

# Searching For Identity

*"If I find in myself desires nothing in this world will satisfy. I can only conclude that I was not made for here." |  
C S Lewis*

## Searching For Identity

I want to confess, at the outset, that as I was attempting to put down some of the thoughts I wanted to share relating to identity, my mind ran an internal commentary about myself. Thoughts such as, *"what will people think of me?"*, *"how will I be perceived?"*, *"I wonder if they'll think 'this' thing or 'that' thing"* ran on loop in my brain. I felt overwhelmed at the thought of showing up, convinced that I'm extremely flawed (and therefore inadequate to be sharing anything of value), anxious about my capacity to sufficiently convey and do justice to God's truths, and wondering, perhaps, at whether I'm even the most articulate person in the world to be attempting to do so!

It struck me as really quite ironic that I was wrestling with my identity **as I prepared to write and share about identity!** I guess it seemed to prove, at least to me, that our identity, [our true identity](#) is something that we have to work hard at reminding ourselves of and something we all have struggled with or will struggle with throughout our lives.

I want to refer to a particular quote which I love – Colossians 1:13

*"For He [God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves." |  
Colossians 1:13 (ESV)*

How truly life-changing! In becoming [disciples of Jesus](#), we've

also become subjects of his kingdom – living in the sphere where Jesus rules!

## **We Are Kingdom People!**

I think this is the first important truth we need to know, believe and establish at our core when we start to think about our identity and who we are. Before we relate ourselves to anyone (or anything) else in our lives, we are first and foremost **kingdom people** and **Jesus is our king!**

Choosing to be a Christian has its origins in believing the things about Jesus, 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 has first claim on our affections, he is 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).

Perhaps we need to take a step back and consider the powerful force that enacted this transfer from the dominion of darkness. The motivating force in all of this was love – the love of an eternal God and the love of a righteous king, **who willingly died** for those who were still his enemies. While we were still in darkness, Jesus died for us. This is the meaning of '**saving grace**' – undeserved, unmerited and entirely outworked without our help or contribution.

*“Christianity is not about our disciplined pursuit of God but about God's relentless pursuit of us – to the point of Jesus dying on a cross for us that we might become His friends. The inexhaustible God loves us so intensely that every time we turn to Him after wandering from His love for us, all heaven breaks out in a thunderous celebration (Luke 15:7)*

*Most of us believe this intellectually. This is the message of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Experiencing this infinite love in our hearts, however, is another matter. The sinister voices of the surrounding world and our pasts are powerful. They repeat the deeply-held, negative beliefs we may have learned in our families and cultures growing up:*

- I am a mistake*
- I am a burden*
- I am stupid*
- I am worthless*
- I am not allowed to make mistakes*
- I must be approved of by certain people to feel ok*
- I don't have the right to experience joy and pleasure*
- I don't have the right to assert myself and say what I think and feel*
- I don't have a right to feel*
- I am value-based on my intelligence, wealth, and what I do, not for who I am.*

*It is astounding how many deeply committed followers of Jesus would affirm that the preceding statements articulate how they truly feel about themselves. Like the prodigal son, they are content to relate to God as hired servants, rather than enjoy the full privileges of sons and daughters of our heavenly Father (Luke 15: 11-21)" – Peter Scazzero*

*"Whom the Son sets free is free indeed!" | John 8:36 (ESV)*

Perhaps we are also more willing at times to relate to God as slaves still chained in the dominion of darkness than of kingdom people, set free and redeemed by the Son and the king!

## **The Process Of Discipleship**

Discipleship – being people of the kingdom – is a process that moves us from being spiritually and emotionally immature children to being fully mature and developed adults – "people

*dedicated to God, and capable and equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:17, NET).*

This process of discipleship is a principle-centered, character-based, “inside out” approach to developing our authentic self in Christ. It means to start first with ourselves; even more fundamentally, to start with the most inside part of self – our core – and to honestly analyse our paradigms, our character, and our motives and to realign those with the king we are serving, with the master we are following.

I think a lot of us struggle with having a clear sense of who we are, and our Christian life is often theory rather than practice, layering over our core, rather than challenging ourselves to examine what lies at the heart of us. This process of layering – creating and developing a false self over the top of core emotional truths – ensures that we remain entrapped and enslaved to ‘the old man’, rather than liberated in Jesus as a [new creation](#).

