness to grow and ask Him to help you prune it from your life.

And, as Christian communities, we must all love enthusiastically, hating sin but loving the sinner, remembering that we were all at one time enemies of God. We must not tolerate those things that allow hate or division to flourish but show our faith by cultivating [works of the Spirit](#), against which there is no law! (Galatians 5:22-24).

“So don’t lose a minute in building on what you’ve been given, complementing your basic faith with good character, spiritual understanding, alert discipline, passionate patience, reverent wonder, warm friendliness, and generous love, each dimension fitting into and developing the others. With these qualities active and growing in your lives, no grass will grow under your feet, no day will pass without its reward as you mature in your experience of our Master Jesus.”
– 2 Peter 1:5-9, MSG

“Anyone who claims to be intimate with God, ought to live the kind of life that Jesus lived.” | 1 John 2:6, MSG

A Powerful Witness To The Truth Of Jesus Christ

Jesus tells his disciples in John 13:35, that by loving one another as he has loved them, all the world will know that they are his disciples. *The world will see your love for each other and know, without even having to ask, that you are followers of the King.* How we love, as Christians, therefore, is either a powerful witness to the truth and reality of the risen King and our allegiance to him; or a public denial of our belief in the King and his ability to truly transform our hearts. By not loving as the King loves, we demonstrate for all to see that the *ruler of this world* still controls us; that we are allowing this rule to flourish in our lives and govern our actions towards others.

Real faith in the King is more than the words we say, the emotions we feel, ideas we debate or a truth we believe. Real faith is something we do; expressed in visible ways, deeply rooted in and flowing from this focused centre; that “one man died for everyone.” Real faith shows up in our life – particularly in the way that we love the King’s people.

‘Sometimes called “the Proverbs of the New Testament”, the

book of James practically and faithfully reminds Christians exactly how to live so as to be compelling witnesses for the name of Jesus Christ. From perseverance to true faith to controlling one's tongue, submitting to God's will, and having patience, this book aids readers in living authentically and wisely for Christ.

Many have claimed that James and the Apostle Paul differed on the question of faith versus works, but in reality, the spiritual fruit that James talks about simply demonstrates the true faith of which Paul wrote.' (taken from the introduction to James, ESV 2000). *If you claim to be a Christian*, James says, ***prove it by your actions***.

The kind of faith that is real, saving faith is shown to be vital, living and demonstrable in action. Depending on God and accepting His gift of grace – truly accepting it – will radically transform our lives. It will challenge everything we do, our belief systems and possibly even misplaced prejudices about others. It will compel us to behave justly to others, with impartiality, even though the world around us might not be just or impartial. It will compel us to do better and be better, not so that we 'earn God's favour' but so that our faith can be seen as a reality, not just a matter of empty words.

Awareness of, and responding to the love of God is at the heart of our Christian lives. We are who we are, first and foremost, because of God revealed in Christ. Yet if our 'loving union with God' doesn't result in a living faith, shown by our good works to others, then, as [1 John 4:7-21](#) says so eloquently, our love for God **simply isn't real**. This kind of faith is a counterfeit Christianity and nothing more than a corpse.

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The Story's Not Over Yet...

“Walking, stumbling, on these shadow feet; toward home, a land that I’ve never seen. I am changing: less and less asleep, made of different stuff than when I began and I have sensed it all along, fast approaching is the day.” | Brooke Fraser

These lyrics are from a song by Brooke Fraser, which I think really speak to our hearts as Christians. When I listen to this song, I feel as if I catch a glimpse of the real world beyond the veil, the world that exists beyond these shadowlands. For a brief moment, it seems as if I catch sight of the home that I know to be an unseen reality, that one day I’ll see, in all its fullness, for myself.

God’s Story

I want to share a few thoughts about God’s Story, the story we see laid out in poetry, prose, prophecy and parable in the book we call the Bible.

We might be inclined to describe the Bible as merely ‘the story of the drama of human history’ – but, in truth, it’s not history yet. History, defined as *“something that happened or ended a long time ago and is not important now, or a person who is not important now, although they were in the past”*, does not accurately describe the reality that is the Word of God.

