



What on
earth is God
doing?

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*Discovering
good news*

Introduction

"Good news!"

"Really?"

"Yes!"

"What is it?"

"We've won the contract!" In the context of a firm's precarious finances, this announcement brings hope, removing anxiety and uncertainty from the business and its employees.

"I've been given the all clear!" After all the worry and treatment, the future for this person and their loved ones is suddenly transformed by optimism.

"Good news!"

"I've got the grades!" It's results day; all the hard work has paid off and now the way is open for the student to study at the university of their choice.

Good news! There's an excitement in the voice of the person bearing good news and a heightened anticipation in the one who's hearing. It's not a joke, an idea, a theory or a made-up story. No, something has happened and because it has happened the outlook on life, now and the future, is better; more hopeful, more joyful, more 'life worth living'.

Christians talk a lot about good news, that's what the word 'gospel' means. But what is it? What happened? Why does it make people more joyful and hopeful?

In seeking to answer these questions, I have written this booklet with two readers in mind:

- the Christian who has some understanding of the good news but doesn't enthusiastically share it with others, possibly because they don't really consider it to be *that* good
- the person for whom the good news is new to them and they have a heightened anticipation to know what it's all about.

My hope is that these two readers would talk together, and that this booklet might provoke questions and conversations, and the discovery of truly good news.

Before writing this booklet I was privileged to interview 20 people of differing backgrounds and ages, ranging from teenagers to octogenarians. The only thing they had in common was that they were not currently church-goers. I am hugely grateful for the freedom with which they shared their perceptions.

What follows is in three parts:

Part One: Discovering good news

Part Two: What God is doing on earth

Part Three: What about me?

Part One: Discovering good news

To understand the context for God's good news, we only need consider one question: What is wrong with the world? This was one of the questions I put to those I interviewed and these are the things they said:

Greed, intolerance, inequality, poverty, narcissism, hatred, racism, misuse of power, corruption, materialism, fear, selfishness, anger, unkindness, religious conflict, deceit, hypocrisy, evil, war, lack of respect, failing to listen, envy, suffering, not enough love, murder, fractured relationships, death, abuse, dishonesty, broken promises, violence.

Sadly, we are too familiar with many of these things. But this is the setting for God to do something special.

God?

Perhaps you struggle with the notion of 'God'.

Many of us are uncertain. We see the incredible intricacy, balance and

There's too much suffering; how can there be a God?

complexity of life forms and wonder how on earth this could all be here by accident; surely there must be a designer and creator who formed it and holds it all in balance? But then we see the hurt and brokenness of the world, the suffering and poverty, and wonder how God would allow this if he existed.

Others of us are atheist. We do not believe there to be a God. We see the amazing wonder and beauty of our planet and all the life forms, including our own human experience, and we have faith strong enough to say that this is all the result of unintentional and unplanned forces of formation and evolution.

But let's imagine for a moment that there is a God who is all-loving and all-powerful; what would such a God do to help the world? It's another question I put to my interviewees and this is typical of how they replied:

- "He would intervene; he would get stuck in, not just help from a distance but he would come and get his hands dirty."
"He would lead by example and put it right."
"He would act to correct the wrongs."

"God would enable people to be tolerant, loving and kind."

"He would interact with us, do something radical by turning up and saying, 'This wrong has to stop! There's only one me so listen to me: I am loving; I'm not about bombing people! You're going against everything that I am about.'"

So people think that God would come to us.

- "God would send a teacher."
"He would put up a mirror in front of people so that they could see what they were doing wrong."
"He would teach us and guide us."
"He would work with humanity in their struggles so that they learnt to change in the challenges they face."
"He would give us all a therapy session to sort us out."
"He would point us in the right direction, giving us a vision of a perfect world so we knew how life is meant to be."

So people think that God would teach us.

- "God would enable people to be tolerant, loving and kind."
"He would make it possible for people to change so that they were no longer greedy or corrupt in power."

“He would change the way that people think and act on both the macro and micro level.”

“He would re-create a different kind of man and woman because humans are responsible for all the problems.”

So people think that God would change us.

God would come to us, teach us and change us

If such a God existed and did those things, would we reckon it to be good news?

