

“The Gospel needs to be proclaimed, but also discussed. This book serves as a catalyst for that conversation. Through engaging and relatable stories, Daniel explains the transformative power of the Gospel like no other book I’ve read.”

—Beau Eckert, senior pastor at Calvary Church

“The beauty, the power, and the simplicity of the Gospel knows no cultural bounds. Wherever it reaches around the world, it is a beacon of light, and it redeems those who are broken beyond human repair. Daniel takes us to the heart—to the truth of stories about people who experience unbelievable suffering and yet find hope. This book paints a picture of the power of the Gospel.”

—Anne Beiler, founder of Auntie Anne’s Pretzels

“I found *#Gospel* incredibly engaging. It is a well-written interaction over the meaning of the Gospel from the book of Romans, applied with real-life stories and illustrations. I especially enjoyed Daniel’s short, but thought-provoking segments from history and daily life. You will enjoy this book!”

—Barry Wissler, president of HarvestNET International

“In a culture where words like ‘gospel’ are rapidly losing their meaning, Daniel gives us a loving and thoughtful reminder that the Gospel of Jesus is anything but meaningless. It is *the* story—the one that binds all the rest of them together.”

—Andrew Peterson, singer and songwriter,
author of *The Wingfeather Saga*

“Have you ever wanted to see the deeper concepts and themes of the Gospel laid out in today’s language? How about clear examples and analogies that are applicable to the culture today? *#Gospel* spells out the Good News of Jesus, walking its readers through Romans with ease and excitement. It masterfully balances and explains the hard-to-grasp concepts. I’d encourage both seekers and believers to open this book. It’s for anyone wanting to see the facts, validity, and relevance found in the Gospel message. Daniel doesn’t leave questions unanswered as he points us to the main answer Himself: Jesus Christ.”

—Joel Bomberger, *Circuit Riders* evangelist

“In a world that is increasingly noisy and complex, Daniel brilliantly simplifies the message of God’s redeeming love made available for every person in a way that this generation can understand. Through stories from scripture, *#Gospel* shows how God’s love intersects with real life. It is a must-read!”

—Matt Mylin, lead pastor of the Worship Center

“Deep in the heart of each of us is a longing to know the answers to the questions, ‘God, are You really there? What do You think of me? Can I really know You?’ In this book, Daniel will take you on a journey to find the answers to these questions. And the answers are better than you could ever hope! The story he invites you into is true to the gospel, engaging, and personal. You’ll be glad you took him up on his invitation to journey toward the heart of God.”

—Scott Arbeiter, president of World Relief

#GOSPEL

Life, Hope, and Truth for Generation Now

Daniel Rice

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Our mission is to inspire the world with the life-changing message of the Bible.



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Foreword

Many of the most significant conversations in my life have occurred around the table.

It was over cabbage stew in Moscow that I learned about microenterprise development, a conversation which would forever alter the trajectory of my life. I proposed to the woman who would one day become my wife over a hollowed-out pineapple filled with stir fry. My job offer at HOPE International was accompanied by a steaming plate of Chicken Tikka Masala.

Given that food seems to hallmark my most pivotal moments, perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that it was over an Aussie burger that I first met Daniel Rice. At the onset of our meal together, Daniel confidently proclaimed that as far as burgers went, the Aussie burger was unrivaled. Reading through the description, I remained unconvinced. After all, what kind of burger includes grilled pineapple, pickled beets, smoked Gouda, and a fried egg?

As it turns out, Daniel was right. The unconventional burger remains to this day, the very best that I've ever had.

As remarkable as that burger was, it was our conversation that day that left the most lasting impression.

It didn't take long to come to understand that Daniel's heart beats for Christ's fame and glory both in his own life and across the globe. He exemplifies wholehearted, relentless pursuit of Christ—and longs to make Him known. Daniel is a man whose heart has been irrevocably captured by the grace of God, and the Lord's work in his life has left an indelible mark on my own.

I'll never forget the grief in Daniel's eyes as he shared the stories of friends who had never truly understood the captivating message of grace in Christ. Something in him seemed to come alive as he shared about his passion to take the timeless truths of Scripture and teach them in a way that a modern audience could better understand. It was clear that #Gospel was so much more than a book he wanted to write—it was a calling he felt compelled by God to answer.

