

Reckonings

Reckon what an earthworm thinks
about a bird
singin' in the mornin'
'fore breakfast?

About as impressed as an oyster is
with the golden streaks of sunset—
that shuts itself inside
the only world it knows.

If worms were just a little smaller,
like amoeba bugs,
it wouldn't matter anyway,
since they'd never feel a thing.

Caught between knowin' too much
and not quite enough,
it don't even know
what it don't know.

Reckon what we don't know
we don't know?

Reckon what
knowin' it
would be like?

—Harry Lee Poe

HOW JESUS DEALS WITH LIFE'S REAL ISSUES

God did not merely create the world and leave us to our own devices. He has continuously sought to have a relationship with people and has taken the initiative in communicating what he is like and what makes for the good life. Sin spoils life for people and offends God. The offensiveness to God is not the sort of the old cavalier, knight, swashbuckler, or Southern gentleman who easily took offense at anything that might be construed as insulting. These characters responded by challenging the offender to a duel. The destructiveness of sin is outrageous and offensive. Whether doing harm to people that God loves or ravaging his creation, sin offends God. God will not allow it to continue. Those who turn their sinfulness in on themselves are to be pitied, but very few people succeed in isolating the effects of their sinfulness to themselves. They hurt others in the process. Some manage to hurt millions. People ought to know better. God does not stand idly by as a detached observer. The story of human history is the story of how God has judged and condemned every kingdom and culture. They have all been brought down, and we can assume that our culture will suffer the same collapse. Yet the destruction of a society does not solve the problem of sin. It merely stops one extreme form of it for the time being.

Though sin offends God, God determined to solve the problem of sin, because he loves people. In the fullness of time, God entered into time and space so that he could show us what a real human life was like. To do this, he lived out a complete life. He did not merely tell us how to live; he showed

us. In order to be a true human, he experienced the two greatest traumas of human existence. He was born and he died.

We know little of the life of Jesus until the last three years of his life, when he engaged in his public ministry of teaching and healing. During that time, however, the Gospels make clear that Jesus felt tempted not to have a true human life. Satan tempted him not to be subject to hunger, not to be subject to physical pain and the laws of nature that constrained people, and not to have to play by the same rules as everyone else (Matt. 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13). He was tempted not to face suffering and death (Matt. 16:21–23; Mark 8:31–33). He explained to his disciples that his mission on earth involved going to Jerusalem, where he would be rejected by the leaders, turned over to the Romans, suffer, and die. Even as Jesus explained his death, however, Peter insisted that it must not happen to him. Jesus responded with one of his most powerful statements recorded in the Gospels: “Get behind me, Satan!” (Matt. 16:23). Satan had not taken over Peter’s body. Rather, Satan used Peter’s suggestion that Jesus could avoid death to tempt Jesus not to go through with the plan. His last night on earth, Jesus labored in prayer over the ordeal he was about to face, because he did not want to go through with it. He was not crazy. He did not want to be tortured to death. It does no good to say that it was all right because he was the Son of God. He was also the son of Mary. He had a frail, human body, just like the rest of us. His will was at odds with the Father, and his temptation was to avoid the final chapter of what it means to be human (Matt. 26:36–44; Mark 14:32–40; Luke 22:39–44). For someone who is truly human, the only way into this life is to be born; the only way out is to die. In the end, Jesus chose to die according to the will of the Father as he said in his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane as Peter, James, and John drowsed in and out of sleep: “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Matt. 26:39).

The experience of temptation was as much a part of the plan of God as the death. Without the true experience of temptation, Jesus would not have known what it means to be human. Without that experience he could be the righteous, awesome, and holy Judge, but he could not be the compassionate, loving, and merciful Savior. He could not be the true go-between for God and humanity if he had not been like other humans “in every way” (Heb. 2:17). He had to experience both perspectives in order to bring both sides together. Because of the experience of temptation, Jesus “is able to

help those who are being tempted” (v. 18). He is also sympathetic with human weakness (4:15).

In some quarters today, the idea that Jesus died for our sins is viewed as a barbaric notion. I understand the concern because it was presented to me in a conversation with a man who was searching for something to believe in twenty-five years ago. For him, the cross was the scandal of Christianity. He said that he could never love a God or trust a God who would send his Son to die for someone else. He said it was like a father who would throw his child under a bus. In that moment I understood something I had always accepted about the gospel. I heard myself saying, “No, it’s like a father who sees his child wander into the street in the path of an oncoming bus. He rushes into the street to be struck by the bus himself, because ‘God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself’ (2 Cor. 5:19 KJV).”¹ The cross is offensive to those who do not believe that the Father and the Son are one. If the Father and the Son are not one, then we could say that God killed Jesus. Because the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father, however, we cannot make such divisions. God did not make a deal with Jesus to forgive the world if Jesus would die. God determined to enter into the world and suffer death in order to save the world.