The Story of God, of which the Bible contains many important aspects, won’t become history until the arrival of “the new

heavens and the new earth, the passing away of the first earth and the moment a loud voice proclaims *“behold, the dwelling place of our God is with humanity and God is all in all”* (Revelation 21: 1-3, ESV)

It would also be too simplistic to state that the Bible is merely a catalogue of continuous human drama. The Bible isn't just a collection of stories about characters and events that happened in the past, nor merely information about cultures or civilisations that have now ceased to exist. Neither is it simply a compilation of recommended principles by which to live an honest and upright life (although it does contain these things and other helpful advice besides!).

The Bible's overarching story can't be relegated to simply ancient history or human drama alone.

“For the Word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” | Hebrews 4:12, NIV

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” | 2 Timothy 3:16-17, NIV

The Bible is the living, Spirit-breathed [Word of God](#), the written revelation of what God has been doing in the past and what He is still doing right now. It's a record of how and when God communicated His intent and purpose with humanity in the past and how He has communicated to us today.

Far from being just black text on white pages alone; this book unveils the purpose, intentionality and creative action of the Eternal One; breathed out, captured by way of quill and scroll by the faithful scribes who heard 'the voice of God', and

recorded the Story of God for all to read. The words on these pages capture the historical reality of God's powerful, creative activities throughout the history of humanity.

When Jesus was sent into the world, the story of what the Creator was doing was demonstrated literally, in Jesus himself, who was the Word-Made-Flesh. Jesus showed to humanity all the fullness and glory of God and His purpose, [embodied in flesh and bone](#) and tabernacling amongst us.

Powerful. Authoritative. Prince of Peace. Emmanuel (*God With Us*).

“On many past occasions and in many different ways, God spoke to our fathers through the prophets. But in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom He made the universe... His Word, made flesh and who dwelt among us” | Hebrews 1:1, John 1:1, ESV

By communicating through vision, in person, [through prophets](#) and finally, through His Son, we are challenged to move from simply thinking of the Bible as a book of facts or information and to instead see it as a visual recounting of what God has and is still communicating with us – the Story of God's rule and reign and the redemption of humanity demonstrated in His Son's life and death and resurrection.

This Story of God, of which the Bible contains many important details, is still being written, all around us every day. The Bible is simply the paper record of a living transformative event, of the real and ongoing story. It provides the relevant information for us to know and understand this centuries-long event, as participants in that story and as recipients of the invitation to the Kingdom of Heaven. It contains the details we're supposed to be paying attention to so we can not just understand the story being told but choose which kind of character we'll be in that story.

The promise – that God will dwell with humanity again – is the great thread of the Bible and it's the **real story** that's being written every day, all around us in a thousand different ways.

God's kingdom in the preaching of Jesus refers not to postmortem destiny, not to our escape from this world into another one, but God's sovereign rule coming 'on earth as it is in heaven.' . . . Heaven, in the Bible, is not a future destiny but the other, hidden dimension of ordinary life – God's dimension, if you like. God made heaven and earth; at the last, He will remake both and join them together forever. The end times are not the end of the world – they are the beginning of the real world – in biblical understanding." | N T Wright

The Story Begins...

The Bible opens with an account about the beginning of all things:

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the [Spirit of God](#) was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created humans in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." | Genesis 1:1-2, 26, NIV

We can tend to read this account as if it's a completed narrative. As if the statement 'Let us create humanity in our

image' was a single event that occurred in the past, one which we perhaps give little real thought to today. Yet, if we view it from a different perspective, stretching our minds a little higher, a little farther, we realise that God is still *creating humans in His image*. This is not history, this is the present reality we are living in and surrounded by.

God is doing magic, right under our noses, every single day!

[God's Spirit](#) is still hovering and continues to move in new and astonishing ways. His Word – His living Word, which brought all of the natural world into being, is continuing its creative work through redemption and regeneration in Jesus Christ, the Word-Made-Flesh. Light is still entering darkness, new life is being ignited and men and women are being reborn in God's image, to become His representatives and perfect image-bearers on this earth.

The Bible is, therefore, the only book in the world which contains snippets and segments of a real-life story that hasn't finished being told. We know what the ending will be, but we're still in it, right now, living and breathing it, every moment of our lives.

