

THE BIBLE TEACHER

Pleading for the Restoration of Pure New Testament Christianity

Vol. 45

August 2014

No. 4

Editorial

What Does the Bible Teach?

Be Faithful Until Death, And I Will Give You The Crown Of Life

TO HIS FOLLOWERS the Lord Jesus Christ has promised that if they will be faithful to Him until death He will give them the crown of life. (Revelation 2:10). That is, even death should not be able to move them from their steadfastness and faithfulness toward Him. The crown of life represents the eternal life with the Lord in heaven where "there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain..." (Revelation 21:4). But the crown of life or the eternal life in heaven will be given to those who will stay faithful to Him until the end.

The last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, was addressed to those persecuted suffering Christians who had lived in the first century A.D. under the Roman empire. In those days, the church, which was just a few years old then, was in most difficult time. Christians were troubled by government persecution. Christianity was outlawed. The followers of Christ were beaten and killed, thrown in cells and killed by animals at sports stadiums by the order of the Roman kings. They wanted to destroy Christianity which was spreading throughout the Roman empire, because of the preaching of the gospel by the apostles of Christ. The Book of Revelation was written when the Roman emperor Domitian was reigning. To increase persecution of Christians he had introduced the law of emperor worship. He had images of himself erected and installed throughout the Roman empire to make his worship

more convenient for all people everywhere. He wanted people in his empire to worship him first and call him the Lord. He had made his worship compulsory for all citizens. To show their loyalty and faithfulness to the emperor all people in his empire were required to burn a pinch of incense on the altar before his image and say "Caesar is Lord." But no true Christian would do that, because their Lord was Jesus Christ. The Christians refused to go through the form of Caesar's worship, therefore they were outlaws. For their disloyalty to the emperor they were beaten, imprisoned, persecuted and many were even put to death.

To give comfort and consolation to those persecuted Christians, the Lord Jesus Christ gave them a message of hope and victory in the book of Revelation through one of His apostles, telling them that in the end they will be victorious and their enemies will be destroyed, therefore do not be afraid, but be faithful even if you have to die for the faith. In the very first verse of the book of Revelation we read: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave Him to show His servants – things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John." From this reading, firstly, we observe that those things which were revealed in the book of Revelation were to take place shortly, that is, within a short time, because they needed immediate relief, and secondly, those things were revealed to them in a signified language. Therefore, the book of Revelation was written in a language of signs and symbols which the early Christians understood. It was given in such a symbolic language so to hide the message from the persecuting Romans. If the Romans could understand the message, the persecution would increase. Therefore, Jesus gave this message of hope and victory to the persecuted suffering Christians of the first century A.D. through the apostle John in signs and symbols. But, can we understand the message of the book of Revelation today? If we can get a basic understanding of the symbols used in the book, then we can surely understand its message. But we must keep in mind, while trying to understand the message of the book of Revelation, what those symbols would mean for the Christians living in those days. In the book of Revelation we find symbols of good thing, such as temple, representing God's presence; angels, representing God's servants and His works; trumpets, seals, and bowls of wrath, representing God's judgment on those who were opposing Him. The Lamb, representing Jesus Christ, who was sacrificed by God

for the sins of humanity. Then there are symbols of evil things: the dragon, representing Satan; the beast, representing the evil king of Rome. Also, there are symbols of numbers used to describe certain things or situations or people. Such as, number two is used for strength, three is used for divine oneness, four is used for the whole universe or four directions of the world, thus four became the cosmic number. When perfect world number four was added to the perfect divine number it became seven, expressing completeness or whole.

The symbolic language of the Revelation was not difficult to understand for those who had first and actually received the message in the beginning, because they understood the meaning of those symbols, but this causes many today to misinterpret and thus misunderstand and misapply its teaching. Today therefore, all kinds of things are being taught from the Book of Revelation which are not true.

From the very first page of the book one can clearly see that the message of this book was directed to the seven churches in Asia Minor, where Christians were being persecuted, exiled and killed for refusal to renounce their religion. Its message was to give them consolation and hope and courage. However, the message was not restricted to the seven churches alone, since the number seven is often used in the book of Revelation symbolically for completeness or perfection. These seven churches were selected by the Lord to be representative of all churches of Christ, because the conditions reflected in those seven churches were also to be found in all other churches or congregations of the Lord's church as well. No doubt, its first message was for them, the first century Christians, yet its message is for God's people everywhere in every successive age.

Revelation is a series of apocalyptic images shown to John by the Holy Spirit of God to set forth Christ as eternally victorious over all world conditions, and thus to encourage the Christians of John's day, and of every succeeding day, until the return of the Lord in judgment. This was the message, that the Lord is coming to the rescue of His people shortly; therefore fear none of those things. The Book of Revelation must be kept close to Asia Minor of the first century A.D. if its message is to be rightly understood today. No interpretation can be regarded as the correct one if it would have been meaningless to those who had first received the book. They were suffering, they were being threatened and killed,

they needed the message of hope and courage, and the Lord, therefore, gave them the book of Revelation. It teaches us that God can defeat all enemies. No one can stand against Him, neither can anything stop His people from doing His will. He is in control. Revelation has a message of hope for all people who will follow God and do His will, and a message of certain destruction for all those who disobey Him. (Revelation 21: 1-8).

