

# In Defense of...God's Plan of Salvation

by Bert Thompson, Ph.D.

*"And Jehovah God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Genesis 2:7).*

Of all the living beings that dwell on planet Earth, one solitary creature was made "in the image of God." On day six of His creative activity, God said: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.... And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (Genesis 1:26,27).

Mankind was not created in the physical image of God, of course, because God, as a Spirit Being, has no physical image (John 4:24; Luke 24:39; Matthew 16:17). Rather, mankind was fashioned in the spiritual, rational, emotional, and volitional image of God (Ephesians 4:24; John 5:39-40; 7:17; Joshua 24:15; Isaiah 7:15). Humans were superior to all other creatures. No other living being was given the faculties, the capacities, the capabilities, the potential, or the dignity that God instilled in each man and woman. Indeed, humankind is the peak, the pinnacle, and the apex, of God's creation.

In its lofty position as the zenith of God's creative genius, mankind was endowed with certain responsibilities. Men and women were to be the stewards of the entire Earth (Genesis 1:28). They were to glorify God in their daily existence (Isaiah 43:7). And, they were to consider it their "whole duty" to serve the Creator faithfully throughout their brief sojourn on the Earth (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

## MAN'S PREDICAMENT: DISOBEDIENCE AND DEATH

Unfortunately, the first man and woman used their volitional powers—and the free moral agency based on those powers—to rebel against their Maker. Finite man made some horribly evil choices, and so entered the spiritual state biblically designated as "sin." The Old Testament not only presents in vivid fashion the entrance of sin into the world through Adam and Eve (Genesis 3), but also alludes to the ubiquity of sin within the human race when it says: "there is no man that sinneth not" (1 Kings 8:46). Throughout its thirty-nine books, the Old Covenant discusses time and again sin's presence amidst humanity, and its destructive consequences. The great prophet Isaiah reminded God's people: "Behold, Jehovah's hand is not shortened that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, so that he will not hear" (59:1-2).

The New Testament is no less clear in its assessment. The apostle John wrote: "Every one that doeth sin doeth also lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). Thus, sin is defined as the act of transgressing God's law. In fact, Paul observed that "where there is no law, neither is there transgression" (Romans 4:15). Had there been no law, there would have been no sin. But God **had** instituted divine law. And mankind freely chose to transgress that law. Paul reaffirmed the Old Testament concept of the universality of sin (1 Kings 8:46) when he stated that "all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

As a result, mankind's predicament became serious indeed. Ezekiel lamented: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (18:20a). Once again, the New Testament writers reaffirmed such a concept. Paul wrote: "Therefore, as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin; and so death passed unto all men, for that all sinned" (Romans 5:12). He then added that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Years later, James would write: "But each man is tempted, when he is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed. Then the lust, when it hath conceived, beareth sin: and the sin, when it is full-grown, bringeth forth death" (1:14-15).

As a result of mankind's sin, God placed the curse of death on the human race. While all men and women must die physically as a result of Adam and Eve's sin, each person dies spiritually for his or her own sins. Each person is responsible for himself, spiritually speaking. The theological position which states that we inherit the guilt of Adam's sin is false. We do not inherit the **guilt**; we inherit the **consequences**. And there is a great difference between the two. Consider, as an illustration of this point, the family in which a drunken father arrives home late one evening, and in an alcoholic stupor severely beats his wife and children. His spouse and offspring suffer the consequences of his drunkenness, to be sure. But it would be absurd to suggest that they are guilty of it! The same concept applies in the spiritual realm. People die **physically** because of Adam's sin, but they die **spiritually** because of their own personal transgression of God's law. In Ezekiel 18:20, quoted earlier, the prophet went on to say: "the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him."

## THE REALITY OF SIN

The reality of sin is all around us, is it not? Consider the ways in which mankind has been affected by sin.

**Physically**—Disease and death were introduced into this world as a direct consequence of man's sin (Genesis 2:17; Romans 5:12).

**Geophysically**—Many features of the Earth’s surface that allow for such tragedies as earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, violent thunderstorms, etc. can be traced directly to the Great Flood of Noah’s day (which came as the result of man’s sin, Genesis 6:5ff.).