The [stories we read about in the Bible](#) then take on new significance. They're supposed to engage all our senses and connect us in very real ways to the people and situations we read about, to help us understand our place in the story that is not just theirs, but ours too. And we know that every story, every moment, has been recorded with intentionality, to enable the reader to participate, but we also know there's plenty more, left untold, that time and space couldn't allow for:

"What else can I say? There isn't enough time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets." Hebrews 11:32, CEV

“And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which, if they were written one by one, I suppose not even the world itself could contain the books that would be written.” | John 21:25, HCSB

The Bible Is Our Own Personal Origin Story

Everyone’s probably familiar with the idea of origin stories. An origin story is an account or back-story revealing how a character or group of people become a protagonist or antagonist in the main story. It adds complexity to a narrative, often giving reasons for the characters’ intentions and choices.

The Bible is therefore our own [personal origin story](#). It tells us where we’ve come from and where we’re going and invites us personally into the main story. The primary character in this story is the King of the Earth, God, revealed in Jesus and the antagonist, the Prince of this World – Sin. There are two kingdoms in this story – one of darkness and one of the Son of God, a Kingdom of Light. We don’t get a choice about which kingdom we start out in but we certainly get to decide which kingdom we finish up in

When we read the Bible, we’re not just reading **about** a story, we’re actually **in** this story and it’s unfolding all around us. This is a story of creative magic, impossible realities, futility, despair and death, rescue and redemption, light, salt, allegiance and exaltation. Most of all, it’s a story of hope.

It’s the story of the creation of the **real world**, not this shadow world that we live in now. It’s the story of how God’s Will will be done on earth, as in heaven and how God will once again walk with us in paradise. It is the story of the Creator’s divine life flowing into ours if we allow it.

This narrative gives shape and purpose to our human experience and [hope for our future](#).

“If we think that this life is all there is to life, then there is no interpretation of our problems, our pain, not even of our privileges. But everything changes when we open up to the possibility that God’s story is really our story too.” | Max Lucado

“Your life flows into mine, pure as a garden spring. A well of living water springs up from within you, like a mountain brook flowing into my heart! Then may your awakening breath blow upon my life until I am fully yours. Breathe upon me with your Spirit wind. Stir up the sweet spice of your life within me. Spare nothing as you make me your fruitful garden. Hold nothing back until I release your fragrance. Come walk with me as you once walked in your paradise garden. Come taste the fruits of your life in me. I have come to you, for you are my paradise garden! Come walk with me until I am fully yours. Come taste the fruits of your life in me.” |
□□Song of Songs□ □4:15-16,□ □TPT□□

Not If, But How?

The question for us all, then, is not ***if*** we want to be a part of this story, but ***how***.

As descendants of Adam and Eve, we’re all born into the kingdom of darkness. Their story is our story and we’re participants in that reality, whether we’re willing or not. But the Master Storyteller hasn’t left the world in darkness. He has crafted a narrative of redemption and light and offers a way, through the sacrifice of His Son, for us to be transferred from that dominion of darkness and into [His glorious Kingdom](#).

Jesus came, preaching that kingdom, urging people to choose a

better way and to give their allegiance to him. *“Repent, he said, for the kingdom of God is here. I have arrived, proclaiming God’s rule and bringing His salvation to humanity.”* (Isaiah 52:10, Luke 17: 20-21, Luke 2:30)

“What I love about the Bible is that the story isn’t over. There are still prophets in our midst. There are still dragons and beasts. It might not look like it, but the Resistance is winning. The light is breaking through. So listen to the weirdos. Listen to the voices crying from the wilderness. They are pointing us to a new King and a better kingdom.” | Rachel Held Evans

If you still belong to the kingdom of darkness, if you haven’t yet given your life and allegiance to the King, I repeat the appeal of Paul to you: *“Here we are, then, speaking for Christ, as though God Himself were making His appeal through us. We plead on Christ’s behalf: let God change you from enemies into His friends!”* (2 Corinthians 5:20)

If you have given your life to Jesus through baptism, then Good News: So Glorious! You’ve been transferred into the Kingdom of Light. **Don’t be a passive participant in the Story.**