Putting Off The Old Man Of Sin

Lesson 24

AND SUCH LIKE

J.C. CHOATE

WE HAVE BEEN going to the scriptures to consider the various sins, works of the flesh, and such like. Over the past several months we have taken many of these things, one by one, to show you that they are sinful, and bad, and that we should rid our lives of these things. We must do this if we are going to obey the Lord to become a new person or a new man in Christ.

When we think of the world and the grasp that it has on us, it is like we have been tied and bound by someone, and we find ourselves in a very uncomfortable position. Of course, it is sin that has us bound, and satan is the one that is responsible for all of this. Now, when we obey God then we break that chain that binds us. We are able to take off the mask of sin, and all of the weights that held us back. Through Christ we become free. Paul says that when we are dead to sin, that is, we have repented of it and obeyed God, then we have been made free in Christ. (Romans 6:7). Again, he said, "But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness." (Romans 6:17, 18).

Again, when we as sinners give ourselves to the Lord in obedience to his will, then he takes us in all of our sin and ugliness as a piece of clay and he moulds us and makes us into a beautiful object or vessel that can be used for good and to his honour, and glory. Paul asked, "Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?" (Romans 9:21). Whether a vessel is made unto honour

or dishonour, however, depends on you and me, and whether we are willing to yield ourselves to God. If we refuse to yield to the potter, then we will turn out to be vessels of dishonour. But as we yield ourselves to him, then he can change us and make us into a usable vessel, one that can be used in his service, and one that will be suitable to dwell in God's presence for all eternity.

Now we have observed thus far numerous works of the flesh, things of the world, and sins that are listed and condemned in the scriptures again and again. These things, when engaged in, will hurt, bring pain and heartache, and will finally destroy the one, or ones, that engages in them.

There is no way, however, for us to cover all of them in this short series of lessons. Some of them overlap, that is, they are similar in nature. Many of the same scriptures that lists a particular sin, also mentions several others. Therefore we have quoted some of these scriptures many times in these studies, but that is all right since it helps us to be reminded of the fact that the scriptures puts a lot of emphasis on these things as being bad, wrong, or sinful.

There are a few sins in the scriptures that I would like to say a little more about at this time. I may have already quoted some scripture that mentioned them, but may be at the time I was talking about something else. Anyway, I think it will be worth our time to think about these things right now.

First, there is the sin of boasting, or bragging. A lot of people are guilty of this. They like to boast of how much they earn, who they know, where they have been, what they are able to do, etc. There is no end to it. They go out of their way to tell you something about themselves and how important they are. It is usually an exaggeration. Actually, the very important is usually humble and doesn't say much about it because everyone already know it. An unknown wants a long introduction before he speaks, but a President or Prime Minister is simply introduced by name and then he speaks. Anyway, the scriptures condemns this type of thing. James says, "Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things." (James 3:5). Paul said of those who had rejected God that among other things that they were boasters. (Romans 1:30). In speaking of what it would be like in the last days, he said that there would be those who love themselves, being covetous, boasters, proud, and unholy. (2 Timothy 3:2). The wise man, Solomon, said, "Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth." (Proverbs 27:1). Therefore if you

are guilty of this bad and sinful habit then you should repent of it. You must if you are going to become a Christian.

Second, the sin of jealousy is prominently mentioned in the scriptures. Of course God said that he was a jealous God (Exodus 20:5), and we know that He was not jealous in a sinful way. Rather, he wanted his people to serve only him and not to turn to another. This is referred to as a godly jealousy. (2 Corinthians 11:2). Often there are jealous husbands and wives. They are suspicious of each other, do not have confidence in their companion. This is often times ungrounded, but where there is jealousy then this leads to other things, such as hatred, rejection, divorce, resorting to physical harm, and similar things. It is seen in the lives of those who are unhappy with the success of others, of them earning more, having more, and such like. The wise man said, "For jealousy is the rage of a man: therefore he will not spare in the day of vengeance." (Proverbs 6:34). Jealousy is also a form of envy. There are many statements in the scripture that deal with envy, but we'll notice only one at this time. James explains, "But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work." (James 3:14-16). I hope you are not guilty of this sin, but most people are.

Third, there is the sin of lust. This one might be covered by such terms as desire, pleasure, and lasciviousness. This is where evil thoughts, desires, and wants have entered one's mind with the intention of entering into a state of some immoral practice. It may not be carried out for various reasons, but the sin has still been committed. Paul talked about how there were those who "burned in their lust one toward another." (Romans 1:27). Again, he said that if we would walk in the Spirit then we would not fulfill the lust of the flesh. (Galatians 5: 16). Speaking to Timothy, Paul said, "Flee youthful lusts." (2 Timothy 2:22). Then he said, "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world." (Titus 2:11,12). John said that the lust of the flesh is of the world and that it will pass away (1 John 2:16,17). And on and on we could go showing that lust is condemned. But how can one rid himself of it? He simply must repent and turn away from such evil thinking and replace that with good thoughts. It can be done. And don't think

that if it goes no further than just thinking about it, that no harm has been done. Jesus said, "But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." (Matthew 5:28). Then John said that if you hate your brother then God looks upon you as a murderer. (1 John 3:15). So lust is sin whether it is in the mind or expressing itself in the actual act.

