

## What is the gospel?

### Part 3: The process of salvation

In most buildings today, the emergency exits and the routes to them are supposed to be clearly marked. If one has wrong directions for an emergency exit, the results could be tragic in the case of an actual emergency. The correct exit and the route to get there are necessary for the health and life of the people in these buildings.

Spiritually speaking, the same is true. If people receive wrong directions as to the nature of their souls, as to the nature of God, and eternity – it is as if they have been directed to a dead end in the midst of a fire. The results are destructive. Sadly, this is no imaginary scenario. Millions of people are directed in the wrong direction and enter eternity without Christ. It is because they believe another gospel.

We're taking the time to see what the Bible calls the gospel. What is the message of salvation according to the Bible? We started out in Part 1 by laying the foundation with the **purpose** of salvation. We saw that God does what He does for His own glory – that even our salvation is rooted in that. We must make sure that when we share the Gospel, we are God-centred, not man-centred.

We then moved on in Part 2 to define the **Person** of salvation – Jesus Christ. We saw that He is God – God the Son. We also saw that He became a man and was fully human, while fully maintaining His deity too. We saw that He is Christ – the Messiah, which means He is Prophet, Priest and King. We understood that a case of mistaken identity in the spiritual realm is deadly. With that as our firm foundation, we move on in Part 3 to the **process** of salvation.

Now by process, we do not mean that salvation takes years. It is, in many senses, an event. We use the term to speak about the transaction that takes place so that a sinner is brought into the family of God. What is the process? What happens? What exactly must a human do? This is where the confusion comes in.

Must one just believe? Believe and be baptised? Believe, be baptised, and be filled with the Spirit? Some say one must speak in tongues to be saved. Or others add a life of faithful obedience, otherwise nothing is secure. What actually happens in salvation – what is God's work, and what is man's responsibility?

In many ways, this is a mystery, and no human can presume to fully explain. In other ways, it is a multi-faceted diamond where God elects, justifies, sanctifies, forgives, adopts, redeems, regenerates, is propitiated, glorifies, imputes righteousness, and countless other things. It is a transaction where the believer receives far more than they bargained for.

But there is a core of this multi-faceted diamond in which we can try to summarise the process in salvation. We must start by asking what it is that God wants to accomplish. As we explored in Part 1 of this series, He wants to do far more than populate heaven. He wants a transaction that will glorify Him now and forever. And as we saw in Part 2, this occurs when His image is reflected through the saved sinner:

*For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.*

**Romans 8:29**

God will in fact be glorified for eternity by our very presence in heaven – we will be trophies of God's grace – every believer a unique picture of God saving a hell-bound sinner and clothing them in righteousness.

**Ephesians 2:6-7** tells us God “...hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: That in the ages to come He might shew the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.”

God wants not only to change the eternal destiny of a person; He wants to change the person themselves. If God were not interested in this, He would surely call a believer to heaven the moment they believed. But He does not. He generally leaves them on Earth for a while to effect a change in them which will glorify Him – indeed, glorify Him forever.

In short – His purpose is to have His life take up residence in the person, to reflect Him now, and then later, to perfect that reflection for eternity. In other words, God wants us to have eternal life. But here is where people get mixed up: Eternal life is not heaven – eternal life is the life of Christ Himself taking up residence in us. Read these verses carefully:

*And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.*

**1 John 5:11-12**

*And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.*

**John 17:3**

*Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live...*

**John 11:25**

*Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.*

**John 14:6**

See, eternal life is not a place. It is not even primarily a measure of the length of the life. Eternal life speaks of the quality of a life. Only God is eternal, and to have eternal life is to have His life abiding in you. Eternal life is profoundly a quality of life – a state of spiritual life – where the dead soul has been regenerated to know God through Jesus Christ.

Now the next question to ask is this, if God wants to have His life come in and reign in us, what is stopping this from occurring? We know that God is all-powerful, and nothing stops Him, but what is preventing the life of God from existing naturally in a person? **Isaiah 53:6** sums it up: *“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*

“Our own way” – perhaps the shortest and simplest description of what the Bible calls sin. It is to say to God, ‘Not Thy will, but mine be done.’ **Isaiah 59:2** explains the results: *“But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear.”* **Romans 3:23** puts it another way: *“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”*

Sin is a human seeking life, happiness and fulfilment outside of God. He seeks it in himself, in God’s gifts, but always in unbelief of God as the source, in ingratitude toward God, in proud rebellion against God’s laws. The first one who did this was Lucifer, who in **Isaiah 14** is recorded as having said to God – *“I will...”* five times. He struck out for independence; he declared a will out of union with God’s. He wanted to find satisfaction outside of God. He believed being worshipped would be a greater thing than to enjoy God in worship.

