

**The Apostolic Gospel: More than Death for Sin<sup>1</sup>**  
**Darell L. Bock, Research Professor of NT Studies,**  
**Dallas Theological Seminary, Texas, USA**

Just for a moment, forget about sin. Forget about the debt we owe and the prospect of God's punishment. Those are all important things to consider, and we will consider them soon enough. But for the moment I want to focus on something else: instead of sin, I want to think about the deep needs that define our humanity. To be human is to be aware that we yearn for things that we just can't get on our own, whatever our culture of self-sufficiency might tell us. We desire to be connected to something outside ourselves. We long to know why we exist at all. These needs and longings are central to the Bible's story. The gospel starts with a promise that addresses the deepest of human needs. Where relationships are broken, the gospel brings restoration.

**The Covenants: God's plan to restore relationships**

*The Abrahamic Covenant*

The gospel didn't begin in Matthew 1:1. It began many centuries earlier in the dusty regions of the Middle East. God made a promise to Abraham, an old man who would give rise to a special people. In the midst of a world that had ignored its Creator for the elevation of their own glory (Gen. 11), God moved to deliver humanity from its own foibles. In Genesis 12:1–3, God made a commitment with Abraham:

The LORD said to Abram:

Go out from your land, your relatives, and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

I will make you into a great nation,

I will bless you,

I will make your name great,

and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,

I will curse those who treat you with contempt,

and all the peoples on earth

will be blessed through you.

That commitment became known as the Abrahamic Covenant. Perhaps the greatest of God's promises to Abraham was this: through Abraham, God's blessing would penetrate throughout the world. In that first declaration of the promise, God offered no details as to how this blessing would spread. That story would develop across several centuries and inspired writers. In that unfolding story is our story—our need for promise and the hope of restoration.

The context of this initial promise is important. In Genesis 1–11 we see how humanity had gone its own way, consistently going astray from the Creator. Whether we think of the individual acts of Adam or Cain or turn to the corporate actions before the flood or in building the tower of Babel, people showed a consistent tendency, one they still have, to turn away God and toward their own interests. In many ways, the story of the Bible is the

story of God's stubborn faithfulness to His creation and those He had made in His own image—his commitment to pursue them in steadfast love and patience. God's love is the core of the gospel. The needs of humanity have run deep for a long time.

God's promise to Abraham grew. Part of the original promise was that Abraham would father a special seed (Gen. 12:2), a people in touch with the true God. That story—the story of Israel's origins—is told from Genesis through Deuteronomy (Gen. 13:13–17).<sup>2</sup> Abraham did father a seed in the figures of Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve sons who followed after Jacob, known as the patriarchs. From them emerged the nation known as Israel. God's program was revealed to this people. They were the bearers of God's promise and revelation. They experienced a deliverance through Moses, pictured in a God who kept an ear open to people. They became a nation called to honor God (Exod. 19:3–6).<sup>3</sup>

### *The Davidic Covenant*

Israel, however, had her own hopes, and they didn't always line up with God's hopes for her. She longed for a king like the other nations had; God was not good enough for them. God noted that the Israelites' request for a king was really a rejection of Him (1 Samuel 8:6–7); nevertheless, He graciously granted their desire and through it eventually extended the promise he had made to Abraham.<sup>4</sup> This extended promise, known as the Davidic Covenant, was to a line of kings from the house of David (2 Samuel 7:8–16):

“Now this is what you are to say to My servant David:

‘This is what the LORD of Hosts says: I took you from the pasture and from following the sheep to be ruler over My people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have destroyed all your enemies before you. I will make a name for you like that of the greatest in the land. I will establish a place for My people Israel and plant them, so that they may live there and not be disturbed again. ...

When your time comes and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up after you your descendant, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He will build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he will be a son to Me. When he does wrong, I will discipline him with a human rod and with blows from others. But My faithful love will never leave him as I removed it from Saul; I removed him from your way. Your house and kingdom will endure before Me forever, and your throne will be established forever.’”

This regal line had a special relationship to God as His representative. The king of this dynasty was a son to God and God was his father (v. 14). Out of this promise came the hope for a unique king who would be the kind of ruler God desired. Out of this promise came the hope of Messiah, a king who would bring peace and establish righteousness in line with promises God made originally to Abraham.

