

# Crossing Over

There are many crossings a human will make in a lifetime. Our introduction to life is just the first.

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## Three Reasons I Don't Believe In Hell

Before beginning, I would like to acknowledge that discussing this particular topic may appear to be controversial and that you, the reader, may not share the views I express. This article is not intended to be offensive or divisive in nature, but rather to open a channel of respectful conversation about a subject that is deeply important to many people.

I have chosen some time ago to abandon a rigid position on issues or topics which are non-essential to the gospel, from which there is no possible room to move or breathe, and allow my questions and convictions to sit in tension with one another while my Christian life continues to grow and deepen.

What this means, in practical terms, is that I'm genuinely interested to hear from you, that I welcome engagement and even difference on many biblical subjects, including this one, and, while I express this to be my currently held position on this topic, I would hope I am still open to learning new things as scripture speaks to me and as I hear from others.

The following thoughts are expressed in that light:

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The subject of *hell* has popped up in a few different conversations recently, and, while I tend to try to avoid speaking from a position of a negative (*'what I don't*

*believe...'*), this doctrine is one that's never rung true for me.

I genuinely doubt the validity of the doctrine of hell or that it's an actual teaching of scripture. For many Christians, a requirement to believe in hell has been a deal breaker in their faith and, I think, for good reason. It's hard to reconcile the many elements of this doctrine with the picture the Bible paints of a good, good God.

In this article, I'd like to share three compelling reasons why I think the doctrine of hell doesn't biblically add up and why I think it's actually in opposition to the truth of the gospel narrative.

## **But Firstly, What Do I Mean By *Hell*?**

Well, I'm referring to the (assumed to be) biblical teaching about the destination of the soul at the moment of death; either to heaven if you've 'done okay' or, alternatively, to hell, if you 'haven't quite measured up'. *Saints* go up. *Sinners* go down.

The parameters for 'not quite measuring up' can differ greatly depending on who you might be talking to. Some would say that *anyone* who hasn't [received Jesus as Lord and Saviour](#) is outside God's salvation. Therefore, either by ignorance or purposed willfulness, they have rejected God and earned themselves a one-way ticket to hell.

This includes, for example, people living deep within the Amazon jungle (who have had limited contact with the outside world and may never have heard the Christian message of Jesus Christ), those who may have been Christian once but have turned their back on Christ, those who have heard the message of Jesus but decided *no thanks*, as well as those who have engaged in various horrors such as rape, torture and mass murder during their lifetime.

Others are more uncomfortable with the thought of Adolf Hitler rubbing shoulders with good and sincere people (who, while they might not have been Christian, could hardly be described as having lived a 'wicked life'). Or those who, through no fault of their own, had never even heard of hell, let alone Jesus. It does seem a little heavy-handed a response towards people who were essentially clueless about the rules but were punished anyway. Hell, they therefore conclude, is only for the truly wicked; surely [God makes concessions for nice people?](#)

The traditional teaching of hell is that it's a place of both psychological and physical torment; an 'eternal lake of fire' where the wicked are perpetually burned for all eternity (decide for yourself who qualifies). This imagery was further elaborated on during medieval times by the artists who graphically displayed vile creatures eating flesh and devouring sinners in the place of torment. (These images, together with fragmented texts of the Scriptures, and the circulation of [apocryphal](#) books, led the medieval church into some strange and grotesque doctrines).

The period of history known as The Great Awakening (1730-1740) placed particular emphasis, as a method of conversion, on the horror that awaited the unrepentant sinner. Jonathan Edwards, a famous American congregational preacher of the time, described hell as a place where "God holds men over the flames in the way that one holds a loathsome spider over a candle. He speculated on how it would feel to have the searing agony of a burn drawn out through eternity. He told listeners that the ground beneath their feet was a rotten flooring over a blazing pit, ready to give way in seconds." (Bruce Shelley, Church History In Plain Language)

## **What Does Scripture Teach?**

Psychologists today would no doubt have a field day with the profoundly damaging psychosocial and spiritual effects of this

kind of preaching, dubbed 'fire-and-brimstone', but, more particularly, what does the Bible preach? Is this kind of reality really found in scripture?

