

## The Unconverted “Believer” (2): What is the Gospel of Salvation?

### Introduction:

Last Lord’s Day we began this series, *The Unconverted ‘Believer.’* We had read from the Word of God of the propensity and pervasiveness for fallen mankind to believe that they are pure or clean before God, even though God regards them as defiled and damned in their sin (cf. Prov. 30:12). One of the manifestations of sin is that sin convinces sinners that they are not sinners before God, but that they are in favor with Him. The Word of God speaks of “the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13). Sin deceives a person, assuring him that he is safe with regard to his standing before God, when actually the wrath of God abides on him. If we wanted to take the time, we could show from the Scriptures that sin is not the only deceiver of sinners that they are in favor with God. Satan, too, is a great deceiver, who would have unconverted people believe themselves right with God. Moreover the fallen world itself will bolster the fantasy of those self-deceived, satan-duped souls. And then sadly there are even those in pulpits who contribute to the spiritual delusion of them who are misled. It is no wonder that there are so many deluded people when considering the ease in which souls want to be deceived and the many forces and voices that would encourage them in their fanciful presumption. **Charles Spurgeon** (1834-1892) once wrote,

Alas! Alas! It is a marvel that there are not more deceived! The wonder is that any find the gate-- that any discover eternal life, when we are so, so mad, so foolish, so insane, as to trifle where we ought to be awfully in earnest, and to play and toy, where the whole heart is all too little to be given to a work of such dread, such everlasting importance. God help us, since it is so easy to be deceived, to search, and watch, and look, and test, and try, that we be not found castaways at the last!

There are common characteristics of unconverted people that must be exposed to them, recognized and acknowledged by them, and changed in them, when they are converted to God through Jesus Christ. One of these characteristics of an unconverted man is *ignorance of his own sinful pride*. Proverbs 14:16 reads, “A wise man fears and departs from evil, but a fool rages and is self-confident.” He assumes he knows best how to govern his life, while presuming that God is pleased with the course that he has chosen for himself. Fallen man is a god unto himself, though he does not think so, or realize it is so. God must bring him down to the dust, before he will look up to Jesus Christ alone.

This sinful pride characterized Judah when God had brought His judgment upon them by sending upon them the armies of Babylon. We may read of the manner in which the majority of the people thought and lived in contrast to the relatively few who were humble before the Lord. Here is **Jeremiah 17:5-10**.

<sup>5</sup>Thus says the LORD:

“Cursed is the man who trusts in man (or himself)  
And makes flesh his strength,  
Whose heart departs from the LORD.

<sup>6</sup>For he shall be like a shrub in the desert,  
And shall not see when good comes,  
But shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness,  
In a salt land which is not inhabited.

<sup>7</sup>“Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,  
And whose hope is the LORD.

<sup>8</sup>For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters,

Which spreads out its roots by the river,  
And will not fear when heat comes;  
But its leaf will be green,  
And will not be anxious in the year of drought,  
Nor will cease from yielding fruit.

<sup>9</sup>“The heart is deceitful above all things,  
And desperately wicked;  
Who can know it?

<sup>10</sup>I, the LORD, search the heart,  
I test the mind,  
Even to give every man according to his ways,  
According to the fruit of his doings.

The majority of these people were under the wrath of God, but they had thought that they were blessed of God. They had ordered their thinking and their lives according to their will, according to their own values and opinions. They were in error regarding their ways. They were ignorant of God’s ways. They presumed that their ways of thinking were in accordance with what God would have them think. Their fallen hearts had deceived them. God had said to them, “Obey My voice.” But then God said, “Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone followed the dictates of his evil heart; therefore I will bring upon them all the words of this covenant” (Jer. 11:7f). People are ignorant of their sinful condition and they are ignorant of God’s true assessment of them. In preparation of a soul to call upon the Lord Jesus, to submit wholly unto Him in all matters of faith and practice, God must show the sinner the error and folly of his own way of thinking, of his own independent and proud spirit that had disregarded the Word of God.

Discovery of one’s true sinful condition is not an easy matter. **David Brainerd**, the young, but well-known 18<sup>th</sup> c. missionary to the Indians (whose grave is in Northampton), wrote in his journal of his effort and of the difficulty to inform and humble people with respect to their sin.

