

**THE  
GOSPEL-  
DRIVEN  
LIFE** Being Good News  
People in a  
Bad News World

**MICHAEL HORTON**



**BakerBooks**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Michael Horton,  
*The Gospel-Driven Life: Being Good News People in a Bad News World*,  
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Published by Baker Books  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Horton, Michael Scott.

The Gospel-driven life : being good news people in a bad news world / Michael Horton.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8010-1319-5 (cloth)

1. Christian life. 2. Evangelicalism. I. Title.

BV4501.3.H677 2009

248'.5—dc22

2009021356

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# INTRODUCTION

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The goal of this book is to reorient our faith and practice as Christians and churches toward the gospel: that is, the announcement of God’s victory over sin and death in his Son, Jesus Christ. The first six chapters explore that breaking news from heaven, while the rest of the book focuses on the kind of community that this gospel generates in the world. It is not merely that there is a gospel and then a community made up of people who believe it; the gospel creates the kind of community that is even now an imperfect preview of the kingdom’s marriage feast that awaits us. The church is its own culture, not only with its distinct story and doctrine, but with its own “politics” and means. Consistent with the message that it proclaims, the church is *receiving* its life, identity, growth, and expansion from above rather than *creating* these for itself and from its own resources.

Distinguished from all religions, spiritualities, and philosophies of life, the Christian faith is, at its heart, a *gospel* (meaning “Good News”). The church originates, flourishes, and fulfills its mission as that part of God’s world that has been redeemed and redefined by this strange announcement that seems foolish and powerless to the rest of the world. In other words, every believer—and the church corporately—has passed from death to life by being made a recipient of God’s activity.

Following from *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church*, this book explores the greatest story ever told and the surprising ways in which God is at work, gathering a people for his feast in a fast-food world. With *The Gospel-Driven Life*, we turn from the crisis to solutions, in the hope that we will see a new reformation in the faith, practice, and witness of contemporary Christianity.

The Good News is not just a series of facts to which we yield our assent but a dramatic narrative that replots our identity. Think of it in terms of a theatrical play. Each week we come to church with our own scripts. If yours is anything like mine, it's "the show about nothing." Yet God descends to give us a new script: a rich plot in which our original character dies and is raised with the lead character. Instead of trying to find a supporting role for God in our play, God writes us into his script as part of a growing cast for his new world. This script does not offer a blueprint for a new creation, if we will only follow certain steps for realizing it. Instead, through this gospel the Spirit sweeps us into the drama, into the new creation that has already been inaugurated. No longer "in Adam," under the reign of sin and death, we are "in Christ."

The book is divided into two sections: *Looking Up, Looking Out* and *Looking Around, Looking Ahead*. I've chosen to use a number of "news" metaphors in this book—"breaking news," "front-page," "headlines"—to emphasize both the urgency of the gospel and the surprising, unexpected means by which God communicates it to us. We don't find the truth about God, ourselves, or the world by looking within, but by being drawn outside of ourselves. Having been turned inside out, we look up in faith toward God and out toward our neighbors in loving service and witness. Surprising news has a way of focusing us on something "out there" in the real world rather than on our own assumptions, experiences, and speculations. Only the Spirit, working through the gospel, has this kind of power to bring about a new creation in the midst of the old. Gradually, we discover that the world outside is more interesting than the inner world of narcissistic preoccupation. It is a liberation that we never expected, much less achieved for ourselves. It's a gift. It is the marriage supper that is promised in the gospel and of which the Spirit gives us a foretaste in this present age. While our consumer culture offers instant gratification in drive-thru spiritualities, the gospel seats us at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as the Triune God serves us with his heavenly gifts.

A new reformation requires both a change in our message and our methods. It's not only our beliefs, but our personal and corporate practices, that must change. If our churches today are focused on our action, piety, and world-transforming agendas, then the crying need of our day is to recover the focus on Christ as the host *and* the meal that delivers forgiveness, new life, and genuine transformation in a world that is literally wasting away.

Like *Christless Christianity*, this book is written for a wide audience of Christians who are burned out on hype and are looking for hope. It especially targets younger laypeople, parents, and pastors who want to see their own lives and their churches become more gospel centered.

# LOOKING UP, LOOKING OUT

BREAKING NEWS

# 1

## THE FRONT-PAGE GOD

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### CHECKING THE HEADLINES

Judging by the success of twenty-four-hour reporting, we are news junkies these days. Besides being informed about the events shaping our world, we long to be a part of something beyond our own cycle of ordinary life. As important as many of these events may be, in most cases they come and go and as weeks, even days—sometimes hours—pass, we have already forgotten the headlines that caught our momentary attention.

The same thing happens in the church world as well. We are so easily distracted from the things that matter most—the commission that Christ gave us to proclaim the gospel and feed his sheep—by fads that come and go. Every party seems to leave a bad hangover: disillusionment, burnout, and fatigue. Yet we are always suckers for The Next Big Thing.

Long before CNN and online journalism, the basic content of the Christian faith was designated “news”—Good News, in fact. In its secular Greek context, *euangelion* (good news) was normally used for

the word of victory on the battlefield brought by a herald from the front lines. More than any other designation, this was the term that early Christians borrowed for their message and mission to the world.