### *The New Covenant*

The bulk of Israel's kings failed. They did not live up to God's ideals, reflecting instead the pattern of rebellion we have seen already. More often than not, they went their own way. Eventually God judged the nation, scattering them through war and exile. It was in this context that God promised a New Covenant, a commitment to write His righteousness on the hearts of people and to fix them from the inside out with His very own presence and power. That commitment was revealed through Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31–34):

“Look, the days are coming”—this is the LORD'S declaration—“when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. This one will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant they broke even though I had married them”—the LORD'S declaration. “Instead, this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days”—the LORD'S declaration. “I will place My Law within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be My people. No longer will one teach his neighbor or his brother, saying: Know the LORD, for they will all know Me, from the least to the greatest of them”—the LORD'S declaration. “For I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sin.”

Two key ingredients came with this elaboration of God's promise. First, there would be forgiveness of sin; second, God's Law would be written on the heart. That long history of unfaithfulness—even by God's own people—demonstrated that human beings didn't have it within themselves to keep their end of the covenant bargain. They needed God's presence and power within them.

Forgiveness never stood alone; it was designed to provide the way to a restored relationship with God. Consider what God said through Ezekiel:

I will also sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will place My Spirit within you and cause you to follow My statutes and carefully observe My ordinances (Ezek. 36:25–27).

A new heart. A new spirit. A new start. If God's people are going to obey God's law consistently, it won't be by trying harder. It will be by God's Spirit dwelling within them.

### *Summary*

This overview of the promise of the Old Testament shows that behind the gospel stands the promise of three covenants that actually form a singular promise of God to fashion a people who themselves are a reflection of God's promise and blessing living in a world filled with need. Together the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants form the gospel's backbone. God would form a people through whom the world would be blessed. He would do it through a promised king, a Messiah. That king would bring two key things the world desperately needed: forgiveness and a restored relationship with the living God. The two were always connected to be good news from God.

## **The Proclamation: from John the Baptist to Jesus**

### *Luke 3:16*

Tucked away in Luke's gospel is a passage most of us pass by very quickly, and yet in it are some of the most profound things said in the entire Bible. It's too bad Luke 3:16 is not as well-known in the church as John 3:16. The promise and revelation in Luke 3:16 literally runs through all of Luke and Acts.<sup>5</sup> In this verse John the Baptist says, "I baptize you with water, but One is coming who is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

John made this remark in response to speculation that he might be the Christ. What is the sign of the new era? God's giving of His Spirit to His people—not the outward, physical sign of water baptism, but the inward sign of a Spirit baptism. This new era will come in the person of the One who follows John: Jesus himself. In bringing the Spirit, Jesus will bring a renewed relationship. Remember what Ezekiel said? "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you." According to John the Baptist, Jesus was coming to fulfill that promise.

But there is more to this verse. It is found in the remark that John was not worthy to unstrap the sandal of the One to Come. Two points help us to appreciate what John is affirming. First, John says this as a prophet of God. In the vocational ladder of jobs God can give, few rank higher than prophet. In fact, later Jesus called John the greatest born of woman (Luke 7:28).<sup>6</sup> So this is not just anyone saying he is unworthy to serve the One to Come—it is a prophet of God, and the greatest of the prophets at that.

Second, let us consider John's saying that he is not worthy to untie the strap of his master's sandal. In Judaism, a person was not to become a slave. However, if he did, there was one thing later Jewish tradition noted a Hebrew slave should never do: he should never untie the strap of his master's sandal in order to wash his feet (Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael Nezikin 1 on Exod. 21:2).<sup>7</sup> Unstrapping a master's sandal was seen as too demeaning for a Hebrew to perform.

The difference between John as a prophet and the person of the One to Come is so great that John, even though he is a prophet, is not worthy to perform even the most demeaning task of a slave. The One to Come is that unique. The significance of this point cannot be overstated. The Messiah to come is a figure of a different order. The chasm between Him and a prophet is vast. The One who brings God's promise is not merely another in a line of prophets but someone in a completely different, utterly unique category.

I love to make this point for those who tend to see Jesus as just another religious great. That is not how the person who pointed to Him saw it at all. The difference between them was too great for them to be seen in the same light.

I used this passage once in India to explain to a Hindi audience just how unique the Promised One is. My point was that John the Baptist was a figure whose activity was

predicted in the Bible centuries before he ministered (Isa. 40:3–5).<sup>8</sup> Not too many of us have our career outlined for us in advance! Yet despite John’s high position in God’s plan and program, the role of the One to Come was even more elevated. Even as a prophet, John would have been honored to have done a most demeaning task for Him and felt unworthy to perform such a task.