Especially I discoursed repeatedly on the nature and necessity of that humiliation, self-emptiness, or full conviction of a person’s being utterly undone in himself, which is necessary in order to a saving faith, and the extreme difficulty of being brought to this, and the great danger there is of persons taking up with some self-righteous appearances of it: The danger of this I especially dwelt upon, being persuaded that multitudes perish in this hidden way: and because so little is said from most pulpits to discover any danger here: so that persons being never effectually brought to die in themselves, are never truly united to Christ, and so perish.<sup>1</sup>

The errant self-assessment of one’s spiritual condition before the Lord is not only common of the people of the world, but it is also very commonplace in churches. I fear that there may be multitudes of “believers” who are unconverted. In fact it may be a greater problem in churches than in the world. It is our desire to expose this problem of nominal Christianity and to present the biblical corrective, which is true salvation in Jesus Christ. We concluded last week by asserting that biblical salvation is not widely proclaimed or understood and that the gospel that that is often popularly espoused in evangelical churches is not what is set forth in the Word of God. May our Lord help us to be right and true respecting this most important matter!

Now let me insert a word before we proceed in our study. As I had expressed last Lord’s Day, I am concerned for the tenderhearted soul becoming fearful and overwhelmed by our subject. I knew this would be a problem with some. I had two of our members this week express separately to me of their fear concerning our subject, to the point of wanting to stay away altogether. But I would urge none of us to

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<sup>1</sup> In the Introduction to Thomas Hooker, **The Application of Redemption** (International Outreach, 2008, orig. 1657), p. x.

succumb to the devil's temptation to do so. God has commanded that we perform proper and thorough self-examination. And when this is done, we can expect God to do a thorough work in our souls and bring comfort out of our conflict. Our Lord assured us, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). God cuts deep and exposes to us any number of issues that we are then to address before Him. We do not want to close our hearts to the work of the Holy Spirit in our souls. I am reminded of an encounter I once had with a relative (on my wife's side) many years ago. I believed that he was a true Christian. His faith and life testified to that reality. But I also knew that his knowledge of the gospel was rather weak and the basis of his assurance in his own mind was flawed--not biblical. I thought that I would help him in this, so I said to him, "Many Christians have a faulty basis for assurance of salvation. I believe that I could show you wherein you think wrongly about your assurance of salvation." He became quite alarmed. He literally closed his eyes tightly and clasped his hands over his ears saying loudly, "I don't want to hear! I don't want to hear!" I was rather surprised by his reaction and thought to myself, "What a terrible response." He would rather continue in his "assurance", though it might have been ill-perceived or non-grounded in the Word of God, rather than be challenged to assess and correct possible error in his understanding of what the Word of God said about the matter. I would have preferred this attitude: "If you can shake me of my assurance of salvation, showing me wherein my thinking is faulty, please do so, for I do not want to be in error about the eternal destiny of my soul!" We must be right about our own salvation. As the Scripture declares, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?--unless indeed you fail to meet the test!" (2 Cor. 13:5). Our goal is not to rob you of assurance of salvation. Our desire is for the every opposite! Our aim and desire is that you have a sound, solid, biblical basis for assurance of salvation. We want you to have and enjoy true peace from God through the Lord Jesus Christ. If you stay with us through this study and prayerfully listen and apply the Word of God, you will by the grace of God receive His blessing toward this end--a sound and unshakeable assurance that you have salvation.

Now one of the major causes of nominal Christianity in our world is that generally churches fail to proclaim a message that confronts people and reveals to them their lost condition from which they need to be saved. The biblical gospel is the good news to people whom God has awakened to their sin, to their need for true salvation, and to the way to attain that salvation. But another gospel has replaced the biblical gospel. This "new" gospel does not result in the true conversion of souls, but it often results in making shallow, superficial Christians--Christians in name only. This is because there is not a biblical revealing to people their desperate and helpless sinful condition from which God must save them. **Charles Spurgeon** wrote these words in his wonderful book entitled, *The Soul Winner*.

The withholding of the doctrine of the total depravity of man has wrought serious mischief to many who have listened to a certain kind of preaching. These people do not get a true healing because they do not know the disease under which they are suffering; they are never truly clothed because nothing is done towards stripping them. In many ministries, there is not enough of probing the heart and arousing the conscience by the revelation of man's alienation from God, and by the declaration of the selfishness and the wickedness of such a state. Men need to be told that, except divine grace shall bring them out of their enmity to God, they must eternally perish; and they must be reminded of the sovereignty of God, that He is not obliged to bring them out of this state, that He would be right and just if He left them in such a condition, that they have no merit to plead before Him, and no claims upon Him, but that if they are to be saved, it must be by grace, and by grace alone. The preacher's work is to throw sinners down in utter helplessness, that they may be compelled to look up to Him who alone can help them.<sup>2</sup>

We are not unique in making the claim that an aberrant gospel is widely proclaimed, though we are certainly in the minority who think so. Consider what **J. I. Packer** (1926-2020) had written about "the gospel" in 1959 in an introduction to a reprint of a book by John Owen:

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *The Soul Winner* (William B. Eerdmans, 1963), p. 24

There are signs today of a new upsurge of interest in the theology of the Bible: a new readiness to test traditions, to search the Scriptures and to think through the faith. It is to those who share this readiness that Owen's treatise is offered, in the belief that it will help us in one of the most urgent tasks facing Evangelical Christendom today—the recovery of the gospel. This last remark may cause some raising of eyebrows, but it seems to be warranted by the facts.