Our lunch that day was the start of a lifelong friendship with someone I deeply appreciate, greatly admire, and constantly learn from. Daniel is someone I seek out for counsel before making important decisions, and during my most painful moments over recent years, he has spoken gospel-saturated words of hope and encouragement. He masterfully weaves wisdom and compassion together in a way that I personally long to more fully grasp.

The apostle Paul wrote, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1 NIV). Although he would feel uncomfortable with it, I know that when I follow Daniel’s example, I come closer to following Christ. It is with great joy that I commend him to you as a trusted guide in your own faith journey.

In the pages of this book, you will hear the “old, old story” in a fresh, new way. Through innovative storytelling and unexpected connections, Daniel takes the timeless, radical truths of the gospel and reframes them for today’s audience—and in so doing, helps us to better understand how even our most ordinary, mundane moments connect to the greatest story the world will ever know.

My hope is that this wouldn’t simply be a book that you read, but rather a discussion that you enter into. I pray that these themes of wild grace and restoration would become inextricably woven into the fabric of your life. As Daniel connects the gospel to the most unconventional stories, I pray that you would begin to connect it to your own stories as you trace God’s goodness and faithfulness in your own life. In Deuteronomy 11:19, the Israelites are commanded to tell and retell the stories of God’s goodness and faithfulness to them. They’re told to “teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” May #Gospel serve

as a helpful tool in your own storytelling.

What you hold in your hands is far more than just a book. You're holding an invitation to enter into the most important conversation this world will ever have about the greatest rescue the world has ever seen. It's a conversation about a redeeming God of unstoppable love who is relentless in His passionate pursuit of you. It's a conversation that will change your life, if you'll let it.

Welcome to *#Gospel*.

Peter Greer,
President & CEO, HOPE International

Introduction

Five to ten seconds.

After that, the filter kicks in.

In our day and age, five to ten seconds is usually all the time we're given to persuade someone that what we have to say is worthy of his or her time. You and I live in a world suffering from a relentless bombardment of information. Television, social media, advertising, acquaintances, friends, and family all vie for time and an attentive ear. *Is it relevant to me?* Without realizing it, we ask ourselves this question countless times throughout the day. *Do I want what this advertiser is selling? Will this be on the test? Is this conversation significant to my situation? Will this news affect my life at all?* If we don't adapt and learn to filter out what does not apply to us, we quickly become overwhelmed. In this new world of burst communication, our presentation of this Gospel needs to be adapted as well. This is the aim of *#Gospel*.

A hashtag (#) is a symbol used on social media to mark and group messages related to a specific topic. Since these messages are by nature open for everyone to see, hash-tagging a term invites others to join an open conversation and adds the author's thoughts to our

modern-day global exchange of ideas. This is the heart of *#Gospel*. This book is designed to be an open conversation, using current cultural references and stories to draw us into a thoughtful dialogue about what the Gospel really is and how it radically alters our everyday lives. *#Gospel* is not a ground-breaking collection of new ideas; it simply breaks down Paul's explanation of the Gospel in Romans in a way that is accessible and engaging for culture today. It is my hope that this book will bring new life to the ancient truth that is still every bit as relevant today as it was two thousand years ago. I pray that it gives fresh life and hope to those who have felt burned by and detached from the religion they were raised in, helpful illumination for those who have always been curious about spiritual things they observed but were never really connected with, and a new perspective for those who are doing their best to daily follow the teachings of Jesus.

Welcome to the conversation.

Chapter 1

#CoffeeTalk

Measure for me the abyss of man's wickedness and guilt during all the ages of his black and hateful history, that I may realize in some degree what that world is which God has loved; and then, pausing for a moment in wonder at the thought that such a world could be loved at all, hasten to speak of love that gave the Son.