**Culturally**—The numerous communication problems that man experiences, due to the multiplicity of human languages, are traceable to ambitious rebellion on the part of our ancestors (Genesis 11:1-9).

**Psychologically**—Man generally is without the peace of mind for which his heart longs (look at the number of psychiatrists in the Yellow Pages of any telephone book!). Isaiah opined: “They have made them crooked paths; whosoever goeth therein doth not know peace” (59:8; cf. 57:21).

**Spiritually**—By sinning, man created a chasm between himself and God (Isaiah 59:2). Unless remedied, this condition will result in man’s being unable to escape the “judgment of hell” (Matthew 23:33), and in his being separated from God throughout all eternity (Revelation 21:8; 22:18-19).

The key phrase in the discussion above is that man’s sin will result in an eternal separation from God **unless remedied**. The question then becomes: Has God provided such a remedy? Thankfully, the answer is: Yes, He has.

## GOD’S REMEDY FOR SIN

Regardless of how desperate, or how pitiful, man’s condition has become, one thing is for certain: God had no **obligation** to provide a means of salvation for the ungrateful creature who so haughtily turned away from Him, His law, and His beneficence. The Scriptures make this apparent when they discuss the fact that angels sinned (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6), and yet “not to angels doth he give help, but he giveth help to the seed of Abraham” (Hebrews 2:16). The rebellious creatures that once inhabited the heavenly portals were not provided a redemptive plan. But man was! Little wonder the psalmist inquired: “What is **man**, that thou art mindful of **him**?” (Psalm 8:4, emp. added).

Why would God go to such great lengths for mankind, when His mercy was not even extended to the angels that once surrounded His throne? Whatever answers may be proffered, there can be little doubt that the Creator’s efforts on behalf of sinful man are the direct result of pure love. As a loving God (1 John 4:8), He acted out of a genuine concern, not for His own desires, but instead for those of His creation. And let us be forthright in acknowledging that Jehovah’s love for mankind was completely **undeserved**. The Scriptures make it clear that God decided to offer salvation—our “way home”—even though we were ungodly, sinners, and enemies (note the specific use of those terms in Romans 5:6-10). The apostle John rejoiced in the fact that: “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us” (1 John 4:10).

God’s love is universal, and thus not discriminatory in any fashion (John 3:16). He would have all men to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4)—**if they would be** (John 5:40)—for He is not willing that **any** should perish (2 Peter 3:9). And, Deity’s love is unquenchable. Read Romans 8:35-39 and be thrilled! Only man’s wanton rejection of God’s love can put him beyond the practical appropriation of heaven’s offer of mercy and grace.

### God’s Plan In Preparation

Did God understand that man would rebel, and stand in eventual need of salvation from the perilous state of his own sinful condition? The Scriptures make it clear that He did. Inspiration speaks of a divine plan set in place even “before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:20). After the initial fall of man, humankind dredged itself deeper and deeper into wickedness. When approximately a century of preaching by the righteous Noah failed to bring mankind back to God, Jehovah sent a worldwide flood to purge the Earth (Genesis 6-8). From the faithful Noah, several generations later, the renowned Abraham was descended, and, through him, eventually the Hebrew nation would be established. From that nation, the Messiah—God-incarnate—would come.

Some four centuries following Abraham, the Lord, through His servant Moses, gave to the Hebrews the written revelation that came to be known as the Law of Moses. Basically, this law-system had three purposes. First, its intent was to define sin and sharpen Israel’s awareness of it. To use Paul’s expression in the New Testament, the Law made “sin exceeding sinful” (Romans 7:7,13). Second, the law was designed to show man that he could not, by his own merit or efforts, save himself. For example, the Law demanded perfect obedience, and since no mere man could keep it perfectly, all stood condemned (Galatians 3:10-11). Thus, the Law underscored the need for a **Savior**—Someone Who could do for us what we were unable to do for ourselves. Third, in harmony with that need, the Old Testament pointed the way toward the coming of the Messiah. He was to be Immanuel—“God with us” (Matthew 1:23).