Sometimes the headlines grab us; sometimes they don't. Often, they become so familiar that we are no longer arrested by them. In *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church*, I argued that the basic story line of the Bible, coalescing around Christ and his redeeming work, is being seriously blurred, confused, assumed, and in some cases even denied.<sup>1</sup> In short, the front-page headlines are being sent to the back page, the religion page, or other sections: entertainment, politics, sports, arts and culture. The result is that God becomes a supporting actor in our story instead of the other way around. We become the headliners and the work of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in history and in our own lives fades into the background.

Part of the problem is that the news industry has become, well, an industry. I haven't been around all that long, but long enough to recall the changing taglines for major news organizations. I remember CBS anchor Walter Cronkite ending each evening broadcast, "And that's the way it is, on this date, \_\_\_\_\_." But in an era of competing sources, it's sold as "all the news you can use." That shift is not insignificant. It's not so much about what *is* important, but about what I and a decent market share of my fellow consumers *feel* is important *for our own lives today*.

I have become more cynical about the news now, partly because I am not a child anymore and realize that Cronkite had his own point of view, but also because TV news especially has become so unabashedly subsumed under entertainment, marketing, and personal bias. People used to trust Cronkite because he didn't make himself the news, but today we expect our reporters to be celebrities with their own fan base. Too often, it's the same situation in the church.

But here's the pinch for Christianity. On one hand, the gospel is the most reasonable news to believe. That isn't what we are used to hearing these days. Religion is an irrational leap and the more you investigate it intellectually, the more likely you are to outgrow it. This is an assumption that you are as likely to hear in churches as on the street. However, the claim that "Jesus makes me happier" is a purely subjective statement. No one should become a Christian simply because of how helpful you've found it to be in your life. Unique among all religious claims, the gospel is an announcement about certain historical events. At its heart, then, Christianity is not a resource for

spirituality, religion, and morality, but a dramatic story at the heart of which is the claim that during the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Jesus was crucified for our sins and, after three days, was raised bodily from the dead. As we will see, the arguments for his resurrection are eminently reasonable—more reasonable, in fact, than alternative explanations. The apostle Paul told the Corinthians that if Christ was not raised, then we are not saved. No other religion makes its validity wholly dependent on a historical fact.

On the other hand, the gospel is “foolishness to those who are perishing” (1 Cor. 1:18). Religion and philosophy—that which the Greeks consider “wisdom”—are there to help us with our inner soul and practical questions about daily living. All of this talk about the incarnation, life, crucifixion, and resurrection of a Jewish rabbi seems beside the point when you do not really think of yourself as a sinner under the wrath of God.

To the extent that we remain pilgrims in this life, the gospel will remain strange even to us. Until the day we die, we will struggle to believe the bad news and Good News that God announces to us. We do not just naturally think that we are born in sin, spiritually dead, helpless, and unable to lift a finger to save ourselves or impress a holy God. As a result, it does not just occur to us that our greatest need is to be redeemed, justified, regenerated, sanctified, and glorified by God’s saving work in his Son and by his Spirit. If the “Good News” that we proclaim is determined by what we already know—or think we know—and experience, it isn’t really *news*. Limited to whatever we already think is relevant, practical, and useful, the message will never be surprising, disorienting, and troubling. It can never throw us off balance or cause us to reevaluate our priorities and interpretations of reality.

You know real news when you hear it. Think of Saul, the archpersecutor of the church, on his way to Damascus for another purge of Jesus followers. Thrown off his horse by a blinding encounter with the risen and ascended Christ, he was reeling with confusion. Acting out of honest loyalty to his deepest convictions about God and his unfolding plan in history, Saul came to see that his whole take on God, himself, Israel and the Gentiles, and confidence in his moral zeal was wrong. He had totally misunderstood what God was doing in Jerusalem. The revolution was so powerful in his life that he changed his name from Saul to Paul. As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul told the Philippian Christians that even though his whole identity had been wrapped up in his strict Jewish outlook—“a Pharisee of Pharisees,”

more zealous than his colleagues in his commitment to the Law—he had now come to see his “righteousness” as “dung.” Everything that he had accumulated by his own zeal and effort he now moved over to the debit column, “in order to be found in Christ, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law.”

For this breaking news Paul was willing to suffer the same persecution that he had inflicted. The news changed everything. And Paul was no longer the headliner; he had a supporting role in God’s story. It was Paul who said that the gospel is “foolishness to Greeks and a stumbling block to Jews, but to those who are being saved, it is the wisdom and the power of God.”

Paul and his fellow apostles knew that they were by nature—like the rest of us—bent in on themselves. And picking up on a phrase from Augustine, the Protestant Reformers said that as fallen sinners we are all “curved in on ourselves.” Born with a severe case of spiritual scoliosis, our spines are twisted so that all we can see are our own immediate felt needs, desires, wants, and momentary gratifications. But the gospel makes us stand erect, looking up to God in faith and out to the world and our neighbors in love and service. Not every piece of news can do that, but the gospel can.

