
What Is the Gospel?

Bryan Chapell

The Gospel Coalition Booklets

Edited by **D. A. Carson & Timothy Keller**

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street

Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Matthew Wahl

First printing 2011

Printed in the United States of America

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All emphases in Scripture have been added by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-2675-6

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-2676-3

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-2677-0

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-2678-7

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11
14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*“Christ Jesus came into the world
to save sinners.”*

1 TIMOTHY 1:15

The events that led to his arrest had been years in the making. When he was growing up, the polite phrase our family used to describe my brother's mental capability was, "He has a harder time learning than most." Though his mind stayed undeveloped, David became increasingly strong in body and will as my parents aged. Stresses of dealing with him, as well as with their own issues, led to their separation and to greater difficulties with my brother. As an adult, David's desire for independence and his developmental disabilities were constant concerns. For friendship and thrills, he developed relationships that spelled trouble. The obvious resulted.

His arrest and confinement were more than his mind could process. He knew only the overwhelming fear that someone with a young child's mental ability would experience in a jail cell. He huddled in a corner and trembled.

My brother's obvious fear rekindled something in the heart of another man in that cell. And despite his own difficulties, he shared with David the message of God's mercy: "Jesus can help you. Trust him."

The truths of Sunday school lessons in special-needs classes that David had attended as a child rushed back to him. He prayed for God to forgive him and trusted in Jesus as his Savior.

David will be in jail for a long time. He will also be with Jesus forever—forgiven, restored, treasured, and transformed. This is the gospel for my brother and for all who trust in Jesus.

Gospel simply means "good news." The Bible uses the term to refer to the message that God has fulfilled his promise to send a Savior to rescue broken people, restore creation's glory, and rule over all with compassion and justice. That's why a good summary of the gospel is "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15).

God's rescue, restoration, and rule apply to our spiritual condition but are not limited to spiritual realities. Through Jesus Christ, our God delivers his people from the eternal consequences of human sin that

have touched everything. Our salvation includes us, but it's also bigger than we are.

Before we further explore these amazing truths, we need to recognize that the Bible does not trumpet them just to dazzle us. God reveals these truths so that sinners such as David and you and me can forever be free of the guilt and power of sin by trusting the good news that Jesus is the Lord who comes to save us. Following are key aspects of that good news.

What God Requires, He Provides¹

We may not like the idea of someone identifying us as “sinners,” especially if we use that term to refer only to ax murderers and child molesters. But the Bible says that God is absolutely holy and that all who do not match his perfection are “sinners,” a term that simply means missing God's standard. If we sin to any degree, we become something other than what God intended (Rom. 3:23; James 2:10). He made us to reflect his holy nature (1 Pet. 1:16). So our faults not only hurt us but also mar our relationship with God (Eph. 4:30).

God's Image

Our relational problems with God began when our human nature was corrupted by our first parents' sin (Rom. 5:12). Since Adam and Eve, every human knows what it means to fail loved ones, hurt others, and abandon one's own ideals. All of us know shame and remorse. These actually reflect a spiritual reality we may not have recognized: we feel guilt because we were made to be like God, but we fail to live so (Rom. 3:10).

We were made in God's image (Gen. 1:26–27). He designed us to be like him so that we could love him and others made in his image. When we sin, we are going against our original nature, and something deep inside of us winces. The guilt we feel is an echo of the pain our heart registers any time sin distances us from the relationship we were designed to have with our God.

God requires holiness for us to have a close relationship with God, but both our nature and our actions distance us from him. How can we fix this? We can't. We are imperfect creatures and can't make ourselves holy any more than a muddy hand can wipe a white shirt clean.

God is the only one who can fix our relationship with him, and

he does so by providing the holiness he requires. God takes the initiative (1 John 4:19). Through Jesus, our God rescues us from the consequences of our sin. He provides what we cannot, and that's why we sometimes refer to his provision as "the gospel of grace." Grace means "gift"—something given to those who cannot provide what they need—like a clean shirt given to those who have muddied their own.

God's Holiness

Jesus Christ's name communicates much about how he makes us holy. The name Jesus means "deliverer"; his mission was to deliver (or save) us from the consequences of our sin. The added word, *Christ*, is more a description of Jesus' purpose than an actual name. It is a title that means "anointed one." God the Father anointed Jesus to be his special envoy to provide his holiness for humanity. For many centuries God promised through his prophets that he would send his anointed one to rescue his people (Acts 3:18–20). Still, most people were surprised when the anointed one turned out to be God's own Son.

Jesus came as the perfect bearer of God's image. Though he was divine, Jesus took on human qualities (Gal. 4:4–5; Phil. 2:6–11). He became God incarnate (the word *incarnate* means "in the flesh"). Jesus was like us in every way except one: he was without sin (Heb. 4:15). Not only did Jesus do no wrong, but because he was miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, he also had no natural corruption, which other humans share (Matt. 2:20–23).