Mankind was prepared for the coming of the Messiah in several ways. **Theophanies** were temporary appearances of God in various forms (see Genesis 16:7ff.; 18:1ff.; 22:11ff., etc.). A careful examination of the facts leads to the conclusion that many of these manifestations were of the preincarnate Christ. In addition, the Old Testament contains **types** (pictorial previews) of the coming Messiah. For example, every bloody sacrifice was a symbol of the “Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Finally, there are more than 300 **prophecies** containing countless minute details that speak of the coming Prince of Peace. These prophecies name the city in which He was to be born, the purpose of His earthly sojourn, and even the exact manner of His death. The simple fact is, Jehovah left no stone unturned in preparing the world for the coming of the One Who was to save mankind.

### God’s Plan In Action

One of God's attributes, as expressed within Scripture, is that He is an absolutely **holy** Being (see Revelation 4:8; Isaiah 6:3). As such, He simply cannot ignore the fact of sin. The prophet Habakkuk wrote: "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong" (1:13). Yet another of God's attributes is that He is absolutely **just**. Righteousness and justice are the very foundation of His throne (Psalm 89:14). The irresistible truth arising from the fact that God is both holy and just is **that sin must be punished!**

If God were a cold, vengeful Creator (as some infidels wrongly assert), He simply could have banished mankind from His divine presence forever, and that would have been the end of the matter. But the truth is, He is not that kind of God! Our Creator is loving (1 John 4:8), and "rich in mercy" (Ephesians 2:4). Thus, the problem became: How could a loving, merciful God pardon rebellious humanity?

Paul addressed this very matter in Romans 3. How could God be just, and yet a justifier of sinful man? The answer: He would find someone to stand in for us— someone to receive His retribution, and to bear our punishment. That "someone" would be Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He would become a substitutionary sacrifice, and personally would pay the price for human salvation. In one of the most moving tributes ever written to the Son of God, Isaiah summarized the situation like this:

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and Jehovah hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all (53:5-6).

Jehovah's intent was to extend grace and mercy freely—through the redemptive life and death of His Son (Romans 3:24ff.). As a member of the Godhead, Christ took upon Himself the form of a man. He came to Earth as a human being (John 1:1-4,14; Philippians 2:5-11; 1 Timothy 3:16), and thus shared our full nature and life-experiences. He even was tempted in all points, just we are, yet He never yielded to that temptation (Hebrews 4:15).

But what has this to do with us? Since Christ was tried (Isaiah 28:16), and yet found perfect (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:22), He alone could satisfy heaven's requirement for justice. He alone could serve as the "propitiation" (atoning sacrifice) for our sins. Just as the lamb without blemish that was used in Old Testament sacrifices could be the (temporary) propitiation for the Israelites' sins, so the "Lamb of God" (John 1:29) could be the (permanent) propitiation for mankind's sins. In the gift of Christ, Heaven's mercy was extended; in the death of the Lamb of God, divine justice was satisfied; and, in the resurrection of Christ, God's plan was documented and sealed historically forever!

## **MANKIND'S APPROPRIATION OF GOD'S GIFT OF SALVATION**

As wonderful as God's gift of salvation is, there is one thing it is not. It is not **unconditional**. Mankind has a part to play in this process. While the gift of salvation itself is free (in the sense that the price levied already has been paid by Christ), God will not **force** salvation on anyone. Rather, man must—by the exercise of his personal volition and free moral agency—do something to accept the pardon that heaven offers. What is that "something"?

In His manifold dealings with mankind, Jehovah has stressed repeatedly the principle that man, if he would be justified, must live "by faith" (see Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). Salvation has been available across the centuries, conditioned upon God's foreknowledge of the atoning death of Christ upon the Cross at Calvary (see Galatians 4:4-5; Hebrews 9:15-17; 10:1ff.). Yet "living by faith" never denoted a mere "mental ascent" of certain facts. Instead, "living by faith" denoted **active obedience**.

Faith consists of three elements: (1) an acknowledgment of historical facts; (2) a willingness to trust the Lord; and (3) a wholehearted submission (obedience) to the divine will. Further, it should be remembered that faith has not always—for all men, in all circumstances—required the same things. It always has required obedience, but obedience itself has not always demanded the same response.

For example, in God's earliest dealings with men, obedient faith required that those men offer animal sacrifices at the family altar (Genesis 4:4). Later, God dealt with the nation of Israel, giving them the Law at Mount Sinai (Exodus 20). Under that Law, animal sacrifices continued, along with the observance of certain feast days and festivals. Acceptable faith, under whatever law that was then in force, demanded obedience to the will of God.