There is no doubt that Evangelicalism today is in a state of perplexity and unsettlement. In such matters as the practice of evangelism, the teaching of holiness, the building up of local church life, the pastor's dealing with souls and the exercise of discipline, there is evidence of widespread dissatisfaction with things as they are and of equally widespread uncertainty as to the road ahead. This is a complex phenomenon, to which many factors have contributed; but, if we go to the root of the matter, we shall find that these perplexities are all ultimately due to our having lost our grip on the biblical gospel. Without realizing it, we have during the past century bartered that gospel for a substitute product which, though it looks similar enough in points of detail, is as a whole a decidedly different thing. Hence our troubles; for the substitute product does not answer the ends for which the authentic gospel has in past days proved itself so mighty. The new gospel conspicuously fails to produce deep reverence, deep repentance, deep humility, a spirit of worship, a concern for the church. Why? We would suggest that the reason lies in its own character and content. It fails to make men God-centered in their thoughts and God-fearing in their hearts because this is not primarily what it is trying to do.<sup>3</sup>

**Arthur Pink** (1886-1952) also wrote earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the gospel popularly proclaimed was not the true gospel set forth in Scripture and that this false gospel produced Christians in name only, who remained lost in their sins.

*What is the Gospel?* Is it a message of glad tidings from Heaven to make God-defying rebels at ease in their wickedness? Is it given for the purpose of assuring the pleasure-crazy young people that, providing they only "believe" there is nothing for them to fear in the future? One would certainly think so from the way in which the Gospel is presented—or rather perverted—by most "evangelists," and the more so when we look *at the lives* of their "converts." Surely those with any degree of spiritual discernment must perceive that to assure such that God loves them and His Son died for them, and that a full pardon for all their sins (past, present, and future) can be obtained by simply "accepting Christ as their personal Saviour," is but a casting of pearls before swine.<sup>4</sup>

And so, not only is a deficient understanding of salvation popularly proclaimed and believed, but a deficient gospel of salvation is all too often taught and trusted. This is what has resulted in the false "conversion" of many, who sadly, but wrongly believe that they are right with God. It is our desire and effort in the first few Sundays of addressing this topic to show forth what the Word of God does teach regarding salvation through Jesus Christ.

What, then, is biblical Salvation? Let us consider a passage of Scripture that Pastor Jason expounded to us recently—1 Peter 2:21-25. Here we read of what God had purposed to accomplish for and in His people through the life and death of Jesus Christ. It describes the salvation that Christ secured for His people. The Holy Spirit has given to us these words:

For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:

"Who committed no sin,  
Nor was deceit found in His mouth";

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<sup>3</sup> John Owen, **The Death of Death in the Death of Christ** (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1959), pp. 1f.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur W. Pink, **Studies on Saving Faith** (Pietan Publications, 2009), p. 12.

who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Pet. 2:21-25)

Pastor Jason brought forth in his sermon the major teaching of the passage, namely, that the Lord Jesus in His suffering and death provides Christians both the instruction and an example to follow in order that they may endure and triumph over unjust suffering and tribulation.<sup>5</sup> His emphasis was on what is set forth in verses 21 through 23. I desire that we now focus on what Peter declared to be the purpose and result of Christ's suffering and death, that is, the salvation of His people. This is stated in verses 24 and 25. To what end did Jesus suffer and die on His cross and rise from the dead? We read of Christ,

“Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” (1 Pet. 2:21-25)

Peter was writing to Gentile Christians, who had come to Christ recently through repentance and faith. Through Peter, God declared that it was Jesus Christ Himself who had secured their salvation through His life, death, and resurrection on behalf of His people.

