

Advent Foundations: The Gospel

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] Hello and welcome to session one of our Foundations class.

This is the session where we talk about the gospel, which is the core of our faith. And the way this class is designed, we hope that you take the time to either watch or listen to this talk.

And then we will use our class time together in person to discuss and apply the things that we talk about in these recorded sessions. So session one is an opportunity for us to focus on the gospel.

And, you know, our first value as a church is the value of gospel centrality. That's our way of saying that everything we do, everything that we are, our entire reason for being here as a church, is something that flows out of the gospel.

That the gospel is core to everything that we're about. And so we're beginning with the most important thing, which is the gospel. Now, I know some of you grew up in church. You've been Christians a long time.

[1 : 09] And maybe you hear this and you might be tempted to skip this session because you think that the gospel is basic and elementary and something that you've known since you were young. And that may be the case.

But, you know, the gospel is something that we have to come back to again and again and again. It's been said that the gospel is shallow enough that a child can play and splash in the shallows and yet deep enough to confound the most skilled mariner.

So as Christians, all of our lives, we need to come back to the gospel again and again and again. I actually grew up going to church. I didn't really come to faith until college.

Once I did come to faith, though, in my senior year, I realized that even though I had grown up going to church and even though I thought I knew what Christianity was all about, that I had some serious misconceptions that needed to be cleared up.

And now that I'm a pastor, I've realized that a lot of those misconceptions are fairly common. There are a lot of people who grow up in the church who call themselves Christians and yet who have some fundamental misunderstandings about what the gospel actually is and what it means.

[2 : 15] And in Foundations, partly because of that, we never assume that we know where people are coming from spiritually. We never assume we know where people stand.

And we want to create an environment where all questions are on the table, where no questions are seen as off limits or silly or stupid. So there are no stupid questions.

And in the discussion that we will have following this class and all the classes in Foundations, I encourage you to bring whatever questions you may have. So as you listen to this talk, if this raises questions for you, write them down and bring them to class.

And we will look very much forward to discussing them together. So let's dive in. We're going to talk about the Christian worldview. The core of that worldview is the gospel.

Now, when we talk about a worldview, that's essentially a conception of the world. It's a way of thinking about the way things are. And often a worldview comes in the form of a story.

[3 : 18] And it's a story that we rely on to help make sense of our experiences. The human brain craves coherence. We want things to connect. We want things to make sense.

And so we use a worldview to help make sense of our lives. And these worldviews are stories that represent our attempts to answer some of the most fundamental questions of life, such as why are we here?

Or what is wrong with the world? Or what needs to be done? What can we do to fix what is broken? Where is all of this going? Right? These are some of the most fundamental questions.

And most religions and philosophies have ways of answering these questions. Now, when we look at Christianity, our core text is the Bible. And even though the Bible is made up of lots of different books by lots of different authors representing lots of different genres, even though it was written over many, many centuries, the Bible tells one great story.

It's made up of a lot of little stories, but all of those fit together and tell one great story. And that story forms the basis of the Christian worldview. And that story, we can think of it as having four chapters.

[4 : 33] It begins with creation. And then we move into chapter two, which is the fall. Chapter three, we might refer to as redemption. And then chapter four, we would call either renewal or new creation.

But these four chapters make up the story that we read in the Bible that starts in Genesis and goes through the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. So what we're going to do is walk through each of these chapters, and we'll get to the third chapter, redemption.

And there we'll see the sort of core truth of the gospel. But in some ways, the gospel can be thought of as this whole story, the story of salvation history. So this story begins in creation.

This is the first couple of chapters of the Bible in the book of Genesis. Now, we know from our observations of the universe that approximately 13.8 billion years ago, there was no space.

There was no time. There was simply a single infinitesimal point. There was nothing. And at some point along the way, this kind of point exploded.

[5 : 42] And it did so spontaneously. And it flung matter and energy outward at the speed of light. And that resulted in billions and billions of galaxies over our vast universe.

Now, we know something like this happened, and yet we have no scientific explanation for what caused it. And Christians believe that God caused creation to come into being.

That God is, as we would say, the first cause. God is the cause who caused everything that came after him to be, to exist, including space and time themselves.

Now, before I was a Christian, I thought that believing in creation meant that you had to reject science. That you couldn't be open to things like evolution.

But frankly, the creation story in the Bible is not really interested in how God went about doing this. We're not really meant to read it as a scientific textbook.

