

THE NEARNESS OF YOUR SAVIOUR

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Scholars have recently been making some discoveries in the Bible which many churches haven't seen. It's like a dense fog has finally lifted and the bright sun is shining through again.

No, I am not talking about musty manuscripts found in a desert cave or dug out of the sand of Egypt. I am talking about discoveries in the Bible itself, very Good News better than most people have thought it is.

Enormous progress has been made in scientific discoveries on all levels. Why shouldn't there be equally marvelous progress in understanding the truth of God? People today should understand it far more clearly than in past generations.

The reason? God is alive! He is more "with it" than the Internet or tomorrow's newscast. He always has new ideas for us. The Holy Spirit is working 24 hours a day, communicating great things to any-one willing to listen. God is like a personal Father to everybody willing to let Him be that—a Father who can be trusted. Why? He is infinite, and so He treats every one as if he/she were the only person on earth. And He has nothing but good will for undeserving people.

The Good News is what the Savior has done, is doing, and will finish doing, for us (and in us). Not what He might do, maybe, perhaps, . . . or IF. He is the world's Savior now, not merely wanting to be if

we do the impossible, or can't be unless we perform perfectly.

Actually, we don't know how to get out of the mess we've made in our lives. Now, do we have to take the initiative because we're afraid of being lost? Or because we hope for some great reward in heaven? Is there some motivation that is stronger? How has the Savior taken the initiative to make things right for us?

For a long time most people have thought Jesus went to heaven to relax on an extended vacation. He did His part a long time ago, leaving us to get our act together, stop sinning, and do lots of good works. Now scholars are discovering in the Bible that Jesus has never taken a vacation of any kind. He is on duty in His "office" which the Bible speaks of as "the sanctuary" in heaven.

His fulltime employment is saving sinners like you and me—rebuilding human wrecks, reaching the worst down-and-out backsliders, lifting people out of the ditch, listening to distraught people's cries and prayers at three in the morning, whispering hope to depressed alcoholics and drug addicts, convincing teenagers that He understands and cares, urging would-be suicides not to do it, pricking the consciences of lazy, selfish "saints," melting hardened prostitutes, healing broken hearts, encouraging prisoners, giving abused children hope. He's busy? You're right. He's busy!

But not too busy to be closer to you and more true to you than a best friend could be. The Bible describes His day and night work as that of a "great High Priest." The best modern equivalent of that is

Divine Psychiatrist, or Physician of our souls. Although He was sinless, He took our fallen, sinful nature and had to say “No!” to self just as we do. “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. . . . In all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest” (Hebrews 2:14-17). His specialty is healing people of all kinds of hurts, even from their childhood.

He is “touched with the feeling of our infirmities” (KJV), or as the NKJV has it, He can “sympathize with our weaknesses.” That Bible writer (he knows what he is talking about!) urges us, “Come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:14-16).

But yes, there is a catch. You’ve got to realize that you are a sinner before your coming “boldly” can make any sense, for He is a Savior. And this Savior doesn’t save anybody but sinners. If you think you don’t need to be saved, that you’re a decent, good person on your own, you’ll feel out of place trying to come. To Him, it’s sinners who are first-class people. He says distinctly, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (Matthew 9:13).

He must have said that tongue-in-cheek, because He knew very well that the only kind of people there are on this planet are sinners. They all need to be

“called.” He was pressing a thorn into the self-complacent thinking of the so-called “good” people, making fun of those pathetic people who think they are righteous and don’t know what a mess they make on the stage of life before others and in the sight of heaven. They strut around shamelessly thinking they don’t need a Savior, when in honest truth “there is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all gone out of the way” (Romans 3:10-12).

There are times when the fog lifts and you see this truth more clearly than at other times because the Holy Spirit presses home the conviction that we’re all the same by nature—lost sinners who can’t save our-selves. Not one of us by nature is a whit better than all the rest, because we’re all made of the same dough, as Martin Luther wisely said. “All the world [has] become guilty before God” (Romans 3:19).

It’s written all over us. Our very name is “Adam,” which is the Bible name for all mankind. Adam was a sinner. When he sinned in the beginning, he was the entire human race in himself, so that the whole human race sinned “in him.” All the sin in the world was therefore included in Adam’s sin when he sinned. There is not a human on earth who has not come from Adam, with his sinful nature. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, . . .” (verse 23). But the Good News comes in the next half of the same sentence: and “[all are] being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (verse 24). Thank God! The second

half of that sentence more than cancels the first half.