## I. Let us consider Peter's statements regarding the work of Jesus Christ.

### A. Jesus Christ bore our sins

First, Peter wrote that Jesus Christ “bore our sins in His own body on the tree.” Pastor Jason addressed these words in some detail, so we need not do so again here, other than to reemphasize the meaning of this declaration. Jesus was bearer of the sin of His people when He died upon His cross. This declares the substitutionary nature of Christ's death on our behalf. He bore our sins. He suffered the death penalty that was upon us for our sin. Peter was probably alluding to Isaiah's prophecy of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53:12, which reads, “And He bore the sin of many.” The verb translated “bore” in Greek is *anaynegken* (ἀνήνεγκεν) and it is frequently translated as “offering.”<sup>6</sup> Christ's death was the realization to which every Old Testament sacrifice upon every altar pointed. Jesus' death provided the atonement for the sin of His people. The Word of God had declared, “The soul that sins shall die.” When Jesus bore our sins, He died. He died as an offering, a substitute or sin-bearer on behalf of His people. Our sins were taken from us and laid upon Him and then He died for our sins. As one wrote, “He Himself, by His own personal suffering, carried the sins up, in other words, the Priest was also the victim.”<sup>7</sup> That He bore the curse and punishment of God upon sin is clear because He died upon the “tree.” Here Peter set forth the cross of Christ to be the true altar on which Jesus Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice for sin. Jesus Christ in His death had become cursed of God for us, and then in dying He paid for our sins so that God could be just to forgive us our sins for Jesus' sake.

The fact that God required such a great price in order to redeem His people reveals the great evil of sin. Here are the words of an older commentator, **John Brown** (1784-1858):

Did Christ, the righteous One, suffer, and so suffer, for us? How inconceivably malignant must sin be, which made sufferings of such a glorious person necessary to its expiation and pardon; and how

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<sup>5</sup> Pastor Jason Austin preached this message in our church on the Lord's Day, January 3, 2021. His notes are available.

<sup>6</sup> This is the Greek word that Peter used and it is the Greek word that the LXX used in Isaiah 53:12. LXX is the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament,

<sup>7</sup> Charles Bigg, **Epistles of St. Peter and Jude**, The International Critical Commentary (T & T Clark, 1978), p. 147.

inconceivably strong must His love be, which made Him willingly to undergo such sufferings, rather than that we should be exposed to the tremendous consequences of unexpiated, unforgiven iniquity!

Oh, how should we hate sin! Oh, how should we love the Savior! Nothing is better fitted to animate and strengthen these two master principles of Christian holiness, the hatred of sin and the love of the Saviour, than the believing contemplation of His sufferings for sin in the room of sinners. Under the influence of the truth now stated, let each of us say in his heart, “Herein is love, not that I loved Him, but that He loved me, and gave Himself to be a propitiation for my sin.” I would put that to death in my flesh, which put Him to death in the flesh. I would mortify my members which are on the earth; I would crucify the flesh, with its affections and lusts; and forasmuch as He has suffered for me in the flesh, borne my sin in His own body to the tree, that I, being dead to sin, might live unto righteousness, I will arm myself with the same mind, that I no longer live the rest of my time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God; and taught by the grace of God in Christ His Son, the righteous One suffering for my sins in my stead, I will “deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present world; looking for the blessed hope, the glorious appearance of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ;” “who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.”<sup>8</sup>

But the point that we wish to make from our passage is this:

## **B. Jesus Christ bore our sins so that we would live lives of righteousness**

Peter declared the purpose for which Christ died. Jesus Christ “bore our sins in His own body on the tree, *that we, having died to sins might live for righteousness.*” The conjunction, “that”, introduces a purpose clause. This clause reveals to what end, for what purpose Christ died. Peter wrote that the purpose for Jesus dying was so “*that we, having died to sins...*” There are places in the New Testament that speaks of our union with Christ in His death—when He died we died in Him. When He was crucified, His people were also crucified in Him. Paul wrote in Romans 6:6, “We know that our old self was crucified *with him* in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.” But Peter is not expressing that idea here; rather, Peter was describing not what happened when Christ died, but what happened when we died to sin, that is, when we were converted, when we became Christians. When a sinner experiences salvation through Jesus Christ *he dies to the sin that had formerly characterized his thinking and living*. When we came to saving faith we died to sin, that is, we ceased to live for sin. This does not mean that we stopped sinning completely, but when we were converted we thereafter no longer lived in and for sin.

Notice what he does not say directly here, although it is stated elsewhere, that Jesus died so that we might be forgiven of our sins. Rather, the Word of God states here that Jesus died “that we, having died to sins, *might live for righteousness.*” Christ died that we might live holy lives. Any representation of salvation and any presentation of the gospel is false that does not promise not only the forgiveness of our sins but also a life of righteousness. True salvation is not merely the forgiveness of sins, salvation is seen in new life in Jesus Christ. Jesus died that we might live in holy righteousness before Him, that is, that our lives are in conformity to His will as revealed in His Word. For we died with respect to sin so that we “might live for righteousness.” This is the main idea of conversion.