The bottom line of the new era’s arrival is the coming of the Spirit. That is the provision that shows the promise of God has come. The goal of all of this covenant activity is to restore a lost relationship—to connect God and His people from within. Once the Promised One arrived, the focus turned to the hope of this restored relationship within the realized rule of God, what Scripture calls the kingdom of God. This idea of God’s effective presence and direction within His people stood at the forefront of the gospel. The gospel is about the privilege of God entering our lives permanently from within our beings, restoring His relationship with us, and making us a part of His precious family. That was the good news John the Baptist pointed to in Luke 3:16, a verse as relevant to the gospel as John 3:16.

The importance of this idea becomes increasingly evident throughout the rest of Luke–Acts. The promise of renewed relationship and a divine presence within believers runs like a golden thread through these two New Testament books.

#### *Luke 24:49*

In Luke 24, Jesus has risen from the dead and appeared to the disciples. The Law and the Prophets have predicted three things, he told them:

- 1) The Christ must suffer.
- 2) He must rise from the dead on the third day.
- 3) ”Repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations” (see Luke 24:45–47).<sup>9</sup>

Our reading of the passage shouldn’t stop there. In verse 49, Jesus says, “And look, I am sending you what my Father promised. As for you, stay in the city until you are empowered from on high.” Jesus will provide what John the Baptist said Messiah would provide, the Spirit of God. Through that Spirit, God shows his way to the people He is forming to be His own, and he empowers them to walk in the way.

#### *Acts 1:4–5*

If there is any doubt that Jesus is talking about the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, Acts 1 removes it. At the beginning of Acts, the disciples are gathered in Jerusalem awaiting their orders from the Father, as the risen Christ had commanded them to do.<sup>10</sup> In Acts 1:5, Jesus tells the disciples something that we have heard before: “For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” Immediately, we can see the connection to Luke 3:16 and what John the Baptist had taught. The signal of the new era, the sign of God’s presence, and the indwelling power of God are all wrapped up in the promise to provide the Spirit in the restored relationship Messiah brings to those who are His.

#### *Acts 2*

But we still are not done with this theme in Luke–Acts. Peter’s preaching in Acts 2 reaffirms and develops this idea even more. This is a key passage when discussing the gospel. In many ways it is the first gospel message preached in Scripture, so it tells us much about what the earliest disciples emphasized in presenting the good news of God. And the disciples’ emphasis, we will see, is on the promise of God’s Spirit, the sign that God was forming a new people from of old in a fresh way.

Acts 2 describes the event that we often refer to as Pentecost. Pentecost was a Jewish feast day that, it seems, had come to be associated with the day the Law had been given to Israel.<sup>11</sup> On this particular Pentecost, just weeks after the resurrection of Jesus, a new salvation event was the topic of discussion: the arrival of God’s promised Spirit and the arrival of the new era of God, both for the world and God’s people.

That day the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and began “speaking of the mighty deeds of God” in all the languages of the people from many countries who were in Jerusalem that day. The people were amazed and wondered what it could mean, these uneducated fishermen and others from Galilee speaking in foreign tongues. Some of them theorized that the disciples must have been drunk!

The bulk of Acts 2 is devoted to a sermon in which Peter explains what was really happening. These people were not drunk, he explained. Rather, their actions were evidence that a long-cherished promise from the prophet Joel was being fulfilled:

After this I will pour out My Spirit on all humanity; then your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will have dreams, and your young men will see visions. I will even pour out My Spirit on the male and female slaves in those days. I will display wonders in the heavens and on the earth: blood, fire, and columns of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the great and awe-inspiring Day of the LORD comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of Yahweh will be saved, for there will be an escape for those on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, as the LORD promised, among the survivors the LORD calls” (Joel 2:28-32).

This strange behavior by the disciples, Peter emphasized, was the work of the Spirit through those who had received the Spirit. Those in whom the Spirit dwells—like those disciples—had both a mission and the empowerment to share it with others.

Later in the sermon, Peter quotes Psalm 16, making the case that this passage, written hundreds of years earlier, referred to Jesus. “Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades,” the Psalm reads, “Nor allow thy Holy One to undergo decay.” As Peter noted, death was not able to hold Jesus just as the psalm had declared.