The word “justified” means to be straightened out, put right, or vindicated. (Remember, only sinners need to be straightened out!) Please look carefully, because all this was done before we ourselves could possibly do anything good. He justified us, put us straight, redeemed us, saved us as the human race, without any contribution from ourselves. It’s wrong to say or think that our faith saves us. “By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8). That agrees with what we just read in Romans 3:24—you were saved before you had faith, but your faith is what grabs hold of that blessed fact and makes it real in your own personal experience. For centuries most Christians didn’t discover these truths in what Paul says in Romans 3:23, 24:

* “All” are “justified.” That means the entire human race. This truth is the cure for depression, despair, low self-respect. Believe it, and hence-forth you hold your head high anytime, anywhere. But how does this change come about?

* These “all” are justified “freely.” No admission ticket required. Anything “free” is for everybody, no exceptions. No one can say, “This isn’t for me” (unless of course you are from Mars or you haven’t sinned—preposterous assumptions). Stop wasting precious psychic energy worrying about whether God has accepted you. Come into His presence like the prince or princess that you are in His sight. You’ve already been adopted into His family “in Christ”!

Someone says, “How can that be? I’m not a real Christian and never have been!” Well, the entire human race was in Christ as the second Adam just as it was in the first Adam. Therefore you were included. You remember when Christ was baptized? The Father said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). He was talking about us all, for He counted us “in Him.” A writer who understood says that word “embraces humanity. God spoke to Jesus as our representative.”¹

* The “all” are justified “by His grace.” Note that the word “faith” is not there. Your faith or your lack of faith had nothing to do with Christ justifying you by His sacrifice. And remember that “grace” is given only to people who don’t deserve it. “To him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness” (Romans 4:4, 5). This accomplishment redeems everyone “in Christ Jesus.”

* “Wait a minute! All this is given to wicked people?” Yes, the Bible says, “all.” If “your Father in heaven . . . makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:45), it includes bad people. That has to be the meaning of “grace,” or it isn’t grace.

* Imagine the surprise that this is going to be to Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists when they realize what the Son of God has done! The very shock of

¹ *The Desire of Ages*, p. 113.

learning this will capture their attention, for most have never been told that Christ accomplished such a feat as this. (Even atheists are going to be shocked, I or no one could have invented this idea!)

By now we're taking a deep breath. This is shocking to all of us as well. What evidence do we have in the Bible that the Good News is this good?

When the Father sent His Son into the world, He was given explicit instructions that His job was to "save the world" for He says, "I did not come to judge the world but to save the world," and "to give [My] life a ransom for many" (John 12:47; Matthew 20:28). And when He was about to die He prayed, "I have finished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 12:47; 17:4). Probably the first people to recognize this amazing truth were the Samaritans of the village of Sychar who said, "We . . . know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world" (John 4:42). They got it—He's not only the Savior of the Jews or of a handful of Gentiles who believe and obey, but He is everybody's Savior!

As the "last Adam" (1 Corinthians 15:45), He became "us" as truly as Adam was us. Thus when He died in our place, He actually died as us. "You are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power" (Colossians 2:10). You died "in Him," were resurrected "in Him," and will live eternally "in Him" (see Romans 6:3, 4, 5, 6; 8:9; Ephesians 1:3-12).

"Is this Universalism?" someone may ask. No, He won't force you to be saved against your will. You can say "No!" and forfeit your birthright even as Esau sold his for a mess of lentil stew (see Genesis

25:29-33). Too bad, for many will. But the "birthright" has been yours because you are a member of the human race.

You are not an exception. Are you a sinner? You are the reason why He came to do this. Can you believe that you have been redeemed? That's what the Bible is saying. Is the gift given to us already? That's what the words "grace" and "given freely" mean.

"Now wait a minute," someone says, "isn't there something I must do?" Yes, of course. Something big and very important. You must believe this Good News. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). It's true, and no one has a right to add any words that Jesus did not say, such as "you must do this" or "you must do that," or that "nothing happens unless you take the initiative." He has taken the initiative; He has loved; He has given.

But this does not mean that faith is a mere mental assent to an equation like $2 + 2 = 4$. To believe means to appreciate what it cost God to love us like that and to give His Son to die for us. This is the much bigger truth that many are now beginning to discover is in the Bible. To believe and to have faith is the same word in the Bible, and such faith takes up the whole heart—nothing left over for the selfishness of the world. The heart-appreciation is big when you realize what Jesus did was big.

The death that He died for us was not merely enduring some physical pain for a few hours. He died what the Bible calls "the second death," the

death without personal hope, “the pouring out of His soul unto death” that Isaiah speaks of (53:12; Revelation 2:11; 20:14).