There are many other wicked works of the flesh and of the world that are condemned in the scripture that we have not covered specifically in this series of lessons. Some of these are idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, wrath, strife, heresies, revellings, extortion, disobedience to parents, unthankfulness, and many others such things.

Let us remember that God is opposed to all sin, all works of the flesh, and all worldly and ungodly practices. We are warned against all of these things since they will destroy us. Those who continue in them will learn the hard way. Paul declared, "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting," (Galatians 6:7,8). Then we are told that those who belong to the Lord, as a result of their obedience to him, have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts (Galatians 5:24), that is, they have repented of such things, had their sins forgiven, and are now committed to a good, lawful, and godly life. (Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38).

But even with all of the sins that are mentioned in the scriptures, surely there have been many other sins that have come along since the days in which God's word was given to man. What about those things? Do you remember, after Paul had listed some of the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21, he concluded by saying, "and such like." All recognize a work of the flesh or a sin whether spelled out in the scripture, or not. It is that which hurts, damages, and destroys. It is that which is immoral, unlawful, and ungodly. It is that which is not for the betterment of mankind. Even though the majority might accept it and engage in it, they are still aware of the fact that it is still bad and wrong.

Continuing, Paul spoke of those who were "inventors of evil things." (Romans 1:30). Those who love pleasures more than they love God, as Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:4, then they have always been able to come up with new and different ways to sin. Man

loves variety and there are always those who are seeking to come up with new things to do. And regardless of what good thing that comes into the world, there is always someone who can come up with a way to misuse it and to make it work for evil, as well as for good.

So just because you may not be able to read of some evil in the Bible, that doesn't mean that it is not condemned. It is certainly covered as a work of the flesh, a worldly practice, and such like.

THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

JERRY BATES

SEVERAL IMAGES are used in the Bible to describe the church so that we can better understand it. Some of those images are a kingdom, a body, a temple, a flock, a family, and a priesthood. In 2 Corinthians 11:2 Paul compares the church to a bride. He writes, *"For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ."* This imagery suggests several aspects such as a unique identity, an extremely close relationship, unlimited provisions, and unblemished beauty. However, I want to focus on another aspect, which is unquestioned loyalty.

The idea of a bride conveys faithfulness. Marriage is a commitment, a covenant that requires love and loyalty. In marriage, each partner should look out for the good of the other person. We know Christ has done that for the church. Christ gave Himself for the church just as a good husband would for his bride (Ephesians 5:23). The idea of a marriage suggests a devotion that matters more than life itself. We have heard stories of husbands and wives who chose to face death together rather than be separated. The devotion of their hearts to each other mattered more than life.

Our allegiance to Christ should be more precious than anything else. When Joseph discovered that his espoused wife, Mary, was going to have a child, he was going to put her away. Undoubtedly, he still loved her, but her supposed infidelity was more than he could stand. He was not going to marry a woman who was unfaithful. It is unthinkable for a bride to betray her husband, so Paul used it to illustrate the fidelity of a Christian towards Christ. James uses the same idea, when he referred to Christians as "adulterers" and "adulteresses" (James 4:4). He stresses that friendship of the world

is enmity or hate with God. If the things of this world become more important to us than Christ, then it is just as serious as committing physical adultery. Christ spoke these demanding words in Luke 14:33, *"So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple."*

Our commitment to Christ should matter more than any other relationship. In marriage, the relationship between a husband and wife should be closer than any other relationship. Anything short of that is bound to cause problems. The same is true spiritually. Our relationship to Christ should be closer than even the relationship of our family. Christ said in Luke 14:26, *"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also; he cannot be my disciple."* These seem to be harsh words, but they only emphasize that no relationship should be more important to us than that of Christ.

As we compare the above thoughts to the church of today, we find many shortcomings. The church is no more important than the local social club for many people. They view the church as a good organization, but certainly not something that demands sacrifice or should come before one's family. Many move from one congregation or group to another, searching for whatever association satisfies their needs and desires for the present time. In the minds of many, the beliefs of family members are more important than what the Bible teaches. Even when confronted with the truth, they refuse to go against their family traditions. Many others spend far more time working and accumulating riches of this world than working for God. They excuse their lack of spiritual activity by saying they don't have time. In actuality, it only reveals what is most important to them.

How important is God in your life? Many would proclaim that God is very important to them, yet they do some of the things as described previously. If a bride were to exhibit such attitudes, she would not be acceptable to her husband, and those attitudes are not going to be acceptable to our spiritual Husband either. God is indeed a loving God, but He is also a God that will tolerate no rivals. As it has often been said, God will either be number one in our life, or He is not in our life at all. Let us always keep in our minds the imagery of a bride adorned for her husband. As someone once said, **"Let us not just act like the bride of Christ, but let us be the bride of Christ."**

CHRISTMAS IS PAGAN

A Short History of Christmas

KEITH SISMAN

IN ORIGIN, "Christmas" is pagan. It is not found in the Bible, neither did the early pre-Catholic church celebrate it. The name itself is from the Old English "Mass of Christ"—Christmas.

Pagan festivities, merrymaking, the giving of presents coupled with the worship of idols and pagan gods, with human sacrifice, are lost in the myths of time. New Year was the time when pagans celebrated the return of the Sun and worshipped it. It is these two festivals that continue today in the form of "Christmas".

