

the FOUR- WORD GOSPEL

A FEW YEARS BACK, I was having one of my always enjoyable conversations with sport psychologist David Cook. Many of you will know who he is. His book, *Golf's Sacred Journey*, and movie, *Seven Days on the Links of Utopia*, are favorites among golfers. That Robert Duvall played Cook's hero, Johnny, doesn't hurt either.

Our conversation that day was not about See It – Feel It – Trust It or face-on putting, though. We were talking instead about a PGA Tour player. David is always rightly discreet, so I don't know who it was, but I know this: the player couldn't hit a reliable fade. He couldn't see it in his mind, and he couldn't produce it in competition. This won't do if you're going to compete at the highest level. You need to be able to move the ball both ways, and David was trying to help him mentally prepare to hit this kind of shot.

But the player's problem was not mine. I didn't have to "own it," as they say. In fact, I took some encouragement from what David was telling me. If a PGA Tour player—one of the top 200 players in all of golf—couldn't produce every shot, why should I weigh myself down with the expectation that I should be able to? David's mental coaching had found an accidental home in me, which is pretty good

when you consider how hard it is to get free therapy these days!

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Since that conversation, I have spent much time thinking through the idea of how simple the gospel can be. I don't mean "watering down the gospel," which is an important concern that arises when we don't teach or preach the full coupling of our sin and God's salvation; this article will discuss that very coupling. Instead, what I hoped to accomplish when mulling this topic was to give even the most tongue-tied Christian a way to describe how God makes a way for our eternal life. To cut to the chase, this simplifying came down to four words:

**I CAN'T,
GOD CAN**

You may know that the gospel (sometimes called the good news) of Christ has implications beyond the hour of our salvation. These four words are applicable not only to that "come to Jesus" process in our lives but also to our walking with him, and he with us, every day thereafter. And as with all things we discover in our lives with Christ, the sustaining emphasis is not on us but on God. Without God in the mix, the whole recipe falls apart, no matter how tasty the other ingredients.

Which, for the moment, brings us back to that PGA Tour player, the one who couldn't hit the reliable fade. I confess that I can't either. I am confident about other shots, but not this one. But if I were playing in a scramble with that Tour player, I wouldn't be able to count on him either. He is one of the best players in the world, but I couldn't trust him to do what I can't do myself. What's the good in that?

In life, all people (but maybe we can see it best in ourselves) have tried solutions that do not work.

A caricature of men shows them as overconfident do-it-yourselfers who end up having to call the plumber anyway. But caricatures are based on truth to some measure, and they usually apply to all of us—men, women, and children.

Certainly, we have all been guilty of thinking we can just solve a matter for ourselves. Way back to when we were those children, we sought to prove our independence to Mom and Dad. Only later, when we were parents ourselves, did we realize that Mom and Dad were probably standing nearby anyway, prepared to spot us should we fall. They had learned through their own painful experiences that few of us are able to succeed alone, at least beyond a little while.

If Mom and Dad did their job well, then, they worked to convey to us that there are experts in the world, people equipped to help us do what we cannot do for ourselves. Plumbers. Golf professionals. Sport psychologists. And lots of others we can name according to our weaknesses. It's hard to read Scripture and think we were designed for independence more than interdependence. We're supposed to help each other—which sometimes will mean we're the one asking for help. This is a good if imperfect system. Sometimes you'll need a second doctor's opinion, or the first contractor you engage will drop the ball. Depending on others can mean dealing with their shortcomings along with our own. When that happens, it hurts.

But now we come to the big questions of life. Some call these questions existential, others call them spiritual, and a few blend the two. To this last group, who we are and why we are here are questions answered both by the nature of our experiences (internal and external) and the design of the designer. If you lean on the Old and New Testament Scriptures,

that designer is the creator and sustainer of the world: God. Everything is determined and held together by him.

This is not like the Bobby Jones vs. Jack Nicklaus vs. Tiger Woods debate, where we might install these golfers in any order at the top of our list. This is *God*.