Christ's holiness does two things for us. First, it shows us how to live for God. If a life were full of love and empty of selfishness, then it would look like Jesus' life (1 John 3:16). Through him we learn how to live to the fullest, to be as God made us to be—fully human and yet in full fellowship with God. But what if such conduct and fellowship elude us? What then? Then we need the second provision of Jesus' holiness. That provision moves beyond showing us how to live *for* God and actually enables us to live *with* God by satisfying his standards.

God's Justice

Jesus' holiness made him the perfect sacrifice for our sin. This sounds strange to modern ears, but it's the message the Bible presents from beginning to end. Our sin is not just an annoyance to God. The sin of

humanity has resulted in inestimable suffering. God does not overlook the anger we unleash, the abuse we inflict, the suffering we disregard, the injustice we ignore. A holy God cannot simply hide his eyes or cover his ears to such sin. Its victims scream for justice, and God's compassion provides what his righteousness requires through Jesus' sacrifice.

Since the Son of God had no sin, his willingness to suffer on a cross and accept the penalty we deserve is far beyond any recompense that humanity could provide. Christ's righteousness so overbalances our unrighteousness that his sacrifice is sufficient to compensate for the sin of the entire world and of all ages (Rom. 5:15–19; Heb. 9:26–28; 1 Pet. 3:18; 1 John 2:2). God accepted Jesus' sacrifice as a substitute for our punishment (1 Pet. 2:24). He paid the debt to justice we could not pay (Ps. 47:7–9; Titus 2:11–14). His suffering atones for (covers) our wrongs (1 John 4:10). His death rescues us from the hell we deserve (Gal. 3:13–14).

For those of us who wrestle with guilt, Christ's provision is amazingly good news. In prison my brother David cannot pay the debt for crimes he has committed any more than we who are guilty of sin can clear the debt we owe a holy God for our breaking his law. Yet because Jesus came to pay our spiritual debt despite our spiritual destitution, David and you and I can live with hearts free of shame.

Christ's Righteousness

Christ's sacrifice satisfies divine justice (Rom. 5:20–26). My spiritual status becomes just-as-if-I-had-never-sinned (Isa. 1:18). Theologians refer to God's declaration of this new holy status as "justification." Justification results from an amazing exchange that took place on the cross of Christ. He took our sin on himself and consequently provided us with his righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 3:18). He became like us (sinful), so that we could become like him (holy).

Christ's great provision for sin allows me to confess the magnitude of my brother's sin—and mine and yours. All people—regardless of the monstrosity of evil in their lives—can also have their sin atoned for by the sacrifice of Jesus.

One of the proofs of this good news is the rest of the verse that was quoted at the beginning of this article. The apostle Paul writes, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst"

(1 Tim. 1:15). Earlier in life Paul had blasphemed Jesus and murdered his followers. But now the apostle can exult that Christ's atonement fully compensates for these wrongs—not because of the insignificance of Paul's sin, but because of the enormity of the cross. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ was sufficient to atone for the greatest of sins and the greatest of sinners.

God's Love

But how do we make sure that the provisions of Christ apply to us? Even Jesus talks about some people going to hell (Matt. 23:33; John 3:18), so we know that Christ's atonement—though it is sufficient for everyone—does not apply to everyone. What assurance do we have that it applies to us? The answer lies in the reminder that God provides what he requires.

God does not require us to earn his pardon. He does not tell us to do some great spiritual task or to feel especially deep remorse to compensate for our sin. Instead, the good news is that God provides his pardon by grace alone (Rom. 3:23–24). He *gives* his love to us rather than requiring us to gain it.

If we had to earn God's love, then it would be very hard for us to obey his greatest command: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). Whenever people make their love conditional upon our service, we may serve them but we cannot love them. If a parent says to a child, "I will love you only if you get an A in math, mow the lawn, and feed the cat," then the child may obey but ultimately will not love the one whose love is so manipulative.

So also the Lord, who requires that we love him, provides for us to do so by making his love an unconditional gift. The Bible says, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). God takes the initiative to demonstrate his unconditional love.

Covenant Faithfulness

The Bible teaches us more about God's taking-the-initiative love by recording the covenants he makes with his people. By such covenants God promises to love his people unconditionally. These covenants are not contracts. A contract can be broken when its stipulations are not met, but lack of performance does not annul God's covenant. That's

why God's people can say, "If we are faithless, he will remain faithful" (2 Tim. 2:13).

Israel's exodus from slavery is one of the best examples of this covenant love. Centuries earlier, God had promised to love Abraham and his descendants. Yet time and again these people failed God. They became slaves in Egypt until God sent Moses to deliver them. Only after their deliverance did God give the commandments that would enable the Israelites to live holy lives.

The order of these events is crucial for our understanding of God's covenant love. God delivered the people *before* he gave the law to them. He did not wait for them to obey him before he saved them (see Deut. 5:6). He did not say, "Obey me, and then I will love you." In covenant faithfulness he said, "I have already loved you and rescued you, and that is why you should follow these laws that will bless your lives."