It is interesting that the biblical writers chose the word “gospel.” The heart of most religions is good advice, good techniques, good programs, good ideas, and good support systems. These drive us deeper into ourselves, to find our inner light, inner goodness, inner voice, or inner resources. Nothing *new* can be found inside of us. There is no inner rescuer deep down in my soul; I just hear echoes of my own voice telling me all sorts of crazy things to numb my sense of fear, anxiety, and boredom, the origins of which I cannot truly identify. But the heart of Christianity is *Good News*. It comes not as a task for us to fulfill, a mission for us to accomplish, a game plan for us to follow with the help of life coaches, but as a report that someone else has already fulfilled, accomplished, followed, and achieved everything for us. Good advice may *help* us in daily direction; the Good News concerning Jesus Christ *saves* us from sin’s guilt and tyranny over our lives and the fear of death. It’s Good News because it does not depend on us. It is about God and his faithfulness to his own purposes and promises.

The average person thinks that the purpose of religion is to give us a list of rules and techniques or to frame a way of life that helps us to be more loving, forgiving, patient, caring, and generous. Of course, there is plenty of this in the Bible. Like Moses, Jesus summarized the

whole law in just those terms: loving God and neighbor. However, as crucial as the law remains as the revelation of God's *moral* will, it is different from the revelation of God's *saving* will. We are called to love God and neighbor, but that is not the *gospel*. Christ need not have died on a cross for us to know that we should be better people. It is not that moral exhortations are wrong, but they do not have any power to bring about the kind of world that they command. These exhortations and directions may be good. If they come from the Word of God, they are in fact *perfect*. But they are not the gospel.

Imagine a movie with two reels: the first covers the plot from creation to the fall, while the second contains the rest of the story, from the promise of a Savior in Genesis 3:15 to the new heavens and earth in Revelation's closing chapters. Everyone has seen the first reel—or various version of it—hundreds of times. However, the second reel is completely unknown apart from local showings. To bring it back to the biblical metaphor, the law makes sense to us already; the gospel has to be told by heralds.

As Paul explains at the beginning of his Letter to the Romans, the law is written on the conscience in creation. Everybody knows that it is wrong to murder and steal. Idolatry is evidence that everyone knows that there is a God and their attempts to pacify him with their own rites and spiritual duties is reflected in myriad systems of sacrifice. However, this original and universal revelation is law, not gospel. After the original transgression of our first parents, God was not bound in any way to save anyone. Having laid out the condition for entering his Sabbath rest, and the sentence for violating it, Adam and Eve had no reason to expect anything for themselves or their posterity except confirmation in everlasting death. Yet God freely chose to have mercy. *Another* word came from his lips: the Good News of a Savior who will come from Eve's flesh, a new Adam who will crush the serpent's head. From then on, the human race has been divided into two families: the one, represented by Cain and his proud kingdom, and the other, represented by Seth, whose heirs called on the name of the Lord. One kingdom, driven by the craving for domination, aims at temporal prosperity, security, and justice, but falls perpetually into violence and internal collapse. The other kingdom, driven by God's promise, looks to God for salvation and every heavenly blessing in Christ.

So "law" is not *news*. It is what we already know inside of ourselves. Just check the polls that routinely confirm that most people still believe that it is wrong to murder, steal, or otherwise harm the interests of

others. They even have some vague sense of responsibility to “God.” But the knowledge of God’s rescue operation in the death and resurrection of his Son is not something that the average person already knows. When their pastors ask them on their deathbed if they’re ready to meet God, they often hear even from lifelong church members, “I hope so. God knows, I haven’t done everything right, but I’ve tried.” “Gospel” is the surprise, and it remains a surprise announcement even to believers. Like a branch that has been bent out of shape, we fall back naturally to being curved in on ourselves unless we are being pulled back constantly to raise our eyes up to God in faith as he has clothed himself in the gospel of his Son. We do not need a reporter to announce to us that we need to be better parents, spouses, and friends; that we should have integrity in our relationships; to be less selfish and more giving; get in the game of life instead of standing on the sidelines; and so forth. Give us advice on these matters and we nod. We begin to take notes and resolve to put them into practice next week. Our ears perk up when we hear exhortations to be all we can be. Our self-righteousness springs to its feet when we are told that we have what it takes if we just put the game plan into practice.

As true as a lot of the exhortations might be, the familiarity of law (things to do) can make us wonder why the message of our churches is all that different and why the Christian message is all that radical. Only the radical news concerning Jesus Christ can distract us from all the trivial pursuits and transform us from the inside out. Only the gospel can cause such a radical reevaluation of our core identity that we’re willing, like Paul, to throw away what we thought was a great resume in exchange for being found in Christ. In fact, once the gospel reconfigures our whole take on reality, it even opens us up to God’s law again as the concrete expression of God’s moral will for our relationship to him and to each other. No longer condemning us, it guides us. Thus, even the law itself is given its due when we strip it of our cleverly devised additions and no longer rely on our own obedience. *Trusting in Christ* as he is clothed in his gospel, we are *guided by the law* without any fear of our failures provoking its judgment. Religious programs and outreach strategies might create social centers defined by niche demographics, but the gospel creates a genuine “cross-cultural” community that gathers the generations, races, rich and poor around Christ and his feast of grace.