You are a child of God, a member of the household of faith, a character in God’s story whose name is written in the book of life! (Psalm 56:8, Daniel 12:1, Malachi 3:16, Philippians 4:3)

Boldly take hold of your place in the story. Be [strong and courageous](#) and don’t fear the enemy who surrounds you. [Jesus, your King](#) reassures you: *“In the world you will have tribulation. But take courage; I have overcome the world!”* (2 Timothy 3:16-17, BSB)

“All of their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and title page: Now, at last, they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every

People Of The Kingdom

[Deciding to become a Christian](#) has its origins in believing the things about Jesus, certainly, in an intellectual sense; who he is and what he came for – but there's more to it than that. We are also choosing to surrender to his guidance and leadership in our life as a willing subject of God's designated king.

Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and earth, he becomes the first claimant on our affections, the motivating force in our decisions and the final judge of our soul (Matthew 28:18-20, Isaiah 9:6, Luke 1:33, Acts 10:36, 1 Corinthians 15:27, Colossians 1:27, Romans 8:10, Ephesians 3:16, Acts 10:42, John 5:22. 2 Timothy 4:8, James 1:21, 1 Peter 2:25).

Becoming a Christian is, therefore, primarily a matter of the heart; a reorienting of our life and decisions in line with our allegiance to the king.

The People Of The Kingdom

An intrinsic part of our identity as Christians is to recognise that we have given our allegiance to the king and that we have been transferred into his kingdom (Colossians 1:13). This kingdom's advancement, day by day in the lives of those who surrender to King Jesus, is demonstrated in a kingdom community that we call 'the church'. **The church is the tangible evidence of the reality of the kingdom of God.** Church

people are kingdom people, living in a fellowship under King Jesus, with lives that *"are literally connected to things before the creation of the world and extending far into eternity"* (Ecclesiastes 3:11) (Matter Of The Heart)

Yet, for many Christians, the 'kingdom of God' is something that takes place solely in the future. Jesus' words *"the kingdom is near"* (Luke 17:20-21) are understood to mean, in reality, *"the kingdom is coming at some later time, that time being hundreds or even thousands of years away"*. The idea of 'the kingdom' is as a future hope for faithful Christians, only realised at the return of Jesus, and not as a present reality. Entrance to this 'kingdom' (in the future) is by believing in Jesus now, receiving the forgiveness of sins in baptism, and then living a morally faithful life; and this is commonly described and preached as 'the gospel of good news' (in its entirety). In other words, *"I am a sinner. I need saving. I believe Jesus came to save me. In Jesus, I am forgiven (I hope! – one can never be too sure) and I hope to be in 'the kingdom', at some point in the future (again, all going well)."*

Yet the kingdom of God – the sovereignty and rule of God – has always existed and will always exist (Psalm 47:7, 1 Chronicles 29:11, Exodus 15:18, Psalm 103:19). 'The kingdom' existed in the past, it exists now and it will exist in the future. Our hope, as Christians, is not just some distant, far-off expectation but a reality that exists right now as we choose to yield to Jesus' rule and live 'kingdom lives' under his dominion. Believing in Jesus and being baptised doesn't just grant us forgiveness of sins; through God's grace, we also receive an entirely new identity; our small, individual stories becoming part of the much bigger story that is being told. We become kingdom people right now! (Matthew 13:38, Philippians 3:20-21, Ephesians 2:19).

Five Things That Make A Kingdom

Kingdom = King + Rule + Realm + Law + Land. Here are some thoughts about the idea of 'kingdom' in the Bible:

1. A **kingdom** is a people governed by a KING. The king is God; He has always been king, ruling firstly through *theocracy*, then by *monarchy* and now through *christocracy*. The kingdom of God, therefore, has gone through many phases, one of which was the phase exhibited during the time of Israel's monarchy. A reasonable chunk of the Old Testament is dedicated to the telling of this story. You can [read more about this in the article 'Jesus, King Of The World'](#).

2. The king must RULE over the **kingdom**. In biblical language, this is always firstly redemptive, and then secondly by governing.