God's grace toward us—loving us even before we loved or obeyed him—is an essential part of the gospel's good news (Rom. 5:8). If God were waiting for us to straighten out our lives before he loved us, then there would be no hope for someone like my brother in that jail cell. David's life was a mess. There was no way that he could correct the wrong he had done. He had neither the physical freedom nor the mental capacity to reverse the damage he had done to others. But when he acknowledged the truth that Jesus loves him and would help him, then Christ's grace applied to David despite years of sin and a lifetime of inability.

All his adult life David had spoken to his family in simple sentences and grunts. But when he trusted Jesus' love for him, David began to send letters to us. We did not even know he could write. The spelling and grammar were childlike, but they improved over time—as did David's ability to describe his faith. He wrote from prison, "God can do miracle things for everyone that believes in him. I believe in God. He sent his son Jesus to die for our sins. God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son. Anyone who believes in him will not die but have eternal life."

By making the words of John 3:16 his own, David told everyone he knew about the gospel of Jesus Christ: It's big enough for all the world; it's big enough for all our sins; and it's available to all who believe in him.

Faith in Christ

The gospel applies to all who *believe* in Jesus. God does not say that he will save those who climb mountains or clean up their addictions or relieve poverty or reach some designated level of goodness. He saves those who simply believe in Jesus as their Savior (John 3:16).

David's situation helps us understand the nature of such faith. We should not be swayed by misconceptions that faith in Jesus identifies something good in us that makes him love us. According to this thinking, faith just makes us a little bit better than other people. But such definitions of faith make no sense at all. How could doing a little thing like acknowledging that Jesus died for sin possibly compensate for the apostle Paul's blasphemy and murder? How could my brother's simple belief in Christ's sacrifice make up for past crimes? If God were balancing the scales of justice with our faith, then he would not be just. We must understand that Christ's sacrifice, not our faith, is the work that balances the scales of divine justice.

If our faith earned God's grace, then we are responsible for our salvation. We could take the credit. But the Bible is clear: Jesus saves. Our faith does not earn God's love or merit his grace. Think how strange it would be for a man who had been rescued from drowning to strut down the beach boasting, "I'm alive because I was good enough to call for the lifeguard to save me." Everyone would recognize that the saved swimmer had no cause for boasting. His rescue was entirely a result of depending on the good will and ability of the lifeguard.

Depending entirely on another is the antithesis of a second common misconception about saving faith: it's made sufficient by its strength. People think that by a sufficient degree of psychological effort or theological study they will pump enough faith into their hearts to warrant God's love. But thinking that salvation depends on our having superior faith is just another way of making faith a work we need to do better than others. This is like the swimmer boasting on the beach, "I am saved because I held on to the lifeguard with greater strength than others have."

To understand biblical faith, we must think of ourselves as entirely exhausted from trying to survive spiritually and relying entirely on the strength of the lifeguard (Jesus) to save us. Our hope cannot be based on the strength of our faith—the waves of weakness and doubt are far too strong for that—but rather on Jesus' provision alone.

Picturing my brother cowering in a jail cell with limited mental capacity, exhausted emotions, and great guilt, I do not want the basis of his hope to be the strength of his faith. I want his hope to be based on the strength of Jesus' love. David has no strength of mind or heart for anything else. His hope must be the same as that of the apostle Paul, who knew what it meant to come to the end of his wisdom, zeal, and strength as the basis for God's approval. Paul wrote, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8–9).

Faith is not a work or a mental exercise or an emotional experience. We cannot boast that we have sufficient faith to merit God's love. Saving faith expresses human yieldedness and confesses that there is nothing about us that should make God love us. We rely on Jesus alone to save us from our sin. We do not trust that anything we do is sufficient to make God love us—not our good works, not our wise thoughts, not even the strength of our faith. We simply trust that Jesus saves.

Faith in Christ alone—a forsaking of the self as the basis of divine approval—is the effect God works in our hearts as he uses all our despondencies and disappointments to bring us to complete dependence on him. When we have no basis of hope but Jesus, we turn from everything else to him. That is one reason Paul says that even the faith we have is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8–9). Saving faith cannot be something we conjure by our efforts. If God did not make our hearts beat for him, then we would be spiritually dead (Ezek. 36:26; Eph. 2:1).

Rest in Christ

Biblical faith is not so much trusting in the degree of our knowledge, fervency, or self-reproach as simply relying on Christ's work. We do not depend on the strength of our faith to hold us to him but on the strength of his love to lift us to himself. As a strong man who enters an elevator does not rely on his muscles but on the cables above to lift him, so also biblical faith is not about the spiritual effort we exert but the spiritual dependence we exhibit. We do not so much rely on our great faith in Jesus as we rest in his great love for us (Isa. 30:15; Heb. 4:9–11). We trust the infinite and unwavering mercy of an omnipotent God rather than the meager and mixed efforts of our humanity.