This verse reveals one of the clearest ways by which one can determine if someone has biblical salvation or that one wrongly believes that he has salvation. Anyone who claims to be a Christian, but he continues to live in and for sin, and one who refuses to live unto righteousness, is not a Christian. If he believes that he is a Christian who has been forgiven of his sin but he continues to live in sin, he is sadly deluded regarding his true condition before God. He is yet in his sins. To quote Spurgeon once again when giving instruction on winning people to Jesus Christ, he wrote these words:

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<sup>8</sup> John Brown, **Expository Discourses on the First Epistle of the Apostle Peter**, vol. 2 (The National Foundation for Christian Education, n.d.), pp. 395f.

There must also be a *willingness to obey the Lord in all His commandments*. It is a shameful thing for a man to profess discipleship and yet refuse to learn his Lord's will upon certain points, or even dare to decline obedience when that will is known. How can a man be a disciple of Christ when he openly lives in disobedience to Him?

If the professed convert distinctly and deliberately declares that he knows his Lord's will but does not mean to attend to it, you are not to pamper his presumption, but it is your duty to assure him that he is not saved. Has not the Lord said, "He that taketh not up his cross, and cometh after Me, cannot be My disciple"? Mistakes as to what the Lord's will may be are to be tenderly corrected, but anything like willful disobedience is fatal; to tolerate it would be treason to Him that sent us. Jesus must be received as King as well as Priest; and where there is any hesitancy about this, the foundation of godliness is not yet laid.

"Faith must obey her Maker's will  
As well as trust His grace  
A pardoning God is jealous still  
For His own holiness."<sup>9</sup>

Peter then explained how it is that they had died to sins. Of Jesus Christ's suffering and death he wrote, "*by whose stripes you were healed.*" We generally think of the lashes of a whip only in terms of administering punishment. But the Bible also sets forth the "stripes" of a whip to have a cleansing result, in that it purges a rebel of his resistant and defiant spirit. The chastised servant comes forth from his punishment humble, compliant, and ready to serve. Through Jesus Christ suffering punishment that was due us for our sin, He healed us of our propensity to sinful rebellion so that we could and would live in righteousness before Him. And so, here Peter was not writing directly of our forgiveness of sins, which we can find in many other places in Scripture; he was writing of our deliverance from a life of sin so that we might live in righteousness. What God has declared before us is that salvation through Jesus Christ is more than the forgiveness of sins, as necessary and important as that is to our salvation. Christ died so that we would be recovered from our life of sin and the sinful independence and rebellion that had formerly characterized us. Christ died so that we might be restored to God to live a life of righteousness before God. Jesus Christ died that we could live "for righteousness", a life in accordance with the will of God as set forth in the Word of God.

Peter then declared that...

### **C. Christians were formerly astray but now have returned in submission and obedience to Jesus Christ.**

The Holy Spirit through Peter gave a further explanation of what was wrought in salvation. We read in **verse 25**, "*For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*" Peter described the lives that characterized these Christians before they had come to experience salvation. Before they were sheep "going astray." They were wanderers, having run away from the Lord, the Shepherd of His people. They were going wherever they wanted to go, not where their Shepherd would have led them if they were following Him.

But then we read Peter's description of the conversion to Christ. He wrote, "But have now", having become Christians, you have "returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." The verb, "You have returned" is precisely expressed. In Greek it is an aorist tense, passive voice verb. It expresses the idea of an event that had occurred in the past. We returned to the Shepherd and Overseer, Jesus Christ. But actually this is not precisely the idea that Peter expressed here. The verb he used, "returned", is a passive voice verb, which indicates that this event happened to them; it was not something that they had actively done. What Peter was expressing was that their returning had been the work of God's grace upon them and in them, not

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<sup>9</sup> Spurgeon, *The Soul Winner*, p. 38.

an action they took of their own will in their own resolve or strength. The Scriptures command people everywhere to be converted to Christ. But those who do convert to Christ do so due to the grace of God working upon them and in them. **Matthew Henry** wrote regarding this,

The word is passive, and shows that the return of a sinner is the effect of divine grace. This return is from all their errors and wanderings, to Christ, who is the true careful shepherd, that loves His sheep, and laid down His life for them, who is the most vigilant pastor, and bishop, or overseer of souls.

Jesus Christ is set forth as the *Shepherd* and *Overseer* of His people. That He is the Shepherd of His sheep speaks of His role and function as their leader and that they are His faithful followers. Elsewhere Jesus had said of His people, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:27f). True Christians, those who have experienced salvation through the life and death of Jesus Christ, follow their Shepherd. To follow the Shepherd means that they obey Him, following Him in the paths of righteousness in which He leads them.

Another biblical term used to describe His sheep is that they have become His *disciples*. A true Christian is a true disciple of Jesus Christ. If you are not a disciple of Jesus Christ, you are not a Christian, according to the Word of God. “The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch” (Acts 11:26).