Long ago, in “another life,” I taught high school English. In helping students build frameworks for their writing, I would have them list, in order, the 10 most important things in their lives. Because this was 25 years ago and more, most of them had God on their list. That is, they had him *somewhere* on their list. This always confused me. If I asked them to define God and they came from a Catholic or Protestant home, they would typically say that he was the universe's ultimate being. So how, I wondered, could they list him as anything less than number one? This is not like

Written by **Jeff Hopper**, editor of the *Links Daily Devotional* and *Links Players* magazine, as well as author of several books, including *My Hundred Helpers: The Provision of God Through People*.

the Bobby Jones vs. Jack Nicklaus vs. Tiger Woods debate, where we might install these golfers in any order at the top of our list. This is *God*. I know you love your mom, but if she's ahead of God on your list, you might want to ask yourself again just who God is.

This understanding of God is critical to the four-word gospel. If I don't believe God can do it all, I am going to have trouble believing God can do what I need him to do—namely, rescue me out of my sinfulness and carry me to salvation. Such belief comes, we know, from the Holy Spirit. From the beginning, it's a regenerative work we cannot do, not for ourselves and not for others. So whether we are the one saved or the one heralding the saving God does, we rely completely on him.

'PREACHING' THE FOUR-WORD GOSPEL

Perhaps you have heard it said that good news of the gospel cannot be taught without the bad news. If you are familiar with the framework of advocacy, you understand this. The need must be established before the solution. This is why the old vacuum cleaner salesman would dump dirt on your floor before demonstrating his wondrous machine. Likewise, if we do not see the dirt in our lives, we have no reason to seek someone who can clean it up. More than that, Scripture explains, if we are dead, we need someone to raise us to life.

This is where **I Can't, God Can** outlines the gospel narrative so cleanly. In a way, it is like the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, what most traditions call The Lord's Prayer. It's not meant to be the

whole of our prayers, but it gives us the structure for praying well. Let's being to expand the four words, then, and see how these words can help us remember the core of what we have to share. While few of us are preachers, we are all meant to take the gift of salvation that has been given to us and pass it on to others in testimony and teaching. We don't need masterful words to do this, but it sure helps when we have the Master's words—that is, when we know some key Scriptures to support our message.

Let's begin with some verses that show why *I can't*.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, the apostle spent much time discussing sin and its consequences. (This is one reason to be wary of preachers who steer clear of talking about sin, by the way. If sin was a deeply explored topic of the apostles, no preacher should be purposefully avoiding it in fear of turning people off.) One of the most well-known of Paul's statements about sin is this one: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Sin is a universal problem. No one can say, "Well, maybe *you* can't, but I

problem that I happen to fit under, kind of like how all teenagers get acne or all golfers hit a shank now and then. Rather, this is something that happens to *me*. It's personal. Even Paul, who intended his every effort to be God-focused, said, "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (Romans 7:18-19). This, after years of walking with Jesus!

When we bring the personal side of our life into the gospel story, we are delivering what many call a testimony. Here we want the emphasis to be on what God has done for us and in us, but it is appropriate to convey that our sin kept us from God in the past and keeps us from living perfectly for him now. "Holier than thou" should never be a part of our testimony, because holiness suggests a flawlessness before God, and none of us can boast of that! Instead, our testimonies should always be marked with humility (which, along with love, is one of the two "master traits" of a life that reflects Christ).

comprehensive with the believers in Ephesus:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. (Ephesians 2:1-3)

This is serious business, again capturing the universal captivity with sin and emphasizing the desperate gravity of the sinner's life. Many people plan to make the argument before God that they have lived a life that was "good enough," and thus he should allow them into heaven, the place of eternal life with him. But spiritually dead people can make no such argument. They would need to be resurrected before they could speak to make their case!

Planning to tell God you're

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sure can." Paul is clear: None of us can achieve perfect righteousness. We sin. All of us. And our sin is the very thing that keeps from saving ourselves, because it is our sin that separates us from God.