As we open our hearts to the reality of God's unconditional love, we discover a sweet and surprising peace (Rom. 5:1–2). Rather than

worrying endlessly about satisfying God's expectations or placating his anger, we find unending divine acceptance (Eph. 2:17–19). We also discover that entrusting our souls to Jesus is not living in daily dread of the frown of God. Because our faith is in Christ's saving work alone, the Christian life is not a wearying treadmill of trying to stay on God's good side. We rest in the grace that covers our sin, overcomes our failings, and grants us the righteousness of Jesus.

No longer are we striving and scratching to make God love us. He loves us! And if the King of Heaven smiles upon us, then we need not despair that some of his creatures may not or that our circumstances seem disappointing. Whether our sin is monstrous or ordinary, whether we believe our lives are futile or too full, whether we live in a fine house or a jail cell—God's grace makes us as righteous as Jesus before the face of God. He loves us as much as he loves Jesus. For all who have grieved their guilt, regretted their failures, and feared their future, this love is wonderful comfort in which to rest. But there is even more good news in the gospel.

What God Provides, He Perfects²

Being justified by grace is wonderful, but that's not all there is to God's plan. Jesus Christ not only rescues us from past sin but also secures our eternity with him. This is why Jesus said that whoever would believe in him "shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). God's salvation is not like being saved from a tiger attack one day only to be cast back into the jungle the next day. The gospel includes the ways that God keeps us spiritually safe forever.

Union with Christ

God not only loves us as much as he loves Jesus, but God's grace actually makes us his children. The apostle John writes, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1). But how can any of us be a child of God when we have been born of natural parents? Vast implications of grace are contained within the answer: we have been adopted by the heavenly Father (Eph. 1:5–6).

How does this adoption process work? The essence of the process we have already described: we rely on Christ for our spiritual life with God. We do this by confessing that we need Jesus to make us holy,

acknowledging our sin and the inadequacy of our thoughts, words, and deeds to make us right with God. God then justifies us by his grace alone, and we become to him as righteous and loved as Jesus.

We have not yet discussed the full implications of such total spiritual dependence. If all of our striving is not what produces spiritual life with God, then by the standards of human achievement, we are as good as dead. As strange as it may seem, the gospel says that this conclusion is exactly right. And this death is actually the door to a new life in God's family.

United to Christ's Death

After he concludes that no amount of doing good can justify a person before a holy God, the apostle Paul adds, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live" (Gal. 2:20). As horrible as these words sound, they are the obvious conclusion of what it means to stand before God on the basis of Jesus' sacrifice rather than our saintliness. What he did rather than what we do is our hope. Our spiritual standing—our identity—is wrapped up in his.

It may sound awful to be united to the death of Christ, but it's actually a good thing. If all that is true of us is nailed to the cross, then that means all our sin, shortcomings, and failures are on that cross, too. Because everything that could spiritually separate us from God is on the cross, he can draw us close to himself. But what good is such intimacy if we are spiritually dead? Paul answers by reminding us that our spiritual life—our identity before God—now comes from a different source.

United to Christ's Life

Not only are we united to the death of Christ, we are also united to the life of Christ. Paul writes, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, *but Christ lives in me*" (Gal. 2:20). These words not only assure us of new life with Christ, but also touch on a key aspect of the gospel we have scarcely mentioned so far: the resurrection.

When Jesus suffered on the cross for our sin, he also canceled the penalty that came when humanity first abandoned God's ways. God told Adam that if he disobeyed, Adam would surely die (Gen. 2:17). Adam's sin broke the intimate bond of life between a holy God and the human heart. God responded by raising Jesus from the dead by the

power of the Holy Spirit to show that the effects of this original sin were really canceled by Christ's sacrifice (Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 15:15–20).

Jesus' life after death proves that God's promise of canceled sin and eternal life is real for us. Our sin does not terminate our relationship with God, and the end of our life on earth does not terminate our relationship with God. When our mortal bodies fail, our spirit continues in fellowship with the Lord forever. There will also come a time when God will raise our bodies, just as he raised Jesus, so that we will be reunited in body and spirit with Jesus, but that's more of the good news that we will discuss a bit later.

For now it is important to realize that, as a result of Jesus' resurrection, the spirit of every believer is already united to Christ. Though he died, he lives again, and he lives within us—in spiritual union with our spirit. Remember that the apostle Paul says, "Christ lives in me." If we are as good as dead (because nothing we do offers us spiritual standing with God) and Jesus is alive in us (because his spirit is united with ours), then we have Jesus' identity. All that is true of him—his wisdom, holiness, and righteousness—takes the place of our stupidity, sin, and rebellion (1 Cor. 1:31). The apostle appropriately rejoices that Christ is our life (Col. 3:4) and "To me, to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). By our spiritual union with Christ, all that shames us is dead, and all that honors him is ours.