—SIR ROBERT ANDERSON

Whoever said love makes the world go 'round clearly had never heard about coffee. The amount of money people will happily fork over for what in essence is just heated bean water is staggering. The United States alone spent \$18 billion on coffee beverages last year.¹ No longer is it simply a hot cuppa purchased every morning from the local diner. There are now entire, wildly successful business models built on the back of the modest Arabica bean. In some places, people are even defined by the coffee that they drink. Many go to great lengths in pursuit of the

1. "Coffee Drinking Statistics," Statisticsbrain.com, accessed July 19, 2017, <http://www.statisticbrain.com/coffee-drinking-statistics/>.

perfect cup. Even home coffee brewers aren't what they used to be. Instead of the glass pot drip coffee makers and stove-top percolators of yesteryear, we're now infatuated by the Keurig.

Coffee is an enormous part of life and culture all over the world. From the twenty-four-hour diner to the local gourmet coffee hipster joint, this energy-giving elixir has asserted itself into almost every part of our daily lives. Some people depend on its potency to propel them from their pillows into their workday. For others, each sip is a calming, almost ritualistic retreat from the stress and pressure of the busy day. Coffee serves as the great equalizer. World leaders from the most powerful nations in the world drink it. Astronauts drink it. Garbage collectors, museum curators, subway train operators, heart surgeons, and the people who stuff takeout Chinese menus under your windshield wiper drink it as well. Coffee is a worldwide phenomenon.

Given that the experience of a cup of coffee is almost universal, let's compare it to people. Let's say that the good and noble things that people do with their lives represent the quality of a cup of coffee. Someone we would call morally upright or selfless, like Gandhi or Mother Teresa, would be an impeccable cup of pour-over coffee. Every culture has these paragons of virtue, the heroes we long for our children to grow up to emulate. We aren't

simply talking about good coffee; this is the stuff of legend. To obtain this kind of coffee would require the rental of a private jet to fly into the heart of the mountains of Columbia to collect the finest beans available, picked by the hands of Juan Valdez himself, and then to return that very day to maintain peak freshness. The beans would then need to be roasted, rested, and ground to perfection by a world champion barista. Coffee of this caliber would then require a second jet to be dispatched to gather crystal clear, icy spring water from an aquifer deep within the pristine, protected Canadian wilderness. These two elements would then be combined flawlessly in the brewing process at precisely the right temperature before being poured carefully into a priceless artifact, taken from the collection of Louis XIV himself, crafted from the finest china and hand-gilded with twenty-four-karat gold. Indeed, that would be the finest (and most outlandish!) cup of coffee the world has ever seen! On the other hand, a person most of us would consider harmful to society might be represented by a suspect pot of coffee from a dirty gas station, probably brewed and burned before you were born. This pot has been sitting out for so long that when poured into the crusty paper cup on hand, it has the murky consistency of old motor oil. It tastes like the bottom of a zookeeper's boot. We set these two wildly different cups on opposite ends of an

endless table, with every other conceivable type of coffee stretched out between them. Coffee from Starbucks, Tim Horton's, Dunkin Donuts, and representatives from every conceivable gourmet shop and cafe are lined up next to brews from gas stations and fast food chains. Now, suppose that after we do this, in through the door walks a somber-looking man in a spotless white lab coat. He is carrying a stainless steel briefcase, out of which he pulls a small glass vial labeled CYANIDE. If you are not familiar with cyanide, it is a toxin among the fastest lethal poisons known to humankind. Cyanide causes death within minutes to hours of exposure. The man proceeds to slowly remove the vial's lid, before painstakingly placing a single drop of the solution into every single coffee cup. He carefully returns the now-empty vial to his shiny briefcase and asks politely, "Which cup of coffee would you like to drink?" It is, of course, a foolish question. No matter how lowly or grand the cup of coffee might have been before the poison, it has all been corrupted. No one would choose to drink any of the coffee if he or she accurately understood the consequences of doing so.

This is the story of Romans 1 in distilled form. In these first few verses, Paul outlines a similar picture of the human condition. No matter who you are, great or small, man or woman, famous or infamous, all of us have been born with a deadly contaminant: sin. Sin is our failure

to hit the mark of perfection. No matter how noble a person's actions are, no matter how much he or she works toward the greater good, no matter how spectacular his or her "coffee" offering, nothing can eliminate the toxin of sin. Your skin color, social status, and sexual orientation have no bearing here. No amount of talent or charisma can tip the scale. The playing field is leveled. All sin is lethal, and no one escapes its deadly effect. Everyone starts from precisely the same place. There are no classes or tiered ranks of acceptability. This is the foundation for the Gospel.