The early church father, Tertullian (died 220) wrote a treatise "De Idololatria" in which he chastised Christians for putting wreaths on their doors and following other practices of idolatry at the Winter Solstice and the New Year. At that time many Christians who did not decorate their homes with lamps and decorations were searched out and persecuted.

"But '*let your works shine,*' saith He; but now all our shops and gates shine! You will now-a-days find more doors of heathens without lamps and laurel-wreaths than of Christians. ... By us...the Saturnalia and New-year's and Midwinter's festivals and Matronalia are frequented—presents come and go—New-year's gifts—games join their noise—banquets join their din! Oh better fidelity of the nations to their own sect, which claims no solemnity of the Christians for itself! Not the Lord's day, not Pentecost, if they had known them, would they have shared with us; for they would fear lest they should seem to be Christians. We are not apprehensive lest we seem to be *heathens!*" (from "On Idolatry", page 70, by Tertullian, **The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 3**, Eerdmans Printing Company).

Laurels were placed on doors *to honor various door, home, and hinge gods*. It is clear that the custom of giving presents and having celebrations was well established by this time (c200), from Tertullian's writing on idolatry. The customs of giving presents at New Year can be traced back to Babel, prior to the dispersion of mankind, and was widespread when Tertullian wrote.

The Romans celebrated the great holiday Saturnalia from 17 to 21 December in remembrance of the great golden age. During this time slaves were given limited freedom and were served by

their masters. On the 22 came Sigillaria, the feast of dolls when dolls and other toys were given to children. On 25 December came Brumalia, otherwise known as "Dies Natalis Invicti Solis", "The Birthday of the Unconquered Sun". This was to celebrate the time of year when the days began to lengthen after the solstice. This date was quite recent, being instituted by the Emperor Aurelian in honor of Mithras, the Persian Sun God of which he was a worshiper around 270-273 AD.

The last date of the Roman holiday was Kalendae Januarri, New Year's Day when everybody gave gifts to everyone else. In Britain the New Year was celebrated in the feast of Yule and in Norway the festival of the god Thor.

When Christianity had been legalized, and the Roman (increasingly apostate) church had gained control of the majority of believers, it incorporated these feasts into the one feast "Christmas", much as the Jews had done when they occupied the Promised Land but failed to expulse all of the idolatrous people already there! So from around 336 the church at Rome set the date of Christ's birth at 25 December, but this was not followed by other churches, the date finally gaining wide acceptance only in the fifth century. The Armenian church still celebrates Christmas on 6 January. Many dates were ascribed for Christ's birth by the early church: 6 January, March 24 and 28, April 2, 19, May 20, as well as December 25.

Pope Gregory I wrote a letter to Augustine of Canterbury (c600) to encourage the pagan use of decorating buildings with evergreens. Augustine had been concerned with paganism and, again, the answer was to incorporate those practices into Catholicism, to make it easier for "converts" to change from one religion to the other.

Ivy was the badge of the wine god Bacchus and was banished to the outside of the house. Holly was allowed inside and hence we have the competition between "the Holly and the Ivy".

Mistletoe is of Celtic origin and was known as "all-heal". It was believed to have certain miraculous powers. Mistletoe is found on the oak tree which was highly venerated by the Oak Priests (Druids) of the many Celtic tribes across Europe and England. Because of its association with the Dryids many denominations have in times past refused its use in decorations in church buildings.

Christmas hymns started in the eastern church from around 760. Carols which are festive songs, as opposed to devotional

hymns, started around 1100 but were not in regular use until the 1300s onwards.

In the 1640s in England, Christmas was dismissed as being pagan and outlawed. During the early nineteenth century it was revived, particularly by Albert, the husband of queen Victoria, who re-introduced the fir-tree into the celebrations.

We can conclude safely that the New Year celebrations and giving of presents predate Christianity and are Pagan in origin. It can also be concluded that these were not the only New Year's festivities but that astrology, divination and human sacrifice would have been made at this time of year.

GOD'S TERMS FOR OUR SALVATION

CLEM THURMAN

THE APOSTLE PAUL wrote, *"Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sake, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory"* (2 Tim. 1:10). To describe His mission in the world, Jesus simply said, *"The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost"* (Lk. 19:10). Because we are lost, God sent His Son to die for us (Jno. 3:16; Heb. 2:9) that we might be saved: *"The grace of God hath appeared, bringing, salvation to all men"* (Titus 2:11).

What is salvation? What does it mean? I have heard many discuss that question, and argue it vehemently, without ever finding what God has to say about it. God describes our salvation by using many different terms to describe the need for salvation, the process of salvation and the results of salvation. When one turns away from sin and comes to Jesus Christ, he is then a Christian (Acts 11:26; 1 Pet. 4:16). Thus, God describes the Christian.

We Are Reconciled to God in Christ

When Adam and Eve sinned, God drove them out of the garden of Eden; they were no longer fit to abide in His presence (Gen. 3). The prophet wrote, *"The Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, nor his ear heavy that he cannot hear; but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, your sins have hid his face from you that he will not hear"* (Isa. 59:1-2). Because we have all sinned (Rom. 3:23; 1 Jno. 1:8,10), that description fits all of us: *"separated from God."* The result of such sin is also revealed: *"The*

wages of sin is death...sin, when it is fullgrown, bringeth forth death" (Rom. 6:23; Jas. 1:15).