Next, Peter turns to the promise of the Father, first seen in Luke 3:16 and repeated in Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:4–5. Peter says in verses 32–33, “God has resurrected this Jesus. We are all witnesses of this. Therefore, since [Jesus] has been exalted to the right hand of God and has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, [Jesus] has poured out

what you both see and hear.” Here is the sign that the new era had arrived through the mediating work of the One at God’s right hand, just as John the Baptist had said.

So a few verses later, Peter sums up the point, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know with certainty that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah!” Peter then calls on his audience to respond and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Spirit of God, the reception of a promise God had made to enable His people. Here is the offer as expressed in Acts 2:38–39: “‘Repent,’ Peter said to them, ‘and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus the Messiah for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call.’”

Thus, the first gospel message of the early church spoke of Jesus giving the Spirit in order to forge a fresh relationship between God and His people. This gospel message called people into a new affiliation with God that permitted them to pass from being subject to God’s judgment into the new life the Spirit of God brings. It called them to experience a vibrancy of life that even life under God’s Law had not been able to provide. Here was good news: The way into relationship with God had been opened up in a fresh new way through Jesus.

Two thousand years of the church’s telling the story can dull the sense of wonder the gospel should bring. Here is the Creator God reaching down to touch a rebellious people’s heart through a sacrifice that He Himself brings, so that those He created may experience the life they were originally designed to live—a life in harmony with creation because it is in accord with the Creator. The gospel is not about a death but about a death that leads many into life. It is not about avoiding something but gaining someone precious, a new vibrant relationship with the gracious and self-sacrificing God who created us to know and follow Him.

#### *Acts 11:15–18*

Our journey through the gospel as promise is not done. The gospel is about more than saving me as an individual. It has a much larger corporately driven goal: the reconciliation of people both to God and one another. A hint of this comes in Luke 1:16–17 which describes John the Baptist’s mission in preparing the way for the gospel: “He will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people.” John’s message was not only to bring people back to God, but to bring them back to one another in healthy relationships that had gone stale.

The book of Acts also points to this element of reconciliation in the gospel. After Cornelius and his Gentile family had embraced the Lord, the Spirit came upon them even before Peter had finished his message to them. Some thought including Gentiles in the new community without making them live like Jews was a mistake and challenged Peter for welcoming these new believers into the community. Peter explains that God showed

what was to be done by how He had responded. Acts 11:15–18 summarizes, “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came down on them, just as on us at the beginning. Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ Therefore, if God gave them the same gift that He also gave to us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, how could I possibly hinder God?” When they heard this, they became silent. Then they glorified God, saying, “So God has granted repentance resulting in life to even the Gentiles!” Now both Jews and Gentiles, groups comprising all of the world’s people, had access to the new life. The gift of the Spirit, the sign of this new era, came with faith in Jesus. Peter’s mind went back to the words of Jesus, noted in Acts 1:4–5 that themselves were an echo of the promise John the Baptist uttered in Luke 3:16. The gospel is about a promise that brings people back to God and to each other. In a world desperate for peace, that is good news.

#### *Acts 13:23–25*

The golden thread of promise in the gospel reappears in Acts 13. In this chapter, Paul is preaching at Pisidia Antioch in a locale that now is located in the middle of Turkey. He summarizes the history of Israel. He starts with Abraham, then goes to the Exodus with Moses, on to Joshua, to the period of the Judges, on to Saul, and then David. From here, Paul leaps all the way from David to John the Baptist and Jesus. A thousand years of Israel’s history means nothing. That history drives towards David and promises made to this significant king. Speaking of David and promises made to him, Paul says in Acts 13:23–25, “From this man’s descendants, according to the promise, God brought the Savior, Jesus, to Israel. Before He came to public attention, John had previously proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. Then as John was completing his life work, he said, ‘Who do you think I am? I am not the One. But look! Someone is coming after me, and I am not worthy to untie the sandals on His feet.’”

Does Paul’s allusion to the completion of the promise look familiar? The untying of the sandals is an allusion back to the Luke 3:16 passage and the promise that Messiah brings God’s Spirit to His people. Paul concludes the message with this word of exhortation, “Therefore, let it be known to you, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you, and everyone who believes in Him is justified from everything, which you could not be justified from through the Law of Moses.” Here Jesus brings forgiveness and justification, things the Law could not generate. As we see throughout Luke-Acts, forgiveness isn’t an end in itself. The point of forgiveness is to remove the barrier that stands between us and God so that He can give us His Spirit and bring us into His everlasting family.