I was getting my hair cut once and we were talking about some world story dominating the news and the guy cutting said, “If there was a God up there who loved us, surely he would come down and sort this mess out!”

This reminds me of a story of two colleagues at work. The radio was on and Joan Osborne's song, "One of Us", with its repeating lyrics, "What if God was one of us?" had just played. One of them said, “Wouldn't that be a great idea for a story?” “What?” the other replied. “Suppose God became a human being. Wouldn't that make a great story?”

Yes! Of course he would come down and sort things out and yes, it did make a

"If God was One of Us."

great story! It's the story of Jesus Christ and it changed the course of history.

This story is recorded for us in the Bible. When we take our twenty-first century imaginings of what an all-loving and all-powerful God would do to help the world and we compare them with what the writers of the New Testament of the Bible were passionately declaring as having happened, we find there is no difference! **What we imagine a good God would do to help us, they were saying, 'He's done it!'**

Bible

A collection of 66 ancient texts written by about 40 different people over a time span of approx. 1,600 years. It's made up of two parts: the Old Testament is B.C. and the New Testament is A.D. The different books all convey something of what God was doing or what he is like.

Could **Jesus Christ** be God coming to us, to teach us and to change us so that the world might be put right? Is this the good news?

The authors of the New Testament – people such as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Paul, Peter and James – had no idea they were writing the New Testament; they were simply researching and recording events that had turned the world upside down or writing letters to

help others get their heads around the enormity of all they had witnessed. They were certainly not trying to start a new religion but processing the implications of what they had seen God doing. It was considered such good news, creating so much joy and hope, that their writing went viral. In fact, it was copied and shared so many thousands of times that we have more reliable evidence for the authenticity of the Bible than we do for any other work of ancient literature.

But what were they saying had happened?
Let's break down the story into four acts.

ACT 1 – God's plan and his promises

The story begins with God who loves the world that he created so much that he committed himself to putting it right: renewing and restoring it completely. God's verdict of his original creation was 'very good' but it was spoilt by humanity's rejection of God, both personally and corporately. Like an artist surveying her vandalised masterpiece, God was grieved at the spoiling of his work. His plan and resolve was to set the world free from everything that mars it, all that 'wrongness' or 'sin' that we identified earlier...

Sin

Anything that is unlike God, at variance from his character.

Greed, intolerance, inequality, poverty, narcissism, hatred, racism, misuse of power, corruption, materialism, fear, selfishness, anger, unkindness, religious conflict, deceit, hypocrisy, evil, war, lack of respect, failing to listen, envy, suffering, not enough love, murder, fractured relationships, death, abuse, dishonesty, broken promises, violence

... and instead to fill the world with his justice and love. When everything on earth happens according to the will and ways of God (this is what Jesus and others call 'the kingdom of God') then everything in the world will be put right. These are the kind of words that describe the will and ways of God in his kingdom:

Love, forgiveness, joy, peace, hope, contentment, fulfilment, justice, selflessness, morality, caring, mercy, humility, honesty, integrity, purity, faithfulness, charity, generosity, grace, healing, wholeness, truth, wisdom, respect, freedom, kindness, gentleness, patience, self-control, encouragement, goodness, unity, compassion, life.

Imagine the world like *that*! God has promised this transformation and he has a plan to deliver it.

Kingdom

A sphere of influence; we all have one. The greater your sphere of influence, the greater will be the impact of your attitudes and actions on others.

Ponder...

If 'wrongness' and God's kingdom were represented by contrasting communities, where would you rather live? And which community do you want to contribute to?

ACT 2 – The birth and life of Jesus

God's intent to put the world right started through his chosen relationship with the Hebrew people (that's what the Old Testament is all about) but was irreversibly established through God's Son, Jesus Christ (that's the New Testament). The story that began with Israel reached its fulfilment with Jesus.

God's plan to put the world right

At Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ as God coming to rescue humanity from what is wrong with the world. You may remember in the Nativity the angel instructing a shocked Joseph, as he reassures him of his fiancée's pregnancy by the Holy Spirit, "to give [the child] the name Jesus (meaning 'God saves'), because he will rescue his people from their sins." Matthew 1:21

The life of Jesus – his character, teachings and actions – was a demonstration of how things are when God does them. But Jesus was not only a living example of the kingdom of God, he was also the One

through whom other people accessed God's sphere of influence for themselves. Here's a glimpse of that happening:

"Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralysed and he healed them."