[6 : 44] The creation story doesn't really focus on how God did it. It focuses on the far deeper question of why. Why would God create?

Why did God do this? And what is God's role and relationship to creation? And Christians believe that we were all created to love and to serve God.

And that's where we're meant to find identity and purpose. It actually says in the creation account that every human being is made in God's image.

That we are the pinnacle of creation. And that has massive implications. Right? For example, our belief in universal human rights, which sits at the very core of Western civilization, that came directly out of the Judeo-Christian belief that human beings have been created in the image of God.

Right? It's rooted in that idea. But here's what this means for us on a more personal level. If we look at the doctrine of creation, one of the things that we draw out of that is this.

[7 : 54] Is that when we look at our lives, your life is not about you. Your life is not about you. It's not about your personal fulfillment.

It's not about our happiness. It's not about our success. It's not even about the things that might seem like they are more important than anything else.

Like our family, our children. It's not really about any of those things. If we were truly created by God to love and to serve him, what that means is that if we really want to know who we are, why we're here, what the purpose of all of this is, we have to begin with God.

That life is ultimately about knowing, loving, and serving the God who made us. So this is what we see in the first chapter of the Bible, that God created all of this.

Why? As an act of love. Why did he create us? So that we could know and love and serve him. This is the purpose, the reason why God created everything that he did.

[9 : 00] So creation shows us the way things ought to be, right? A world filled with God's presence, a world full of people who know and love and serve God and live out his purposes and continue his good work in creation.

This is the way things ought to be. But then, of course, we get to chapter 3 of Genesis and we see the second movement in our story. We move from creation to the fall.

Human beings, as we said, were created to love and serve God. But at some point along the way, we decided that we wanted to be in control of our own lives. We decided that instead of loving and serving God, we wanted to love and serve ourselves alone.

But the fact is, since we were made to love and serve God, if we remove God from the equation, that creates a vacuum.

And other God substitutes get pulled in to fill that vacuum. And so we see human beings begin to look to other things to give us what God alone can give us.

[10 : 09] We try to fill that God vacuum with other substitute gods. David Foster Wallace was not a Christian, but he was a writer and he was a keen observer of human nature.

And this is what he says about human beings. He says, here's something else that's weird but true. In the day-to-day trenches of life, there's actually no such thing as atheism. There's no such thing as not worshipping.

No, everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. Now, what he's saying is this, is that human beings tend to take things, and often these are very good things, and we simply elevate those things until they become ultimate things.

What that means is that we allow them to become so important. We allow them to become so central to our lives that if we were to lose these things, life would hardly be worth living.

Whatever we rely on for happiness, whatever we rely on for identity, wherever we find hope and meaning, those functionally serve as our gods.

[11 : 16] And the word in the Bible for these God substitutes is the word idols. Now, this leads to another misconception that I had growing up about Christianity. I used to think, all through my childhood, that Christianity was mainly concerned with sin.

The Bible actually teaches that sin is a symptom. Sin is a symptom of a far deeper issue, and that is the issue of idolatry. So Christianity teaches that all of the evils of the world, all of the injustice and poverty and racism and environmental degradation and all of the things that indicate that the world is broken, all of that is actually caused by idolatry.

And again, I just want to be clear that idols are often good things. The problem is simply that we allow those good things to become too important. We allow them to become ultimate things. So success is a good thing.

It is good to have ambition. It is good to have goals. But for some people, success can become an ultimate thing. Now, what does that mean? Well, it means that for them, their whole sense of worth is tied up in their accomplishments.

They sacrifice friendships. They sacrifice relationships with their family and their children. They maybe even do unethical things to get ahead because for them, success is the thing that matters most.

[12 : 35] That's their idol. Another example would be being well-liked. It's perfectly legitimate to want people to think well of us and to want to be respected and admired.

But for some people, approval can become an ultimate thing. What that means is they're willing to compromise their values and their standards in order to gain approval. Maybe they can't say no when they need to say no.

Maybe they can't set boundaries. Maybe they avoid conflict at all costs because they would rather die than risk, rejection, or disapproval. Now, for a person like that, approval has become their idol, right?

Being well-liked has become the ultimate thing. And almost anything can be turned into an idol. Things like status or sex or money, national identity, family, right?

Anything can become ultimate. For many people in our society, politics has become an idol. We see politics almost functioning as a new religion for people on the right and the left.

[13 : 34] Now, the implication of idolatry is this. The problem is that idols never really deliver what they promise.