Family Privileges

Because we share Christ's identity, we are members of God's family (Heb. 2:11). It does not matter that we have terrible backgrounds. The old is gone; we have new lives in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). Everyone who is united to Christ is as much God's child as he is. Through this "adoption" God gives us special assurances in order to help us honor the Christ whose identity we share.

Unchanging Status

The first assurance is of unchanging status. When my brother was sentenced for his crime, my family was allowed to gather with him in a holding cell before he was taken to prison. Through tears my father quoted an old hymn to my newly saved but prison-bound brother:

And prisons would palaces prove,
If Jesus would dwell with me there.³

With the tender expression of these words, my father affirmed his love, as well as the comforts of the Lord's love, for David. Although he had terribly humiliated and betrayed my father, David was still his son. Nothing David did could change that relationship.

In the same way, our actions do not change our relationship to God (Heb. 10:14). Even when we sin and betray his love, we do not stop being his children. Our spiritual status is not determined by what we do but by what Christ has done. Since Christ indwells us, God loves us. Assurance of his infinite kindness gives us the desire to honor him and the willingness to return to him when we have sinned (Rom. 2:4).

God may discipline us to turn us from more harmful consequences of our rebellion, but this spiritual correction is not because he loves us any less. The aim of the heavenly Father's discipline is to help us, never to harm us. Even when we are in the throes of the worst discipline God administers, we are loved infinitely and protected spiritually (Heb. 12:5–11). As God's children, our status never changes.

Perpetual Protection

Because of our unchanging status, we also have God's assurance of his perpetual protection. Although this promise of perpetual protection may cause a guffaw from those who know about Christian martyrs or about ordinary believers who have experienced pain and tragedy, God's protection is real and trustworthy.

How can those who constantly experience life's trials possibly believe in God's perpetual protection? The answer lies in remembering that this life is not the end of our existence or the most important part of it. Jesus said, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

God is much more concerned to make our eternal state secure than to make our temporal existence easy. For this reason he puts a spiritual hedge around our lives so that nothing can enter that would destroy our eternal status with him. After all, how could God love us as much as he loves Jesus if he ever allowed us to do or to experience something that would result in our eternity in hell? We will face many difficulties in this fallen world (Gen. 3:17–19), but God will never allow anything that would sever our relationship with him (Rom. 8:35–39).

We are unlikely to know the specific reasons for any particular trial

until our Lord explains them in heaven, but we already know God's general purposes. The apostle Paul writes, "In all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Rom. 8:28). This is an amazing promise: the events of the universe are not random. God works all things for the good of his people. Paul goes on to describe what that "good" is. He says that all things work together to make us more like God's Son "that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (Rom. 8:29).

God is in the daily business of maturing and expanding his family so that heaven will be populated with a vast number of Jesus-like children. To build in us (and display to others) Christlike character and compassion, our God allows us to experience the trials of this world. These trials wean us from excessive love for temporal things and help us understand and live for the greater worth of God's eternal priorities (2 Cor. 4:17). Still, he never allows more than we can endure (1 Cor. 10:13), never removes his loving presence (Heb. 13:5), and amid the trials that stretch our faith, more frequently gives blessings to strengthen our heart (Lam. 3:23).

God measures both the tears and laughter that are necessary in the recipe of our (and our neighbors') eternal good. That's why it was not naïve for my brother David to write from prison one night, "I am so sad when I think about mom and dad [hurting]. I am going to cry for a while before I pray and go to bed." A sophisticate might scoff at prayer to a God who allowed the causes for such tears. Yet David's tears were not a denial of God's hand in his life but the very reason he needed to pray. David believed God would work past his rebellion and pain to accomplish a greater good. At that time, David could not have known the greater good God was accomplishing, but he would know it very soon as God also revealed the power of such prayers.

Personal Power

A third assurance of our adoption is personal power. Even more amazing than God's promise to work all things together for good are the means he uses. For example, the promise of all things working for our good comes within a discussion of prayer. The apostle first acknowledges, "We do not know what we ought to pray for" (in stark contrast to some contemporaries who pretend they know exactly). Then Paul adds, "But the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. . . . Because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance

with God's will" (Rom. 8:26–27). Wow! Even though we can't know enough to direct God to do what is best, the Holy Spirit translates our prayers into perfect petitions for God's will to be done.

As we offer our petitions in the context of a greater desire for God's will to be done (cf. Matt. 6:10), he responds by making *all things* work together for our good. God reshapes the world about us so that what is spiritually best for us occurs. By our prayers, we are co-creators with God of a new reality. Everything changes because we pray—not because our prayers are so powerful or good, but because the God to whom we pray is.

The frequent gospel claim of the New Testament writers was simply that Jesus is Lord. This was not mere rhetoric but the actual announcement that the One who created all things had come as God had promised in order to deliver his people with divine power (Mark 1:15; Acts 2:36; 10:36). That power will know its full expression at the consummation of all things, but it is even now transforming all reality by our prayers.

