

The Gospel Explained

The most important question a person can ask and strive to answer is, *How can I be saved?* The Bible gives us a clear and simple answer to this question—in short, a person is saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in and because of Christ alone, and all of this is for the glory of God alone. This brief essay accomplishes two things. First, it explains the gospel message as simply as possible. Second, it provides the reader with a number of verses which teach us the way of salvation.

One could go so far as to say that the biblical way of salvation is as easy as your ABCs. In fact, we can use this insight to outline the biblical gospel:

A: All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

B: Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

C: Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and appeared to his twelve disciples.

These three basic points are loose quotations of biblical passages, and give an adequate summary of the way in which a person can be saved. In order to have a salvation experience one must first acknowledge one's sin, along with one's total inability to save oneself from the consequences of sin (i.e., eternal separation from the living and true God). Secondly, one must acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ as the only adequate Savior of humankind, and then trust or believe in him alone for one's salvation. Finally, one must acknowledge and trust or believe in what Christ did to accomplish our redemption; namely, he died for our sins, he was buried, and he rose again on the third day, and he even appeared to his earliest followers so that they could know that he really is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

We offer the following verses proving that, according to the Bible, simple faith or trust in the person of Christ will bring anyone into an eternal, saving relationship with the God of the universe.

All have sinned. The first step in establishing a relationship with God is to acknowledge your sin before him. As we will see, Scripture is clear that those who will not acknowledge their sin before God will not be saved. Some may wonder why this step is necessary. Maybe the following illustration can help: have you ever had a friend betray you in some way—maybe it was even a girlfriend or boyfriend? You knew that he/she had betrayed you. He knew that he had betrayed you. You continued to see each other from time to time, and you continued to be kind to that person. However, despite the fact that you were “friendly” with each other, it is clear that there was no longer any real relationship of friendship between the two of you. You wonder why the person will not “fess up” to his/her betrayal. And you notice that your former friend's lack of courage to acknowledge the wrong done has put quite a bit of distance between the two of you. Now, maybe you've never had an experience like this before, but surely you can see why a failure to acknowledge a breach of trust will inevitably lead to a relationship's coming to an end.

If what I have said is true with respect to human relationships, how much more is this true when we turn our attention to God and the way he relates to us. Humans are imperfect, so we all need to go to one another from time to time and ask for each others' forgiveness. But God is morally perfect. And if our sins against each other separate us from one another, how much more will our sin against God separate us from him?

But if all of this is true, then it surely makes sense that our first step in establishing a relationship with God is to acknowledge the fact that we are sinners—deserving the infinite displeasure of God. Please do not misunderstand this first step—it is not to be taken lightly! Do not flippantly say to yourself, “Yea, I'm a sinner. But God will forgive me 'cause that's his job.” God is under no obligation to redeem you. Your sin, because it has separated you from God, has rendered God absolutely free to accept or reject you. You must appreciate the fact that God would remain infinitely pure and perfect even if he decides to leave you in your sin and not redeem you! You do not deserve his mercy. Therefore, God is free to either show

mercy towards you or give you what you deserve (i.e., an eternity in which you experience his infinite wrath and displeasure).

It is sometimes suggested that, when the Scriptures exhort us to fear God, such is merely a way of saying that we should revere and respect him. But, while this is true as a general point, the foregoing comments should make us weary of leaving the issue there. The fear of God must include being genuinely afraid of his wrath. Those who have not tasted the goodness of God's mercy must come to grips with the fact that they are facing nothing less than a wrathful God who will judge them at the end of their lives. The sinner ought to be terrified at such a prospect, especially when the biblical warnings concerning a future judgement are brought to the sinner's attention! The question, of course, is this: does the Bible really teach us that we are all sinners, deserving nothing short of an eternity in hell where we experience the eternal and all-consuming wrath of God?

Our sins have separated us from God, and our refusal to acknowledge our sin to him only compounds the problem. As the Scriptures teach us, we have all sinned, our sins have separated us from God and cause us to deserve his eternal displeasure, and God refuses to help us as long as we refuse to acknowledge our sin:¹

... for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks [Gentiles] are all under sin; as it is written:

“There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless, there is none who does good, there is not even one. Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness; their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known. There is no fear before their eyes.”

Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh shall be justified in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin.

... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3.9b-20,23)

Therefore, to the one who knows *the* right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin. (James 4.17)

Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who *continually* does good and who never sins. (Ecclesiastes 7.20)

All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way. (Isaiah 53.6a)

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1.8)

That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting *and* wickedness, *as well as* deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride *and* foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man. (Mark 7.20-23)

Thine eyes are too pure to approve evil, and Thou canst not look on wickedness *with favor*. (Habakkuk 1.13a)

¹ All quotations of Scripture are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*.

But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden *His* face from you, so that He does not hear. (Isaiah 59.2)

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness ... And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; *they are* gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them. (Rom 1.18,28-32)

But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgement of God, WHO WILL RENDER TO EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. (Rom 2.5-8)

When I kept silent *about my sin*, my body wasted away
Through my groaning all day long.
For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was drained away *as* with the fever heat of summer.

Selah (Psalm 32.3-4)

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. A good philosopher will tell you that to believe in something is to have a positive cognitive attitude towards that thing (or proposition regarding that thing). So, for example, to believe that there is a God is to have a positive mental attitude towards the proposition “God exists.”

Biblically, there is a little more to “faith” or “belief” than just a positive mental attitude. In fact, biblical and saving faith involves three aspects: (a) *knowledge*—a basic understanding of who God and Jesus are, as well as what Jesus Christ did for our salvation; (b) *assent*—a positive attitude towards God and Christ, as well as the provision made for our redemption; (c) *trust*—wholly relying upon Christ as your own and only Savior. To illustrate, imagine yourself going to a “skydiving school” for the first time (I certainly remember my first time!). When you walk in the classroom, you have a vague *knowledge* about what you’re in for, and, as time in the classroom increases, your knowledge about planes and parachutes and how they work increases. Then you go outside and watch others as they land on the ground after jumping out of a plane that’s 3,000-5,000 feet in the air. During this time you begin to *assent* to the proposition “If I jump out of the plane, the parachute will surely save me (at least, if I am wearing one).” But it is not until you put on the parachute, climb into the plane, are taken several thousand feet in the air, and then choose to jump out that you are able to say you truly *believe* or *have faith* or *trust* in the parachute’s ability to save. The move from assent to trust is the movement of the soul—a movement from believing *that* there is a God and *that* Jesus is the unique Son of God to believing *in* God and *in* his unique and only Son. It’s one thing to assent to a proposition (e.g., “the parachute will save me” or “God exists” or “Jesus is the Son of God”), it’s another thing to wholly rely upon or trust a person (e.g., “I am now placing complete trust in the parachute to save me” or “I am wholly relying upon God, as he is revealed in Christ, to save me from the wrath I completely deserve”).

The Bible offers us bad news. It tells us that we are sinners who (all of us) deserve the undying wrath of God to be poured out on our souls. But, and thanks be to God for this, the Scriptures also offer us gospel—i.e., good news. They tell us that all we need to do is place our faith in Christ—we need only rely upon God, as he has revealed himself in Christ and his work of redemption—and we will be saved from the wrath to come.

We will look at verses which teach this truth in a moment. But, before doing that, let's move on to discuss the redemptive work of Christ, which is the heart of the gospel message.

Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised, and appeared to his disciples. God is righteous and just—i.e., he is holy, morally pure and perfect. As such, he cannot overlook sin. The sinner, therefore, must be punished for the things he has done. Because he cannot change who he is, God has a choice. He can, if he wants to, send everyone to hell. To send everyone to hell is the just thing to do, for doing so would simply be giving everyone what they deserve.

Thankfully, God has chosen not to do this—rather, God has decided to provide a way of salvation that is sufficient to save everyone who has ever lived; namely, Christ and his work of redemption. Jesus Christ is the only person in human history who never committed a single sin. He fulfilled God's moral law perfectly. At this point Christ has a choice; namely, he can get what he deserves—which is an eternity with God in heaven—or he can lay his life down for human sinners like you and me. Jesus chose to do the latter. He, a totally innocent man, chose to receive the punishment we sinners deserve. We owe a debt to God that we cannot pay; Christ paid a debt to God that he did not owe. His death on the cross opens up the door for us, for it allows us to spend an eternity with God. He died for our sins, according to the Scriptures.