It takes courage to decide to live differently, to follow Jesus into the unknown and to be committed to emotional and spiritual reality. It takes courage to define ourselves by how God sees us – deeply loved, despite our flaws and to live from that basis of [grace](#) in our Christian discipleship.

*“Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is an illusion.” | Brennan Manning*

I’d really like to encourage us all, but especially those of you who might be really struggling with identity right now in your life, to give real attention to developing your authentic self in Jesus.

1. Pay attention to your interior (the “heart of you”) in silence and solitude.

2. Find trusted companions to help you along the way.
3. Move out of your comfort zone.
4. Pray for courage.

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are God's children. Our existence is now framed by Christ's life – who is [a life-giving Spirit](#) (Romans 8:16).

Here are some core, emotional truths that we can believe and take deep into our hearts, as much-loved children of God: We are created in God's own image (Genesis 1:27), the crowning glory of His creative work (Psalm 8:5). We are incredibly unique and known intimately by God (Psalm 139:13-16) and we are more valuable to Him than many sparrows (Matthew 10:31). Even when we have travelled far from His spirituality (Romans 3:23), He loved the world so much He sent His son to die for us (John 3:16). While we were still 'at enmity' with Him, He reached out to reconcile us back to Him (Romans 5:8-10). His grace, not our sin, has the final word in our position before Him (Romans 5:20). Those who step into His grace are saved (Romans 10:13), we are born-again (1 Peter 1:3), adopted as God's children and positioned as His heirs (Ephesians 1:5, 1 John 3:2, Romans 8:16-17). **We belong to God and He loves us with the love of a perfect Father** (John 14:18, 1 John 3:1).

*"...This is my [Paul's] prayer. That God, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ and the all-glorious Father, will give you spiritual wisdom and the insight to know more of Him: that you may receive that inner illumination of the Spirit which will make you realise how great is the hope to which He is calling you—the magnificence and splendour of the inheritance promised to Christians—and how tremendous is the power available to us who believe in God. That power is the same divine power which was demonstrated in Christ when He raised him from the dead and gave him the place of supreme honour in Heaven—a place that is infinitely superior to any conceivable command, authority, power or control, and which carries with it a name far beyond any name that could ever be used in this*

If you are struggling with your identity as a disciple or want to understand more about God's work of grace in your life (and how that causes radical transformation), I would highly recommend reading the following two books: "What's So Amazing About Grace" by Phillip Yancey and "Emotionally Healthy Spirituality" by Peter Scazzero.

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

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## 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*

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**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)

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## Toxic Faith

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

It seems hard to believe that people who have answered Jesus' call to a life of freedom could so easily lose the sense of joy and relief they first felt. It's difficult to understand why Christians who have been made free and 'alive in Christ' would choose to return to a kind of spirituality that slowly imprisons the mind and poisons the soul. How does a message that speaks clearly of God's love – a life of salvation in Jesus by His grace – become perverted and distorted, becoming instead a culture of performance-driven expectations, demanded by an unfair and intolerant God?

*"God didn't go to all the trouble of sending His Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again." | John 3:17, MSG*

Yet for many Christians, this is exactly where they find

themselves. It may be early into their Christian journey or many years later, but somewhere along the way, their perception of Christianity becomes misshapen and their sense of peace, fulfillment, and relief dissipates.

Religious life becomes exhausting; they feel overwhelmed, emotionally drained and trapped. They may begin to judge themselves or others around them by what they do, what they wear, what they say. They become consumed by rules, preoccupied with fault and blame, and heavily focused on performance – their own or others'. Something that was meant to empower them and set them free has rendered them powerless – they are stuck, with no way forward and no way out.

The simple truth of being 'saved by grace through faith alone' has been turned on its head, becoming 'the gospel of acceptance with God through performance'. Their simple faith in Jesus as the only source of life and acceptance with God has become toxic. Or perhaps, sadly, they never had that simple faith to begin with.

## **Toxic Faith**

Toxic faith is a destructive and dangerous relationship with a religious system, not with God, that allows this system to control a person's life in the name of God. It is a system where another gospel is preached – not one of freedom and liberty and acceptance through grace, but one, in reality, of enslavement to rituals and rules.

Seeking God's approval on the basis of your own religious behaviour is toxic faith. Anything that adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching. A true and meaningful relationship with God can never be sustained on this basis.