But sin is not only a general

Once we establish that our sin prevents us from saving ourselves, we do well to present the gravity of our sin. Here again, Paul had plain words for the Romans: "For the wages of sin is death..." (Romans 6:23a). But Paul was more

good enough also leads to a logical problem. Let's say we commit only one sin in thought, word, or deed each day. Disdain for a colleague's success. A juicy bit of gossip. Some pocketed cash that the tax collector will never see. Live an aver-

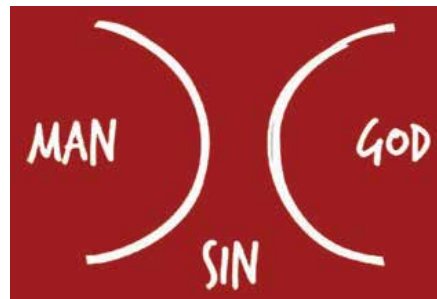
age life and you'll have compiled roughly 30,000 such sins. Now imagine standing before the holy, perfect God of heaven and earth and saying, "Surely you can overlook these 30,000 sins of mine, especially since that guy over there had 30,001." Such words would sound ridiculous—if you dared to speak them at all.

Many years ago, a prominent ministry created a little evangelistic booklet called *The Four Spiritual Laws*. Its illustrations were as compelling as its words. One of these showed a chasm separating us from God. That chasm had a name: SIN. When we say "I can't," we acknowledge that we have dug that chasm. We cannot save ourselves—we cannot get to God on our own—because our sin won't allow for it. Every time we try to span the chasm, we fall back in with no way out. When it comes to saving ourselves, there's no way.

But now is when we come to the good news in the gospel message. This, like *I can't*, is captured in just two words: *God can*. A single verse in Paul's letter to the Romans may capture this transfer like no other: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Notice that before we say "God can" in a theological sense, we might say "God did" in a historical sense. The incarnation of God, Jesus Christ, went to the cross for us.

When we tell the story of Jesus, we step outside of our own story in deference to his. A staple of that story has always been this: "Christ died for your sins." We know what this means, though more accu-

rately, Jesus died for us, *because of* our sins. Jesus, the carpenter rabbi from Nazareth, shed his blood and died on a Roman cross, becoming both the blameless lamb of sacrifice foreshadowed in the Jewish law and the promised Messiah of the Jewish prophets. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21b). Christ did not atone for his own sin on the cross; he had none. Rather, he atoned for our sins—all 30,000 of them multiplied by all who would believe. It was the greatest act of love man has ever known. And why not? For it was the act of God.



Jesus' death was the first of two ways God built the bridge that spans the chasm of sin. In fact, the illustrations in *The Four Spiritual Laws* show a cross as that bridge. Because of Jesus' death, we are justified—legally forgiven—by God. Unholy people, we will enter the presence of a holy God for all eternity only if we attach ourselves by faith to the one who died completely holy, Jesus.



But eternal life requires a second agent: resurrection. Without

resurrection, Christ himself would not live eternally, and without resurrection neither will we. Here's Paul on the matter: "For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him" (Romans 6:9). Later in the same chapter, Paul argued for our eternal existence, as we have gone from being slaves of sin to being slaves of righteousness in Christ:

When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. (Romans 6:20-22)

We have already examined the first half of the closing verse of this same passage: "For the wages of sin is death." Look at how that verse concludes: "But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Truly, God *can* make a way for us because God *did* make a way for us. It cost him his life, but his life was returned to him, and now he offers it to us.

THE GOSPEL EXTENDED

When we take a golf lesson, we know that its purpose extends beyond the day we take it. We need to keep reminding ourselves of what we have learned and applying the keys to our swing on the range and on the course. If we forget what we have learned, we will

go back to fighting the same failings we've had in the past.

The same principle is true with the gospel. Its truth is something we need all the time. This is why our "preaching of the gospel" should be doubly applied, being

mit their sin and turn to God: "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 18:13-14).