#### *Acts 15:7–9*

Our final passage in the thread appears at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Once again, Peter is defending the manner in which Gentiles have been brought into the community alongside Jews. Acts 15:8 reads, “After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them: ‘Brothers, you are aware that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the gospel message and believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them by giving the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.’”



By now, the argument ought to be familiar. God took the initiative in the gospel, showing that Gentiles who genuinely responded received the same Spirit originally given at Pentecost. Their hearts were cleansed by faith so God could come and indwell them. If God is present in them without their keeping the Law, then we should not ask them to do something God did not ask them to do.

**Summary: The Gospel is about a promise**

The golden thread we have traced reflects the message at the center of the gospel. God has taken the initiative in Jesus Christ to bring us into relationship with Him. At the core of that good news stands a promise to form a new relationship and a new community. God was remaking a people He had previously formed around His Law. That Law had not led God's people into righteousness, not because the Law was flawed, but because we were. For a relationship with God to function, a new work had to be done from within the depths of the human soul. So God offered the hope of a promise, the hope of His Spirit poured out in the last days and the hope of a new responsiveness etched in His children's hearts.

To clear the path for that new heart, it had to be evident that sin was costly and that it was an obstacle between God and people. Sin was a debt that could be repaid only at a deep, deep cost: the cost of a life. God paid the cost Himself through His Son, the Messiah. The evidence that Jesus is the Messiah is indicated not just by an empty tomb and resurrection, but by the provision of the very promise that pointed to the new era, the gift of a new relationship in the Spirit. John the Baptist had pointed to this as the test of whether the Promised One had come. In the Spirit's presence, God not only drew near, but showed that the real gospel was about regaining fellowship with Him and joining the reconciled people He had been dying to create.

*Darell L. Bock,  
dbockdts@aol.com*

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<sup>1</sup> The following is one chapter of my larger book on a biblical theology of the gospel entitled, *Recovering the Real Lost Gospel: Rediscovering the Gospel as Good News* (Nashville: Lifeway, 2010). This chapter highlights the roots of the gospel. My remarks at the conference will summarize this plus some other points about the gospel.

<sup>2</sup> "Now the men of Sodom were evil, sinning greatly against the LORD. After Lot had separated from him, the LORD said to Abram, 'Look from the place where you are. Look north and south, east and west, for I will give you and your offspring forever all the land that you see. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if one could count the dust of the earth, then your offspring could be counted. Get up and walk from one end of the land to the other, for I will give it to you.'"

<sup>3</sup> "Moses went up the mountain to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain: 'This is what you must say to the house of Jacob, and explain to the Israelites: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now if you will listen to Me and carefully keep My covenant, you will be My own possession out of all the peoples, although all the earth is Mine, and you will be My kingdom of priests and My holy nation.'" These are the words that you are to say to the Israelites.'"

<sup>4</sup> "When they said, 'Give us a king to judge us,' Samuel considered their demand sinful, so he prayed to the LORD. But the LORD told him, 'Listen to the people and everything they say to you. They have not rejected you; they have rejected Me as their king.'"

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<sup>5</sup> Luke wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, which picks up where the Gospels leave off. I speak of Luke-Acts because these two books are essentially Volume 1 and Volume 2 of Luke's account of the beginnings of the Church.

<sup>6</sup> "I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John, but the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

<sup>7</sup> Jacob Lauterbach, *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society (reprint 2004 [1933]), 2:358. The remark appears in a section discussing the six years a slave can serve. He should not wash the feet of his master, put shoes on him, carry things for him to a bathhouse, lift him by the hips as he goes upstairs, or carry him in a chair or sedan chair.

<sup>8</sup> "A voice of one crying out: Prepare the way of the LORD in the wilderness; make a straight highway for our God in the desert. Every valley will be lifted up, and every mountain and hill will be leveled; the uneven ground will become smooth, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will appear, and all humanity will see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

<sup>9</sup> "Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. He also said to them, 'This is what is written: the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead the third day, and repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem.'"

<sup>10</sup> "While He was together with them, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the Father's promise. 'This,' He said, 'is what you heard from Me . . .'"

<sup>11</sup> It is possible the Jewish book of Jubilees sees Pentecost and the giving of the Law as having fallen on the same day (Weiser, *EDNT* 3:70; BDAG 796; Betz, *TDNT* 9:296; Tob. 2:1; 2 Macc. 12:32).