This deconstruction of faith is not just a problem that modern Christians struggle with. The first-century church at Galatia

also dealt with this issue and the damage caused by this 'false gospel' is catalogued throughout the letter written by Paul to the Galatians.

The tone of Paul's opening words is one of incredulity at the situation in which the Galatians find themselves.

*"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all." | Galatians 1:6, NIV*

The Greek word used here for 'desert' means 'to defect'; and it's a defection, not from a denomination or doctrine, but from 'Him who called you by grace'. It's a severing of the real and personal relationship a Christian has with God. And it's a distortion of the gospel Paul first preached to them, Christ's gospel, of forgiveness of sins by grace – by Jesus' performance – and not by their own. In fact, Paul says, it's really no gospel at all.

Paul takes the issue the Galatians are dealing with very seriously. When a spiritual life of grace and rest is replaced with a life of imposed works, it's a hugely serious issue.

But what was happening in Galatia for Paul to be so up-in-arms? What induced him to tackle the situation with such passion, to the point of stating the following words, not once but twice?:

*"Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach **a gospel other than the one we preached to you**, let them be **under God's curse!** As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you **a gospel other than what you accepted**, let them be **under God's curse!**" | Galatians 1: 8-9, NIV*

# Law Versus Grace

Paul had been converted from a life steeped in [religious tradition](#) and law, a life that gave him privilege, prestige, and power. He had used that power to persecute the church of God, systematically destroying it, until one day He was confronted by the risen Jesus, and a message that was radically different to everything he thought he knew.

Paul learned that God was not an impersonal force to be used to make people behave in certain prescribed ways, but a personal saviour offering life and freedom through the saving work of Jesus. Paul discovered that right standing with God was not to be achieved through law-keeping – and, in fact, was impossible to be achieved this way – but by personal belief in God's promises.

Paul learned of the **true gospel** – that of being 'saved by grace through faith alone and not by works, lest any man should boast' (Ephesians 2:8-9).

This is the gospel that He originally preached to the Galatians and which they had gladly received. Yet, it is with dismay that he hears that religious leaders of the old school had come into the church, reintroducing old ways, law-keeping, and an abundance of religious rules and regulations. One of these religious rules was the rite of circumcision, which they were insisting Christians should undertake. Circumcision, in that time, was the ultimate act of external religious performance, and was being promoted as added 'proof of spirituality'.

*'Yes', they would have said 'faith in Jesus is important and you absolutely must have it. But it's **not enough**. In order to find positive standing with God, you must also be circumcised'.*

In other words, there was a group in Galatia propounding the

idea that right standing with God depends on what Jesus did **plus** additional 'spiritual acts' that are undertaken. This is completely in opposition to the message of the cross, that salvation comes through Jesus' performance, not our own:

*"For Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." | 1 Corinthians 1:17-18, ESV*

*"He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." | 1 Peter 2:24, NIV*

This 'different gospel' was a serious perversion of God's gift of grace and a not-so-subtle manipulation of the relationship between the individual and God. No wonder Paul was furious.

*"Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God's grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily." | Galatians 2:21, MSG*

## **The Collision Of Grace And Spiritual Performance**

The word of God is living and active, and, like a powerful sword, it cuts right through [to the heart](#), judging the thoughts and purposes contained therein. It can be used as an instrument of grace, by reminding us of God's love and showing us how to bring order and purpose to our lives.

In the wrong hands, however, or wrongfully used, the word of

God can be used in ungraceful ways, as a means of shaming others into performing someone else's agenda, in the name of God. In the hands of performance-based people, it can be used as a weapon in order to pressure people into acting differently or to get rid of them if they do not. It can be used to lay burdens on men 'too difficult to bear'.

*"Woe to you experts in religious law as well! You load people down with burdens difficult to bear, yet you yourselves refuse to touch the burdens with even one of your fingers!" | Jesus, Luke 11:46, NET Bible*

The appearance of Jesus on the Jewish scene was a dramatic collision between grace and spiritual performance. The conflicts the Pharisees initiated with Jesus were usually over minor issues such as fasting (Mark 2:18), sabbath keeping (Mark 2:24), eating with 'unclean' people (Mark 9:11), or attitudes towards civic duties, like paying taxes (Matthew 9:11) – all performance-driven markers of supposed spirituality.

The Pharisees 'majored on minors' because precise details of religious life were their passion, but in doing so, they were actually inverting spiritual values. They made uncompromising stands on matters of no particular spiritual importance, while issues of greatest significance were minimised.