The Son of God left heaven and came to earth to *"reconcile"* us to God. Because of our sins, we were enemies of God, but Christ came to restore us to fellowship with God—which is what *"reconcile"* means. As the apostle Paul wrote of Him, *"And might reconcile them both in one body unto God through the cross, having slain the enmity thereby... Through him to reconcile all things unto himself, having made peace through the blood of his cross"* (Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:20). Being in sin, we could not forgive ourselves. Being lost, we could not save ourselves. That is the reason *"God gave His only begotten Son"* to die for our sins (Jno. 3:16). God had to initiate the means of our salvation. Paul wrote, *"God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us ... while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son"* (Rom. 5:8-10).

We Are Redeemed by the Blood of Jesus

The word *"redeem"* means, *"To rescue or deliver, as from bondage, by paying a ransom"* (Webster). Most sinners don't recognize it, but they are in bondage: *"Everyone that committeth sin is the bondservant of sin"* (Jno. 8:34). When we give in to sin, Satan becomes our master. Jesus came and died on the cross (Heb. 2:9), *"That through death he might bring to nought him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver all them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage"* (Heb. 2:14-15). We all like to think that we are in control of our own lives, that we determine how we live and what we do. But the truth is that when we give ourselves to a life of sin, we are in bondage to the devil. The good news, though, is that Jesus came to set us free: *"If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed"* (Jno. 8:36).

As sinners, we are in bondage, in slavery to the devil, by our own choice. Can you imagine the depth of the love that was willing to pay the price to redeem us? That price is the blood of God's own Son, and He was willing to pay it to *"redeem us from all iniquity and purify unto himself a people for his own possession"* (Titus 2:14). It is true that *"the earth is the Lord's, and fulness thereof"* but that was not the currency required to redeem us from sin. It cost the life, and blood, of Jesus Christ to deliver us from Satan's clutches: *"Knowing that ye were redeemed, not with corruptible things, with silver or gold, from your vain manner of life handed*

down from your fathers; but with precious blood...even the blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

We Have Forgiveness, Remission, of Sins

Sin separates us from God (Isa. 59:1-2), and we all sin (Rom. 3:23). That shows our need for forgiveness. We cannot have fellowship with God as long as we carry the guilt of sin. As Jesus shed His blood to reconcile us to God (Rom. 5:9-10) and redeem us (1 Pet. 1:18), so His blood was shed for the remission of our sins. When Jesus instituted His Supper, He gave the cup of the fruit of the vine to the disciples and said, *"This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many unto remission of sins"* (Matt. 26:28). In order for our sins be to remitted, or forgiven, the blood of God's own Son was necessary. Through His love for us, and His desire for our salvation, He was willing to pay that price.

Seven weeks after the death of Jesus, the apostles began to preach His gospel as He had directed: *"That repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all nations, beginning at Jerusalem"* (Lk. 24:47). As they told of the sacrificial death of Jesus, people asked, *"Brethren, what shall we do? And Peter said unto them, Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins"* (Acts 2:37-38). That is what Jesus told them to preach, and they did it. Why did Christ shed His blood? He answers, *"Unto remission of sins"* (Matt. 26:28). Why repent and be baptized? He answers, *"Unto remission of sins"* (Acts 2:38). The apostle said of Jesus, *"In whom we have our redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses"* (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14).

We Are Born of Water and the Spirit

Nicodemus was ruler of the Jews, probably a member of the high council of the Jews, but he was intrigued by Jesus and wanted to know more of this *"Jewish rabbi."* Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, *"And said to him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that thou doest, except God be with him"* (Jno. 3:2). Jesus replied, *"Except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God"* (v. 3). As a Jew, Nicodemus undoubtedly took great pride in being a citizen of the kingdom of Israel. That citizenship was his because he was a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But Jesus said, *"Ye must be born again."* Nicodemus protested by saying, *"How can*

a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (v. 4). Jesus then shows that He speaks of a different kind of birth, a spiritual birth that will put one into the spiritual (not fleshly) kingdom: "Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (v. 5).

What Jesus taught in Jno. 5:3-5 about being born again, the apostle Paul taught, *"Are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life"* (Rom. 6:3-4). Birth results in new life, which is precisely what Paul says takes place when one is baptized into Christ. When one is *"led by the Spirit"* (Rom. 8:12-14) to so trust in Jesus and the cleansing power of His blood (Rom. 3:23-26) to be *"baptized into Christ, into his death"* (Rom. 6:3), he is then *"a new creature"* (2 Cor. 5:17) who has begun *"newness of life"* (Rom. 6:4).

It is by the blood of Jesus Christ that we are *"reconciled"* to God (Col. 1:18-21). It is by the blood of Jesus that we are *"redeemed"* (1 Pet. 1:18). Only by His blood can we have *"remission of sins"* (Matt. 26:28; Acts 2:38). And it is only by His death that we can be *"born of water and the Spirit"* and begin *"newness of life"* (Jno. 3:5; Rom. 6:3-4). All these are beautiful pictures of the salvation which God freely offers us in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Saved by GRACE through FAITH

DOUG BURLESON

ALTHOUGH MANY HAVE perhaps forgotten the context in which the words were originally written, the phrase *"by grace you have been saved through faith"* from Ephesians 2:8 (esv) has become a sound bite that many who know the name of Christ can easily recite as an important Christian principle. Yet despite the popularity of God's words through Paul, their purpose and power have sadly been overlooked since human creeds have often distorted their message.

