

What Is the Great Commission?

Crucial Questions

R. C. SPROUL

What Is the Great Commission?

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Chapter One

What Is the Gospel?

The battle between the Persian army of Darius I and the troops of Greece that took place at Marathon in 490 BC was a watershed moment in the Greco-Persian Wars and in the history of Western society. Until that point, Darius had not been defeated in his quest to conquer Greece, and Persian dominance across the Mediterranean region had grown steadily for more than one hundred and fifty years. The defeat of the superior Persian forces by the Greek army at Marathon ushered in the two-hundred-year

influence of Classical Greek culture and the decline of the Medo-Persian Empire.

This was a hugely important battle—yet the people back home had no idea of the outcome in the battle’s immediate aftermath. They had to wait anxiously to get some word of what had happened. But today, in most cases, we don’t have to wait very long for updates on significant events. We live in a world where news travels very rapidly, with sophisticated technology to announce what is going on around the globe in a matter of moments. In the ancient world, though, it was not like that. A battle of strategic importance for the history of the nation may have been taking place two thousand miles away, and it would certainly have taken some time for reports to travel so far.

Armies in the ancient world used runners to carry word about the outcome of battles. The people at home would post lookouts to watch for some sign of a messenger. It’s said that the watchman could tell by the bearing of the runner whether he was coming with good news or bad.

One of the enduring legacies of the Battle of Marathon is as the inspiration of the marathon-length race. The legend is that a runner brought news of the Athenian victory to the city of Athens and dropped dead from exhaustion

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after he arrived. He pushed himself to the absolute limit because he was bearing good news, and he wanted the people to be able to rejoice in it.

The Apostle Paul alluded to these practices in his epistle to the Romans, where he said, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (10:15). Picture how the watchman could see the feet flying as the runner rushed to the city gates to bring good news. It was a beautiful sight, and the people would shout celebrations of victory at the sight of him. They had a word for that kind of a message: it was a *euangelion*, a good message—a *gospel*.

The word *gospel* derives from the Old English *godspell*, meaning “good story” or “good message.” *Godspell* translates the Latin *evangelium*, which is derived from the Greek *euangelion*. The Greek word is made up of the prefix *eu-* and the root *angelion*. The prefix *eu-* is found frequently in the English language and refers to something “good.” Take the word *euphemism*, for example. A dentist about to drill might say, “This may cause a bit of discomfort,” rather than, “This is going to hurt.” He uses softer words to take the edge off something that is difficult for us to hear. That’s a euphemism: stating something in better terms than it actually is. Likewise, at a funeral, when a minister stands

up and says something nice about the deceased, we call that a *eulogy*, a “good word.”

When that prefix *eu-* is added to the root *angelion*, which means “message” (the same root gives us the word “angel” or “messenger”), we get *euangelion*, “good message.” Originally, the word *euangelion* functioned as a literal expression for any good report—particularly in the context of military engagements or political campaigns. But when we come to the New Testament, the concept of a *euangelion* takes on a new meaning. Jesus began His ministry with a public proclamation about good news that He was announcing to the people: what we call the gospel of the kingdom. He declared a new state of affairs, which He illustrated in many different ways with parables, saying “the kingdom of heaven is like this” or “the kingdom of God is like that.”

By the time that we get to the Epistles, we see that the usage of *euangelion* or *gospel* undergoes a change. After the personal ministry of Jesus—after His life, death, and resurrection—the New Testament writers no longer speak about the gospel of the kingdom. Instead, they talk about “the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Apostolic preaching was focused on the person and the work of Jesus. That’s what the word *euangelion* came to mean by the close of the New

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Testament: it had to do with a message and announcement about Jesus, including who He was and what He did.

We read of this gospel in Luke 24:

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.” And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. (Luke 24:1–9)

Think about what it was like for the Eleven when these women came running back from the tomb and in their excitement said to them, “He’s not there, but He has

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arisen.” This message was not just *any* good news. It was not just a word of a victory in battle or the announcement of a political hero’s election. This was the greatest message that had ever been communicated to the world. This was an announcement that changed everything. If this message is true, it *has* to change everything. You cannot hear it and be indifferent. That’s why people are often so hostile to the proclamation of the gospel: they understand that if it is true, life can never be the same.

The key to understanding the importance of the gospel is found in the first verse of the book of Romans, when Paul identifies himself as “Paul, an apostle, a slave of Jesus Christ set apart for the gospel of God” (1:1). When Paul speaks about the gospel of God, he is not saying that it is a message *about* God, but that it is a message that *belongs* to God. In other words, he’s saying that this gospel comes to us *from* God. It is God who declared Christ to be the Messiah by raising Him from the dead. It is God who announces to the world the essence of what we call the *kerygma*: the proclamation of the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of Christ. So, then, the whole task of evangelism is merely to repeat to the world what God Himself has first declared. He was the original messenger.

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Does every Christian have a role to play in evangelism?

After His resurrection, Jesus gave His followers a mission: to go to all the nations and make disciples. What does this Great Commission mean? How are disciples made? And does every Christian have a role to play?

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul explores the Great Commission by defining key terms such as the gospel, evangelism, missions, and discipleship. Dr. Sproul explains that disciple-making requires much more than just sharing the gospel, and two thousand years after Jesus' commission, this mission continues.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

Dr. R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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