Jesus called them out on their hypocrisy in the gospel of Matthew, where he says:

*"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." | Matthew 23:24, NIV*

Jesus, in contrast, set out the essential way that a person finds [right standing with God](#):

*“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” | John 14:6, BSB*

*“I am the gate. If anyone enters through Me, he will be saved. He will come in and go out and find pasture.” | John 10:9, NIV*

*“Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies.” | John 11:25, NIV*

*“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be [saved](#).”  
| Acts 4:12, ESV*

Jesus is the only way to find right standing with God. The name of Jesus is the only means by which humanity can be saved. Jesus’ performance, not our own, is what secures this extraordinary gift of grace.

Christians must not be drawn to extremes in a misguided zeal for religious purity but pay attention to the essentials that Jesus so patiently explained. We must be on guard to avoid systems that employ the use of ‘formulas’ and ‘doctrines’ to press good people of faith into conformity with a system instead of conformity to Christ. Particularly, we must be on the lookout for cultures that promote or enable power posturing, performance preoccupation, unspoken rules, and a lack of balance.

*“God’s steward, an overseer (leader) must be above reproach – not self-absorbed, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not greedy for money. Instead, he*

*must be hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it was taught, so that by sound teaching he will be able to encourage others and refute those who contradict this message. For many are rebellious and full of empty talk and deception, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced.” | Titus 17-10*

*“Leaders are given to the church to protect the flock from legalists, who push religious performance as the means of right standing or favour with God. In Paul’s letter to Titus, he says that the rebellious men **must be silenced**. Unfortunately, in many churches, not only are the leaders not protecting the flock against those who push religious performance, they are the pushers and in bondage to performance themselves.” | Johnson & VanVonderen*

Jesus had no interest in setting up rigid religious and social guidelines for his followers. He chose instead to major on the significant agendas of the kingdom of God. Paul confirms Jesus’ way of living in his final words to the Galatians:

*“For my part, I am going to boast about nothing but the cross of our Master, Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, I have been crucified in relation to the world, set free from the stifling atmosphere of pleasing others and fitting into the little patterns that they dictate. Can’t you see the central issue in all this? It is not what you and I do – submit to circumcision, reject circumcision. It is what God is doing, and He is creating something totally new, a free life! All who walk by this standard are the true Israel of God – His chosen people. Peace and mercy on them!” | Galatians 6:14-16, MSG*

*“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” | John 8:32, NIV*

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**Toxic:** 'Mid 17th century: from medieval Latin toxicus 'poisoned', from Latin toxicum 'poison', from Greek toxikon (pharmakon) '(poison for) arrows', from toxon 'bow'. (Oxford Dictionary). 'Containing or being poisonous material especially when capable of causing death or serious debilitation' (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). **Faith:** 'Great trust or confidence in something or someone.' (Cambridge Dictionary)

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## Repentance: Grasping Hold Of Grace

The Bible describes the act of receiving God's grace as repentance. At its core, repentance means to turn back, to change one's mind. But Scripture shows that true repentance is more than a change in thinking – it also results in a change in behaviour.

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## The White Flag Of Grace

The subject of God's grace permeates every aspect of [the Gospel](#), giving it weight and power. The saving acts of God, due to the work of Jesus on the cross and Jesus' resurrection from the dead bring reconciliation ("atonement") between people and God. This is why the Gospel is described as a message of hope for the whole world (Luke 14:15-24).

The word 'grace' itself is described by one author as "the last, best word" in English, remaining unspoiled over the years in its meaning. Its many usages still retain some of the glory of the original, with words like *gratitude*, *gratuity*, *congratulations*, and *gratefulness* all carrying the idea of something that brings delight, joy, happiness, or good fortune.

## The White Flag Of Grace

The word 'grace' in the Bible (*chen* in Hebrew, *charis* in Greek), literally means 'favour', with the idea of bending or stooping in kindness to another, together with graciousness in manner or action. The Old Testament use of the word includes the concept of those who "show favour" by undertaking gracious deeds, or acts of grace, such as being kind to the poor and showing generosity. Examples of God's graciousness are also seen throughout the Old Testament, as in Deuteronomy 7:8, Numbers 6:24–27, Psalm 119:29 and Psalm 27:7.