In other words, out of love for you He gave Himself to go to hell, truly giving Himself forever. (The most wonderful hero in the world who died for somebody else couldn't go that far!) On His cross He felt abandonment by God to the fullest, and sobbed out, “Why have You forsaken Me?” There at last we see the “width and length and depth and height” of love. It's *agape*, as different from what we call love as day is from night (Ephesians 3:18). When our shriveled up little hearts begin to appreciate that, we begin to live. We are like dead people resurrected. In fact, our hearts have never been so moved; we don't realize the tremendous devotion to Christ that is buried there, and our potential for loving people who we never dreamed we could love. This discovery is magnificent!

To have faith is not merely to trust the Lord like you trust the bank or the insurance company. You can do that and still remain as selfish as you were before, because such trust is a self-centered concern. The John 3:16 idea of faith solves the problem and lifts our naturally self-centered hearts out of a dark cave into the sunlight: faith is a heart-melting appreciation of what it cost the Son of God to save us.

We know this from several texts that tell us what faith is.

Those two things that God did in John 3:16: (a) He so loved the world that He (b) gave His only begotten Son, trigger (c): we believe. The (a) and

the (b) come before the (c) If your heart says “Thanks!” for (a) and (b), then you've already begun (c). But just begun, for one's selfish heart only begins to come alive; you grow; the hardness is melted day by day. And that faith “works through love” (*agape*).

In other words, faith couldn't even exist unless first of all there was the revelation of that unearthly love at the cross (*agape*). All of this is just another way of saying that salvation is by grace, “not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:9).

So might I hide my blushing face
When His dear cross appears;
Dissolve my heart in thankfulness,
And melt mine eyes to tears.
But drops of grief can ne'er repay
This debt of love I owe.
Here Lord, I give myself away,
'Tis all that I can do.—Isaac Watts

If faith “works through love,” then there is no end to the good works that it will continually motivate us to do. Stop carrying a load of guilt. Faith is itself a change of heart. It reconciles an alienated, selfish heart to God; and since no one can be reconciled to God and not at the same time be reconciled to His holy law, such faith immediately makes the believer become obedient to all ten of the joyous commandments of God. Will that be difficult? Of course not, because the love of Christ supplies an infinitely powerful motivation.

From then on, it's not a matter of “what do I have to do in order to be saved?” but “how can I say ‘Thank You’ enough for saving my soul from hell

itself?" It's an entirely new situation, for "behold, all things have become new," for "all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:17, 18).

That is also part of the Good News—you become a "minister," and in some wonderful way (you cannot understand how), you help proclaim to somebody else "the word of reconciliation" that has so changed you (verse 19). If God picked you up and set you in heaven itself you couldn't be happier, because there is no thrill known to humans more delightful than that of being the channel through which this life flows to another human being.

You're probably shocked by all this almost incredible Good News. Ask the question again: what did Christ actually accomplish for us before we were even born? The answer is spelled out in startling clarity in Romans 5. Let's look at that, and then try to grasp what it's saying:

[Verse 15: "God's act of grace is out of all proportion to Adam's wrongdoing. For if the wrongdoing of that one man brought death upon so many [the Greek says the many, that is, everyone] its effect is vastly exceeded by the grace of God and the gift that came to so many [everyone] by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ. [16] And again, the gift of God is not to be compared in its effect with that one man's sin; for the judicial action, following on the one offence, resulted in a verdict of condemnation, but the act of grace, following on so many misdeeds, resulted in a verdict of acquittal. . . . [18] It follows, then, that as the result of one

misdeed was condemnation for all people, so the result of one righteous act is acquittal and life for all" (*Revised English Bible*).

Here is where many people are waking up to see something astounding:

* Adam's act of sin brought a "verdict of condemnation" on "all people." But amazingly, Christ's "one righteous act" brought "a verdict of acquittal" on the same "all people." In other words, all the evil that Adam did to the entire human race was reversed by Christ. How could He do it? He is the divine Son of God, the Creator Himself! He became a man, but in doing so did not cease to remain what He was—God. His name "Immanuel" means He is with us (see Matthew 1:23).

* This explains how "all" have been "justified freely" by the sacrifice of Christ. "The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). None left over.