We sometimes forget that a sacrifice is supposed to be exactly that. If parents sacrifice in order for their children to have certain advantages, it means that the parents have given up something precious to them. They have gone without. It has cost them dearly. It cost God dearly to love us, but by his sacrifice, he ended blood sacrifice. All over the world, people once worshiped the divine by offering living sacrifices. Go back far enough, and almost every culture practiced human sacrifice with a ritual meal that involved eating the victim. In many cultures, the victim was the firstborn child of the family. This form of worship was the abomination of Canaanite religion for which God condemned their culture to oblivion and used the Hebrew slaves of Egypt to execute his judgment so there would be no doubt that it was a judgment from God. The Aztecs of Mexico and the Incas of Peru practiced human sacrifice to their gods. We sometimes forget that the religion of Europe horrified Julius Caesar, who had a pretty strong constitution. Druid worship, from France to Ireland to the Scandinavian countries, involved drinking the blood and eating the body of the firstborn child.

1. I used this story in more detail in *Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 29–30, 40–41.

The idea of sacrifice has gone from a universally accepted norm to a universally repugnant notion because the sacrifice of Christ ended sacrifice and rendered it reprehensible.

The idea of a sacrificial ritual that places the blame on an innocent bystander in order to exonerate the guilty flourishes in our culture, and probably every culture. The famous Dreyfus case in nineteenth-century France was an example of placing the blame for incompetence in the French army on a Jewish officer, because he was expendable. We find the same sort of behavior in every kind of institution. Recently, some Chicago Cubs fans gathered to blow up a baseball. It was a ceremony designed to destroy the "curse" that prevented the Cubs from winning the World Series. The crowd demanded a sacrifice. The mob wants someone to blame, and the leaders want a scapegoat. Such is the nature of sin that intrudes into religion.

Until the time of Moses, everyone in Palestine offered their own sacrifices to their own gods, wherever they pleased. Sacrifice was a way to bribe the gods and make a deal with them. With the Law of Moses, however, sacrifice ceased to be universal. Only the priests could offer the sacrifices, and they could only do it at the temple. Rather than encouraging sacrifice, the Law of Moses radically restricted sacrifices. With the sacrifice of Jesus, God ended blood sacrifice once and for all (Heb. 7:27; 9:12, 26, 28; 10:10). Jesus fulfilled the meaning of the old sacrificial system. As Jesus shared the Passover meal with his disciples for the last time the night he was arrested, he gave new meaning to the ancient observance and the meaning of the Passover lamb.

For more than twelve hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Jews had observed the Passover. The meal observed the anniversary of the night that the angel of death passed over the homes of all the faithful children of Israel who put the blood of a lamb on the lintel and doorposts of their houses. The Passover meal remembers how the freed slaves did not take the time for their dough to rise, but baked their bread without leaven because they were in such a hurry to leave the land of their oppression. As Jesus shared the unleavened bread with his disciples at his last Passover, he spoke words that had never been spoken at the Passover meal. As he broke the bread he said, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). He then gave his disciples the cup of the Passover and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (v. 20).

With these words, Jesus instituted the new covenant about which the prophets had spoken. With the coming of the new covenant, the old covenant was fulfilled, completed, and finished. When his disciples had marveled at the magnificence of the temple that the wicked king Herod had built, Jesus said that their generation would live to see its destruction such that not one stone would be left standing on another (Luke 21:6, 32). His word came true in A.D. 70 when an army under Titus captured Jerusalem at the end of the Jewish War and destroyed the temple. At the time the sacrificial system and the priesthood of the Law of Moses came to an end. In essence, the religion of the Old Testament and the kingdom of Israel, with all its ritual and ceremony, came to an end, but the faith of Abraham continued.

Jesus did not merely come to earth to die; he came to die *for us*. The death of Jesus solved the problem of sin in all of its dimensions. The laws of the old covenant revealed the problem of sin, but the promise of the new covenant is to rescue the world from sin. In explaining the problem of sin to the Romans, who did not have the benefit of knowing the Law of Moses or the words of the prophets, Paul said that “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). The new covenant involves a gift: a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The death of Jesus Christ was not an expression of the wrath of God, but of the love of God. Paul explained to the Romans that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (5:8). God did not have to be persuaded to forgive people. God never had a conversation with his Son and said that he would not forgive people unless the Son would die in their place. That would be polytheism. God is not divided. The Father does not have a different attitude toward the world than the Son. Instead, God resolved to deal with sin himself. God the Son entered the world to make things right, and this involved a dreadful death. He was always willing to forgive, but forgiveness was never the problem. God can forgive, and sin still remains. Something had to be done about the problem of sin itself.