In the New Testament, the word grace has many layers of meaning, including the deepest and most transformative – God's saving grace, as defined by Ephesians 2 – the gift of eternal life, freely given through Jesus Christ. In God's language, His grace gives us what we don't deserve and cannot earn. This is why it is so frequently contrasted against the Law of Moses, which still condemned every man or woman, no matter their sincerity or good deeds.

*"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." – Romans 6:23, ESV*

*"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." – Ephesians 2:8, NIV*

*"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only*

*Son, that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.” – John 3:16-17, NIV*

We see God’s love for humanity demonstrated in His grace – His undeserved favour and kindness, bestowed on the human race. God’s grace was shown in action – in [sending His son](#), to save the world through him.

## God’s Grace Is A Gift

Paul the apostle frequently described God’s grace as a gift because he, of all people, understood how easy it was for Christians to be deceived into believing they could earn God’s love or forgiveness. Paul, previously known as Saul, had been an extremely zealous [Pharisee](#). He was strictly religious, scrupulously lawful and he actively persecuted the new Christian religion (believing them to be heretics) – consenting even in their murder, in the misguided belief that he was doing God’s will (Philippians 3:5-7).

Yet Paul was confronted on his way to Damascus in a very real way by the [risen Jesus](#), who made it clear to him that God’s grace is something that is given freely, not earned.

The truth is, we cannot “earn anything” from God and we don’t “deserve anything”, apart from the sentence passed on humanity for [Adam and Eve’s disobedience](#) in the beginning – mortality. Yet God generously offers us something quite different, something undeserved – forgiveness and life, **as a gift**. God has, in effect, raised the white flag of grace, enabling a way for us to be reconciled back to Him.

*“He has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of His own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.” – 2 Timothy 1:9, NIV*

God's call to saving grace has been echoing down the centuries, appealing to any who would listen. Isaiah 55 likens this call to the provision of thirst-quenching water, free of charge, to those who are dying of thirst.

*"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost." Isaiah 55:1, NIV*

## The Spirit Of Ungrace

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.

Yet, the concept of grace flies in the face of what we perceive to be deserved or fair and offers a completely different way of seeing things – less like ourselves and more like God. Jesus taught in his now famous prayer, known as "the Lord's prayer", that we should ask God to forgive us **as we forgive others** (Matthew 6:9-13). Peter later tried to clarify exactly what Jesus meant by this, asking him to specify how many times he was required to forgive (Matthew 18:21). Peter hadn't grasped the 'unreasonableness' of grace, as God sees it. We are to forgive **as God has forgiven us**. Wholeheartedly and without reservation.

Peter's question prompted Jesus to tell another story – 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. Keeping score or imposing limits of forgiveness simply do not find a place in Christian behaviour. God has already forgiven us a debt so mountainous that any person's wrongs against us shrink to anthills in comparison. How can we not forgive in the light of what we ourselves have received?

In fact, there is a direct correlation 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

## **Forgiveness Is An Act Of Faith**

*"One day I discovered this admonition from the apostle Paul, tucked in among many other admonitions in Romans 12. Hate evil, Be joyful, Live in harmony, Do not be conceited – the*

list goes on and on. Then appears this verse, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." At last I understood: in the final analysis, forgiveness is an act of faith. By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God's hands the scales that must balance justice and mercy. When Joseph finally came to a place of forgiving his brothers, the hurt did not disappear, but the burden of being their judge fell away. Although wrong does not disappear when I forgive, it loses its grip on me and is taken over by God, who knows what to do. Such a decision involves risk, of course: the risk that God may not deal with the person as I would want. (The prophet Jonah, for instance, resented God for being more merciful than the Ninevites deserved.) I never find forgiveness easy, and rarely do I find it completely satisfying. Nagging injustices remain, and the wounds still cause pain. I do so because the Gospel makes clear the connection: God forgives my debts as I forgive my debtors. The reverse is also true. Only by living in the stream of God's grace will I find the strength to respond with grace toward others." – [Henri Nouwen](#)

The long and short of it is this: if we cannot show even the slightest resemblance of grace in our lives to one another, then we have totally misunderstood who God is and what exactly it is that He has done for us.

Grace teaches that God loves because of **who God is**, not because of who we are. Therefore, we choose to show that same attitude of grace in our behaviour to others. Showing grace isn't because we **should forgive**, it's because we're reminded that we **have been forgiven**.

*"And this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus*

*Christ to all who believe. There is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus....” Romans 3:22-24, BSB*