* But iniquity (or sin) brings a sure result—death, the real thing. Christ has "taste[d] death for everyone" (Hebrews 2:9). What we call "death," the Bible calls "sleep" (John 11:11-14; 1 Thessalonians 4:15, 16). But this is what the Bible calls "the second death," what's final (Revelation 2:11; 20:14). Let the truth sink in: He died your second death. Take a deep breath, and ponder that. There is no reason under heaven why you should have to die that same second death, unless you choose to tell Him "No" and resist the Holy Spirit.

* Grace is seen to be stronger than sin, even as light is stronger than darkness. All the sins that the devil and his evil angels can ever invent are

outdone by the grace of Christ that is “out of all proportion” to human sin. Good News? It's astonishing!

* Furthermore, grace gives a “gift”—that “verdict of acquittal,” a precious justification before the universe. When Christ took on Himself “the iniquity of us all,” He took our guilt, leaving us pronounced free, and treated us as though we were innocent. “Not fair”? If so, it is gloriously unfair, because Christ has taken our place; He became us. It's not that God is satisfied for an innocent man to be executed instead of the guilty one “vicariously” (which would be unfair indeed), but Christ took us all into Himself. We who are the guilty ones died “in Christ” because He put Himself into the human race, and now we are “in Him.” Not only did He die instead of us, He died as us.

* This is the Good News Christ commanded us to proclaim to everyone. When the sinner hears it and his heart responds, when he begins to appreciate what's involved, his heart has to be changed, and Satan can't stop it from happening. The sinner experiences justification by faith. This is much more than a mere legal “verdict of acquittal.” It has dynamite-like power to change selfish hearts into loving ones. When Jesus came so close to us that He became one of us, He felt how we feel inside. We have sinned, while He never sinned. But He was tempted to sin, just as we are tempted, but He never gave in to temptation.

It's not a sin to be tempted—everyone is, in one way or another. Even a thousand temptations do not equal one sin. The sin comes only in yielding to

the temptation. “We do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

That Good News means that no matter what your problem is, He knows, He understands, and more than that, He sympathizes with you, and you can trust His goodness. But it doesn't mean that He sympathizes with the sin or that He excuses you for going on to commit it. He knows the sin will kill you, which is why He hates it. If you were standing on the windowsill of a skyscraper, He wouldn't say sweetly, “I know how you are discouraged, so it's OK with me for you to jump.” No, He would veil at you, “Get back in here! Don't you dare do this! I know how you feel, for I too have been tempted to despair, but I overcame it, and I freely give you grace to overcome it too!” Why would He talk so strongly? Because He loves you. So, sympathizing with all our weaknesses doesn't mean that for one moment He excuses them. You will love Him more when you understand why He can't stand your continued sinning.

That same grace which has justified you is given you to overcome every sin, every addiction. It is not merely offered to you provisionally IF. . . It is freely given to you: “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need”(verse 16).

Let's check out this promise:

* Suppose you are an alcoholic. (a) The “mercy” gives you hope for forgiveness; (b) the “grace” assures you that you don't deserve it and that you

can't save yourself— the basic principle of the famous Twelve Steps; (c) the “help” is deliverance from the addiction itself, not merely transferring it to other drugs or nicotine;

(d) the “throne” tells you that the true so-called “Higher Power” is Jesus Christ, the Son of God Himself (alcoholism is more than a disease, it is sin against Him and against His holy law that says, “Thou shalt not kill;” (e) the deliverance is from the root of it all—self-indulgence. (But remember that deliverance from the sin does not mean that you will never again be tempted. You will still have a sinful nature or sinful flesh until the Lord comes.)

The Good News is this: the deliverance gives you the grace to say “No!” to temptation every time it comes up. You “overcome” as “also [He] overcame” (Revelation 3:21). You are never alone, for you are with Him.

* Suppose you are addicted to a drug. Yes, Christ was tempted as you are, “yet without sin.” While He was in unspeakable agony on the cross, kind people offered Him a drug that would ease His pain. You could never be as terribly tempted as He was to bite down on that saturated sponge and get relief, but “He would not drink” (Matthew 27:34). He was determined to keep His mind clear so He could finish His work of becoming your Savior from addiction. You can never duplicate what He did, but by His grace you can keep your mind clear so you can appreciate what He did for you. He is fully qualified to “help.”

* Suppose you are into gambling. This insidious habit eats out your soul like acid. But what you

could not do, “God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh” (Romans 8:3). If He “condemned sin” it must mean that He outlawed it, trampled it under foot, defeated it. In Christ you have freedom from this addiction. Use “the hand of faith” to grab it, and hang on to it. Don't make the vain promise never to gamble again, but (1) choose not to, and then (2) ask your Savior to save you from it, and (c) thank Him for it. That's the ABC of conquering this problem.