It is no wonder that people become bored with church and assume that they can get along well enough in life without it. We need to see

God as the headliner again, instead of ourselves. It is not we who must find a supporting role for God in our personal and social campaigns for spiritual, moral, and therapeutic well-being. We need to stop and listen to God's surprise announcement about what he has done to save sinners like us. The only thing that the church can provide to the world that is truly unique is the gospel. Only the gospel brings a *new creation* into this present age of sin and death. That is the basic message of this book.

### God the Headliner

"You need to get out more." We often hear this—or say it—when we get the impression that someone is a little out of touch with reality. Sometimes it is said when we express surprise at hearing about something that our conversation partner assumes we would have known about already. Focusing narrowly on our own inner thoughts, experiences, feelings, and felt needs, we cut ourselves off from the unfamiliar. Nothing can come to us from outside, disrupting or disturbing our fortress of inner security. Wrapping ourselves in a cocoon of inwardness, we feel cozy in our own personal cult of private piety. We think we're in charge. We imagine that we just follow our heart, that we decide for ourselves what is true, valuable, and useful. In reality, though, our choices are already shaped by the culture of marketing; our preferences have been conditioned by the goods and services, identities and images, possibilities and impossibilities, that have been designed for us in any given moment of this fading age. God's Word comes to release us from this prison that we have mistaken for a palace, as God introduces himself to us and to his world for the first time. God's first word is, "You need to get out more"—out of our cocoon that we have spun for ourselves.

The God of the Bible is a strange God—not the kind of God we can manage, manipulate, accommodate, or domesticate to our familiar experience. We cannot find this God by looking within ourselves. His Word is not the same as our inner voice. He cannot be pared down to our size, measured by our speculations, experiences, or felt needs. Rather, he stands over against us, telling us how things actually are. When God actually confronts us, our speculations are exposed as idols, our experience judged as little more than a projection of ourselves, and our felt needs give way to more pressing needs that we did not even realize that we had. God confronts us, disorients us, and pulls us outside of our comfort zones. If we feel naked and

ashamed, then it's a good sign that we are actually in the presence of the God of the Bible.

The idols of the nations make the religion page, but God is a front-page headliner. Repentance and faith are provoked by this encounter. Look outside of yourself to the God who acts in history!

### Your Inner Life Is Not the News

Although such a day is not unimaginable at our present pace, it would still be unlikely that major news organizations could survive if they reported their inner longings and hunches as the news. Who would take seriously financial articles that began with the words, "I feel that the economy will improve"? Or the suggestion that the truth of a report on a major disaster depended on how useful it might be for the readers' daily lives. A while back I asked a reporter why U.S. news outlets (especially TV news) routinely omits international stories that I see and hear reported by other news organizations. "It's not judged relevant to the lives of Americans," she told me. Talk about narcissistic! If our criterion for news is whatever we find useful for our daily experience, then given the limitations of that experience, we will miss some of the most important events. News is important not because it sells but simply because it is *news*. It tells us what is going on outside of our own inner experience. Even the sports page with its predictions of division champions is expected to be based on the games that have actually been played, the national standings of each team, injuries, and other factors. We take all of these things very seriously. Yet when it comes to religion, we go soft. It doesn't really matter whether the report is true; the main thing is that it works for me. It helps me create my life plan.

We have accepted the division between the public sphere of facts and the private sphere of values, an outer realm of nature and history and an inner realm of freedom and spirit. However, where religion and spirituality are typically means of driving us deeper into ourselves, following our "little voice within" or our "inner light," the gospel summons us to look outside of ourselves for the truth about our condition and identity and especially for any hope of redemption. It just does not finally matter what we think, feel, do, or want to be true. We need someone to give us the report. Yet this is just what we do not want: an authoritative source—even God—standing outside of us and above us, telling us how things actually are.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, English poet, satirist, and novelist G. K. Chesterton routinely sparred with friends like Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, who shared the perspective of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Nietzsche’s legacy has been especially felt in the more extreme forms of existentialism and postmodern thought and it is often identified as *nihilism*. In this sense, nihilism (literally, “nothing-ism”) does not mean that there is no point to life, but that there is no point to life *that I don’t create for myself*. Only the individual’s will is sovereign. “That my life has no aim is evident from the accidental nature of its origin,” said Nietzsche. “That I can posit an aim for myself is another matter.”<sup>2</sup>

From this perspective, Christianity was a party killer: all about managing one’s inner life. The soul, not the body; the pious affections, not the world; is the theater of Christianity, they argued. However, Chesterton pointed out that this caricature resulted from elsewhere than orthodox Christianity. “It is commonly the loose and latitudinarian Christians who pay quite indefensible compliments to Christianity,” he observed.

They talk as if there had never been any piety until Christianity came, a point on which any medieval would have been eager to correct them. They represent that the remarkable thing about Christianity was that it was the first to preach simplicity or self-restraint, or inwardness and sincerity. They will think me very narrow (whatever that means) if I say that the remarkable thing about Christianity was that it was the first to preach Christianity. Its peculiarity was that it was peculiar, and simplicity and sincerity are not peculiar, but obvious ideals for all mankind. Christianity was the answer to a riddle, not the last truism uttered after a long talk.<sup>3</sup>

It is not Christian orthodoxy but moralistic liberalism that reduces the surprising news of the gospel to the bland repetition of what people already know.

