

G O S P E L A B O V E A L L

*I passed on to you as most important what I also received:
that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.*

1 CORINTHIANS 15:3

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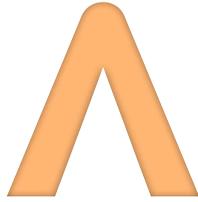
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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Welcome to an eight-week journey to see what it means to make the gospel above all in our lives and in our churches. Here's how the study works.

Group Experience

START. Your actual group session will most likely begin here with an ice-breaker that's designed to help you ease into the study and get everyone talking. A brief description of J. D.'s teaching helps set the stage for hearing from God during each video teaching session.

WATCH. Key statements from the video session are provided so that you can follow along and take notes as J. D. and his guests discuss the content.

DISCUSS. These questions help the group study Scripture passages that reinforce the teaching on the video. Each question is designed to lead the group deeper into the concepts discussed each week so we can more fully appreciate the gospel's ongoing work in our lives. These questions facilitate the work that the Holy Spirit is accomplishing in the lives of individuals and the group.

RESPOND. These actives are meant to take the week's teaching down the practical level so that it can be applied to our lives. These questions should challenge and encourage the people in your group to make the gospel of first importance.

PRAYER. This section ends the group time with some practical handles and pointers for prayer.

Personal Experience

PERSONAL STUDY. Each week features two personal studies to go deeper into the truths of the week's topic.

ENGAGE WITH YOUR COMMUNITY. These exercises are meant to help you connect more deeply with your church community.

ENGAGE WITH THE WORLD. These exercises are meant to help you connect more deeply with those who have not yet believed in Jesus.

TIPS FOR LEADING A SMALL GROUP

PRAYERFULLY PREPARE. Pray for each meeting beforehand. Ask the Holy Spirit to work through you and the group discussion as you point to Jesus each week through God's Word.

A good small-group experience has the following characteristics.

EVERYONE PARTICIPATES. Encourage everyone to ask questions, share responses, or read aloud.

NO ONE DOMINATES. Be sure your time speaking as a leader takes up less than half your time together as a group. Politely guide discussion if anyone dominates.

DON'T RUSH. Don't feel that a moment of silence is a bad thing. People often need time to think about their responses to questions they've just heard or to gain courage to share what God is stirring in their hearts.

AFFIRM AND FOLLOW UP ON INPUT. Make sure you point out something true or helpful in a response. Don't just move on. Build community with follow-up questions, asking how other people have experienced similar things or how a truth has shaped their understanding of God and the Scripture you're studying.

KEEP GOD'S WORD CENTRAL. Opinions and experiences can be helpful, but God has given us the truth. Trust Scripture to be the authority and God's Spirit to work in people's lives. You can't change anyone, but God can. Continually point people to the Word and to active steps of faith.

KEEP CONNECTING. Encourage group members with thoughts, commitments, or questions from the session by connecting through emails, texts, and social media. Build deeper friendships by planning or spontaneously inviting group members to join you outside your regularly scheduled group time for meals; fun activities; and projects around your home, church, or community. The more people are comfortable with one another and involved in one another's lives, the more they'll look forward to being together.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

At the age of twenty-seven J. D. Greear became the pastor of a forty-year-old neighborhood church. In the years since, that congregation of four hundred has grown to more than five thousand in weekly attendance. Today the Summit Church, located in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, is one of the fastest-growing churches in North America.

Pastor J. D.'s messages aren't intended just to show people how to live better lives. His goal is to leave people in awe of God's amazing love. Because of his belief in the power of the gospel, Pastor J. D. has led the Summit to set a goal of planting more than one thousand gospel-centered churches in the next forty years.

Pastor J. D. holds a PhD in systematic theology from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He also lived and worked among Muslims in Southeast Asia for two years and wrote *Breaking the Islam Code*. Pastor J. D. and his beautiful wife, Veronica, have four ridiculously cute kids: Kharis, Alethia, Ryah, and Adon.