In recent years, I have come to understand this to a level that I had not known before, even though I first trusted in Jesus when I was five years old. Like many who read our content at Links Players, I have been living with cancer for several

There are so many things in life we cannot do (though we will proudly and foolishly try most anything!). We must learn to give these to God, who can.

delivered to those whose hearts may be open to salvation and to us who have already received it. In fact, you may have heard of the exhortation to "preach the gospel to yourself every day." Many Bible teachers have taken up this expression that may have originated with seminary professor Jack Miller, who died almost 25 years ago. But can this same idea be applied when we've reduced the gospel to just four words? Yes. Now let's see how.

When we remind ourselves each day that, because of our sin, we have no way to blaze a trail to God on our own ("I can't), the result is two-fold. First, we put ourselves in a humble place, which is where sinful people start their journey to forgiveness and salvation. Jesus told a parable of two praying men, one a proud religious leader and the other a contrite sinner. Look at the way Jesus described the prayer of that sinner: "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" Then Jesus revealed the reward that comes for those who humbly ad-

The second result of telling ourselves that we can't find our own way to God is that we seek him. If we can't do it, then who can? When the disciples were following Jesus, Peter professed what he knew to be true about Jesus, saying, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69).

We should not overlook belief as a major factor here. The writer of Hebrews wrote: "Anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Hebrews 11:6b). Our earnest seeking, when coupled with belief, leads to rewards, including eternal life. In remembering where belief can take us, we draw encouragement from the Lord, just as the man did when he said to Jesus, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). This man wanted so much to attain the fullness of what Jesus had just told him: "Everything is possible for one who believes."

But again, *I can't* is only the first half of our gospel. Far more powerful is the fact that *God can*.

years, a condition that has meant long surgeries, radiation, and extended periods of chemotherapy. Most of my complications have been small, but the doctors have never relaxed because my tumors keep returning. I have had some very good doctors, and my respect for them only keeps increasing. However, God sees many things they cannot. While we often stop and stare in awe at the vastness of the ocean or, more so, of the night sky, God's hand is no less evident in the microscopic world of our own cells. God sees these cells individually and knows when my cancer will return; my doctors instead have to wait for the cells to accumulate and show up on scans before they can say, "It's back." And for every possible side effect listed on my medications, God alone allows this one or that to invade my space.

The God who oversees my cancer—and the chronic illnesses of many friends of mine—is the same God of the gospel. If he loved us so much that he sent his Son to die for us, what is he incapable of doing, either in his will or in his strength? We depend on him,

knowing the promise Paul gave to the Romans:

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?... For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31-32, 38-39)

There are so many things in life we cannot do (though we will proudly and foolishly try most anything!). We must learn to give these to God, who can. Maybe this brings us to a place of simplification, which is not our natural instinct. But if we can crystallize the gospel in four words, we can limit life to one: God. He has created us, he loves us, he calls us, he regenerates us, and he sustains us. It's all him.

BIG TO LITTLE, LITTLE TO BIG

We all know that the truths of the

gospel can't be fully captured in four words. While relying on just four words to prompt us as we share with others and preach to ourselves is helpful, we can keep equipping ourselves with Scripture passages like those we have explored in this article. In study and conversation with friends you can find many more. You may even commit to memory a more expanded version, like this one:

**Because of my sin
I CAN'T
save myself,
but because of
Christ's work
on the cross
GOD CAN
bring me to
salvation and
eternal life with him.**

In golf, there is a theory of teaching that starts small. Every new move is taught through the wedges, because these do not require the big, sometimes unbalanced

movements of longer irons or the driver. But that does not mean the game is small. There is much to be learned and a big course to be navigated. We might find the same to be true here. The gospel comes to us through the container of Scripture, a large storehouse of God's wisdom in God's words. The truths that reside there stretch across time and place. So we do well to capture Scripture's heart—the gospel—in a way that we can grasp and retain. But once we have done that, we do not restrict ourselves, like a golfer who plays only par-3 courses. No, we keep looking for more meat to add to those bones. We go from big to little and back to big, fortified by the inner work of the Holy Spirit as we do the ongoing outward work of learning from God and applying his teaching in our lives, especially as we live them before others. 🍷

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