No matter how much we sacrifice, no matter how much we give up in service of our idols, they never, ever, ever deliver. It's never enough. Coming back to David Foster Wallace, he says this.

If you worship money and things, if they're where you tap real meaning in life, then you'll never have enough. You'll never feel you have enough. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly.

Worship power, and you will end up feeling weak and afraid. You will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect. Being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.

So Christians believe that we will never be satisfied, that we will never be whole until we abandon our idols and return to the God who made us for himself.

[14 : 36] Right? So that's the second piece of our story. We moved from creation to the fall, and the fall shows us that the core problem in the world is idolatry, that we have rejected our purpose to love and serve God, and now we have fallen prey to and have come to worship and serve false gods known as idols.

This brings us to the third movement of our story, redemption. How is our relationship with God restored? Where do we find hope for freedom and new life?

Now this brings us to perhaps my biggest misconception about Christianity growing up of all. See, growing up, I always assumed that the core message of Christianity was that good people get saved.

I thought Christianity was just like every other religion. Be good and you will get saved. But that is what every other religion may say. It's not at all what Christianity says.

Right? This narrative, good people get saved, is what we might refer to as the moral performance narrative. And the moral performance narrative essentially says this, is the way I know that I'm a good person, the way I know that I'm a righteous person, is because of what I do.

[15 : 50] Right? What I do is the ultimate measure of my righteousness, and how I know that I'm a good person. So if you're a traditional religious person, you might say, I know that I'm righteous because of my morals.

I know that I'm righteous because I regularly read my sacred texts. I know that I'm righteous because my good deeds outweigh my bad deeds. I know I'm righteous because I regularly show and prove my devotion.

And because I do all of these things, I know that I will be rewarded. That's how most religions around the world operate. Now, if you're a secular progressive person, you're going to have a different standard of righteousness, but the underlying mechanism is the same.

You might say, I know I'm a good person because I believe in tolerance and inclusion. I'm open-minded. I believe in equality. I want to overturn unjust power structures.

And life is about being true to yourself. Right? So you would say, I know I'm a good person. I know I'm a righteous person because these are the beliefs that I hold dear. These are the things that I live for.

[16 : 52] And what invariably happens is that however we define righteousness for ourselves, whether we're a traditional religious person or a more secular progressive person, however we define righteousness, we end up looking down on people who don't live up to our standard of righteousness.

So Jonathan Haidt, in his book, *The Righteous Mind*, talks about how we are all hardwired to be self-righteous. We are hardwired to assume that we are the good people.

We meaning me and people like me with my shared definition of righteousness. Right? That we are the good people. We are the righteous ones. And those other people are the unrighteous.

Right? They're the unclean. So if you're a traditional religious person, you can't help but look down on all those godless secular progressive types. Right? They're the real problem of the world.

They're what's wrong with things. Right? But if you're a secular progressive person, you're going to think the opposite. You can't help but look down on all those bigots, all those religious extremists. Right? That's what's wrong with the world.

[17 : 54] So the moral performance view says that you are righteous because you live up to your standard of righteousness. It is a self-made righteousness.

Right? And you can operate like this as a religious person or as a non-religious person. Right? But either way, you are creating a standard of righteousness, living up to that standard, and then proclaiming yourself to be righteous.

Christianity is centered on something entirely different. Christianity is centered on grace, which is the opposite message. The grace narrative says this, that if we actually understood God's definition of righteousness, if we actually look at how God defines what it means to be a good person, we would see that no one can live up to that standard.

That no one can attain it. That no one even comes close. Scripture says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

And there the Apostle Paul is talking not just about Gentiles, the kind of non-Christians and pagans. He's talking to Jews. He's talking to Jews who believe very much that they are righteous. He says we've all sinned.

[19 : 07] We all fall short. And what the gospel says is that we need someone to rescue us. And this is why Jesus came. Jesus came to live the life that we should have lived.

To live a perfectly righteous life. Jesus came to then give his life on the cross. To die in order to pay the price for all of human sin. And then that Jesus, after three days, rose from the grave.

He rose from death. And that through his life and his death and his resurrection, he triumphed over evil. He conquered death.

And he has risen and now extended the invitation to all people to come to him. To repent and turn away from their sin and their idolatry. And to embrace the grace that he offers.

To find forgiveness and be reconciled to God. And to be given a new identity in him. And this is the core truth of the gospel. When we talk about the gospel, this is the very essence of it.

