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Good News and Bad News

IF WE'RE GOING TO consider whether the gospel message is relevant to the Jewish people, then we ought to start with an understanding of the message itself. The word *gospel* means “good news,” but in reality, the message is both good and bad.

The good news is that God loves each one of us so passionately that He’s provided a way for us to be forgiven and restored to a personal, eternal relationship with Him. The bad news is that each one of us is cut off from God because of our sin (Isa. 59:1–2). We’re born with rebellious hearts, and we practice that rebellion throughout our entire lives.

There’s a Jewish teaching that says we actually possess two natures: *ha yetzer hara* and *ha yetzer tov*—the evil inclination, and the good. It’s an appealing idea to think that we’re born with the scales set at “even,” and that we can control the course of our lives for the good, if we follow a certain path. The path for us Jews, according to this teaching, is the path of pursuing a life of strict obedience to the Law of Moses.

But let’s be honest with ourselves. As children, did any of us need to be taught how to be jealous or selfish? Did we have to

be taught how to desire what wasn't our own, to blame others, to conceal what we'd done when we knew it wasn't right, or to deny it or lie about it when we were found out? All of that came very naturally to every one of us.

We don't have two inclinations; we have one. Tragically, we're infected with a sinful and rebellious nature from birth. It's our spiritual DNA, and it's killing us.

By contrast, we needed to be taught to trust and share, to be kind and forgiving. We needed to learn to choose the good over the evil because, sadly, evil is our default. It's our natural bent.

We don't have two inclinations; we have one. Tragically, we're infected with a sinful and rebellious nature from birth. It's our spiritual DNA, and it's killing us.

It's because of our rebellion that our lives feel bankrupt and pointless, no matter what we do. By turning away from God, we've divorced ourselves from the only One who can give our lives real meaning and genuine affirmation for a job well done. Solomon knew the misery of living a pointless life that comes from being cut off from God, and he cried, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!" (Eccl. 1:2).

It's because of our rebellion that our relationships fail to satisfy us, and why they fall apart. Since our primary relationship with God has been severed by our sin, every other relationship with anyone else falls victim to sin as well. In short, we're unfaithful to each other because we're unfaithful to God. And even if we try to change, sin holds so tightly on to every aspect of our lives that we're powerless to break the grip. Caught in that grip, we grovel through pointless lives

and broken relationships, with no power to change. And we are heading toward a godless eternity. That's the bad news.

RESCUED

But here's the good news: God loves each one of us so deeply and so intensely, that He provided a way for us to be forgiven for our rebellion, rescued from our plight, and restored to a proper relationship with Him. The Father sent the Son, Yeshua (Jesus' Hebrew name) the Messiah, in order to die as the payment for our sins and rise from the dead, just as Moses and the prophets foretold. When He died, He took upon Himself the punishment of God that our rebellion deserves. No wonder He cried out from the cross in unspeakable agony, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:1). Yes, He was pointing us to the prophecy about His crucifixion so that we might know that everything was going just as the Father had planned. But those words were also a cry of unimaginable emotional pain. In that moment, the Son was experiencing the horror of being utterly forsaken and abandoned by the Father. That abandonment is hell.

Yeshua's anguish should have been ours. But He took that agony upon Himself so that we might never know that torment and never utter that cry. He willingly endured the punishment that we deserve when He gave His life as the payment for our sins.

He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities . . . He was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due. (Isa. 53:5, 8)

JESUS DIED FOR OUR SINS

But He didn't stay dead. He came back from the grave, as prophesied by King David in Psalm 16:10, and as promised by Yeshua Himself in Matthew 12:39–40. His resurrection proves that His claims about being our Messiah are true, because His resurrection is the very sign of confirmation that He told us He would give. His resurrection also lets us know with certainty that the debt we owe to God has been paid on our behalf, if we repent and believe. It's a legal concept, and it's easy to grasp: just as criminals are released from prison after they've "paid their debt" to society, so Yeshua was released from the prison of death as proof that our debt has been paid, if we receive that payment as our own.

Jesus exchanges our separation from God with a new relationship with God—an intimate, everlasting relationship that begins the moment that we repent and believe.