Lucifer made a dark exchange – He forsook the glory of God as the source of his life to find it elsewhere. This is the essence of sin – and it is what is hostile to God’s life in us. God spoke of this in **Jeremiah 2:12-13**: *“Be*

*astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, saith the LORD. For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."*

The essence of sin is to pursue something other than God as our god. Whatever we look to for meaning, joy, sustenance, hope, satisfaction, pleasure, love – this thing becomes our god. Sin is sin because it is falling short of the glory of God, it is exchanging the greater – God – for the lesser – one of His gifts. Ever since Adam ate of the fruit, every man and woman born has had the natural inclination to follow Lucifer in rebellion to God. We fight against the will of God – we resist His life, we want no lordship over us except our own.

This is the state in which all people are found: *"As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one," (Romans 3:10)*. All are far from God. All have a selfish will, hostile to the life of God. All effectively sit on the throne of their own lives, usurping God's place.

Now as we can see, what God wants to accomplish, and what is hindering it, are profound enemies. It is not as simple as some Gospel presentations make out: 'You're a sinner, sin brings death, Jesus died for you – so you don't have to die – now pray this prayer and don't die.' That seems like a consequence-cleaner gospel – taking away what your sin has caused, but not dealing with the issue.

The issue is that God wants to have His life in you, and your sinful self-life inherited from Adam is sitting where He wants to sit. God seeks the glory from your life by being crowned as your highest hope, joy and love. Instead, sin sits there as the thing you look to for the promise of joy, hope and love. He seeks the throne of your life, directing all things as it should be, but a pretender to the throne – your self-life – sits there as a self-appointed prince, like Lucifer.

It's obvious that to resolve this situation, there can be no negotiation, no trade, and no mutual agreements. There will be a war, with death, victory and surrender. Here's how God did it, and still does it.

That sin, that rebellion, that self-life in man, is already on death row:

- God says **Ezekiel 18:20**: *"The soul that sinneth, it shall die."*
- **Romans 6:23** says: *"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."*
- **John 3:18** says: *"He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."*

Death is what is coming to the unrepentant rebel. All men are born idolaters – seeking joy out of things that can never satisfy; making gods out of things far inferior to God. One can see why God would be fully just to punish this with death. If God is infinitely worthy, and man prefers the cheap and worthless to the infinitely worthy, then sin is an infinite travesty.

This worthiness is another way of describing God's holiness. God's holiness is the perfection of all His attributes. Sin is the deviation from these – the seeking of things outside of God, in spite of God, in rebellion to God. Depending on how great God is, sin becomes as great for choosing it over Him. And God is infinitely great – therefore sin is infinitely wicked.

How do you punish infinite wickedness? With infinite punishment. That is why hell is described by Christ and the apostles as a real place of eternal torment, not of sudden annihilation. God's holiness does not allow Him to warp justice by overlooking sin. Therefore, every sin must end up being punished. That would mean every human should end up in hell, created for the devil and the fallen angels.

But God was not content to leave it so. His love compelled Him to open up a second chance to mankind. To save man and place His life within man, He needs to accomplish a miracle. He needs to reach into this rebel whose back is toward God, eradicate the rebellious heart inside him, pay the price for his sin which His own justice demands, and clothe him with righteousness, with the very life of Christ.

But the thing is: this rebel is not caged, tamed, pacified or trained to be respectable. He has to be killed. Death is not only the penalty for sin, it is the cure. God is not going to share His throne with a quiet rebel; He will defeat it entirely, and execute it. Sounds harsh, but I'm afraid that sin is like poison – not something we think we can dilute and play with till harmless. God's means for destroying sin is death. But if God were to merely kill each person, it would not solve the problem. It would merely be the just sentence for their sin.

So God did the unthinkable. He became a man, to be the only life perfectly acceptable to God. God the Son, Jesus Christ, was truly the second Adam, who fulfilled the law and perfect righteousness. He was now positioned to bear the sins of every man. He had no sin of His own, making Him a qualified sacrifice – one who would be the punishment of others' sin, and be the death of every man spiritually.

A person who wishes to be freed from sin must die. **Romans 6:7** says it plainly: *"For he that is dead is freed from sin."* Their own death will not suffice, though – but the death of Christ will. So for a person to be saved – they must by faith accept Christ's death as their own death. They see that their sin is worthy of death. They see the guilt of preferring things over God – of seeking to rob God of His glory by enjoying other things more than Him, by disobeying His commands. But then, they look in faith to the goodness of God in Christ.

Such a person looks to what Christ has done to take care of their sin problem, with its penalty and power. They accept Christ's death as their own. They die with Christ by faith. But this is not like the case of Barabbas. Jesus took Barabbas' place – and then Barabbas went on to live life any way he pleased. That is not what substitution means. Rather, it's like the thief on the cross, who figuratively died with Christ.

The attitude of the sinner who sees his need to die with Christ, who sees his sin as worthy of death, is called repentance. Realising my rebellion as wicked and futile, and knowing judgment is deserved – this is repentance. Such a person wants the end of his sin, rebellion and idolatry, and accepts the death and blood of Jesus as payment for their sin and as the power to end their rebellion.