3. There has to be PEOPLE for there to be a **kingdom**. In the Old Testament (OT), this was the nation/**kingdom of Israel**. But Israel, like a tree, has deep roots and grafted-in branches, seen in the New Testament (NT) to be the church (which does not replace Israel but expands it) (Romans 11:1-28).

4. A **kingdom** must have a governing LAW. In OT times, this was achieved through the Torah, also known as the Law of Moses. When Jesus (God's perfect king) arrived, he didn't destroy this law but fulfilled it completely, and by his life, death and resurrection, a greater law came into being – the Law of Cruciformity; loving as Jesus loved. Jesus stated that the entire law of the new covenant, the law which governs people of the kingdom, is summarised in these words "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Love others as much as you love yourself." (Matthew 22:37-40, CEB)

5. A **kingdom** must have a LAND. Land is big in the OT and moving into the NT, we see the 'tree of the kingdom' expanding to (eventually) encompass the whole world (Matthew 13:31-32, Mark 4:3-32). In the past, this has been, at various phases, in literal places like the Garden of Eden or the land of Israel. But right now, 'the land' is wherever 'the church'

(the community of kingdom people) takes up physical space. Wherever kingdom people reside, God, in Jesus, rules. One day, this kingdom will fill all the earth and God's rule and glory will be seen in all things – as He intended from the beginning (Numbers 14:21, Habakkuk 2:14, Matthew 6:10, Revelation 21: 1, 4)

This reality – that church people are kingdom people – is one of the most **exciting and empowering aspects of a Christian's existence in this life** – we are living for the king! So why don't we talk much about kingdom living or being kingdom people? And why don't we speak more often of the church as the kingdom community?

Soteriology: “Small-Story” Gospel

Well, here's what I think the reason might be. For many Christians, the gospel of “the good news of the kingdom of God” (which, incidentally, is what Jesus came preaching!) has unfortunately been reduced to simply a system of personal salvation and sin management. It has become a **gospel of soteriology alone**; a doctrine of salvation which has somehow become disconnected from the larger big-story **gospel of ecclesiology; theology about the nature and structure of the church.**

The truth is; when we are saved by Jesus, God also brings us into family and puts us in community! The gospel is not just about our own personal salvation but includes larger theological implications of ecclesiology – that Christian people, gathered together, are church people, who are kingdom people!

“The movement that has long called itself “Evangelical” is in fact better labelled “Soterian.” That is, we have thought we were talking about “the gospel” when in fact we were concentrating on “salvation.” | Scot McKnight

If we have a small-story gospel understanding, our trajectory as a Christian may go something like this: we (individually) repent, we (individually) are then baptised...and then life gets kind of weird for a lot of Christians. We're saved – but what now?

At this point, Christians can become obsessed with getting other unbelievers 'over the line' (saved!) but still aren't really sure what to do with them after that. Our Christian lives seem mostly about sin management (ourselves or for others) and we can tend to also be a little self-absorbed in this. All we know of 'gospel' is that we're sinners who need saving. Others are sinners who need saving. 'Christian living' (gospel living) is only about being, firstly, saved from sin and then executing a moral life thereafter.

Christianity can take a sudden and exhausting turn into the territory of works-based living, eventually leading to [church burnout](#) and, for many Christians, [the question of whether church-going is even relevant anymore](#).

Don't get me wrong. **Sin is absolutely a problem for us, as is mortality.** It is the thing that separates us from a whole relationship with God and absolutely needs addressing in our individual lives as well as in the collective human experience (Isaiah 59:2, Isaiah 53:6, Acts 3:19, Galatians 5:19-21, Romans 5: 12-21, Hebrews 7:25).

But the problem with thinking the gospel is only about personal salvation or forgiveness of sins is that we fail to recognise we are being invited into something much bigger than just a solution for our own individual stories. When we receive the good news of the gospel, our little stories are actually becoming intertwined and woven into God's larger kingdom story. We are supposed to begin experiencing life, personally and collectively, as people of the kingdom, connected to something that extends far into eternity. The fascinating reality of the gospel is that *"we are invited into*

a story that is bigger than our culture, bigger even than our own imaginations, and yet we get to experience it and tell that story to others with the particularity of our own moment and place in time” (Rachel Held Evans).