Unless God calls him elsewhere, Pastor J. D. plans to stay at the Summit Church until he preaches his last sermon at his own funeral before saying goodbye and hopping into the casket.

INTRODUCTION

What's the most important priority in your life? In your family? In your church? If you're a follower of Jesus, the answer to all of these questions should be the same: the gospel of Jesus Christ. What Christians need most today is to elevate the gospel above all. The gospel, you see, is more than simply the entry rite into Christianity. It's not just the ABCs of the Christian life; it's the entire alphabet. It's not just the diving board off which we jump into the pool of Christianity; it's the whole pool.

The apostle Paul said he had resolved "to know nothing" while he was with the Corinthians "except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). For him, the gospel was the only message worth proclaiming to the world (see 15:3). It was the one priority his life was about. What about you?

In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation. ... In it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith" (Rom. 1:16-17). That conviction explains why Paul insisted on keeping the gospel above all. Nothing else in all of the New Testament—except for Jesus Himself—is referred to as the very power of God.

We need the power of the gospel—the death-defying, earth-shattering power of God—to bring transformation to every area of our lives and our communities and our churches. Growth in Christ is never about going *beyond* the gospel but going deeper *into* the gospel. The gospel is like a well. The purest water is found when you go deeper, not wider.

If the gospel is the very power of God, that truth means other things aren't the power of God. So we've got to get this right. If we don't give the gospel intentional focus, we'll make our programs, our politics, our preferences, or our petty differences more important. The gospel is too great and the mission too urgent to be distracted by lesser priorities.

The goal of this Bible study is to help you see the unique glory of God revealed through the grace of the gospel. Once that message becomes above all in your life, your world will never be the same.

WEEK 1



**G O S P E L
A B O V E
A L L**

START

Welcome to group session 1 of *Gospel Above All*.

What would you say is most important in your life?

How is what's most important to you reflected in your actions?

Can you give an example from your life?

Priorities determine our actions because we act in accordance with our desires. We talk about, celebrate, and look forward to the priorities, events, and relationships we love. Where does the gospel fit into our list of priorities? Is it a matter of first importance, or is it something we consider only occasionally? *Gospel Above All* is a call to put the gospel ahead of any and all competing priorities.

Followers of Jesus need to reinforce our identity as a gospel people. We don't find our unity in worship styles, in views on eschatology, or in political positions. We find our unity in the gospel. All preferences, opinions, and perspectives must be secondary to this message. During the next eight weeks we'll consider together what it means to truly place the gospel above all.

WATCH

Refer to this viewer guide as you watch video session 1.

The gospel is the good news that God loves us, that Jesus Christ came to earth to suffer the penalty for our sin and die in our place so that we could be restored to God, reconciled to Him, and live with Him forever.

The gospel is not just the way we begin in Christ. It's also the way we grow in Christ.

For the gospel to be above all, it's got to go deep in us to the point that it transforms us from the inside out and changes all of our affections, mentality, and behavior.

Applications of the Gospel

1. Preaching, teaching, and study of God's Word
2. Messaging
3. How we think politically
4. Culture
5. Loving our neighbors

It is as you become overwhelmed with the love of God for you that love for God and for others grows in you.

Everything that we do ought to go through the filter of "Is this helping to see the gospel extend to the ends of the earth?"

The gospel ought to produce the most inclusive community on earth.

The future of the church in America hinges on whether God's people return to the gospel as the central, defining element in their lives and the defining focus of their mission.

DISCUSS

Use the following questions to discuss the video teaching.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:2 together.

*I decided to know nothing among you
except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*

1 CORINTHIANS 2:2

Paul believed the gospel was the most important message in the world. Although we might agree with his assertion in principle, we often deny it with our actions and the attention of our hearts. No other concern should supersede our dedication to the gospel message. All we are and all we do as followers of Jesus originates in the gospel.

What are some messages or concerns we elevate above the gospel in our churches and in our lives?