Here are three reasons why I don't think scripture teaches this at all:

## **1. Hell Doesn't Fit The Gospel Narrative**

One of the amazing aspects of the Bible is the consistency of its message and theme, from start to finish. It's remarkable, given the reality of its varying authorships and the different time periods during which it was written, that the major theme of God's sovereignty, rule, and purpose remains intact. In fact, affirming God's sovereignty throughout the biblical record gives shape and purpose to the role for which humanity was created.

[The gospel narrative](#) is one that tells the story of Jesus, God's only Son, and announces that he is both Lord and King. In him, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name, all in pursuit of His purpose (Acts 2:36, Romans 8:19-21).

But what is He saving people from?

The first book in the Bible, Genesis, tells us something important about our own history, and it sets the stage for the drama that subsequently unfolds throughout the rest of [God's story](#).

It tells us, firstly, that we were created with purpose, designed to be like God, to image Him throughout His good world and rule wisely and well on His behalf (Genesis 1:26).

Secondly, it tells us that instead of partnering with God in this purpose, we chose our own will, introducing the evil of sin into God's good world. The terrible consequence for the first humans, Adam and Eve, is that they were banished from

the garden and from God's presence. Furthermore, humans became 'dying creatures', subject to disease, aging, and mortality. Dying became hard-coded into our DNA.

*"You will sweat all your life to earn a living; you were made out of soil, and you will once again turn into soil." | Genesis 3:19, CEV*

*"Adam sinned, and that sin brought death into the world. Now everyone has sinned, and so everyone must die." | Romans 5:19, CEV*

We are subject to mortality. **Death is our great enemy; this is the consequence of disobedience, passed on Adam and Eve and received by all those who came after them.**

*"So then, as through one trespass there is condemnation for everyone, so also through one righteous act there is justification leading to life for everyone." | Romans 5:18*

The gospel narrative tells of humanity hopelessly enslaved to sin and at the mercy of mortality (Romans 6:15-23). Far from the spiritual life God intended for us, we're incapable of saving ourselves or of overcoming death (Acts 4:12). The gospel, however, offers good news! : rescue, redemption and eternal life – God's own life, by the simple act of [giving allegiance](#) to His Son, Jesus, as Lord and Saviour (Romans 10:9-10).

The gospel confirms the biblical reality of a just but loving God who is for His creation, who is not willing that any should perish, and who has actively worked to reconcile and transform us so that we can live the life of purpose for which He created us (2 Peter 3:8-10, John 3:16).

*Hell* – further punishment after death – simply doesn't fit the gospel narrative.

## 2. Hell Doesn't Fit The Character Of God

God is the God of promise, at whose Word the universe came into being and whose Word will never return to Him void, not accomplishing the purpose for which it was sent ([Genesis 1:3](#), [Isaiah 55:11](#)). His loving devotion endures forever. He is faithful, true, just, and all glorious ([Psalm 136:3](#), [1 Timothy 1:17](#)).

The Psalmist declares the wonder and worthiness of this Eternal God, who is clothed in light, who stretches out the heavens like a tent, and who walks on the waves of the sea ([Psalm 104:2](#), [Job 9:8](#)). All of creation bows in obeisance to His majesty, for all things, owe their existence to Him ([Psalm 104:30](#), [Psalm 6:4](#), [Psalm 96:11](#), [Luke 19:40](#)).

God proclaimed both His Name and character to Moses, the great deliver of Israel [during the Exodus](#), stating:

*“The Lord – the Lord is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth, maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But he will not leave the guilty unpunished, bringing the consequences of the fathers’ iniquity on the children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation.” | Exodus 34:5-9, ESV*

The Psalmist also writes often and extensively about the innate goodness of God:

*“For the LORD is good; His steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” | Psalm 100:5, ESV*

*“The LORD is good and upright; therefore He shows sinners the way.” Psalm 25:8, CSB*

*“The LORD is good to all; His compassion rests on all He has*

made.” | Psalm 145:9, BSB

There's a lot to unpack in all those verses. Yet perhaps the overwhelming take-home point is this: God is just. He's not vindictive or biased and He doesn't show favoritism based on our social status, gender, or nationality. In fact, He is generous-hearted and gracious, even to those who are His enemies.