It is with this good news in mind that Paul opens his letter to the Romans with the following words in verses 16–17 of the first chapter:

For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile. This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life." (NLT)

As he penned these words, one can only imagine the passion that flowed from his quill, tempered by years of suffering and pain for the sake of the one he labored for. He had forsaken his former life and set out on a journey to take this Gospel to the ends of his world. Paul was all in.

#UnlikelyActivist

Born with the name Saul, in one of the largest trade centers on the Mediterranean coast, Paul most likely received his second name through his father, a Roman citizen. The name *Paul* was Latin, and it was very common for Jews of that day to have two names: one Hebrew, the other Latin or Greek.² Saul's family was a deeply religious family that was wealthy enough to send their son to Jerusalem to receive his education at the prestigious school of a Pharisee named Gamaliel, one of the most notable rabbis in recorded history. In Jedi terms, Gamaliel was to a young Saul what Obi-wan was to Luke Skywalker. His school was renowned for providing students with a balanced education, and it is probable that Paul had broad exposure to classical literature, philosophy, and ethics.³ Interestingly, it was Master Gamaliel who would later come to the defense of a budding new movement seen as an enormous threat to the religious establishment of the day, led by a ragtag band of common fisherman, tradesmen, a revolutionary, and a tax collector. Having been molded in a cocoon of strict adherence to the Law, Paul's hatred for this new movement began to simmer. He was present as the

2. Ferdinand Prat, "St. Paul." In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. vol. 11. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911).

3. Quency E. Wallace, "The Early Life and Background of Paul the Apostle," *The American Journal of Biblical Theology*, (2002).

pious kingpins of his order crushed the life out of one of the new upstarts named Stephen with stones, and his thirst for blood only grew. Soon Paul would become a leader in the fight to scour this new sect from the face of the earth. His gruesome exploits earned him the fear of many, and even after his dramatic transformation, it would take time and the help of a brave advocate for the heads of this new faction of Christ followers to trust him.

It was a quest for blood and justice that propelled Paul to start out on a journey that would forever alter the course of his life. He set out for Damascus, determined to capture and kill any who associated with the Way. His trip took an unexpected turn when he came face-to-face with the very God he believed he was defending and finally came to understand that the origin of this new sect, Jesus Christ, was exactly who He said He was. He was instructed to go see a man in Damascus named Ananias, and though his encounter left him blind, he did just that.

Due to Paul's fearsome reputation, Ananias was none too happy to hear of his arrival. Ananias had likely personally known some of the victims of Paul's homicidal raging. After arguing his point with God Himself, Ananias eventually relented and set out to meet the monster responsible for so much death and suffering of the believers in Jerusalem. Paul remained in Damascus

for several days and immediately began preaching in the Jewish synagogues that Jesus Christ was God. This was such an about-face that people who heard about it were completely dumbfounded. After all, this was the same man who had come to Damascus to crush the very idea that he was now preaching as truth! The local religious leaders were so angry that they plotted to kill Paul, and his new friends had to concoct a crazy escape plan to smuggle him out of the city. What was it about this message that was so important, so radical, so powerful and revolutionary that it could change its greatest persecutor into such a wholehearted ally? What was it about this Gospel that was so divisive that it became a death sentence for those fearless enough to broadcast it publicly?

#FrozenCure

The word *Gospel* literally means “good news.” In an inescapable disaster, this is the message that turns the tide. In 2014, there was a particularly virulent outbreak of the Ebola virus in a few countries in Africa. Ebola is almost always deadly and has claimed millions of lives over the years. A few brave medical doctors and workers were courageous enough to travel to the heart of the outbreak to treat the victims—a valiant, incredibly dangerous endeavor. Soon enough, some of them were

infected, and one soon died. Two of the infected were American missionaries named Nancy Writebol and Dr. Kent Brantly. Nine days after Brantly was infected, his condition had deteriorated rapidly. His breathing was labored, and he knew that he was dying. Kent called his wife and two young children in the United States to say good-bye. One can only imagine the crushing agony his wife experienced as she listened to her husband's labored breathing over the phone. In that moment of desperation, something remarkable happened. An experimental serum was flown in by a small pharmaceutical company based in San Diego. The serum had never been tested on humans, but it offered the very thing Kent needed: hope. He was snatched from the very jaws of death, and within hours of administration, the vaccine had completely reversed the course of the deadly disease ravaging Kent's body. The phone call home to his wife with this "good news" must have been breathtaking to hear. Rescued from certain death, both Brantly and Writebol had been given a new chance at life.⁴ Hope when all seems lost. Good news in an impossible situation. From death to life—this is the story of the Gospel.