J. D. mentioned on the video that nothing gives Jesus as much joy as seeing people come to know the gospel. Why should our ministry pursuits reflect Jesus' passion?

According to Jesus, the gospel is the sum of Jesus' ministry. In Greek the word *gospel* literally means "good news." The origins of this word extend beyond Christianity. When a Roman general won a military victory, the gospel of that general's victory went forth to alert the different parts of the empire about His success.

In the same way, the gospel of Jesus Christ signals Jesus' victory over sin, death, and the grave. It's the message that though we're desperately broken by sin, Jesus came to earth, lived the life we couldn't live, died the death we deserved to die, and rose again in victory over sin and death. Because of what

GOSPEL ABOVE ALL

Jesus did to provide salvation, we can now be resurrected from the dead and reconciled to God. We were created for this kind of relationship with God.

Why do Christians need the gospel just as much as non-Christians?

In the video teaching J. D. said, “The fire to do in the Christian life comes from being soaked in the fuel of what has been done.” Growth in the Christian life comes from being rooted in the gospel. The gospel isn’t just an entry into the Christian faith but the entirety of the Christian life.

***How does the gospel lead us to deeper trust and obedience in God?
In what ways have you seen this type of growth in your life?***

The gospel has far-reaching applications for the way we study God’s Word, our message as Christian people, how we think politically, the type of culture we create, and the way we love our neighbors. The rest of this study will deal with all of these topics.

***What would you say Christians are known for in your community?
How do we become people characterized by the gospel message?***

Many of us are probably growing tired of the constant political battles being waged in our culture. The people around us likely are as well. In these tumultuous days the church must allow the gospel to shape our political involvement. The opportunity to create a refuge from the incessant bickering has never been stronger. To do this, we have to make room for differences of opinion on secondary matters, because the gospel is too important to be subverted by partisanship. We must be a people full of grace, just like Jesus.

On the video J. D. said Jesus “radiated openness” to people who were different from Him. How does the gospel create the most inclusive community on earth?

RESPOND

Use these questions to apply today's teaching.

As we close our time together today, let's briefly reflect on a few ideas we've introduced in this session and look forward to the group sessions ahead.

What might it look like when the gospel is above all in our churches? In our small groups? In our lives?

Examine the table of contents to see the topics we'll cover. Which upcoming session topic are you most looking forward to? Why?

PRAYER

Close the session with prayer.

Father God, in a world full of competing messages and conflicting claims, You've given us the one truth that's above all other truths—the gospel of Jesus Christ. Only one message saves, and we've heard it and believed. From our love for the truth and care for our neighbor, would You allow this message to become a matter of first importance in our lives? Please give us grace to lift up the gospel above all.

Remind group members to complete this week's personal study and to fill out the worksheet on page 124.

GOSPEL ABOVE ALL

What Is the Gospel?

The word *gospel* has become so common in some circles that it has been stripped of much of its power and meaning. But the word was so central to Jesus' ministry that I simply can't get away from it. So what exactly do we mean when we say "gospel"?

How would you describe the gospel in one word?

What about in one sentence?

The key word in all the gospel is *substitution*. At the church I pastor we say that the gospel in four words is "Jesus in my place." Jesus went to the cross, not merely to die for us but to die instead of us. He took our burden of sin so that we could put on the mantle of His righteousness. That's the good news of the gospel: Jesus lived the life we were supposed to live and died the death we were condemned to die. The apostle Paul summarized it this way:

I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:3-4

What elements did Paul include in his concise gospel statement?

Where do you see "Jesus in my place" in these verses?

Jesus died "for our sins" (v. 3). We're sinful; Jesus is sinless. On the cross Jesus died in our place for our sins. He died as our substitute. The principle of substitution separates Jesus' gospel from every other religion. The great religions of the world all teach that we must do something to please God. Go here. Say this. Do this. Don't do that. Pray this. Chant that. If we do these things often enough and well enough, God will accept us—or so we hope.