Jesus demonstrates this in His famous sermon on the mount, where he sets out the characteristics of those who would be children of the kingdom. He shows that choosing to behave in this way is simply imitating the characteristics of their Heavenly Father:

*“You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. For He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward will you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what are you doing out of the ordinary? Don't even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” | Matthew 5:45-48, CSB*

This aspect of God's graciousness – His undeserved love and favour to humanity – permeates every aspect of the gospel narrative, giving it weight and power. Because He is just, He wouldn't overlook the sin of the world. But because He is also gracious and good, God sent His Son into the world, to suffer under the hands of wicked men, so that humanity could be rescued from the curse of sin and death (Matthew 16:21, Isaiah 53:4-6). In His goodness and in His justice, He made arrangement for sin to be absorbed and absolved, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

God is not a vindictive sadist. It simply doesn't fit the character of a good and gracious God to punish people by "holding them, like a loathsome spider, over a flame for all eternity." I would have serious concerns about other aspects of God's character if I truly believed He is capable of sustaining such indefinite torture, even to those I might consider deserving of such a fate.

Interestingly, during the time when kings ruled the nation of Israel (926BCE – 586BCE), Israel engaged in the practice of child sacrifice by fire to the pagan god Molech, a practice they had absorbed from the nations they had previously conquered. God considered this to be a great evil; it was completely abhorrent to Him and something which he had expressly forbidden (2 Chronicles 33:6, Jeremiah 32:35, 2 Kings 21:6).

The doctrine of hell, in its many terrifying forms, perhaps tells us more about the capability and cruelty of human imagination than the reality of what occurs at death.

*Hell* – as a place of fiery, eternal torture for the wicked – simply doesn't fit the character of God.

### **3. Hell Isn't Found In The Bible**

Well, it is. But not in the way you think.

While the word *hell* is certainly found in some of our English translations, it's usually a translation of the original Hebrew word *she'ol* (שְׁאוֹל), and on the remaining occasions, three other Greek words (*hades* (αἴδης), *gehenna* (γε'εννα) and *tartarus* (ταρταρο'ω).

It's translated by the King James version as *hell* 54 times, however more accurate translations like the NASB or NIV show the word *hell* only occurring between 13–14 times, all of which are found in the New Testament. The Hebrew word *she'ol* is translated in other places as 'grave' and 'the pit' and the



more accurate translations tend to translate it in this way ([Genesis 37:35](#), [1 Kings 2:6](#), [Job 17:16](#), [Isaiah 14:11](#), Ecclesiastes 9:10)

The English word *hell*, comes from 'helan', meaning 'to conceal'. It conveyed no thought of heat or torment but simply of a 'covered over or concealed place.' In the old English dialect, the expression "helling potatoes" meant, not to roast them, but simply to place the potatoes in the ground or in a cellar (Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged).

Here's a brief overview of the original words:

## She'ol

**She'ol** was understood, by Jewish writers, as a place of stillness and darkness to which all the dead go, both the righteous and the unrighteous, regardless of the moral choices made in life. In *she'ol*, one is cut off from life and from God.

*"For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun" | Ecclesiastes 9:5-6, ESV*

*"Humans and animals come to the same end—humans die, animals die. We all breathe the same air. So there's really no advantage in being human. None. Everything's smoke. We all end up in the same place—we all came from dust, we all end up as dust." | Ecclesiastes 3:19–20, The Message*

*She'ol* is used throughout the Old Testament and is derived from a word meaning *hollow*, the place under the earth where all previously living things rest in eternal, silent repose, without knowledge, consciousness, or reward.