“The good news is as epic as it gets, with universal theological implications, and yet the Bible tells it from the perspective of fishermen and farmers, pregnant ladies and squirmy kids. This story about the nature of God and God’s relationship to humanity smells like mud and manger hay and tastes like salt and wine...It is the biggest story and the smallest story all at once – the great quest for the One Ring and the quiet friendship of Frodo and Sam.” | Rachel Held Evans

When we become a Christian, we become a kingdom person, living in a fellowship with other kingdom people. Church isn’t just something we go to, it’s the tangible evidence of the reality of the kingdom. Church isn’t just an event we attend, it’s a fellowship we belong to. It’s the Fellowship of the King! (1 John 1:3, Acts 2:42, 1 Corinthians 1:9)

A New Day In An Old Story

While our individual salvation is absolutely bound up in what we have come to describe as the gospel, the good news that was preached in the first century had its roots in a much older, much larger story, that of the long-promised king and saviour of the world. The power of Jesus’ sacrifice and the wonder of [his resurrection](#) form the foundation of a Christian’s faith and hope but it is the fact that Jesus is **the Christ** (“the anointed one”), that is at the heart of the gospel (2 Timothy 2:8). Our forgiveness and redemption sits inside this much larger gospel message – that of the rule and dominion of the king. Recognising the gospel as “the good news of the kingdom of God” (which, in the gospel of Matthew is also called the kingdom of heaven) helps correct our gospel theology and

realign it to the larger story that's being told. **You are part of a much bigger story than your personal salvation alone!**

Author Scot McKnight argues that Western Christians conceive 'the kingdom' too individualistically.

In both the Old and New Testaments, God's kingdom is defined in terms of God's people. This reality means that one may not put the kingdom and the church in antithesis. On the contrary, "you can't be kingdom people without being church people". McKnight, in fact, claims that "there is no kingdom now outside the church" and that "there is no kingdom mission that is not church mission" (The King Jesus Gospel pages 79, 87, 96). Kingdom living consists, then, of the church being the church – "liv[ing]" together "as a fellowship under King Jesus" (p.99). | Scot McKnight

"When Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God, he was preaching much more than personal salvation for the individual. He was preaching "a new day in an old story – the story of God the King – and God as king in King Jesus. The one gospel is about Jesus the lord, the king the messiah and the saviour. This is the story that alone makes sense of Jesus' choice of the word kingdom to explain the mission of God to the world." (Scot McKnight)

"Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force." | Matthew 11:11, NASB

"From then on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" | Matthew 4:17, NIV

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near,

Repent and believe in the good news! | Mark 1:15, NIV

“Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or, ‘There it is!’ For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst.” | Luke 17:20-21, NASB

The Significance Of “The Kingdom”

“To grasp the significance of the message of the kingdom in the ministry of Jesus, we can also resort to a statistical analysis. The term *basileia* (kingdom) occurs 162 times in the New Testament and 121 of those are in the Synoptic Gospels where the preaching of Jesus is recorded. The formula “kingdom of God” or the “kingdom of heaven” occurs 104 times in the Gospels. This message is not only the inaugural message of Jesus and the focus of His great Sermon on the Mount, it is his final message. “After he had suffered, he also presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). The gospel of the kingdom includes the necessity of salvation since the very message begins with the call for repentance, but it goes beyond the call to salvation and includes the demand for kingdom-focused living. **It insists that we are saved for a purpose.**” – SBC Life

‘Kingdom redemption’ is the work of God, through Jesus, and by virtue of his sin-solving cross and new-life creating resurrection, unleashed to those who are needy because of their sins. Any kind of “redemptive” activity that does not deal with sin, that does not find strength in the cross, that does not see the primary agent as Jesus, and that does not see it all as God’s new creation life unleashed is not kingdom redemption, even if it is liberating and good and for

the common good. | Scot McKnight

The kingdom of God is more than social justice or personal salvation. 'The kingdom' is the promise of God from the beginning to fill the earth with Himself and to rule justly in the hearts and lives of all humanity. It includes the promise of total reconciliation with humanity; only made possible in Jesus (Ephesians 1:11-12, 1 Timothy 1:16-17, 2 Timothy 4:18, 1 Peter 4:11, Romans 11:36, Revelation 1:16).