Thankfully, the story does not end there. Christ was raised from the dead. Jesus did not deserve to die. He deserved life. By raising him from the dead, God was declaring Christ to be completely innocent of any crime he was accused of committing. God was, by raising Jesus from the dead, declaring that his Son was wholly just, righteous, and pure. In short, Jesus was justified (declared righteous) by works so that we could be justified (declared righteous) by faith. By placing our faith in Christ and his completed work, we receive the redemption provided for us. And, the moment we trust Christ as our Savior, we are declared righteous—i.e., we are justified and saved—by the true and living God. Thus, in Christ's redemptive work there is a glorious exchange. We give him our sin and condemnation, and he gives us his righteousness and justification. I cannot think of better news to give to anyone! Christ has died, and Christ has risen, and by placing our simple faith in him we have eternal life.

Thankfully, Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection from the dead. This gracious act was human confirmation that our gospel is not based in myth, but is based upon history. Christianity is a faith based upon fact! And, because it is factual, it is trustworthy. Christ should be trusted in because he is true—or, as he himself said, he is Truth itself!

The following verses tell us that Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised from the dead, and appeared to his disciples; thus, simple trust in him and his completed work results in salvation:

And they [Paul and Silas] said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household." (Acts 16.31)

We *are* Jews by nature, and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified... I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness *comes* through the Law, then Christ died needlessly. (Gal 2.15-16,21)

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received,

that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,
and that He was buried
and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,
and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. (1 Cor 15.3-5)

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3.16-18)

Therefore, if any man is in Christ, *he is* a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all *these* things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Cor 5.17-21)

He who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised for our justification. (Rom 4.25)

Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of the parched ground; He has no *stately* form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hid their face, he was despised and we did not esteem Him. Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well being *fell* upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.... But the Lord was pleased to crush *Him*, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself *as* a guilt offering, He will see *His* offspring, He will prolong *His* days, and the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hand. As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see [light]² and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities. (Isaiah 53.1-6,10-11)

Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Gen 15.6)

What shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.” Now, to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom the Lord reckons righteousness apart from works:

“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven,
And whose sins have been covered.
Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord
will not take into account.” [Psalm 32.1-2]

For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

² Most translations leave the object here untranslated—or, for the sake of clarity, insert the word “it” here (cf. NASB). The reason for this is that the Hebrew word אור (meaning “light”) is missing from most Hebrew manuscripts. However, it is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and so we insert it here.

But if it is by grace, then it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we also have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. (Rom 4.1-8; 3.28; 11.6; 5.1-2)

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. (Eph 2.8-9)

At this time Jesus answered and said, "I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and intelligent and didst reveal them to babes. Yes, Father, for thus it was well pleasing in Thy sight. All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son, except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and YOU SHALL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS.³ For My yoke is easy, and My load is light." (Matt 11.25-30)

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Rom 8.1)

Jesus said ..., "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this? (John 11.25-26)

We could go on quoting verses. But, if nothing else, the reader should walk away with the conviction that the Bible clearly teaches us that our sins have separated us from God, but God has graciously provided us with a way of redemption; namely, Christ, who died for our sins and was raised again for our justification, so that simple faith or trust or reliance upon him as our own and only Savior results in the gift of eternal life.

If, at this time, you earnestly desire an eternal love relationship with the living God, I suggest you pray for God to forgive you of your sins right now. The following is a suggested prayer. Note here that these words are not a magical formula. It is far more important that you come to God with a sincere heart, trusting in Christ alone for your salvation, than that you repeat the words of this prayer verbatim. Here is our version of the "sinner's prayer:"

Dear Heavenly Father, I come to you confessing that I am a sinner. I have done many things that I should not have done, and I have not done many things that I should have done. For this reason I am wholly deserving of your infinite wrath. Thank you Father, for sending your one and only Son to redeem sinners. I acknowledge that the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross for human sinners, that he was raised on the third day, and that he appeared to his disciples as the Risen Savior. I believe that these are events that really happened. I now trust in Christ and his work of redemption to save me. Thank you, Father, for saving me through Christ.

For it is Jesus' name that I pray. Amen.

³ Here Jesus is alluding to Jer 6.16.