Chesterton described a newspaper article he had recently read which opined that “Christianity when stripped of its armour of dogma (as who should speak of a man stripped of his armour of bones), turned out to be nothing but the Quaker doctrine of the Inner Light.” “Now, if I were to say that Christianity came into the world specially to destroy the doctrine of the Inner Light, that would be an exaggeration,” Chesterton responded. “But it would be very much nearer the truth.”<sup>4</sup> The Romans of the first century (especially the Stoics) were advocates

of the Inner Light. However, Chesterton concludes that “of all horrible religions the most horrible is the worship of the god within.”<sup>5</sup> “Christianity came into the world firstly in order to assert with violence that a man had not only to look inwards, but to look outwards, to behold with astonishment and enthusiasm a divine company and a divine captain. The only fun of being a Christian was that a man was not left alone with the Inner Light, but definitely recognized an outer light, fair as the sun, clear as the moon, terrible as an army with banners.”<sup>6</sup>

The Bible is not a collection of timeless principles offering a gentle thought for the day. It is not a resource for our self-improvement. Rather, it is a dramatic story that unfolds from promise to fulfillment, with Christ at the center. Its focus is God and his action. God is not a supporting actor in our drama; it is the other way around. God does not exist to make sure that we are happy and fulfilled. Rather, we exist to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. God is not a facilitator of our “life transformation” projects. He is not a life coach. Rather, he is our Creator, Lawgiver, Judge, and Covenant Lord. As we will see, he is also our Redeemer. However, before we can speak of God’s saving work in Christ we have to reverse the focus from a human-centered to a God-centered way of thinking. The gospel witnesses not to an inner light within the self, but to the Light that came into the world, shining in the darkness and overpowering it (John 1:4–9).

The Protestant Reformers comforted anxious believers with the assurance that the gospel lies entirely outside of them. It is an “external Word” spoken by another person to me in the name of Christ. The gospel doesn’t depend on anything in me at all; it is an objective, completed work. The gospel is entirely outside of you! Has anyone ever told you that? Has it really hit you that no matter what your inner voice, conscience, heart, will, or soul tells you, God’s objective Word on the matter trumps it all?

## No Religion Page Deity

The God of the Bible is an “outdoor” God. He likes to find us where we least expect it: in the ordinary and especially lowly things that he has made, in everyday history. As biblical faith is not confined to the inner life, it is not restricted to private religious experience. The central context of God’s relationship to human beings in the Bible is that of a *covenant*. The whole Bible can be read as one long court-

room trial, with God as the king, judge, and deliverer, and human beings as the covenant servant. In the Scriptures, God adapts the international political treaties of the ancient Near Eastern world to his relationship with creatures. In these ancient political treaties of pagan nations, there were *suzerains* (great kings or emperors) and *vassals* (lesser kings or tribal leaders) and the gods were called upon as *witnesses*. However, only in Israel was the nation's God himself the *treaty maker*: the great King, Lord of the covenant. The gods of the nations were "religion page" deities, but the God of Israel claimed the whole world and its history as his stage.

God is not a mere witness of history. He is not like modern monarchs whose regal splendor is symbolically significant but historically negligible. Israel's God is not a ribbon-cutting deity who presides over patriotic events, symbolizing the proud heritage and military might of his favored nation. Rather, he is the one with whom even Israel had to reckon. If Israel violated the terms of the treaty, God was not a religious witness, but the *offended party* and he would evict the people from his holy land, as he did our first parents from Paradise. God unilaterally gave his treaties to his people; he did not negotiate them.

It is within this context of Israel's covenant with God that the Bible opens. In fact, the creation narrative in Genesis 1 and 2 is the prelude and historical prologue for the covenant of humanity with God, which Israel's oath at Sinai echoes. The suzerain is *God*. Israel's Lord is not simply a powerful Near Eastern ruler, but the Creator of the heavens and the earth. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Ps. 24:1). Not only Israel, but all nations, and not only human beings but all creatures, were brought into existence in order to serve his universal reign. God does not sit on the sidelines as a witness, occasionally dabbling in political affairs but mainly keeping himself to the religion page. He is the front-page God who created all that exists for himself, rules history for his own purposes, and reserves the right to disturb the status quo whenever his wisdom dictates.

In this covenantal context, God gave Israel his name. In this formal act God binds Israel to himself and himself to Israel. There are "names" and "*the Name*": "How excellent is your name in all the earth" (Ps. 8:1); "As is your name, O God, so is your praise" (Ps. 48:10); "His name is great in Israel" (Ps 76:2). It is this name that Jesus called us to hallow in our prayers (Matt. 6:9). God has many titles, but only one name. In our English Bibles the difference between the title

(*Adonai*) and God's personal name (*Yahweh*) is distinguished by the use of lowercase (Lord) and uppercase (LORD) letters, respectively.