*“Since she’ol in the Old Testament times referred simply to the abode of the dead and suggested no moral distinctions, the word ‘hell,’ **as understood today**, is not a happy translation.” – Collier’s Encyclopedia (1986, Vol 12, p.28)*

## Hades

In the [Septuagint](#) (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) and throughout the New Testament, the translators used the Greek word **hades** (ᾍδης) in place of the Hebrew word *she’ol*, translating with the Jewish concepts of *she’ol* in mind – a place where there is no activity – rather than the mythology of Greek concepts. This can be shown to be the case as they expressly use *hades* as an equivalent for *she’ol*, both in the Greek translation and also where they are quoting passages from the Old Testament (Hebrew text). One example appears below comparing [Psalm 16:10](#) with [Acts 2:27](#) (where the former is being quoted by Peter the Apostle):

*“For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.” – [Psalm 16:10, ESV](#)*

*“For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption.” – [Acts 2:27, ESV](#)*

With one exception, mentioned further below, the word *hades*, in all appearances in the New Testament has little, if any, connection to afterlife rewards or punishments.

The best equivalent understanding, which most modern translations use is ‘*the grave*’. The context of the verses in which this word is used support the Jewish understanding of *she’ol* as a place of silence and inactivity to which all those who die are consigned.

The exception, as noted above, is Luke’s parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31), in which the rich man finds

himself, after death, in hades, and “in anguish in this flame”, while in contrast the angels take Lazarus to “the bosom of Abraham”, described as a state of comfort.

A parable is a type of analogy – a succinct, didactic story written in prose or verse, designed to illustrate one or more instructive lessons or principles, and is never intended to be interpreted literally. Additionally, it would be problematic for an entire theology to be built around one specifically non-literal section of scripture; or even from several parables put together. *“Parables should never be used as sources of doctrine, but rather we take doctrine as a norm for interpreting the parables”* (Tertullian).

This passage, in my opinion, therefore shouldn’t be considered to be literally describing aspects of an afterlife, including hell: that is, a place of eternal fiery torment *because this is not what scripture teaches elsewhere* Nevertheless, it is certainly an fascinating passage, intended to illustrate some lesson or principle and therefore requires an interpretation of some sort.

## **Gehenna**

Another Greek word that has been translated as *hell* in some translations is ‘Gehenna’. It appears twelve times in the New Testament and is actually a Greek compound, derived from the Hebrew words *ge* and *hinnom* or the “valley of Hinnom”; a proper name which literally means valley of the son of Hinnom. Gehenna is actually the word that Jesus uses in the New Testament and [you can read more about what Jesus really said about heaven and hell here](#).

The valley of Hinnom is a deep narrow slice of earth just outside the city of Jerusalem. Also called Tophet, or ‘the valley of dead bones’, it already had a long and disturbing history by Jesus’ time. Firstly, as mentioned earlier in this article, in the early days of Israel’s kingdom, it was the

place of idolatry and child sacrifice, by burning alive with fire to the pagan god Molech (2 Kings 23:10).

Later it was used as a place where rubbish, filth, and the carcasses of beast and men alike were disposed of. Fires were kept constantly burning to consume the valley's refuse and to prevent contamination. In the days of Jesus, the highest mark of ignominy that could be inflicted upon a person was a criminal's burial in the fires of Gehenna.

Gehenna is a literal place of perpetual burning; *but it was in Israel, not in a subterranean underworld*. Therefore Jesus' meaning when warning of Gehenna was quite different to what might be understood by *hell* today. The theological implication of Jesus' words is likely this: that the consequences of unrepented sin in our life will lead to the finality of death and, by inference, the complete and utter annihilation of existence.

Just as the fire of Gehenna burned indefinitely, completely obliterating any trace of whatever was cast into it, so is our existence in death, without the salvation that is to be found in Jesus. Extinction of not just of our physical body, but of our life, our soul, our spirit, the very thing that makes us *us*. *All of us*.

Again, the theological implications point to the need for and provision of [a saviour, the hope of the world](#); the very core of the gospel narrative.