My family has discovered that such gospel promises are not empty (Isa. 65:24; Eph. 3:20). One of the reasons that my brother David cried for my mother and father was their separation from each other. Decades of tensions had pushed them away from each other and made my brother's trial even more difficult to handle. So, after his conversion, David began to pray for my aging parents, who had been separated for almost fifteen years, to get back together. I didn't have the heart to tell him how futile I thought his prayers would be. But I was about to be reminded of biblical truths my heart needed to reclaim.

A few weeks before my oldest daughter's wedding, my mother called to say that she and my father had made arrangements to come. She added, "We will be staying in the same hotel—in the same room." And into my shocked silence, she whispered, "It's not a scandal. Remember, we are still married."

I asked, "Mom, are things better between you and Dad?"

She replied with tears, "Through dealing with your brother's difficulties, your father and I learned to lean on each other again." Then I wept—and marveled at the God who works all things for good and uses the simple things of the world to shame the wise (1 Cor. 1:27). I should have expected more of my Lord than I did. But my mentally limited, crime-convicted, prison-confined, little brother simply believed God's

Word and prayed for God's help, and God answered as he knew was best.

Now when my 79- and 82-year-old parents visit my brother in prison, they walk through barbed-wire gates holding hands. And I say to all who will dare to believe with me, "The gospel is real; it changes the world." I will not promise that God will answer precisely as we ask or that we will always see the results of our prayers in our lifetime, but I will promise—because Scripture does the same—that God will work everything for the good of those who love him.

Spiritual Growth

The personal power assured by our adoption does not only apply to the world outside of us but to our inner being as well. Believers do not pray for anything more earnestly than that their lives would bring glory to their Savior. Yet we remain besieged by temptations and too often defeated by our spiritual weaknesses. For these struggles the gospel brings a fourth assurance to God's children: God gives us the inner resources to battle sin.

The process by which we grow in Christlikeness is called "sanctification." There are a number of practical ways God's Word helps us mature in this way. First, the Bible tells us what God expects. God doesn't make us guess. Instead, God gives us instructions that keep us spiritually safe and fulfill our desire to glorify him. While the world thinks of God's laws as party stoppers, Christians understand that God's commands actually lead us in the paths most pleasing to him and satisfying to us.

So that we don't get swept into the deceptions of the world, God also tells us to learn from his Word, commune with him in prayer, worship with his people, and seek counsel from those mature in his ways. Through regular use of these "means of grace," we grow in godliness. To some degree these means of grace are effective simply because we are natural beings who respond to natural processes of learning and behavior. If we are thirsty, we are helped by a drink of water; and if we are struggling with a temptation, biblical counsel helps us stay away from it.

But our sanctification is not simply a natural process. The Bible says our spiritual battles are not against flesh and blood but against spiritual evils—within and without us (Eph. 6:12). These require more

resistance than human resolve can provide. So the Lord also uses the means of grace to provide us with supernatural power for the spiritual victories we need.

Spiritual power enters our lives with the faith that we are what God's Word says: new creatures in Christ Jesus. Prior to Christ's presence in our hearts, we were *not* able *not* to sin. But Jesus transforms us. He provides his Holy Spirit in our heart to convict us of sin (i.e., convince us it really is wrong) and to empower our resistance. We are not helpless against Satan (Col. 1:13). The apostle John writes, "The one who is in you [the Holy Spirit] is greater than the one who is in the world [Satan]" (1 John 4:4). The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead indwells us and provides sin-conquering power.

Satan will still try to convince us that it's only natural to fail and that we cannot resist sin. Yet God's Word says we can resist because we are no longer dependent on natural powers alone (Rom. 8:11). Of course, if we don't believe victory is possible, then we have already lost the battle. That's why simple faith in the truth of God's Word is the beginning of spiritual victory. Regular use of the means of grace bolsters the faith by which we act on the reality of our power.

Spiritual Security

The means of grace are also meant to plant deep within us the profound conviction that even if we do not win every battle, we are loved no less. With great wisdom a friend of mine writes, "The only people who ever get better spiritually are those who know if they never get better, they are loved no less." This sounds impossible and backwards. If people know that their failing doesn't diminish God's love, then won't they persist in their sin? Yes, some rebellious or insensitive souls will take advantage of grace, but not those yielded to the Spirit of God.

Before we can understand how God's unswerving love actually promotes holiness, we need to consider a key question: "What gives sin power in your life?" The answer is, "Sin has power in your life because you love it." If sin did not attract you, then it would have no power to tempt you. Now another question: "What is the only way to displace love for sin?" The answer is: "With a greater love." When we love Jesus more than the sin, we want to please him more than we want to indulge the wrong (John 14:15). Love for Jesus drives the love for evil, which gives sin its power, out of our lives.