The Scriptures are clear that the "obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5; 16:26) is based on the Word of God (Romans 10:13), and that both the faith and the obedience are demonstrated by **action**. Hebrews 11, in fact, devotes itself to an examination of that very concept. "By faith" Abel **offered**. "By faith" Noah **prepared**. "By faith" Abraham **obeyed**. "By faith," Moses **refused**. And so on. Even the casual reader cannot help but be impressed with the heroes of faith listed in Hebrews 11:32-40, and the **action** they took because of their faith. Writing by inspiration, James observed that faith, divorced from obedience, is dead (James 2:26). What, then, is involved in this "obedience of faith" in regard to salvation? What must a person **do** to be saved?

Several critically important questions need to be asked here. First, where is salvation found? Paul told Timothy: "Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sake, that they also may obtain **the salvation which is in Christ Jesus** with eternal glory" (2 Timothy 2:10, emp. added).

Second, where are all spiritual blessings found? Spiritual blessings are found only “in Christ.” Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:3: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places **in Christ**” (emp. added).

Third, and most important, how, then, does one get “into Christ”? In other words, how does the alien sinner rid himself of his soul-damning sin? What “obedience of faith” is required to appropriate the free gift of salvation that places him “in Christ”?

## THE ROAD HOME: SALVATION THROUGH THE “OBEDIENCE OF FAITH”

The only way to find the “road home” to heaven is to follow God’s directions **exactly**. There are numerous things God has commanded that a person **do** in order to enjoin the “obedience of faith” and thereby receive the free gift of salvation. According to God’s Word, in order to be saved a person must do the following.

First, the sinner must **hear** God’s Word (Romans 10:17). Obviously, one cannot follow God’s commands if he has not heard them, so God commanded that people hear what He has said regarding salvation.

Second, one who is lost cannot be saved if he does not **believe** what he hears. So, God commanded that belief ensue (John 3:16; Acts 16:31).

Third, one who is lost cannot obtain salvation if he is unwilling to **repent** of his sins and seek forgiveness (Luke 13:3). Without repentance he will continue in sin; thus, God commanded repentance.

Fourth, since Christ is the basis of our salvation, God commanded the penitent sinner to **confess** Him before men as the Son of God (Romans 10:9-10).

However, this is not all that God commanded. Hearing, believing, repentance, and confession will not rid one of his sin. The overriding question is: How does one get rid of sin? Numerous times within the pages of the New Testament, that question is asked and answered. The Jews who had murdered Christ, and to whom Peter spoke on the Day of Pentecost when he ushered in the Christian age, asked that question. Peter’s sermon had convicted them. They were convinced that they were sinners, and desperately in need of salvation at the hand of an almighty God. Their question then became: “...brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). Peter’s response could not have been any clearer. He told them: “repent ye, and **be baptized** every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ **unto the remission of your sins**” (Acts 2:38). Saul, who later would become Paul, the famous apostle to the Gentiles, needed an answer to that same question. While on a trip to Damascus for the explicit purpose of persecuting Christians, Saul was blinded (see Acts 22). Realizing his plight, he asked: “What shall I do, Lord?” (Acts 22:10). When God’s servant, Ananias, appeared to Saul in the city, he answered Saul’s question by commanding: “And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and **be baptized, and wash away thy sins**” (Acts 22:16).

What, then, is the correct biblical answer regarding how one rids himself of soul-damning sin? The biblical solution is that the person who has heard the gospel, who has believed its message, who has repented of past sins, and who has confessed Christ as Lord must then—in order to receive remission (forgiveness) of sins—be baptized. [The English word “baptize” is a transliteration of the Greek word *baptizo*, meaning to immerse, dip, plunge beneath, or submerge (Thayer, 1958, p. 94).]

Further, it is baptism that puts a person “in Christ.” Paul told the first-century Christians in Rome:

Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3-4).

Paul told the Galatians: “For as many of you as were **baptized into Christ** did put on Christ” (3:27, emp. added). Little wonder, then, that Peter spoke of baptism as that which saves (1 Peter 3:21).