The ancient political treaties included the provision for calling on the name of the great king in a time of crisis and in this treaty the Covenant Lord gives his name to his people so that they may call upon him in distress. God reveals his name not to satisfy our insatiable quest for intellectual ascent into heavenly secrets, but in order to reconcile us to himself and to each other. God's goal is not simply to be understood, much less to be used, but to dwell in the midst of his people in everlasting peace. Like the places (land and temple) and times (sabbaths and festivals) that God sanctifies, he reveals his name in order to create a community gathered around him in faith, hope, and love.

God takes up a variety of titles already in use among the pagan nations for their gods to refer to himself as the only true God. Yet it is his personal name, *Yahweh*, that Israel is allowed to invoke for rescue from its enemies. The event of this revelation in Exodus 3 bears striking features of its covenantal context (a *suzerain* treaty). Pharaoh is lord (*suzerain*) of Egypt, even an object of worship, at the time when *Yahweh*'s children are under the heavy hand of oppression. God gives Moses his personal name to invoke as the covenant Lord who will liberate his people from Pharaoh's cruel suzerainty. From now on, *Yahweh*'s people are to know him by this personal name (Exod. 3:4–15).

When Moses's appeal to Pharaoh to let God's people go provokes severe hardship in retaliation for this demand, Moses (invoking the proper name) protests, "O LORD, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all" (Exod. 5:22–23). To this *Yahweh* reiterates his pledge, adding, "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them." God made a covenant with them and has remembered and will remember to keep it. "Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment'" (v. 6).

The Lord *Yahweh* declares war on the lord Pharaoh in order to liberate his people and bring them to his holy land. Begun with Pharaoh's massacre of the firstborn Hebrew sons, *Yahweh* strikes the firstborn sons of Egypt. Each plague is a judgment that manifests God's sovereignty over each of the principal deities of the Egyptian pantheon.

In sharp contrast with paganism, therefore, the revelation of God's name is not a secret password for manipulating the cosmic forces for one's own pleasure. Rather, it is a covenantal guarantee. Just as Egypt's satellite states could call on the name of their imperial lord for liberation from invading forces, God reveals his personal name to his people as a pledge of redemption and to his enemies as a pledge of judgment. On the basis of this liberation, Israel is not to invoke any other gods or lords: "I am the LORD [Yahweh] your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:2).

In Isaiah 45, God declares, "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance. . . . In the LORD all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory'" (vv. 22–23, 25). In this context, it is significant that the Father handed over this exclusive name to his Son who was born of our flesh and became "obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him *the name that is above every name*, so that *at the name of Jesus every knee should bow*, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, *and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord*, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:8–11, emphasis added). Salvation comes by calling on the name of Jesus Christ alone (Acts 2:21; 5:41; Rom. 10:13; Eph. 1:21; Heb. 1:4).

As the story unfolds, the identity of the one God in three persons becomes clearer. All things are done by the Father, in the Son, through the Spirit. In the covenant, God binds himself to specific people, places, and things. He is not an abstract deity, worshiped by some as Yahweh and by others as Allah, the Great Spirit, or the Benign Providence mentioned by many of America's founders. Rather, he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Israel, the God who dwells in Zion—and the God who became flesh in the virgin's womb.

Does our worship focus on this unfolding historical drama of the Triune God? Are we being constantly directed outside of our inner experience and our own felt needs to the real newsmaker in history? Are we perpetually drawn outside of ourselves, "looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2)? Is our corporate and private

worship centered on “human will or exertion” or “on God, who has mercy” (Rom. 9:16)? Is the main point trying to see how God fits into our existing plot or to hear God tell us how we fit into his unfolding drama of redemption? Like the Old Testament feasts, the great events celebrated by Christians have to do with God’s mighty acts: the Son’s becoming flesh (Christmas), the crucifixion (Good Friday) and resurrection (Easter), Christ’s exaltation to the right hand of the Father (Ascension Day), and the sending of the Spirit (Pentecost). There is no room in the Christian calendar for celebrating our own works.

### Competing for the Headlines

We come to know God only insofar as he is pleased to reveal himself and he reveals himself through his actions in history. Yahweh and Israel are both “on trial” in the covenantal drama. Ever since the fall, however, humanity has been trying to replace God as the newsmaker. When the tactic of subtle distortion did not work, Satan went for the more direct approach: “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). Why should they listen to every word that comes from the mouth of God when they could determine for themselves how things really are, the nature of good and evil, truth and falsehood, and the best way to happiness?

Many readers will remember the reports of the tragic last days of Howard Hughes, the extraordinary tycoon who rose to international fame as an industrialist, aviator, and filmmaker. Tall, dark, and handsome, he had the world at his feet, moving from resort to resort—often purchasing each and occupying the penthouse floor. In his later years, he became increasingly neurotic and reclusive. When the management of the Desert Inn in Las Vegas could no longer handle their idiosyncratic guest, he bought the hotel—along with several others. An insomniac, he also bought the local TV station so he could watch programs around the clock. Living out his last four years in the Bahamas at his Xanadu Resort, Hughes would only speak to his top lieutenants and his now-alienated wife by phone. Never leaving his room, which was lined with sanitary plastic, he urinated in jars and left them neatly placed throughout his suite. His hair and fingernails grew long and wild and, in sharp contrast to his previous six-foot-four stature, he weighed ninety pounds at his death and his body could only be identified by

fingerprint analysis. The man who had boasted that he was born on Christmas Eve and attracted the gaze of the world's public for decades became a sideshow for prurient gossip magazines.