The gospel, on the other hand, is about what Jesus has done for us. In every other religion the prophet is a teacher who gives us a plan to earn God's favor. In Christianity we have the story of a Savior who has earned God's favor on our behalf and gives it to us as a gift. Other religious systems are about what you do; Christianity is about what has been done for you.

In what areas of life do you feel as though you need to earn your keep?

How have you transferred this need to prove yourself to your relationship with God?

Why is the message of the gospel—the truth that in His grace God has done everything necessary for your salvation—a message that Christians need to reflect on every day?

The Gospel Is for Christians Too

We need to ask and answer the previous question because the gospel is for Christians too. Although believers might not deny the gospel, we tend to forget it. For many of us, the gospel functions solely as the entry rite into Christianity. It's the prayer we pray to begin our relationship with Jesus, the diving board off which we jump into the pool of the real Christian life.

The gospel, however, isn't just the diving board off which we jump into the pool of Christianity; it's the pool itself. It's not only the way we begin in Christ; it's also the way we grow in Christ. All of the Christian life flows from the good news of what Jesus has done.

What are some ways you've minimized or misunderstood the gospel's ongoing importance in your faith?

GOSPEL ABOVE ALL

If you're honest, do you ever feel you've moved beyond the simple gospel message? If so, why?

Paul recognized this tendency when he said the gospel was “most important” (v. 3). He didn’t see the gospel as a mere entry rite into faith. The gospel is the main priority in the Christian life. It can never be less than primary. Growth in the Christian life isn’t about going *beyond* the gospel but going deeper *into* the gospel. The purest waters from the spring of life are found by digging deeper, not wider, into the gospel well.

List some markers we commonly use to determine growth in the Christian life. How are those markers tied to a deepening faith in the gospel?

Our hearts are hardwired to run back to works-based righteousness. Grace doesn’t come naturally to us. Therefore, we need to remind ourselves of the gospel message often because it remains good news even for those of us who’ve followed Christ for years.

What are some ways you could remind yourself of the gospel daily?

Our world is sick and needs the healing balm of the gospel. We must avoid the temptation to let any other issues replace the centrality of the gospel in our lives. The need is too great, the hour is too near, and the beauty of the gospel is too precious for us to define ourselves by anything else. The gospel must be above all.

PRAYER AND REFLECTION

Spend some time in silence before the Lord doing two things.

1. Express gratitude for what Jesus has done for you in the gospel.
2. Ask Him to help you identify areas in your life in which you’re trusting in something other than the gospel of grace or in which you’ve allowed something else to become a matter of first importance.

ENGAGE WITH YOUR COMMUNITY

The purpose of this section is to help you process key ideas from this week's study with other members of your group. Take some time to thoughtfully consider the following questions. Then record your responses. Reach out to one or two members of your group and discuss your answers together.

The gospel is above all preferences and plans. It's more important than any denominational or doctrinal distinctives. Yet in practice the gospel often gets pushed to the background. This exercise is designed to help you identify what you prize above the gospel.

What priorities do you elevate to a higher level of importance than you should?

Why should the gospel supersede all of these lesser concerns?

How can you ensure that the gospel remains most important in your life?

NOT JUST THE DIVING BOARD

Earlier this week we established that the gospel should be the most important truth in our lives. Today we're going to examine why.

You probably haven't ever had a reason to use a plumb line, but it's a remarkably simple, helpful tool. It's a piece of cord with a weight attached to the end. When the cord is allowed to hang freely, the weight naturally creates a perfectly vertical line. Painters, builders, and other craftsmen use this tool to keep their work level and straight. The plumb line ensures that a proper foundation is being built.

At the Summit, the church I pastor, we have a series of short, pithy statements we use as rallying points, both for our staff and for the entire church. They encapsulate our ministry philosophy in memorable phrases. They're called plumb lines.

Plumb line 1 at the Summit is:

The gospel isn't just the diving board; it's the pool.