Numerous New Testament writers made the point that it is only when we come into contact with Christ’s blood that our sins can be washed away (Ephesians 1:7-8; Revelation 5:9; Romans 5:8-9; Hebrews 9:12-14). The question arises: **When** did Jesus shed His blood? The answer, of course, is that He shed His blood on the Cross at His death (John 19:31-34). Where, and how, does one come into contact with Christ’s blood to obtain the forgiveness of sin that such contact ensures? Paul answered that question when he wrote to the Christians in Rome. It is only in baptism that contact with the blood, and the death, of Christ is made (Romans 6:3-11). Further, the ultimate hope of our resurrection (to live with Him in heaven) is linked to baptism. Paul wrote of “having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Colossians 2:12). If we are not baptized, we remain in our sins. If we are not baptized, we have no hope of the resurrection that leads to heaven.

Baptism, of course, is no less, or more, important than any other of God’s commands regarding what to do to be saved (see Jackson, 1997). But it is **necessary**. And one cannot be saved without it. Is baptism a command of God? Yes, it is (Acts 10:48). Is baptism where the remission of sins occurs? Yes, it is (Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21).

Some, who no doubt mean well, teach that a person is saved by "faith only." In other words, people are taught simply to "pray and ask Jesus to come into their hearts," so that they might be saved from their sins. This teaching, though widespread, is completely at odds with the Bible's specific instructions regarding what one must do to be saved.

First, the Scriptures teach clearly that God does not hear (i.e., hear to respond with forgiveness) the prayer of an alien sinner (Psalm 34:15-16; Proverbs 15:29; Proverbs 28:9). Thus, the sinner can pray as long and as hard as he wants, but God has stated plainly how a person is to be saved. This makes perfect sense, since in John 14:6 Christ taught: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one cometh to the Father but by me." The alien sinner cannot approach God on his own, and, as an alien sinner, has no advocate to do so on his behalf. That is one of the spiritual blessings reserved for Christians (Ephesians 1:3). Thus, it is fruitless for an alien sinner to pray to God to "send Jesus into his heart." God does not hear (i.e., hear to respond to) such a request.

Second, the Scriptures plainly teach that man **cannot be saved by faith alone**. James, in his epistle, remarked that indeed, a man may be justified (i.e., saved), but "not only by faith" (James 2:24). This, too, makes perfect sense. As James had observed just a few verses earlier: "Thou believest that God is one; thou doest well; the demons also believe, and shudder" (James 2:19). It is not enough merely to believe. Even the demons in hell believe, but they hardly are saved (see 2 Peter 2:4). It is obvious, therefore, that mere faith **alone** is insufficient to save.

Also, where, exactly, in the Scriptures does it teach that, in order to be saved, one is to "pray to ask Jesus to come into his heart"? Through the years, I have asked many within various religious groups this question, but have yet to find anyone who could provide a single biblical reference to substantiate such a claim. Salvation is not conditioned on prayer; it is conditioned on the "obedience of faith." Saul, as Christ's enemy-turned-penitent, prayed earnestly. But the fact remains that his sins were removed ("washed away") only when he obeyed God's command, as verbalized by Ananias, to be baptized. Prayer could not wash away Saul's sins; the Lord's blood could—at the point of baptism (Hebrews 9:22; Ephesians 5:26).

## CONCLUSION

The biblical message—from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22—is that mankind is in a woefully sinful condition, and desperately in need of help in order to find his way "back home." A corollary to that message is that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 18:23; 33:11), and genuinely desires that all should be saved (John 3:16). But in order to be saved, one must do **exactly** what God commanded, in **exactly** the way God commanded it. When a person hears, believes, repents, confesses, and is baptized for the forgiveness of his sins, that person becomes a Christian—nothing more, and nothing less. God Himself then adds that Christian to His Son's one true body—the church. The child of God who remains faithful unto death (Revelation 2:10) is promised a crown of life and eternity in heaven as a result of his faith, his obedience, God's mercy, and God's grace (John 14:15; Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 1:5). What a joyous thought—to live the "abundant life" (John 10:10b) with a "peace that passeth understanding" (Philippians 4:7) here and now, and then to be rewarded with a home in heaven in the hereafter (John 14:2-3). What a joyous thought indeed!

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