Matthew 4:23-25

Ponder...

Every time we write the date and the year, whether we like it or not, we are referencing that day in relation to the birth of Jesus Christ. Could one person's life really have been that significant?

ACT 3 – The death and resurrection of Jesus

The death of Jesus Christ on the cross is at the heart of the good news and it is where God's love for the world is most fully demonstrated.

Read the story and you realise that Jesus had done no wrong yet was dying a

The cross is at the heart of the good news.

criminal's death. Despite the fact that human beings were to blame for the brokenness in the world, Jesus took full responsibility. In an act of profound mystery and sacrifice, Jesus died for the sins of the world. His mission was to defeat spiritual forces of evil in order to rescue people from contributing to the wrongness of the world and make life in the kingdom of God available to everyone. His mission was accomplished as he was crucified – suffering the horror of every evil that was thrown at him and dying under its dreadful weight.

“God would not just help from a distance but he would come and get stuck in, get his hands dirty.” The bloodied hands of Jesus hammered with nails to a Roman cross was exactly that: God getting stuck in to defeat enemy powers so that we could be rescued and the world be put right.

What looked like defeat when Jesus died proved to be victory when, on the third day after his death, he was raised to life again. His resurrection began God's renewing of his creation: Christ had overcome all evil, including death itself, and disarmed the powers of darkness. The world turned a corner!

Resurrection

The raising of a dead person to a new, transformed life in a changed body that is no longer subject to decay and death.

Ponder...

If God is the Creator of life, the resurrection is no big deal for him. We may struggle to believe it but the resurrection of Jesus changed history. Do I dare explore the truth of it knowing that it could change my story?

ACT 4 – The story continues today

God has made Jesus the CEO of his project to put the world right – the King of God's kingdom – giving him absolute power and authority to see his plan through to its glorious conclusion, which will happen when Christ returns to sort out the remaining mess and injustice in the world.

Until Christ's return he reigns in heaven, and God is actively inviting everyone to become involved in what he is doing on earth, by acknowledging Jesus as King and following him. God is calling us to:

- Trust Jesus Christ and his victory over the powers of sin, death and evil.
- Honour Jesus as King and Teacher by serving him and learning from him.
- Welcome God's gift of his Spirit to live in us so that we are re-created and changed from the inside out.
- Recognise the goodness and love of God and worship him.

Heaven

Heaven is God's dimension of our reality just as earth is the human dimension. When these two merge, as God has promised, this new creation will be stunningly good!

- Become people of God's love, willing what is good for everyone around us, including those who hate or hurt us.

Love

The power of God's love makes the world a better place. We're not talking about romantic love or just loving the people who love us but an unconditional, gutsy, laying-down-your-life-for-others type of love. There is a favourite reading at weddings which is good for every married couple to aspire to, but this description of God's love is for everyone:

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."

1 Corinthians 13:4–8a

When this love shapes me and influences everything I do, the world is a better place and I feel most truly 'me', fulfilled and free. Imagine this love multiplied through families, communities, schools, friendships, workplaces, boardrooms,

God's love makes the world a better place.

governments, the entire world ... wow! This is what God is calling us to be part of!

So this is the good news of Jesus.

It's not a theory or an ideology. It actually happened.

God came to us...

in Jesus Christ to rescue us from what is wrong and reconcile humans to himself in a restored relationship.

...to teach us

Jesus became our King and Teacher so that the 'kingdom of God life' becomes available to us as we trust him and put into practice what he says.

...and to change us

As we trust Jesus, the Spirit of God lives in us to change us into the best possible version of ourselves, so that God in us makes the world a better place.

Ponder...

The story of Jesus is either true and incredibly good or it's fake news that has deceived millions. There cannot be an in-between. What do you think?

If you have read this far and you are not already a follower of Christ, then your response is likely to be one of the following:

Follower

a disciple,
a student,
an apprentice
of Jesus so that
we learn to live
the life that
Jesus offers.