4. Sanjay Gupta and Danielle Dellorto, "Experimental Drug Likely Saved Ebola Patients," CNN.com, August 5, 2014, http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/04/health/experimental-ebola-serum/index.html?iid=article_sidebar.

#FrozenHeart

In 2013, Disney released an animated film that would obliterate all previous box office records set by movies in its genre. It was a colossal success by any standard and raked in over \$1.3 billion worldwide. I know this well, because I have three young daughters. Like most little girls, they were *Frozen* fanatics. The story was an interesting one. The characters were well developed, and the artwork was extraordinary. In some ways it was the typical Disney fare, princesses and villains, comical little side characters, and lots of conversational singing, but something about this particular story stood out to me. The more I saw it, the more I couldn't unsee it: a picture of the human condition. Warning, spoilers are ahead if you are one of the last remaining inhabitants of planet earth who hasn't seen this movie. *Frozen* is a love story, but not in the way that one might expect. The tale unfolds as two sisters, Elsa and Anna, are emotionally driven apart by a childhood accident, some unfortunate parenting, and a mysterious secret. Elsa has the magical ability to control ice and snow, and while playing with Anna one night, she almost accidentally kills her. Her parents, fearful for Anna's safety, forbid any further contact between the sisters, which leads to incredible loneliness and confusion. The problem is exacerbated when their parents are lost

at sea, leaving each of them very much alone. On Elsa's coronation day, throngs of people gather to celebrate her crowning, including a prince from a neighboring kingdom named Hans. Anna and Hans hit it off right away and seem to be the perfect match, but when they tell Elsa, she disagrees. An argument ensues, and Elsa loses control of her powers, shattering the celebration with shards of ice before bolting off into the frigid night, with Anna in close pursuit. As the story unfolds, Anna is once again unintentionally struck by her sister's ice magic, and we find out in true fairy tale fashion that only an act of true love can save her. She rushes back to Hans, hoping that a kiss from him will break the spell, but it becomes increasingly clear that Hans has no love for her and is secretly plotting to overthrow the kingdom. In the climax of the movie, Hans raises his sword to cut Elsa down, but in an act of "true love," Anna throws herself in front of the blade, choosing to sacrifice her life for her sister instead of running into the arms of the man she's fallen in love with. What struck me was the crystal-clear portrayal of the two sides of the human heart: selfishness and love. All of our actions stem from one of these two motivations—from the time we enter this world, a writhing mass of dependency and helplessness, to our proudest, most accomplished moments. Once, Jesus was asked what

the most important command of God was. His answer was simple: love. Love God. Love others. If God is a truly perfect and holy God, He must demand perfection from anyone in His presence. No one has ever been able to choose love over self every time. No one is perfect. Everyone has missed the mark. Everyone is contaminated by sin. Even an incredibly sacrificial act like Anna's is not enough if it has been marred by a less-than-perfect life. Jesus is our atoning sacrifice to God not simply because He gave His life for us but because He lived the perfect life that we were incapable of living and then traded our records for His.

In the end, we each have only two choices. We can choose selfishness, or we can choose self-sacrificing, unconditional, true love. The heart of the Gospel is news of how True Love defeated sin and death and rose again.

It was for this very reason that Paul was so passionate and unflinching about the Gospel in his life and writings. In that news, desperation and hope hung in the balance. In that news, the eternal condition of the human soul would be determined. In that news, life sprang out from jaws of death.

This is the Gospel. Hope for the hopeless. Humanity, once dead in sin, being made alive in Christ. Forgiveness for the unforgivable.

No one escapes the taint of sin. We are all infected. We desperately need a cure. The Gospel is the message we have all been waiting for.