What has the Lord said with regard to the foundation of the Christian's salvation in Ephesians 2:8? The bottom line is this: By God's gracious initiative, all people have been invited to come to

Him and persevere in faith. This summons is the basis of biblical revelation and redemption.

In Ephesians 1, Paul made it clear that any spiritual blessing Christians have in the present is the result of the past—namely, the result of God's gracious acts and the response of the hearers in faith. God acted in favor of humankind by "blessing us in Christ with every spiritual blessing" (v. 3), including His choosing and making known His will according to His love and purpose by means of His grace.

God's divine acts in Christ resulted in His being praised (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14). Those who are willing to obey now have the ability to hear the saving gospel of truth, believe in Him, and be sealed with the promised Holy Spirit (v. 13). Those who obey the gospel will be privy to the power of God that exalted the Christ by raising Him from the dead (vv. 20-23).

In contrast with the goodness, power and patience of God made evident in Ephesians 1, Ephesians 2 begins with a vivid reminder of humanity's sad condition outside of Christ. The Christians of Ephesus had formerly been dead in sin, living in rebellion against God as followers of the prince of the power of the air himself (vv. 1-3). In Christ, God afforded these Christians the opportunity to reverse their sad condition by responding to God's grace through faith (vv. 4-10).

By Grace

What is grace? Grace (*charis*) is the unearned favor that God has shown, by His own initiative, toward sinful people. The Bible teaches that grace is the result of God's goodness, which results in salvation being made available to everyone (Acts 15:11; Romans 3:24). No one deserves the favor that God has shown, but everyone discovers the opportunity to respond in faith if he so chooses.

In the context of Ephesians 2:8, remembering that both grace and faith are mentioned is an important aspect of proper interpretation. Sadly, some might be led to believe that grace alone is the means to finding salvation. Salvation does not result from a person sitting by with gratitude for God's gracious provision without faithfully responding. God has not predetermined that certain individuals will be saved and others will be lost.

God is to be credited for every good and perfect gift (James 1:17), and Ephesians 2:8 reminds readers of another blessing that every person should be thankful for: the opportunity for salvation. By means of Christ's atoning sacrifice, as mentioned in Ephesians

1, people can respond to God's initiatory work in full faith.

A "grace without faith" perspective leads to ingratitude and complacency toward what God has done. A "grace without faith" perspective can lead to a belief that individuals are being unconditionally chosen by God, with no regard to their own volition, in a manner that will not allow their lack of faith to lead them to step outside of God's covenant. A "grace without faith" perspective can lead to the idea that God has generated a list of those who are guaranteed one of the predetermined 144,000 places in a limited heaven. A "grace without faith" perspective was not and is not a part of God's redemptive plan.

God knew before He created the world that He would provide an opportunity for all to be saved by grace through faith. When individuals read God's Word, they can come to know that although God will definitely be victorious over evil, the determination as to whether one will be saved now results from the way he responds to God's gift of grace.

Through Faith

The word "faith" (*pistis*) occurs almost 500 times in the New Testament. Faith means that one actively trusts and obeys the Lord in response to His gracious initiative (Hebrews 11:1, 6). Faith is the greatest reaction a human can offer in response to God's gift.

In the context of Ephesians 2:8, one must again remember that both faith and grace are mentioned. While some might be led to believe that grace alone is the means to finding salvation, others might be led to believe that *faith* alone is the means to finding salvation. From a human-centered perspective of "faith without grace," individuals might do great works with the expectation to be rewarded eternally, but one cannot please God enough to "earn" salvation.

A "faith without grace" perspective leads to a false sense of security in ritual that is devoid of any reference to the divine acts of God, which give faithful responses such as baptism meaning in the first place (Romans 6:3-4). A "faith without grace" perspective leads to a human-centered, works-based distortion of the scheme of redemption that can find purpose and meaning only in God's initiative and provision (2 Timothy 1:8-10). A "faith without grace" perspective was not and is not a part of God's redemptive plan.

The cost of sin was too great for anything other than the blood of the slain Lamb of God to provide the atonement. There are no

good works that can counterbalance sins. Salvation is not a merit-based system. Israel could not keep the Law under the former covenant, so why would those who have already seen Christ live perfectly through the eyes of faith now try to do the impossible as well? Without grace it would not matter if one believed, because there would be no hope.

You Have Been Saved

Although neither the phrase "grace without faith" nor "faith without grace" is found in Ephesians 2:8, some readers of Scripture unfortunately also read into the text that individuals are saved by "partial grace and partial faith." This group erroneously believes that one can partially earn his or her salvation in that God graciously gives one what cannot be obtained by human effort alone. Yet salvation is not the result of God and humanity meeting in the middle.

The "partial grace and partial faith" view is particularly dangerous because it limits the power of God. The "partial grace and partial faith" view is an inaccurate reflection of Paul's summary of salvation because this perspective takes away from both the power of God's grace and the need for a person to respond urgently in faith. There are no half-commitments in Christ. God has fully offered salvation to humanity. At the cross, Jesus paid it all. In response to God's full grace, a person shows full faith. Jesus paid it all, and those who respond to Him give it all.