The translation of Gehenna to *hell* is actually a mistranslation. More correctly, it should have been transliterated into English (ie it should read 'Gehenna' on every occasion) and left in its proper form for the reader to interpret.

## **Tartarus**

Used in 2 Peter 2:4, this Greek word actually occurs nowhere

else in scripture.

*“For if God did not spare messengers having sinned, but having cast [them] down to Tartarus with chains of deepest gloom, delivered [them], having been reserved to judgment...” 2 Peter 2:4, LSV*

Tartarus was considered in Greek mythology to be the great abyss, situated far below *hades* (the grave). Together with the context of this verse, the use of this word suggests a particular and specific meaning. Some kind of *imprisonment* is implied, certainly, but no sense at all of fiery torment or torture. In fact, the verse suggests that judgment (of who and what kind isn't stated) is still yet to come.

Certainly, there are questions raised by these passages – the parable of Lazarus for example. What does it mean? What lesson are we intended to take from it?

And what is Peter referring to in his letter? Who are the messengers He refers to? What was their crime? And why is this Greek word found here, yet used nowhere else in scripture?

It's not my intention to discuss these at any length in this particular article, only to comment that I don't believe these single instances are compelling enough evidence for the doctrine of hell, particularly when compared alongside all of scripture as discussed earlier in this article.

Again, as with Gehenna, *Tartarus* should have been transliterated into English and left in its proper form for the reader to interpret.

## **What I've Concluded**

While scripture certainly has much to say about what happens *after life* and why, it's a markedly different story than perhaps we've been led to believe.

Scripture tells us that we're all bound by mortality, a one-way, downhill journey from cradle to grave, where life – all aspects of *living* – cease. This situation is permanent and final (Genesis 3:19, 2 Samuel 14:14, Psalm 103:15-16, Romans 5:12, Romans 8:20-28).

Death is not just the enemy of life itself, but also thwarts the purpose for which humanity was created. Even the noblest of men or women soon pass from the world's stage, their personalities and achievements more often than not fading from memory. *"No wisdom of man or rebellion can deliver new life out of death."*

But the perfect human was promised to come, one who would bear the sin of the world and who would wage war against sin and death in his own body (John 1:29). Through his perfect life, his willing sacrifice, his dishonorable and painful death, and his glorious resurrection, all of humanity were promised that rescue would come and that death would be overturned. Jesus was going to build his church and not even the *gates of the grave* would prevail against it (Romans 8:3, Matthew 16:18).

*"He [God] has revealed this grace through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has abolished death and illuminated the way to life and immortality through the gospel" | 2 Timothy 1:10, BSB*

The gospel narrative is the story of God, in Jesus, saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name, all in pursuit of His purpose. Those who believe in Jesus will live, even if they die, for Jesus promises that he is not just the light and life of humanity but the resurrection itself (John 11:25, John 3:16).

**The traditional doctrine of hell finds no place in this narrative, nor does it fit the character of a good and gracious God, nor can it actually be found in scripture.**

Instead, the final pages of the Bible close with the great conclusion promised as part of Jesus's reign, once He has put all His enemies under His feet, that the last enemy to be destroyed will be death itself (1 Corinthians 15:26): *"Look, God's dwelling is with humanity, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. **Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more because the previous things have passed away.**"* (Revelation 21:3-4, CSB)

*"The angel showed me a river that was crystal clear, and its waters gave life. The river came from the throne where God and the Lamb were seated. Then it flowed down the middle of the city's main street. On each side of the river are trees that grow a different kind of fruit each month of the year. The fruit gives life, and the leaves are used as medicine to heal the nations.*

***God's curse will no longer be on the people of that city. He and the Lamb will be seated there on their thrones, and its people will worship God and will see Him face to face. God's name will be written on the foreheads of the people. Never again will night appear, and no one who lives there will ever need a lamp or the sun. The Lord God will be their light, and they will rule forever.*** ([Revelation 22:1-5, CEV](#))

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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*

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)