But Jesus Christ is also the *Overseer of your souls*, if you are a Christian. He is your Protector and your Provider. He governs you. He preserves you. This dual role as Shepherd and Overseer reflects the biblical idea that He is leading His people to a destination and that He is protecting and providing for them in their journey to assure their arrival to the destination in which He is leading them. Jesus Christ will see to it that He will lead you and see to it that we you will join with Him and with all those who know Him savingly.

What Peter wrote in verses 24 and 25 describes the nature of salvation. Salvation involves breaking away from the power of sin that had formerly controlled His people. God reconciles and restores a wayward and alienated people unto Himself (and to His people). Salvation also results in His people submitting and following Him as He leads them in their lives of righteousness. One commentator once expressed this matter within the context of Peter’s epistle:

No striving after personal liberty or antisocial behavior or opposition to the natural order can be allowed to impair the Christian workers’ imitation of Christ. According to verse 24, such conduct is no longer possible for the Christian. Christ carried their sins in His body on the cross. For He took upon Himself all human iniquity and brought it to an end by His innocent death (Isa. 53:6), so that His believers have already departed from their sins and must live to righteousness. They are no longer common, weak human beings, but have through Christ’s wounds been healed of all frailty. Previously they strayed like sheep from one interest to another, verse 25, but now they have turned to the real shepherd and supervisor of their souls, and have no excuse or occasion to follow false leaders and seditionists into rebellion.<sup>10</sup>

**Matthew Henry** (1662-1714) set forth the substance of these verses in this way:

Learn, first, Jesus Christ bore the sins of all His people, and expiated them by His death upon the cross. Secondly, *no man can depend safely upon Christ, as having borne his sin and expiated his guilt, till he dies unto sin and lives unto righteousness.*

Consider carefully those words of Matthew Henry, for it is precisely what we are asserting: no one can rightly claim to have the forgiveness of sins that Christ secured for His people, unless he has died to his former sin and is presently living unto righteousness, which is a life believing upon and submitted to Jesus Christ as the Shepherd and Overseer of his life. This is what Holy Scripture declares forthrightly. The apostle John wrote, “Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just

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<sup>10</sup> Bo Reicke, **The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude** (Doubleday & Company, 1964, 1981, p. 99.

as He is righteous” (1 John 3:7). If you are not living as a Christian lives as set forth in the Scriptures, you are no Christian. And then he stated a few verses later:

By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:10)

Salvation is not just the forgiveness of sins, it is much more. The gospel of salvation is a declaration of good news that God through Jesus Christ saves His people from sin, both the penalty of sin and a life of sinning unto a life of joyful compliance and fulfilling service to King Jesus and His people.

## **II. The “gospel” of salvation proclaimed by many/most present-day evangelicals**

The great problem today is that there is wide-spread belief in an abridgment of salvation, which is only one part of biblical salvation, that is assumed wrongly to be the whole of salvation. Evangelicalism has reduced biblical salvation to only entail God’s forgiveness of sins. Pick up most gospel tracts. Listen to most evangelistic presentations and sermons. What is frequently addressed is only the need for God to forgive people of their sins so that they may not be sent to hell but that they might receive the free gift of eternal life. Yes, it is declared that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, who lived a life of perfect righteousness but died upon His cross to suffer and pay for sin and that He rose again the third day. But they then say that if you but believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins, then God will have forgiven you and He has given you the gift of eternal life. That all sounds fine to our ears for we are so accustomed to that message. But as our text declares, biblical salvation is more than the forgiveness of sin, as important as that is.

The gospel of today is guilty of what is called, *reductio ad absurdum*, or “the reductive fallacy.” It is an error of formal logic, in that people think something to be true because it has a ring of truth, an element of truth, but the subject has been reduced to such a level of simplicity that it no longer represents reality. One described this error in this way:

You commit the *reductive* fallacy when you stop with a one-level description when there are many levels to be described. You are mistaken when you “reduce” a complex entity to only one of its many aspects. Our generation is especially vulnerable to this problem of *oversimplification*—another name for the same error...<sup>11</sup>

Salvation is God’s rescue of the believer from the guilt and penalty of sin, but in addition, salvation entails much more. To limit one’s message and offer of salvation as only God’s forgiveness of sins, is not to proclaim a complete gospel. It has become a false gospel, for it no longer produces or results in biblical salvation of those who embrace it. Salvation is deliverance from sin in its entirety—yes, from its penalty of condemnation and damnation. But in addition salvation delivers us from the alienation of sin, from the power of sin that dominated our thinking and living, and one day from the very presence of sin when the Lord comes to receive His people unto Himself. And the gospel we proclaim must speak to this full scope of salvation.