Despite the popularity of "grace without faith," "faith without grace," and "partial grace and partial faith" perspectives on Ephesians 2:8, the Spirit inspired Paul to write that individuals can be saved by "grace through faith." In other words, salvation is, in effect, all God and all man. Salvation is fully possible because of God's grace, but it also requires a full commitment in faith to God.

One key to the interpretation of Ephesians 2:8 is the use of the preposition "through". According to Paul, faith is the means through which one can accept God's grace. God offers grace to everyone, but not everyone accepts it. A faithful response does not consist of sitting back and waiting on God's election. A faithful response is not about "working one's way to heaven." A faithful response is not about meeting God in the middle. A faithful response is about responding to God's grace through faith.

Once genuine faith comes in contact with genuine grace, one can find a salvation bond. Salvation is activated. The Bible teaches that repentance, confession and baptism are all expressions of

one's faith. The New Testament makes it clear that everyone came to God in this way, and they were then considered saved. Without grace, repentance, confession and baptism would be worthless. Without faith expressed through repentance, confession and baptism, one would not benefit from God's gracious provision.

Salvation does not involve either faith or grace to the exclusion of the other; salvation occurs when one responds to God's grace *through* faith. God has made a great opportunity available to all people everywhere. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift.

Draw Near To The THRONE Of GRACE

BILLY R. SMITH

We Have a Savior

"Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession" (Hebrews 4:14 NASB). Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). Because of His sinless life, sacrificial death, triumphant resurrection and thrilling ascension through the heavens, our exalted Savior has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 1:3; 12:2), where He serves as our perfect High Priest.

God appointed Old Testament priests to serve as His mediators with Israel. Only the high priest could stand between God and His people and offer a blood sacrifice for their sins once a year on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). He would bring the blood of a goat through the outer court, through the Holy Place, and into the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle/temple, sprinkling the atoning blood on the mercy seat before the glory of God (Leviticus 16).

Contrary to this imperfect system of atonement, Jesus is our great High Priest because He is the unique Son of God—who became one of us; who gave Himself as the perfect sacrifice for our sins once forever; who arose from the dead never to die again; and who ascended through the heavens into the very presence of God, having accomplished the magnificent work He was given to do (John 17:4).

In becoming our Savior through whom we have access to God (John 14:6; Acts 4:12), the Lord Jesus is ever faithful as our High

Priest, interceding on our behalf. The combination of these two roles could not be better stated than in these inspired words: "Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25).

No wonder the writer concluded Hebrews 4:14 with this stirring reminder: "let us hold fast our confession." Indeed! With Jesus as our Savior and High Priest, how can we forget our bold confession of faith that He is "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16)? This is the good confession the Lord Himself made before Pilate (1 Timothy 6:13), that Timothy made in the presence of many witnesses (v. 12), and that we make with both lips and life.

There is a dual meaning here. We are people of faith, not fear. We are anchored in our faith (Hebrews 6:19), and we are ready to give an answer to those who ask a reason for our hope (1 Peter 3:15). We do not keep our confession to ourselves; we boldly proclaim our faith to all who will listen. How can we possibly be silent, indifferent or thoughtless when the world's need is so great and we have so much to give—the Savior of the world?

We Have A Savior Who Sympathizes

"For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus came not only to save us but also to identify with us. Isaiah saw Him as "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3) while the Hebrews writer affirmed that all the Lord suffered while on earth has made Him able to help us in our own suffering (2:18). What blessed assurance!

Often, well-intentioned people say to those experiencing sorrow, "I know just how you feel." We must be very careful with such expressions because the circumstances of another may be similar yet different from our experiences. To sympathize with someone is to feel sorrow, but to empathize is to feel *with* them because you have experienced firsthand their actual sorrow.

That is what Jesus does for us. In becoming flesh and confronting Satan face to face (Matthew 4:1-11), He understands the strength of our temptations. He knows the joy and the disappointment of friends, the complete injustice of enemies, the anguish of Gethsemane, and the absolute agony of Golgotha (Hebrews 5:7-9). Yet He did so without sin and with unwavering devotion to His Father's will (Matthew 26:42).

Thomas was told by his fellow apostles, "We have seen the Lord!" (John 20:25). He boldly responded, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." When given the opportunity to do just that, he exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" (v. 28). Thomas would never again doubt the power of the Lord's resurrection from the tomb, nor would he question the reality of the Lord taking those wounds directly to the presence of God. Neither should we, regardless of what life or death may bring. Jesus knows, and Jesus cares (1 Peter 5:7).

We Can Have Confidence

"Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). The closing verse of this passage is based on the absolute certainty of verses 14-15. Because Jesus is the Son of God—our sinless Savior and High Priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses—we may with boldness draw near to the very throne of God. As His children, we may pray at any time, under any circumstance, knowing that He is there; He is listening; and He is responding in love, wisdom and power to our greatest need.

The privilege of prayer is a grand result of all that Jesus has accomplished and made available to those who trust and obey Him. It is only through Him that we have access to the Father of mercies (John 14:6). It is only through Him that we may approach God—not in suspense, but with the security of knowing that He will keep His promises (Matthew 6:8). It is only through Him that we make our approach in absolute awe and reverence of God's eternal holiness (Hebrews 12:28). It is only because of Him that we pray in anticipation of finding help in every hour of need (4:16).