And if we want to know how Jesus understands the collective Christian life – 'church life' – the place to begin is with what he called the kingdom of God. When we think of the church – the one body of Christ, the community of believers, we need to understand how this connects in tangible, relatable ways to the 'kingdom of God' and how we see this illustrated in the people of the kingdom today. A true and full telling of the gospel must include the reality of the church, not as individuals gathered together in a building but as a kingdom of people – priests, rulers and images bearers on behalf of the King – King Jesus.

"For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" | Colossians 1:13, ESV

Author's Note: This article should in no way be taken to imply that 'the kingdom of God' is merely spiritual. Jesus' context was, clearly, the nation of Israel and historical implications are at work for these people who had been chosen to be God's witnesses. The idea of 'the kingdom of God' was certainly consistent with the Jewish hope of a saviour and the arrival of the one who would be the 'consolation of Israel'. The prophet Isaiah speaks poetically about the one who would bring

peace, justice and righteousness again to Israel. This national hero would be from David's royal line and Isaiah predicted that his kingdom would have no end.

Jesus was born to be king, destined to inherit the ancient throne of David, his royal ancestor, and to rule wisely and well, not just over Israel but over the whole world. Not only was he the descendant of David and therefore the legitimate heir to the throne of Israel, he was also the Son of God and therefore the promised saviour of the world. The confluence of these two important aspects is no coincidence and we can only be astonished at how God chose to bring all these things together to achieve His purpose.

God has in no way forgotten his promises to individuals or to groups of people and implicit in that are literal promises to the people of Israel that still await fulfilment (Isaiah 52:7-9, Luke 2:25, Acts 26:6).

“And he shall set up a banner for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.” Isaiah 11:12, NASB

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” – Micah 5:2, NIV

“Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the descendants of David, and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?” – John 4:42, NIV

There are many layers to God's great story, which finally converge in Jesus. “Jesus is all of Israel's major leaders and more, he's a new Moses and especially a new David and a new Solomon and a new servant and a new son of man and whole new redemptive order. His name – *Yeshua* – means ‘he will save his people from their sins’ (Matthew 1:21). The story is that in Jesus God now rules and God's kind of ruling is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, and reconciling.” (Scot McKnight)

Keep Your Eyes On Jesus

We're [called to a radical life](#).

This is a life in which we're called to follow someone we've never seen. We've heard about him but we've never seen him with our own eyes. We've 'believed the report', the good message about who Jesus is and why he came, and our hearts have been convicted to follow him. And even though we haven't seen him, we love him.

"Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory" | 1 Peter 1:8, ESV

The Redemptive Power Of His Sacrifice

We have come to realise that, without Jesus, we are nothing more than 'dead men walking'.

We're reminded of the story of the serpent placed on the pole during Israel's wilderness wanderings (Numbers 21). Their criticism of God and His way brought a plague of poisonous snakes throughout the camp. Moses was told to place a copper snake on a pole for all to see and anyone who fixed their gaze on that serpent on the pole would be healed and live.

A snake on a pole has come to represent medicinal healing throughout the medical world today and we can, of course, see the redemptive symbol in this story for our Christian lives. The bronze serpent is the clearest type of the saving work of Jesus. Jesus himself used this symbol to appeal to the people

in his day (John 3:14). Like the serpent, Jesus was to be raised on a stake for all to see, and all those who looked to his redemptive sacrifice would live.

We fix our gaze on Jesus, crucified, believing in the power contained in his name, and though we are dying, yet we live! Death no longer has the final say.

“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.”
| 1 Corinthians 15:-20-23, NIV

Believing And Becoming In Jesus

Our Christian life starts the moment we turn our eyes to Jesus and [acknowledge him](#) as Lord of our heart and our life. But our gaze must never leave him.

The Christian life is one of transformation; of more than just believing, but of becoming, where the impossible is possible. We are able to become more than conquerors through him who loved us.

“What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will He not also, along with him, graciously give us all things. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.” | Romans 8:31-32, 37, ESV

We are learning to follow where Jesus has gone already and we are learning, day by day, to trust him as our good shepherd.