* Suppose you are a slave to appetite. Same struggle, same victory. When Christ began His ministry, His first battle was with appetite, and He won a total victory for us (Matthew 4:2-4). Again, your victory has already been given you by grace; but you realize it “through faith.” Immerse yourself in the story of Christ's battle and His victory. Let your mind grasp what happened. It's useless to pray the Lord to take away the temptation, for food is everywhere. He couldn't answer your prayer unless He shut down all the supermarkets and restaurants in the world. But you can pray that His Holy Spirit may help you to grasp how grace is stronger than sin. Thus your faith will grow in strength. You don't need to fall even once. You simply let the Lord hold you by the hand. All He must have is your permission!

* Suppose you are a prostitute, into kinky sex, or a porn addict. The root of slavery to lust is that same self love that started this worldwide rule of sin in the beginning. But there is hope. You need to understand that there is healing in the cross of

Christ: “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:14, 15).

Sin is the murder of the Son of God, all over again. Those who refuse repentance “crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame” (Hebrews 6:6). The healing medicine will burn like healing acid down to the toes, but it will cleanse away this love of self. It’s a heavenly work, but this is what the High Priest does as our Divine Psychiatrist—He cauterizes and heals the wound. The blessing is coming, for He has promised to “pour” on us “the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they have pierced. . . . In that day a fountain shall be opened . . . for sin and for uncleanness” (Zechariah 12:10, 13:1). Blessed “fountain”!

Don’t try to take a detour away from God’s holy law, and around that cross. Fall on your knees, let the tears come freely, let your soul be melted, beg for Him to do His work, because, like a surgeon who will not operate without your full permission, He is too polite to do His work of cleansing your heart and healing you unless you give Him your full consent for the necessary “surgery” to take place. He has never lost a patient!

* Worst of all, suppose you are a hard-hearted, selfish, worldly professed “Christian.” You are lukewarm, and you don’t know how to get over it, for it’s like a drunken stupor. You want to wake up but you’re paralyzed. You know in your own heart you are a disgrace to the Savior. Like the self-

sufficient scribes and Pharisees who crucified Him, you make people think you are pious and religious, but you know it’s a lie. Yes, your case is the most difficult for Him to handle. Saving perverts and criminals is easier than healing a lukewarm church that is deluded, thinking it is “rich, and increased with goods, and [has] need of nothing” (Revelation 3:17 KJV). Jesus said that “harlots enter the kingdom of God before you” (Matthew 21:31).

But there is hope. He commands us, “Be zealous and repent” (Revelation 3:19). It’s useless to think we repent when we try to confess the few “little sins” we add up. Real repentance includes the sin we didn’t realize was in our hearts. Deep down, we are no better than anyone else. That stabs us awake, but it’s true, because we have no righteousness of our own (Isaiah 64:6). Therefore, the sin of somebody else would be our sin but for the grace of Christ. The entire human race would be in ruin if Christ had not saved us, and you and I are a part of it. If the sin of the whole world was Adam’s, then it’s our sin. When we confess that, then we are ready to repent. Remember, the greater we realize the sin to be, the greater the joy of realizing our forgiveness from it.

* Mary Magdalene’s story tells us what faith is. This lady knew she had been possessed by “seven devils” which Jesus had cast out. “Seven” means all; therefore she saw herself as the “chief of sinners.” She knew she was no better than anybody else. She saw the sins of the whole world as hers. Discerning at last the full extent of her sin, she was ready to realize the full extent of her salvation. Her

heart overflowing with gratitude, she broke her alabaster flask of “very precious” ointment and anointed the feet of the Son of God and washed them with her tears. Jesus told her, “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace” (Luke 7:50). Jesus taught the lesson that the one who has been forgiven much loves much, but the one who thinks he needs only a little forgiveness, “the same loves little” (verse 47).

Are you ready to confess that your problem is those same “seven devils”? If you stop short of that full realization, you have not done what John says is the only secret of deliverance: “If we confess our sins [the whole lot!], He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). That includes that most awful sin of all: a hard-hearted religious unbelief.

It’s all Good News. You already have a Savior near at hand. He is the Lover of your soul. He has His hand on you now. Let Him lead you all the way. Welcome Him into your life and into your heart.

He gives you the Holy Spirit to guide you. You can’t go wrong unless you refuse His leading. “Your ears shall hear a word behind you saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it, whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left’” (Isaiah 30:21). That’s 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week service! Your Savior’s “office” is never closed, not even Christmas or New Year’s.