## **III. Biblical salvation reverses and restores humanity from its fall into sin**

One way that we can see what biblical salvation entails is a reflection upon the fall of mankind into sin. When we consider mankind’s prelapsarian<sup>12</sup> state, the result and consequences of his lapse or fall into sin including God’s judgment upon mankind for his sin, then a clear picture may be formed in our thinking of the nature of biblical salvation.

Before Adam and Eve sinned, we read of a blessed condition in which they lived before God and for God. They lived in paradise, the garden of God. It was a beautiful place, in which they knew God and dwelt

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<sup>11</sup> A. J. Hoover, *Don’t You Believe It!* (Moody Press, 1982), pp. 25f.

<sup>12</sup> “Prelapsarian” speaks of mankind’s state and condition before (pre) his fall (lapse) into sin.

before God in His creation. They walked with God daily, reflecting and enjoying the work that they completed as they tended the garden on behalf of their Creator, the God whom they knew, loved, and served. Both Adam and Eve lived together in love and harmony with one another, their relationship with God being the center of their life and being. They lived with the desire for, and the enjoyment of, the glory of God. But then, through the subtlety of the serpent and the defection of Adam before God, mankind fell from its glorious standing and relationship with God. Sin resulted in them becoming alienated from God, in that they sought to flee from His presence. God was no longer their loving King and Protector, the Shepherd and Overseer of their souls. The devil was now their master and they were his slaves, from which they had no desire or power to break free. In sin each of them was now serving self, which was in reality service to the devil. Adam and Eve had become aware and ashamed of their nakedness, losing the former glory that had clothed them. The relationship between Adam and Eve also was now horribly defaced, having become alienated in their affections from one another. Adam no longer loved his wife as he had loved himself. Eve no longer honored and submitted to her husband as she had before delighted in so doing. They had become sinners, and each of them now failed to assume personal responsibility for their own sin. But blamed someone or something else. In short, they had spiritually died before God as He had declared would happen if and when they transgressed His law. God would no longer allow them to live in His presence in His garden paradise. He excluded them into a world that had now become a wilderness to them and there they wandered and squandered the days remaining to them. And it was not long afterwards the sin that had entered the world through Adam became widespread in its manifestation and exceedingly horrific in its pervasiveness in the human soul. The lost and fallen condition of mankind was set forth according to God's assessment:

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. <sup>6</sup>And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. <sup>7</sup>So the LORD said, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." (Gen. 6:5-7)

Thankfully, however, though God had determined to cleanse the world of sin and sinners through a great flood, God purposed that He would preserve mankind. We read in Genesis 6:8, "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD."

Now answer the question, what was necessary for God to do in order to restore fallen mankind unto Himself? Were Adam and Eve and all their posterity only in need that God forgive them of their sins? Of course they had that need. But is that all they needed? Having been forgiven, would they then have been allowed and able to return to the garden paradise from which God had excluded them and had barred their return? Of course not. If they were only forgiven of their sins, they would have still been in rebellion to God. They would have still been alienated in their affections for God and rebellious to the will of God. Moreover Adam and Eve would have still been strained and broken in their relationship with one another. And of course being forgiven of their sins would not in itself have reversed the state of spiritual and physical death into which they had fallen. They would have continued to be wanderers in a dark and lost world, far removed from dwelling in the presence of God enjoying fellowship with Him and with His people.

What, then, was their need in salvation? They were in need of the Savior that God had promised to them. They needed one to come, one of them from among them to save them from their sin. All that was necessary in order for God to restore His people from sin unto Himself is what the Bible sets forth as salvation.

What then, is the biblical gospel? The gospel is the good news to sinners that God has wrought His salvation through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel is much more than just an announcement that God is willing to forgive sins to those who believe on His Son, although that is an essential aspect of the gospel. The gospel is the good news that through faith in Jesus Christ His people are delivered from sin and all of its consequences. Through Jesus Christ God reclaims and restores His people unto Himself and enables them to be with Him, to dwell with Him forever. Through Jesus Christ God becomes and forever remains their God and they become and remain forever His people.

#### **IV. The manner in which the sinner comes to Christ for salvation**

What then, is the common experience of a sinner that comes to Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior? What does this look like in your life? Of course God deals with people in a variety of ways and He brings them to experience salvation through His Son in various degrees of intensity and awareness of biblical truths. But in general, we can speak of the experience of the soul that comes to Jesus Christ in salvation. First, there is a stage of preparation of the sinner to bring to him to see and understand his need and the awareness of his only hope of salvation in Jesus Christ. And then God converts that sinner from his former way of life into the newness of life in Jesus Christ as a Christian.