- **Dismissive** – you don't believe it; it's fake news. If believing a myth helps other people, that's okay but it's not for you. If that is how you feel, I hope in reading this you at least may have a greater understanding of what those crazy Christians believe!
- **Offence** – because you believe something different and you are happy in your beliefs, you may be feeling offended in some way. If so, I am sorry. I have no desire to offend anyone but I hope it may have given you some insight into what the Christian gospel is all about.
- **Agitated** – your experience of Christians or the church has not been one characterised by love; you may have been judged, condemned or even abused. Again, I am sorry. My prayer for you is that you will know God's healing, love and freedom from what is in your past. Jesus himself encountered religious people who did not represent God.
- **Curious** – you might be surprised at what you have read, or haven't read. You are intrigued; questions have been triggered and there is more to explore.
- **Open** – something resonates in you

and you are open to the possibility of finding this to be truly good news. You have a willingness to change your thinking and your lifestyle and will want to get to know Jesus through reading the Bible, prayer and conversation with others who follow him.

- **You're on board** – you see it and it makes sense to you. Jesus is King and you're giving your life to serve him. You are excited with the anticipation of the adventure before you!

Part Two: What God is doing on earth

It's a huge story that has already changed the world and it will continue to do so; millions of people have changed the way they think and followed Jesus, finding their lives transformed. C. S. Lewis, perhaps most well-known as the author of the Narnia Chronicles, wrote, "I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it, I see everything else".

It's not about religion; there are hundreds of religions in the world. They are mainly composed of human ideas and traditions to appease and invoke the help of 'god', many promising an escape from an endlessly evil world into a perfect

*It's not about
religion ...*

paradise elsewhere. But no religion or belief system changes the truth of what God has actually done, is doing and will yet do. The big question is, **what is God doing to help this world and how can we get on board with that?**

When we trust the good news to be true...

When someone decides to be a follower of Christ, they are aligning themselves to God for him to bless them, change them and involve them in his project of renewing the world. All of God's blessings are significant in themselves; taken together they are awesome and it takes those who receive them time to grasp them.

- **God forgives us.** At some point along the path of getting to know and follow Jesus, we realise that we personally have contributed to what is wrong with the world. Our actions, or inaction, have at times been driven by greed or selfishness and we have hurt or failed to help others, adding to the brokenness of our world. Our sins (those actions and attitudes that are at variance with God's character) hinder our relationship with other people, ourselves, God and our planet.

*Set free from
guilt and
shame!*

Nothing can restore relationships like forgiveness does and God shows us the way by freely forgiving us for the times we have grieved him. God does not want anyone to be hindered in life by feelings of guilt, shame or condemnation.

- **God enables a relationship with him.** God loves us and wants us to know and experience him. Someone who trusts and follows Christ becomes part of God's family and discovers the joy of knowing God as their Father. It's like being a long-lost child who is found by a parent who has always loved and wanted them. Experiencing the unconditional love of God gives the follower of Jesus great confidence in life; finding healing and a wholeness in their relationship with God makes them wonder how they ever lived without him!
- **God gives his Holy Spirit to live within us.** Having reconciled us to himself through his forgiveness, God wants us to partner with him in his project of putting the world right by being part of the solution and no longer part of the problem. God gifts us with his Spirit so that we might be renewed from the inside out as we share in

his nature of unconditional love. The fruit of the Spirit of God that grows in the life of a follower of Christ is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. As this fruit develops, we become less selfish and more like Jesus in character. And as we change, so the world changes too: one person at a time, then families, communities and beyond.

- **God gives us a new purpose in life.** It's an incredibly high calling to work with God in his mission to fill the world with his justice, goodness and joy. A follower of Christ learns that everything they do has a fresh purpose: relationships, work, parenting, marriage, sport, leisure... everything becomes an opportunity to see God's influence at work in the world for good, through them.
- **God fulfils us.** Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full." John 10:10. He also said, "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will find it." Mark 8:35. It feels nonsense to us to believe that by giving up control of our own lives and serving King Jesus we could find a truly fulfilling, contented

life but the person who follows Christ proves it to be true. Many speak of an inner emptiness that money, sex, drink, or anything else could not fill, suddenly being satisfied when they encounter Jesus.