This statement is important to consider because Christianity teaches something fundamentally different from every other religion. Every other religion says if you change, you'll be accepted. But Christianity says, "Because you've been accepted, therefore change." Christianity doesn't proclaim good advice but good news. And that news transforms us from the inside out.

What other world religions are you familiar with? How is Christianity fundamentally different?

How is Christianity distinct from the cultural messages we encounter every day?

The gospel of grace is a radically unique, liberating message in a world full of contrary ideas that promise to bring us life and peace but can't deliver on what they promise. Believers have a tendency to forget the gospel and start believing those other messages.

The gospel of grace is a unique, liberating message in a world full of religious commands and restrictions. It's the only message that can really change us. Religion might be able to force outward conformity ... for a while. But religion can never transform the heart. To borrow Jesus' metaphor, it cleans the outside of the cup but leaves the inside filthy (see Matt. 23:26).

Believing you've been accepted by grace, however, transforms you in a fundamentally different way—in an organic way.

How has believing the gospel transformed your life?

What makes the change produced by the gospel distinct from other kinds of changes you've made?

The Gospel Gives You Peace and Security with God

In John 14:18 Jesus said, "I will not leave you as orphans; I am coming to you." A faithful father doesn't leave his kids wondering whether he loves them. When I go away on a trip, I don't say to my kids, "Daddy will be back soon ... or maybe he won't. You'll just have to wait and see whether I come back. Sit around and think about that idea while I'm gone and let it compel you to become better children."

Those words wouldn't produce love and loyalty in my children. They might produce a little fear-based obedience, but it's only a matter of time until fear-based obedience turns into father-loathing rebellion. God doesn't want that for us any more than we want that for our kids. He wants us to be at peace with Him, and that begins by recognizing His compassion for us. Only experiencing the love of God can truly inspire love for God.

The Gospel Releases Power in Your Life

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek.

ROMANS 1:16

The gospel is the power of God. The same power that surged through Jesus' ministry during His time on earth is available to us today. It's the power of the Holy Spirit, and it comes into our lives when we believe the gospel. As Paul expressed it, when we behold the glory of God in the face of Christ, we're "transformed into the same image from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18). Through Jesus we encounter the only message that's able to save.

Reread Romans 1:16. If the gospel is the only message that saves, why would we ever be ashamed of it? What unique power has the gospel given us?

People who've experience the grace and mercy of God in Christ should constantly, loudly, unashamedly talk about the gospel. We have no trouble talking about other things we love. How much more then should we talk about the message that has brought us peace with God?

Nothing we do should ever lack a gospel motivation and a gospel focus. Jesus and His gospel are the center of all we do. He's the ultimate hero of Scripture. He's the Lord of our churches. He's the point. He's our chief plumb line. And He alone holds the power.

PRAYER AND REFLECTION

Thank God that your righteousness and standing before Him can't be earned. Ask Him for grace to stop trying to earn favor and to start embracing the love and compassion available to you in Christ. Pray that the Holy Spirit will daily remind you of what Christ has done for You and will help you make that message the center of your life.

ENGAGE WITH THE WORLD

The purpose of this section is to help you process key ideas from this week's study and think differently about the way you engage with the world. Take some time to thoughtfully consider the following questions. Then record your responses.

What's most important to us informs the way we interact with the world. Jesus taught that what comes out of us begins in our hearts (see Matt. 15:10-20). For example, if our chief motivation in life is to achieve success, to be a good parent, or to be a moral person, those heart desires will guide the way we live. Because we're gospel people, the motivation at the center of who we are should be the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What's your primary motivation? Is it the gospel or something else? If it's not the gospel, what do you need to let go of to allow the gospel to bear fruit? Use this chart to record your thoughts.

Motivation	How You Live	Change

Whom do you know who models gospel motivation well? What could you learn from the work God is doing in his or her life? Take time to connect with that person this week and learn from his or her example.