And now one final question: What makes you love Jesus? Again the Bible answers simply: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Now finally we understand why it really isn’t true that “if God loves us despite our sin, then we will ‘party hearty.’” When we truly love him, we want to please him. And what makes us most want to please him is the knowledge that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases (Lam. 3:22–23). His persevering grace toward his children is the motivating power for holiness in our hearts (Rom. 12:1–3).

Soon after he was in prison, David began to mail us scrawled copies of Bible verses and the words to worship songs his prayer group was singing. He also began to sign each of his letters, “God bless you.” Even though he is in prison—with temptations and trials beyond what I can know—he sees himself as an instrument for proclaiming God’s glory. He wants his life to reflect the grace he has experienced. No one forces him to write the words; no one could. But his love for Jesus has become a compelling force in his life, as is always true for those who know Christ’s unconditional love and unending grace.

Eternal Inheritance

A fifth assurance of God’s children is their inheritance (Eph. 1:14; 2:7). The Bible says that God’s adopted children are co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17). Only a few essentials of this good news can be mentioned in this brief space. The first is eternal life, which is not endless years of playing harps in the clouds. When believers die, their souls immediately enter the glorious presence of our heavenly Father (1 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:21–24). Full acceptance, full joy, and full peace are immediately ours, but that’s not the full story (Luke 23:43). One day Christ will come and renew the earth that he originally made so good (Isa. 65:17–19; Rom. 8:21–23). All the benefits that humanity originally enjoyed in Eden will be restored—a world full of God’s provision and absent of suffering (Rev. 21:4).

Creation will be restored, and we will be renewed in spirit, body, and mind (1 Cor. 15:52–54). Not only will my imprisoned brother David know God’s full forgiveness, but his body will be pure again and his mind healthy and whole for the first time. My brother will be more glorious than the angels (1 John 3:2–3). He will walk about freely in the new creation with his head up, his eyes bright, and his heart rejoicing in the beauty that surrounds him. My family, those

who have already departed and those yet to enter heaven, will have a reunion with him and all those who love Jesus (1 Thess. 4:14–18). We will feast at our Lord’s table, delight in his goodness, and forever enjoy a world made perfect by the grace of our God. The One who came to save sinners provides a salvation so grand that it restores the whole earth, involves our whole being, and lasts for eternity (Rev. 21:1).

Whom God Perfects, He Uses⁴

Individual Purpose

Christ’s expansive love for his people and their world—made apparent by his redemption of both—has a profound effect upon all who love him. Because we love him, we also love *what* and *whom* he loves. Soon after his commitment to Christ, my brother David—formerly profane in word and deed—wrote, “I love Jesus so much [that now] I can’t stand it when people take his name in vain. I want them to know how good he is.” When Jesus indwells our heart, his heart becomes our own (Rom. 6:4–11).

Individuals who love him want to please him by loving those he loves. We delight to be his ambassadors to the lost, his hands to the needy, his voice for the oppressed, and stewards of the creation he made as provision for all people. We rejoice that his family extends beyond human boundaries of race, region, class, and culture, and we delight to love accordingly. And as we express Christ’s love in us, we who were once in need ourselves ultimately discover a final aspect of Christ’s salvation: a divine purpose.

We have been rescued from empty lives, as well as from sinful ones (1 Pet. 1:18). Jesus makes the broken useful. Jesus was not done with the man whose failures placed him in a jail cell with my brother. As that man shared his faith with my brother—a man of another race—both knew Christ’s love and became spiritual brothers for eternity.

Time and again my developmentally disabled brother has been aided in prison by men whose race or background would have separated them in ordinary society, and as David has learned of a love greater than his prejudices, he has become an instrument of Christ’s love also. His simple trust of and friendship with those unlike himself inaugurates within prison walls the glory of an eternal brotherhood in heaven.

Corporate Purpose

We participate in Christ's transforming purposes as individuals but also as gathered people. Through the church, we proclaim Christ's good news in word and deed so that his rule spreads from heart to heart across all nations (Col. 1:22–2:4). His ultimate kingdom is the story the Scriptures unfold from their first pages. Our God would not leave a hurting creation in its pain. Despite the betrayal that led to the brokenness of the world and its inhabitants, our God has never abandoned either. He redeems people so that they will know and extend his grace. Thus, the salvation he brings is both for and through sinners. In the church we gather together to praise him for this goodness, to encourage one another in living for him, and to help others understand and experience his transforming love.

The ancient, unfolding story of salvation is for us, includes us, and enfolds us in a larger embrace. We have purpose beyond ourselves and, in fulfilling it with others, we celebrate our corporate identity with the body of Christ. Collectively he grants us fulfillment and participation in the furthering of his kingdom that transforms all things for his glory (Eph. 1:21). As we live in community encouraging, instructing, strengthening, and forgiving one another, we become transformative salt and light for the world in which we live (Matt. 5:13–16; Eph. 3:10–21).