Paul experienced this: *"I have been crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me,"* (**Galatians 2:20**).

But merely a death would be half a gospel. Imagine a doctor telling you that there was one cure for your terminal disease – death itself. He is right, only death will do the trick, for the disease will die with you. But what kind of cure will that be? It is only if there is life after that, that the disease has truly been beaten. Likewise in God's plan – when Jesus died, we died in Him, but that alone would leave us dead in our sin. **1 Corinthians 15:17** makes this clear: *"And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins."*

But there was a resurrection – new life in the place of the old. And so in the second part of the gospel – the old life is crucified with Christ, and Christ's life is resurrected in its place. A death and a resurrection. The old life is gone; Christ's life has come in to rule and reign. God's plan is accomplished – our hostile life out by death, His pure new life in by resurrection.

In salvation, I turn away from my old way of life, my rebellion, my idolatry, and I embrace all that Christ is for me – righteousness, peace with God, new life by faith. I look to Him to become my new life – my very life – what I depend on to live.

*For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if One died for all, then were all dead: and that He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again. Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more. Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.*

**2 Corinthians 5:14-17**

The gospel is a death and a resurrection. Read Romans 6, and see how Paul uses the two pillars of the gospel – death and resurrection – to teach holy living in a believer’s life. We sometimes lose sight of the resurrection in our gospel, but Paul says plainly in **1 Corinthians 15:1-4**: *“Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; ...how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures...”*

This attitude of a sinner wanting the life of God in place of His own rebellious life, wanting the life of God to save him and come in and dwell in him forever is called faith. It is placing our trust in God for Him to become our very life, our means of survival in this life and the next. Faith desires the righteousness of God in the place of our sin, which we come to hate.

And so God accomplishes what He purposed by the death and resurrection of His Son. As every sinner comes to the Son and asks Him to be their new life, God does the saving, co-crucifying and co-resurrecting of that sinner with His Son. The old is destroyed, the new is revived. There is a negative and a positive in the gospel – death and resurrection, repentance and faith. And just as Christ’s death and resurrection and two sides of the same process, so repentance and faith are two sides of the same plea by a sinner – to turn away from sin, and turn to Christ.

So the process of the Gospel is a painful one, but a necessary one for a return to God’s original design – man in submission and obedience to Him, with His life bringing out the man’s full potential to be all He was meant to be. The old dies, by accepting the death of Christ as his own death in repentance, and the new lives by receiving the resurrection life of Christ as this new life in faith.

By this, a number of things happen. Firstly, this process of God putting our old nature to death and giving us new life is known as regeneration. **Ephesians 2:4-5** says: *“But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved...)”* The word ‘quickened’ here means made alive or regenerated. God took those who were spiritually dead to Him, put their sin to death, and gave them eternal life.

*Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost...*

**Titus 3:5**

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...*

**1 Peter 1:3**

‘Born-again’ is a biblical phrase. It is not something that belongs to some fringe groups. This act of being born again is an event – something that happens when a believer places their repentant faith in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said it plainly in **John 3:3**: *“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

Secondly, when a person is saved, they are justified. This means that God declares them righteous. He looks at their crime of sin, and sees that they have accepted the punishment of Christ on their behalf, and so they are cleared – they are declared innocent before God. They are also reconciled to God. Even deeper than reconciliation – a family relationship is made. God adopts us into his family, giving us all the privileges that He gives to His Son Christ. We are treated as if we were natural born sons of God.

Add to this wonderful thought is the fact that we are forgiven. Forgiven – in a final sense. Our past, present and future sins are totally written off, like a debt paid by another. And not only are we forgiven, but Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. God looks at us in Christ. This means, according to **Romans 8:3-4**, that as we obey Him, depending on the Spirit, and His life is fleshed out in us, we fulfil the law. The law is fulfilled in Christ, and so it has no binding effect on us, but the righteousness of the law is performed by us as we live out our lives in obedience to Him.

This reminds us of another thing that happens as we are saved – we are sanctified. This means God sets us apart. He sets us apart from the world, from sin, from the unsaved. He sets us apart for His use alone. This sanctification is both positional, and also progressive. Another amazing truth that salvation brings is that God glorifies us. We understand that this will only finally take place in heaven, but it is so sure that Paul speaks of it in the past tense in Romans:

*Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.*

**Romans 8:30**

Paul speaks of us already seated in heavenly places. He tells us in **Philippians 3:20** that our citizenship is in heaven. Regenerated. Justified. Sanctified. Glorified. Adopted. Reconciled. Forgiven. What an amazing, multi-faceted diamond our salvation is! It is not simply 'pray a prayer after me and get a free ticket to heaven' – it is 'be reconciled to your Creator by acknowledging your rebellion, and turning to Him for mercy and forgiveness.' God gladly gives it.