His resurrection assures us of something else. Because He's alive, we can come to Him, and we can be certain that we'll be forgiven, if we approach Him with repentant hearts. This is the greatest comfort that we can ever know.

Consider the agonizing alternative. If Jesus had died but had never risen from the dead, if the one I've offended is no longer alive, then I can never hear Him say, "I forgive you." I can never be free from my guilt, even if I regret my

crimes with every fiber of my being. A corpse can't forgive.

But Yeshua isn't dead. He's alive. And when we ask Him to forgive us, He speaks the most wonderful words that our hearts will ever hear. "Your sins are forgiven."

If we believe that Yeshua died for our sins and rose from the dead, if we repent of our sins and ask Him to forgive us, and if we openly profess Him as Lord, then He rescues us from the power that sin exercises over our present lives, and from the eternal punishment that we deserve—being utterly and eternally forsaken by the Father. He replaces our chronically rebellious hearts with new hearts that want to obey. His Spirit, living within us, actually empowers us to obey. He fills the void of our empty lives with a purpose and a plan. He makes our relationships right by teaching us to love Him with all our heart, soul, and strength, and to love each other as we love ourselves. He exchanges our separation *from* God with a new relationship *with* God—an intimate, everlasting relationship that begins the moment that we repent and believe.

The Bible calls this relationship the gift of eternal life. But we don't have to wait for eternity in order to experience it. It's ours even now, when we hear the message of the gospel and repent.

That's the good news. That's the gospel. That's the truth. And it is a message that all people, including the Jewish people, need to hear and receive.

If Jews Don't Need Jesus, Then Why . . . ?

I've been told . . .

“Jews don't need to believe in Jesus
in order to be saved.”

IF IT'S TRUE THAT Jews don't need Jesus for salvation, then why did Jesus and His disciples proclaim the gospel so passionately and so persistently to their fellow Jews?

We read in the gospel of Matthew that Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, “teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom” (Matt. 4:23). Does the fact that Jesus declared “the gospel of the kingdom” automatically drive us to the conclusion that we must bring the gospel to the Jewish people today? Not necessarily. It could be argued that He proclaimed the gospel as an *option*, not as a necessity. Or, it could be argued that His message and activity

simply placed Him in the company of the Old Testament-style prophets. “Yes, Jesus called for His people to repent, but so did a host of other messengers before Him.”

But when we consider other statements that He uttered, then a clearer picture emerges about the specific content of His message and the unique claims that He made about Himself. In John 8:24, we’re told that Jesus explained, “Unless you

Jesus delivered the gospel message to the Jewish people not as an option but as a necessity.

believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.” And in John 14:6, one of the best known passages from the New Testament, Jesus declared, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.”

In both of these statements, He made unique claims about Himself, and He was speaking to His fellow Jews. It’s hard to avoid the obvious conclusion: Jesus delivered the gospel message to the Jewish people not as an option but as a necessity.

**“ . . . AS THE FATHER HAS SENT ME,
I ALSO SEND YOU . . . ” (JOHN 20:21)**

Jesus not only practiced Jewish evangelism Himself; He commanded His followers to do the same. In Matthew 10:6–7, we’re told that when He first began to send the apostles out to proclaim the gospel message, He instructed them to go exclusively to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”

The book of Acts makes it clear that the apostles and early disciples heeded His commandment and engaged in Jewish

evangelism wherever they carried the good news. For example, on the very first Shavuot (Pentecost) after the resurrection of the Lord, Peter seized the opportunity to tell a predominantly Jewish crowd from virtually every region of the known world, “let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him [Jesus] both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36).

As a result of his unceasing evangelistic activity among his fellow Jews, Peter ultimately found himself standing as a prisoner before the Sanhedrin, the seventy-one religious leaders of the Jewish people. And on that occasion, he declared, “there is no other name [besides Yeshua] under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Once again, we need to take note of the content of the message, and the context in which it was delivered. Peter emphatically declared that Jesus is the only way of salvation, and he made that declaration to his fellow Jews (specifically, to the Jewish high court).