##### **1. God's work of preparing and bringing a soul to embrace Jesus Christ**

God began His work in bringing you to salvation by first causing you to become born again by His Holy Spirit. It was an act of sovereign grace that He purposed to produce in you at a time in your life that you had not anticipated or had desired. In that sovereign work of grace, God imparted spiritual life to your soul. Regeneration, or the new birth, is what began your movement and advancement on the path that would result in your salvation. God brought you to hear and learn of who He is and what He is like in a way that you had not previously known. The desire to know Him gradually began to arise in your soul, which increasingly occupied your interest and thoughts. For some this was a sudden change in desire and interest; for others it was more gradual and over time. But you learned and came to believe in the supremacy of God, that He is the Creator and the Giver of every good and perfect gift that we enjoy in His world. You learned of His holy nature, His moral purity, and of His sovereign rule over all that transpires in His world. But in coming to know God and what He is like, you came to know yourself in ways that you had never seen or known. You came to know the offense that your sin was before God. You began to see that you were a sinner in His sight and that you warranted His displeasure and condemnation. You learned that there was a judgment that would take place when you would stand before Him and give an account of all your sins. You learned of hell as the just punishment of sinners and that was your destiny unless you were saved from your sin. But then you learned of God's way of salvation in Jesus Christ. You came to see that Jesus Christ Himself was the gospel, the good news of salvation from sin through faith in Him. You came to know who He was and what He was like as God incarnate. You came to learn and believe that God had sent His Son into the world to save sinners such as you. You learned that God had provided His Son in His life and death to be the Savior of the world. And that after dying He rose from the dead and ascended to heaven whereupon His Father glorified Him, enthroning Him as King of kings and Lord of lords. And at some point the Holy Spirit gave you understanding and faith that God would receive you for Jesus sake, that if you purposely turned from your sin in order to come to Him in faith, you believed His promise in Christ. Perhaps you resisted at first. You loved your sin and did not want to turn loose of the reigns of your life surrendering your will to His will. But you increasingly understood to fail or refuse to repent and believe the gospel would result in His just condemnation of you and His eternal sentence of eternal punishment. And so, perhaps then you began to make some efforts at amending your ways. Presuming you must, you maybe thought that you could. But the harder you struggled against sin, as you attempted to conform to the law of God before you, you found the shackles of sin to grow firmer and tighter. But the time came when you saw the folly of such efforts. The Lord had brought you to the place in which you cast yourself down before Him.

##### **2. The sinner's conversion--becoming a Christian**

It was then that you underwent conversion. You cast yourself down before the Lord, confessing your unworthiness and inability to contribute any effort or any resolve to live before Him. You laid your case before Him, "Lord, You, and only You, can make me clean. Unless you act on my behalf and unless you enable me to do what You have commanded me, I am lost. Essentially you come in the manner expressed in the classic hymn:

Not the labor of my hands  
Can fulfill Thy law's demands;  
Could my zeal no respite know,  
Could my tears forever flow,  
All for sin could not atone;  
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring,  
Simply to the cross I cling;  
Naked, come to Thee for dress;  
Helpless look to Thee for grace;  
Foul, I to the fountain fly;  
Wash me, Savior, or I die.<sup>13</sup>

As you placed your full faith in Him, you began to discover that the power of sin that had formerly controlled you had been broken. The desire to sin no longer was your drive, but you desired to live for God, to learn more of Him, to know and serve His Son, whom now you confess as "My Lord and My God." Perhaps the Holy Spirit at that time spoke comfort to your soul. A sense of peace came over you in a way that you could not fully comprehend, in that it surpassed all your understanding. But you came to see that the promises of God in Christ were for you, the sinner, or who now was the former sinner, for now you were a Christian pardoned, and you had begun your life of love and service to His name. You believed on Jesus Christ as Lord and you submitted to Him as your Lord, purposing to love Him and obey Him in life. In short, you became a committed disciple of Jesus Christ. You purposed to show forth your commitment to Him and your resolve to live for Him in your baptism, in which you publicly confessed Him before others, testifying that your former life in which you were the Lord of your own life and come to an end. You died to your former life in sin. And you were raised from the baptismal waters confessing your resolve to live your new life in Him and before Him in the presence and fellowship of your church family with whom you have joined yourself.

This is the typical way in which the Lord draws sinners unto Himself. Sometimes various aspects of this work of saving grace are accentuated and sometimes these movements in the soul take place more gradually and less dramatically, but the end is the same for all. For you "have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."

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"Now may the LORD show steadfast love and faithfulness to you." (2 Sam. 2:6)

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<sup>13</sup> "Rock of Ages"; words by Augustus M. Toplady, 1776. Music, TOPLADY, by Thomas Hastings, 1830.