Redemptive Purpose

For the great privilege of participation in Christ's transforming work, we have been saved, and for this great purpose, we honor our King and reflect his grace in every dimension of our lives—our relationships, our occupations, our recreations, and our worship. We keep no aspect of our lives from reflecting his glory as he extends his reign over the whole of life.

Sacred and secular distinctions cannot be used to isolate the concerns of Christ from any sphere of life. He is the Lord who has come and will come to extend his gracious reign over all. He saves us in order to place his claim on us. As we find our greatest satisfaction in dedicating every aspect of our lives to him, he delights to use us for eternal purposes and to redeem the world through our individual and corporate efforts.

When the gospel writers declared the gospel of Jesus, it was typi-

cally with the declaration that the Lord of all had come. No joy could accompany such a pronouncement if it marked only the beginning of a despotic rule. However, if the King comes to save sinners and if their salvation includes a renewed heart, an empowered life, and a transformed world, then his purpose and theirs is truly good news. The news is so good that even the angels long for it, and we who love him who provides this gospel also cherish its proclamation (1 Pet. 1:10–12). Whether we have known an imprisonment of body, mind, habit, guilt, relationship, or circumstance, Jesus Christ comes to save us eternally from it all. This is great news—and it is the gospel!

Notes

1. This portion of the story relates to the themes of “Creation of Humanity,” “The Fall,” “The Plan of God,” “The Redemption of Christ,” and “The Justification of Sinners” in The Coalition’s Confessional Statement.
2. This portion of the story relates to the themes of “The Power of the Holy Spirit,” “The Kingdom of God,” “God’s New People,” “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper [i.e., means of grace],” and “The Restoration of All Things” in The Coalition’s Confessional Statement.
3. “How Tedious and Tasteless the Hour,” John Newton (1779).
4. This portion of the story relates to the themes of “How should we relate to the culture around us?” and “What is gospel-centered ministry?” in The Coalition’s Theological Vision for Ministry.

The Gospel Coalition

The Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We have become deeply concerned about some movements within traditional evangelicalism that seem to be diminishing the church's life and leading us away from our historic beliefs and practices. On the one hand, we are troubled by the idolatry of personal consumerism and the politicization of faith; on the other hand, we are distressed by the unchallenged acceptance of theological and moral relativism. These movements have led to the easy abandonment of both biblical truth and the transformed living mandated by our historic faith. We not only hear of these influences; we see their effects. We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

We believe that in many evangelical churches a deep and broad consensus exists regarding the truths of the gospel. Yet we often see the celebration of our union with Christ replaced by the age-old attractions of power and affluence or by monastic retreats into ritual, liturgy, and sacrament. What replaces the gospel will never promote a mission-hearted faith anchored in enduring truth working itself out in unashamed discipleship eager to stand the tests of kingdom calling and sacrifice. We desire to advance along the King's highway, always aiming to provide gospel advocacy, encouragement, and education so that current- and next-generation church leaders are better equipped to fuel their ministries with principles and practices that glorify the Savior and do good to those for whom he shed his life's blood.

We want to generate a unified effort among all peoples—an effort that is zealous to honor Christ and multiply his disciples, joining in a true coalition for Jesus. Such a biblically grounded and united mission

is the only enduring future for the church. This reality compels us to stand with others who are stirred by the conviction that the mercy of God in Jesus Christ is our only hope of eternal salvation. We desire to champion this gospel with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy—gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines.

Our desire is to serve the church we love by inviting all of our brothers and sisters to join us in an effort to renew the contemporary church in the ancient gospel of Christ so that we truly speak and live for him in a way that clearly communicates to our age. We intend to do this through the ordinary means of his grace: prayer, the ministry of the Word, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the fellowship of the saints. We yearn to work with all who, in addition to embracing the confession and vision set out here, seek the lordship of Christ over the whole of life with unabashed hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform individuals, communities, and cultures.

“Jesus’s holiness made him the perfect sacrifice for our sin. . . . Our sin is not just an annoyance to God. The sin of humanity has resulted in inestimable suffering. God does not overlook the anger we unleash, the abuse we inflict, the suffering we disregard, the injustice we ignore. A holy God cannot simply hide his eyes or cover his ears to such sin. Its victims scream for justice, and God’s compassion provides what his righteousness requires through Jesus’s sacrifice. . . . He paid the debt to justice we could not pay. His suffering atones for our wrongs. His death rescues us from the hell we deserve.”

—From the booklet

These Gospel Coalition booklets are edited by D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller and are designed to offer thoughtful explanations of the ministry’s confessional statement. The Gospel Coalition is an evangelical movement dedicated to the gospel of Christ and a Scripture-based reformation of ministry practices.

Bryan Chapell is president and professor of practical theology at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, where he has served in various capacities since 1984. In addition to his work at Covenant, Chapell is the author of numerous books, including *Christ-Centered Preaching* and *Holiness by Grace*.