PETER, APOSTLE

“TO THE CIRCUMCISED” (GAL. 2:7)

In Galatians 2:7–8, Paul speaks of Peter’s apostleship to the “circumcised,” or to the Jewish people. By definition, an apostle is a person who has been sent out with a message. The message that the apostles carried was the good news that Yeshua had died for our sins and had risen from the dead. But if Jewish evangelism is unnecessary, then why was Peter ever commissioned by the Lord to be the apostle to the Jews? Why, for that matter, did Peter repeatedly risk his life by declaring a message that his hearers really didn’t need to hear?

During the early days of the church, *Gentile* evangelism was the controversial issue (see Acts 11:1–3). *Jewish* evangelism was taken for granted. It was the norm, and no one contested either the activity or the need.

The story doesn't end with Peter, of course. We know that the other apostles and disciples not only proclaimed the gospel to their fellow Jews (Acts 6:7–10; 11:19); we know that many of them thought that the message should be proclaimed *only* to the Jews. Ultimately, it took some heated debate and the intervention of the Holy Spirit Himself to convince those first Jewish believers that they should proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles as well (Acts 11:1–3; 15:6–9, 13–20). In other words, during the early days of the church, *Gentile* evangelism was the controversial issue (see Acts 11:1–3). *Jewish* evangelism was taken for granted. It was the norm, and no one contested either the activity or the need.

“. . . TO THE JEW FIRST” (ROM. 1:16)

Paul was called to be the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 22:21; Gal. 2:7). But even so, the record in Acts reveals that he always began his ministry in every new city by first evangelizing his fellow Jews. In fact, while living among the disciples in Damascus, immediately after coming to faith and long before launching out on his very first missionary journey, Paul “began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God’” (Acts 9:20). Then, after returning to Jerusalem, Paul spent his time “talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews” (Acts 9:29). What he practiced in Damascus

and Jerusalem became his enduring pattern in every city that he visited throughout his entire missionary career. Even in the final chapter of Acts, when Paul was brought to Rome as a prisoner, we're told that he "called together those who were the leading men of the Jews . . . and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets" (Acts 28:17, 23).

From Damascus to Rome, we always see Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, proclaiming the gospel "to the Jew first."

**"HIM OF WHOM MOSES IN THE LAW AND
ALSO THE PROPHETS WROTE" (JOHN 1:45)**

Even before Yeshua's first advent, Moses and the prophets pointed us to His coming, delivered His message, and exhorted us to believe. In the Law, God both promised a coming Redeemer and warned the Jewish people about the consequences of failing to receive His words. Speaking to Moses, God explained,

I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him. (Deut. 18:18–19)

If Jews don't need to believe in Jesus, then why did God warn us through Moses of the frightful consequences that would befall us if we failed to believe and heed Yeshua's words?

There's really no ambiguity about what the biblical record reveals. Even so, many misconceptions cloud the issue and undermine the need for Jewish evangelism.

Six centuries after Moses, the prophet Isaiah described the reason for the Suffering Servant's ordeal. Writing as a Jew to other Jews, Isaiah declared, "He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities" (Isa. 53:5). Other prophets told us even more. From Micah, we learned that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). From David, we learned that He would die by crucifixion but then rise from the dead (Pss. 22; 16:10). From Daniel, we learned that all of this would take place before the destruction of the second temple, which we know occurred in AD 70 (Dan. 9:25–26).

So once again, we're forced to ask: why all the specific detail, if knowing His identity and believing in Him really isn't so essential?

Seven centuries after Isaiah, we come to the dawn of New Testament times. And when Zacharias describes the future ministry of his son, John the Baptist, he explains that John "will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways; to give to His [Jewish] people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins" (Luke 1:76–77). But if Jews don't need to hear the gospel, then why did God send John the Baptist to give us "the knowledge of salvation" and to point us to "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29)?

That the prophets announced His coming and implored Jews to look to Him is clear. That Zacharias and John the Baptist pointed us to Him is clear. That Jesus the Messiah

proclaimed the gospel to His fellow Jews is clear. That He commanded His followers to do the same is clear. That they obeyed His commandment and followed His example is clear.

There's really no ambiguity about what the biblical record reveals. Even so, many misconceptions and arguments cloud the issue and undermine the need for Jewish evangelism. Let me weigh those arguments and see how they hold up against what the Scriptures teach.