The inspired author of this priceless epistle described the throne of God as the throne of grace. Although we deserve justice, He offers us the riches of His grace (favor) and the treasure of His mercy (forgiveness). Therefore, we must draw nearer to Him. In light of this, let us stop relying on ourselves or on others for what only He can provide. Let us lay aside our every weakness, our arrogance and our stubborn independence. Let us determine never to give in, give up or give out, refusing to allow Satan to win when our victory is in Jesus!

God Gives Grace to the HUMBLE

JEFF A. JENKINS

Humility is not a popular subject. Generally speaking, as a people we do not like to talk much about humility. There may be a couple of reasons for this. One is we are not a very humble people. We do not think much about humility. We do not attempt to learn how to become more humble. In fact, our society teaches us just the opposite of humility. We are taught to be proud. We are taught that we can accomplish anything we want. We are taught to strive for greatness. We are *not* taught to strive for humility.

A second reason we do not like to talk about humility is we are afraid if we talk about it, we will appear to have lost all humility. We have all heard the jokes about people who believe they are humble. You know the one about the individual who is given a medal for humility, and he proudly wears it everywhere he goes. Or the one about the man who writes a book he titles *Humility and How It Made Me Great!* Those who are truly humble are not likely to tell you about how they developed humility.

Even as I write these words and consider this topic, it strikes me as odd to attempt to discuss humility. It is an uncomfortable feeling to try to tell others they need to be humble when one feels a great need to grow in humility in his own life. My sincere prayer is that these thoughts will help all of us to grow in our humility. We need to ask God to forgive us for our lack of humility, and we need to learn the importance of humility.

Why Is Humility Important?

Humility is important because it gets God's attention. This is a rather astonishing concept. When we think about getting someone's attention, we might think about being loud, out front and bold—but being humble? Yet this is exactly what Scripture teaches. These are the words of the Lord: "But to this one I will look." Are you ready for His answer? "To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word" (Isaiah 66:2 NASB). This is the man who captures God's attention.

This wonderful passage of Scripture gives us an entirely different kind of motivation for humility than we will hear from typical leadership gurus. In this passage, God was addressing His people, the Israelites. They had been given everything they possibly

needed, yet they did not tremble at God's Word. God called them out of their prideful state and told them if they wanted His attention, they needed to humble themselves.

Is it possible that God's people today, the church—who have also been given so much—have hearts that are filled with pride? If we desire God's look, His attention, we must rid our hearts of pride and fill them with humility. God does not pay attention to prideful people. In fact, God hates those who are filled with pride (Proverbs 6:16-17).

Humility is important because it brings attention to the Lord. Humility is an unusual trait in our world. When someone is humble, people want to know why. When humility is genuine and from a heart that is trying to be like Jesus, people will turn to the One who caused him to be humble.

When Paul instructed us to develop the attitude of Christ (Philippians 2:5), he reminded us that our Savior "humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (v. 8). If we truly want to be like Jesus and if we want to cause others to see Christ in us, we will work to develop a servant heart of humility.

Humility is important because if we can develop this wonderful characteristic, we will receive grace from the Lord. It is true that God has made His amazing grace available to all men (Titus 2:11), yet there is an amazing statement recorded in James 4:6 that seems to be reserved for a special group of Christians. It seems to be a special kind of grace. Our brother James told us: "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." What a wonderful promise to Christians who can maintain a humble heart!

How Can We Become Humble?

Pray for humility. Our greatest resource for growth in humility is prayer. We must come to a place in our lives where we understand and admit that we will not develop humility on our own. We need the help of our Lord. This is precisely why the writer of Hebrews told us to "draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

Paul also reminded us of the importance of asking for help: "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6). When we ask God to help us grow in our humility,

He will give us the help we need most to accomplish the goal.

Focus more on Jesus than you do on yourself. We are told that we need to look to Jesus (Hebrews 12:2). Our goal in life should be to become more like Him (Philippians 3:10). When we focus on Jesus, we will learn to rejoice even when we suffer (Hebrews 12:3). When we focus on Jesus, we will learn how we should serve (John 13).

When we focus on Jesus, we will learn to please our Father in everything we do (John 8:29), and we will learn to glorify God in all we do (12:27-28). In 1 Peter 2:11-12, the words of Peter remind us that the way we live can cause even nonbelievers to glorify God, and the implication is that they will become Christians because of our lives.

Get out of yourself and into serving others. The essence of pride is thinking more about ourselves than anyone else. Again, we live in a society that says we should look out for number one; we should take care of ourselves first; and we should focus on our own goals, dreams and desires.

Without even realizing it, pride has become our friend when it should be our enemy. Humility has become our enemy when it should be our friend. New Testament theologian John Stott once wrote, "At every stage of our Christian development and in every sphere of our Christian discipleship, pride is the greatest enemy and humility our greatest friend." These insightful words remind us that growth and development are a process.

One of the reasons our Lord understood humility so well and called us to a life of service is because serving others was the basis for His existence on this earth (Philippians 2:1-8). We will be at our best when we get out of ourselves and into serving others.

A very helpful old hymn says it well: "Lord help me live from day to day, / In such a self-forgetful way, / That even when I kneel to pray, / My prayer shall be for—Others." Developing a heart of humility is extremely difficult in our world. However, it is important, even necessary, for those of us who are attempting to follow Jesus to fill our hearts with humility. May God help us become more humble Christians as we strive to become more like Him.