- **God gives us hope.** To be able to face the future, whatever happens, and feel secure and confident in all that God has done and has promised is a great blessing. Even death itself is no longer a cause to fear because Jesus promises to be with us in death and we are promised resurrection when Christ returns. The hope we are invited to live with every day is of being actively involved in heaven coming to earth. In that way, we anticipate the Day that God has promised when Christ returns and heaven and earth will come together in his renewed creation.

The best is yet to come!

Part Three: What about me?

If you're dismissive or offended by this so-called good news, the likelihood is that you're no longer reading this booklet and it's ripped up and in the bin. But one day, you'll perhaps get to know a follower of Christ and their lifestyle and character will be a complete enigma to you, and the

only explanation will be that this good news is true and God is at work in the world through them.

If you're agitated or curious by what you've read, you'll probably put this booklet down and do nothing much about it. That is, until something happens, or you meet someone, and then you'll ask more questions and your intrigue may become an openness to Jesus. God has a gentle and quiet way of pursuing us in love which, one day, may surprise you. Enjoy the surprise!

If you're open or on board, you'll want to get on and explore life in God's kingdom. You'll be eager to talk with God and with others who are following Christ.

Talking with God

The best prayer if we want to partner with God in his project to put the world right is the model prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. It can easily be adapted to our own faith level and circumstances:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name... whether you know him well or a little, speak to God about who he is to you; ask him for a revelation of himself for you to know him better; aim to give him the number one spot in what you

give worth to; worship him for what you already know of him.

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven... starting with you, your circumstances and your work today, ask God to enable you to do everything as if it were Jesus himself doing it; be open to learn from Christ in situations; ask him to teach and guide you as you read the Bible and for his Spirit in you to bear the fruit of God's goodness and love.

Give us today our daily bread... ask your Father God for your everyday needs as you trust him to provide for you.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us... recognise the ways in which you have said and done things your way and not the way of Christ, perhaps hurting someone or not helping them in the way that Jesus would; acknowledge those things to God and receive his forgiveness. At the same time, ask God to help you to extend that same forgiveness to those who have hurt or not helped you.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil... be aware of the ways in which evil might tempt you to contribute to what is wrong in the world (often in the

Jesus the King.

areas of money, sex and power) and look to Jesus to keep you from those things as you obey and learn from him.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever...

God's project to put this world right is unstoppable; we give power to what we worship and as you worship God and trust the teachings and work of Jesus Christ you will find great reward in being part of God's kingdom.

Amen. This is a Hebrew declaration of affirmation; it means, 'This is the way we want it/Let it be!'

Talking with others who follow Jesus

There's much to learn: how to read the Bible, listening to God, what is church, why is baptism important? So many questions and more. Getting to know Jesus and his way of life is best done together with others who are themselves wanting to be the people that God has made them to be.

The more you get to know God, the easier you will find it to trust him with what he is doing in your life. What does he want to

do through you to make his world a better place?

We're all familiar with the phrase 'all hell broke loose'. Let's follow Jesus and live in such a way that 'all heaven breaks loose!'

On earth. Here and now.

You might find the next spread helpful as a visual aid.

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God came to us: Jesus lived among us. He died, was buried and was raised again. The world turned a corner. New hope dawned.

*"God has rescued us from the **dominion of darkness** ...*

Greed, intolerance, inequality, poverty, narcissism, hatred, racism, misuse of power, corruption, materialism, fear, selfishness, anger, unkindness, religious conflict, deceit, hypocrisy, evil, war, lack of respect, failing to listen, envy, suffering, not enough love, murder, fractured relationships, death, abuse, dishonesty, broken promises, violence.

*... and brought us into the **kingdom of the Son he loves**".*

Paul the Apostle (Colossians 1:13)

Love, forgiveness, joy, peace, hope, contentment, fulfilment, justice, selflessness, morality, caring, mercy, humility, honesty, integrity, purity, faithfulness, charity, generosity, grace, healing, wholeness, truth, wisdom, respect, freedom, kindness, gentleness, patience, self-control, encouragement, goodness, unity, compassion, life.

*Where do you want to live? What do you want your life to contribute to?
Are you consistent in being the person you want to be?*

**God is inviting us to his kingdom life –
it's ours by trusting and serving King Jesus.**