[20 : 09] That Jesus accomplished our salvation for us. That Jesus did it for us. He took our failures on himself on the cross.

And then he gives us his righteousness like a garment. That's the gospel in a nutshell. And what we believe is that salvation cannot be earned.

That there is nothing that we can do that can add anything to what Jesus has already accomplished for us on the cross. Salvation is a gift. And it's a gift that God gives us because he loves us.

And it's a gift that can only be received by faith. By believing that God has done this for us. And that profound love is the only thing that has the power to dislodge the idols in our lives.

Because when we look at the things like success or money or power that we sacrifice for, we realize that it's never enough. That it's always wanting more. That we're always giving more. And we're never getting the fulfillment that we crave.

[21 : 14] When we compare that to the love of God. And when we look at that love put on display on the cross. We realize that God is the only one in the universe who is worthy of our worship.

The only one worthy of our worship is the being who would go to that great a length. Who would plot and plan over thousands of years to one day give his own life.

To lay down his own life in order to save those he loves. And so the Christian life is all about casting off the idols that we're tempted to worship. And learning how to find our worth and our identity and our meaning in the love of God.

So Christianity does not teach that good people get saved. Jesus actually teaches that people who believe they are good tend to be the ones who are least likely to be saved.

Because it is so hard to convince people like that that they actually need grace. Those are the ones that have the hardest time believing and accepting the gospel. You know I have a friend who is a Unitarian Universalist pastor.

[22 : 24] And he loves to say that all religions are basically different paths that lead up the same mountain. And they all lead to God in one way or another. But there's one crucial difference with Christianity.

See only Christianity says that we're not able to go up the mountain. Only Christianity says that God loves us so much that he was willing to come down the mountain to us.

This is what sets the gospel apart. So for me as someone who in my earlier days before my conversion. As someone who had been reading and learning about other religions.

When I realized this it was earth shattering. It helped me realize that Christianity and the Christian gospel. That it is entirely unique in the world. No other religion or worldview says this.

But the story doesn't end there. Right? So Jesus comes. He offers grace. Right? We abandon the self-salvation project.

[23 : 18] The moral performance narrative of trying to prove our own worth. We embrace the grace and forgiveness that Jesus offers. But now what? What is our salvation for? And what we see as we look at the fourth movement of the Christian story.

Is that God intends to completely restore and renew this world. This brings us to another misconception I had about Christianity.

See I always thought Christianity was basically just about getting saved and going to heaven. I thought it was essentially our ticket. Right? To get us off of this planet and into God's arms before everything burns up.

And yet I realize now that the actual hope of Christianity is that God plans to renew and restore this physical world. In the final chapters of the Bible the image that we have is not just a bunch of people floating up to the clouds and playing harps.

The image that we have is a city. It is a city. The city. The city of God. Descending and becoming the center of all things.

[24 : 28] What we see in the final chapters of the Bible. What we see is that the heavens and the earth are finally joined together. Right? The new Jerusalem descends. God reestablishes, renews his creation.

The heavens and the earth are one. And God is at the very center of it all. And we as human beings are raised to life again. We have physical resurrection bodies like Jesus did when he rose.

And the apostle Paul says the proof of this, the proof that we will be raised, the proof that we will have resurrection bodies, is actually found in the resurrection of Jesus.

So Christians believe that the resurrection of Jesus is a preview of what God is going to one day do with the whole world. So we believe that the Christian life is about joining with Jesus in the healing and the renewing of the world.

So all that we do as Christians, all of the ways that we try to love and serve people, to share and proclaim the gospel in word and deed, all of the ways we care about and do the work of justice and mercy, we do all of that looking forward to God's promise of renewal.

[25 : 42] We want to, we are called to participate in the ongoing work of renewal now, knowing that one day God will bring this work to completion. So this is what the Christian life is about.

So just to review, these are the four chapters that summarize the story at the heart of the Christian faith, the Christian worldview, the four movements or the four acts of the Bible story.

Creation, God made us for himself. The fall says we rejected God to serve idols. Redemption, God through Jesus offers forgiveness and freedom.

And then finally, restoration, we join with Jesus in the renewal of all things. That's the gospel. And I look forward to discussing this more in person. I pray that God would bless you.

And I pray that God would press these truths in our hearts once again, whether this is the first time we're hearing it or the hundredth time we're hearing it, Lord. I pray that we would have a fresh understanding of the gospel and the depth of your love for us.

[26 : 44] Amen. See you soon. Amen.