The tragic story of Howard Hughes echoes in my mind as I read the story of the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar II—also known in history as Nebuchadnezzar the Great—in the book of Daniel. In chapter 4, the king calls for Daniel to interpret his latest dream. The proud ruler who had built an empire around his own glory, including the world famous Hanging Gardens, and had reduced Jerusalem and Judah to rubble, lost everything. The dream was fulfilled:

All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, and the king answered and said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven. "O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will." Immediately the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers, and his nails were like birds' claws. (Dan. 4:28–33)

Far closer than the life of an American mogul is the biography of Saddam Hussein, who frequently invoked the long-celebrated legacy of Nebuchadnezzar in Iraq's history and considered himself as the great king's obvious successor. Indeed, he was.

However, whereas Hussein was found hidden in a hole on a farm and was eventually executed in 2006 for crimes against humanity, the book of Daniel indicates that Nebuchadnezzar had a change of heart:

At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?" (vv. 34–35)

Faith in God is generally treated by the powerful of the earth as a crutch for the weak and foolish. As Nebuchadnezzar admired his accomplishments from his lofty penthouse, he was doubtless of this opinion. However, he literally lost his mind. It is not foolishness, but sanity that recognizes the way things really are. God is Creator and Lord; we are all nothing more than ants pretending to conquer the earth when we merely crawl on top of our own anthill. Together with his sanity, Nebuchadnezzar's counselors and nobility returned to him and he was again "established in my kingdom," with even greater esteem. "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble" (vv. 36–37).

At last, the great king of Babylon had learned the hard way that God is not a golden statue in a royal temple symbolizing the sovereignty of the king and his empire, but the Lord of heaven and earth. Far from a "religion page" deity, the God of Israel is the only God and he grabs the headlines every day:

Why do the nations rage and the people plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his anointed [messiah], saying, "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." . . . Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Ps. 2:1–12)

## Masters, Tourists, and Pilgrims

Nobody cares if your god generates religion stories. It might be vaguely interesting that families that pray together stay together or that people who follow biblical principles can have their best life now. There are enough mass movements in religion to justify an editor and perhaps a few writers to cover the latest "revival" or political election in which "values voters" played a key role.

However, as Paul told the philosophers in Athens, "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth,

does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as if he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (Acts 17:24–25). It is he who has determined where each person would live—and how long (v. 26). Pagan religion is certainly a form of superstition (Paul uses a term that is two-toned, meaning “religious” and “superstitious” in v. 22). However, the God of Israel plays on the stage of world history, not in a private corner. “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (vv. 30–31). As a datable event in our own history, the resurrection cannot be shoved into a closet of personal piety. Everyone has to deal with it. This isn’t just another religion story. It’s *the* international headline.

Like Adam, we have preferred to write our own script and to create our own plot. In the modern age, it was thought that we had finally matured from the dregs of superstition into the enlightened era of universal reason. Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that the individual is “meant to produce everything out of himself.”<sup>7</sup> No external authority—no Word outside of us—can be allowed to judge or save us. However, under the banner of autonomous reason we unleashed more devastation, oppression, violence, and genocide than in all of the centuries combined.

Reacting against rationalistic arrogance, our age is drifting into irrational skepticism disguised as humility. Chesterton spoke of the “dislocation of humility” in modern thought and it works as well as a description of what many people are calling postmodern:

By asking for pleasure, he lost the chief pleasure; for the chief pleasure is surprise. Hence it became evident that if a man would make his world large, he must be always making himself small. . . . But what we suffer from to-day is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled on the organ of conviction, where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert—himself.<sup>8</sup>

Today what we doubt is not ourselves but God’s Word. Chesterton’s friends had assumed, with Nietzsche, that Christian orthodoxy was a blight on humanity, a curse upon life and happiness. However, it is

nihilism that has despair at its heart. Because its chief article is that life has no transcendent meaning or purpose, Chesterton added, “It cannot hope to find any romance; its romances will have no plots.”

One can find no meanings in a jungle of skepticism; but the man will find more and more meanings who walks through a forest of doctrine and design. Here everything has a story tied to its tail, like the tools or pictures in my father’s house; for it is my father’s house. I end where I began—at the right end. I have entered at least the gate of all good philosophy. I have come into my second childhood.<sup>9</sup>

It is not a particularly “postmodern” reaction that finds talk of orthodoxy arrogant and narrow-minded.

The new humility paralyzes people from actually moving in any direction, despite all the talk of progress, innovation, and forward-looking excitement. “We are on the road to producing a race of men too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table. . . . Scoffers of old time were too proud to be convinced; but these are too humble to be convinced.”<sup>10</sup> Chesterton adds, “An imbecile habit has arisen in modern controversy of saying that such and such a creed can be held in one age but cannot be held in another. . . . You might as well say that a certain philosophy can be believed on Mondays, but cannot be believed on Tuesdays.”<sup>11</sup>

If the concept of the modern self was that of a *master* of all it surveyed, the postmodern self is best described as a *tourist*. There is no destination; just personal journeys from nowhere to nowhere in particular. A contemporary disciple of Nietzsche, Mark C. Taylor, says that we can only aspire to be “aimless drifters” toward no particular destination except the one or ones that we choose for ourselves. We still want to write our own script, but, like the *Seinfeld* tagline, it’s the show about nothing.