A Leap Of Faith

Living the Christian life is often stepping out into the unknown. It's often an exercise in surrender, trust, and faith.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.” | Hebrews 11:1-3, ESV

We look around us and see how things presently are, in this life, **and yet we believe that there is more** and that **we can be more**. This belief is underpinned by the [evidence of the risen Christ](#). Resurrection, the most unbelievable, incredible event to have possibly happened **has** happened. When Christians gather together for communion, we celebrate and witness to this remarkable event. The ramification for us as believers is not a small thing: the [same power](#) that raised Jesus from the dead now lives in us!

“I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand in the heavenly realms.” | Ephesians 1:19-20, NLT

“And if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit, who lives in you.” | Romans 8:11, BSB

Jesus promised his followers that he would be with them, even to the end of the world. This is his promise to us. Sometimes

he will lead us through fire and across water, through deep valleys and up high mountains. There is no promise that the Christian life will always be easy but he promises he will never leave us or forsake us.

Some of you may be feeling the heat of those flames. Or perhaps you feel like your feet are sinking and you're going to drown. Raise your eyes and fix them on Jesus! He goes before us, he stands beside us, every day of this Christian life.

Faith Is Learning From History

We learn a lot from the story of Israel and their exodus from Egypt. When the children of Israel were delivered out of slavery, that moment only signaled the beginning of a journey of faith. And almost immediately, they were brought to the edge of the ocean, with churning water ahead of them and the enemy hard at their heels. There was no way forward and no way back. And then, suddenly, a miracle was performed and God parted the ocean before them – a way out – seemingly impossible but clearly visible. They had to make a decision of faith – to step into that path cut through the ocean and cross through to the other side. Moses, their leader, spoke boldly at this moment:

“Don't be afraid, stand firm and watch God do His work for you.”

Some of us may be in that moment right now, afraid of what is behind us and unable to see a path ahead of us. Sometimes, the step of faith involves standing still and watching God go to work for us. Sometimes, faith asks us to step out into the unknown.

We have the story in Matthew 14:24-31 of Peter being called by Jesus to step out of the boat and onto the churning water. And we realise from reading this story that sometimes faith asks

us to step out of the boat, out of the place where it feels comfortable and relatively safe and into the dark and churning ocean. In those moments, too, we must not lower our gaze. Faith will keep us afloat, fear will sink us.

We must look for Jesus and keep looking for Jesus. He is the good shepherd, who laid his life down for the sheep, and, like the Psalmist, we can confidently say,

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” | Psalm 23:4

Keeping Our Eyes On Jesus

How do we keep our eyes on Jesus? How do we ‘follow him’ and keep him front and foremost in our minds, day by day?

We need to make him real! We need to learn about him, discover what kind of leader he is, read about his character, his personality, his emotions. We need to talk to him, tell him our struggles and our fears. We need to ask for his courage to be ours. We need to invest in **relationship** with him; deep and personal and transformational.

We need to be reminded and convicted in our hearts that he is not just our personal saviour and friend, but [the resurrected King](#), in whom all power rests and with whom all things are possible!

When we come together as church, we are reminded that the church was born from the sacrifice of a man who, while we were yet sinners, died for us. Who, for the joy that was before him, endured the cross. And whose resurrection assures us that the best is still yet to come.

“The word that saves is right here, as near as the tongue in your mouth, as close as the heart in your chest. It’s the

word of faith that welcomes God to go to work and set things right for us. This is the core of our preaching. Say the welcoming word to God – “Jesus is my Master” -embracing, body and soul, God’s work of doing in us what He did in raising Jesus from the dead. That’s it. You’re not “doing” anything; you’re simply calling out to God, trusting Him to do it for you. That’s salvation. With your whole being you embrace God setting things right, and then you say it, right out loud: “God has set everything right between Him and me!” Scripture reassures us, “No one who trusts God like this – heart and soul – will ever regret it.” | Romans 10-10-13, MSG

The Christian life isn’t always easy and the next step isn’t always clear. Sometimes we need courage to make that step and sometimes we just need to stand still and watch God go to work for us.