“From the viewpoint of a/theology,” Taylor explains, “there never was a pure origin and never will be a perfect end. ‘All promise, all future hope and expectation, come to an end in the death of God.’”<sup>12</sup> It is “The Book” (the Bible, that is) which creates the notion of “history,” with its promise-fulfillment pattern. “Between the ‘tick’ of Genesis and the ‘tock’ of Apocalypse, the history of the West runs its course,” Taylor notes in disapproval. “History, as well as self, is a theological notion.”<sup>13</sup> The Bible assumes that meaning is discovered in the historical events themselves, but Taylor complains that this leaves no place

for the individuals to create meaning for themselves.<sup>14</sup> “The death of the sovereign God now appears to be the birth of the sovereign self,” Taylor observes, but this has only led to the death of the self as well.<sup>15</sup> “There is no Logos, there are only hieroglyphs.”<sup>16</sup>

So we saunter through the carnival, on our way to nowhere. Like tourists, we are not really seeking the truth as much as we are spectators of new experiences, identities, images, and styles that have been marketed to us in the giant mall of Western consumerism. Indeed, we have become “futile in [our] thinking, and [our] foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, [we] became fools” (Rom. 1:21–22).

In contrast to modern and postmodern versions of human autonomy (self-rule), the biblical drama celebrates God as the headliner and us as the supporting cast. There is a significant origin and end point to history, within which we ourselves are cast members. It is a courtroom drama in which we are either false or true witnesses, “in Adam” or “in Christ,” justified or condemned, alive or dead. Neither masters nor tourists, we become *pilgrims*. Unlike masters, pilgrims have not arrived and they do not presume to inaugurate their own kingdoms of glory. They don’t have all the answers and they are not exactly sure what their destination city will be like; they are driven by a promise and by God’s fulfillment of his promise along the way. Yet unlike tourists, they are on their way to a settled place and every point along the way is a landmark toward that destination.

Nietzsche and his heirs were right to reject any religious philosophy that caused people to withdraw from the world of flesh and blood, into a cocoon of pious inwardness. They were correct to conclude that a God who liberated the soul *from* the body rather than the soul *with* the body was unworthy of our worship. However, they apparently had no awareness of a Christianity other than this moralistic asceticism. Their only response to a simplistic legalism (confusion of the gospel with law) was an equally simplistic antinomianism (denial of law). They thought that only by wiping away the transcendent realm of God and heaven that reduced this realm of worldly existence to a mere shadow could they affirm life. Yet in the process, they dispensed with the only source of meaning and hope.

Chesterton observed that Christianity’s outer ring is dark enough, with its grave view of original sin, judgment, and hell, “but inside that inhuman guard you will find the old human life dancing like children, and drinking wine like men; for Christianity is the only frame for pagan freedom. But in the modern philosophy the case is opposite; it

is its outer ring that is obviously artistic and emancipated; its despair is within.”<sup>17</sup> For the unbelieving world a kind of superficial happiness and general well-being full of entertainments but lacking any real plot hides the fear of death. Apart from God’s grace, we cannot come to terms sufficiently either with our mortal wound nor enter into the genuine revelry and mirth of God’s kingdom. Denying our sin (not just *sins*, but our sinful condition), we’re too silly for a funeral; finding the gospel foolish, we are too serious for a party.

Ironically, the distorted version of Christianity that Nietzsche and his disciples rejected and their own alternative share much in common. Both are oriented toward turning within rather than receiving reality and its proper interpretation by looking outside of oneself. Both are determined to create a story from individual experience, willing, and effort, rather than to receive judgment and salvation from a transcendent God through his external Word. The one is too pious and the other is too lawless to be judged and saved by someone else and to be gathered with the wretches of the earth at the wedding feast of God’s kingdom.

Throughout this book, I will be exploring the ways in which the Triune God draws us out of our inner monologue and gives us a new plot, a new character, and new lines in his saving script. Through Zephaniah God prophesied to Israel of a coming Redeemer who will fulfill all righteousness, offering the “Amen!” to the Covenant Lord’s command and commission. He will bring a remnant not only from Israel and Judah, but from the nations into his courts: “For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord” (Zeph. 3:9).

Will we surrender our pretension to being the playwright, producer, and director of our own life movie and become part of the thanksgiving parade of liberated captives in the train of the Redeeming God? Or will we use “god” and “spirituality” for our private and public ends? Will we join the throng of worshipers on their way to Zion or the delirious mutiny against the Lord and his Messiah captured in Psalm 2? Neither having arrived nor merely wandering from booth to booth at Vanity Fair, we are travelers who “seek the city that is to come” (Heb. 13:14). Taylor was right: the Bible did give birth to the notion of history, with its origin and destination. The Creator is also the Consummator, as Jesus declared in his revelation to John: “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty’” (Rev. 1:8). Now *that* is a headline.