God the Father continued to be present throughout the physical universe and the spiritual realm, but God the Son was uniquely embodied in the human life of Jesus of Nazareth. God the Holy Spirit provided the eternal continuity between the Father and the Son. Jesus explained to Nicodemus that eternal life is not a commodity that God takes away from some people at the last judgment. Rather, God desires to bestow life upon all who are

destined to die. Since sin causes death, Jesus attacked sin and death head on, but these are located in people. To destroy sin, it would seem necessary to destroy people. The solution to the problem of evil would seem to be the eradication of people. This might be so if sin were the true nature of people, but God did not make people sinners by nature. The sinful nature is a perversion of the original innocence of people. Through his death, Jesus Christ separated people from their sin and restored them to God. But how?

The idea of a substitutionary death can be found in almost all cultures.² This transcultural concept lies at the heart of what Jesus did to save people from sin. It is not enough to say that he died in my place or that he took my punishment. This instrumental approach does not go far enough. He did take my place, but the nature of the substitution is more profound, as Paul explained to the Romans:

We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. (Rom. 6:2–10)

The substitution is a double substitution that works both ways. Christ takes my death, yet I die with him. He gives me his life, yet I live in him. As Paul told the Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the

2. See René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). God, who is not bound by time or space, bridges the gap between the crucifixion of Christ two thousand years ago and my experience of it today. The death of Jesus only has benefit for those who join their lives to Christ. In that moment, they enter into the life of Christ by way of his death that makes us “at one” (atone) with God.

When Paul told the Romans that “the wages of sin is death,” he did not say that Christians get an exception. Everyone must die (Heb. 9:27), but Christ changed forever the nature of death. The difference belongs to those who die “in Christ.” After the last Passover meal, before the guards came to arrest him, Jesus had a long conversation with eleven of his closest followers. He told them that he was like a vine and they were like branches (John 15:1–8). Branches have no life of their own except as they relate to the vine, which provides them with their life. Cut off from the vine, the branches wither and dry up. Branches bear the fruit because the vine provides them with the source of life. Throughout the New Testament, the benefits of salvation contain one qualification. They only come to those “in Christ.” Salvation is a relationship. Eternal life and all the other benefits come as by-products of that relationship. The primary benefit of salvation is a relationship to God through Jesus Christ.

On the cross, Jesus reconciled people to God. He was, in his body of flesh, the coming together of God and humanity in one person. Those who are joined to Christ by a willing submission to him are joined into this reconciliation, as Paul explained to the Colossians:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation. (Col. 1:19–22)

Jesus Christ drew into himself on the cross all those across the ages who have confidence in him as the Son of God. The Gospels describe the crucifixion as a time of physical darkness for three hours as Jesus hung on

the cross from noon until three in the afternoon. As Christ drew into himself the sinfulness of the world with all of its darkness that veils our view of God, Jesus experienced for the first time what it feels like to walk in darkness. The darkness of the world's sin veiled his own view of his Father to the extent that it felt as though the Father had abandoned him. He cried out with a quotation from the Psalms: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). Some people take this to mean that the Father actually forsook his Son because he had taken on sin and God cannot look on sin. Actually, God can look on anything he wants to look on. Otherwise, he would not have seen anything in this corner of the galaxy for a very long time. God is intimately acquainted with all of the intricacies of sin, and none of it passes his notice. It is sin that cannot look upon God. As Christ bound a sinful humanity to himself, he became overwhelmed by the darkness, but the light broke through. Calm returned. He spoke again to the Father. "It is finished" (John 19:30). Then he cried out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Then, he died.

Jesus spent a few hours late Friday afternoon, all day Saturday, and a few hours of Sunday in the realm of the dead. He did not engage Satan in hand-to-hand combat. The Son of God has no opponents who can stand against him. Besides, the realm of the dead is not Satan's dwelling place. It has no more charm for him than for us. Satan as ruler of hell is a remnant of Egyptian and Greek mythology where the underworld had a ruler. Satan busies himself among the living. The realm of the dead, prior to the visit there by Jesus, was quite a different experience than the usual picture drawn up by popular fiction. First of all, the faithful dead and the unfaithful dead all resided in the realm of the dead. Abraham, Moses, and David all had their place among the dead in a shadowy existence. Cain, Jezebel, and Goliath also dwelt among the dead. The difference between the two classes of people was how they experienced death. For Abraham and the faithful dead, it was known as Paradise or the Bosom of Abraham (Luke 16:22; 23:43 KJV). The unfaithful dead experienced death as torment. Stripped of physical existence, they had nothing left but what their spiritual life had become through a lifetime of aggressive separation from God. When Jesus rose from the dead, he led a host of captives in his train and emptied Paradise forever (Matt. 27:52–53; Eph. 4:8–10; 1 Peter 3:18–20; 4:6).

In his suffering and death, Jesus bore the sins of the world as he incorporated individual believers into himself. Within himself sin was purged as it

encountered the Holy One. Death, however, could not hold him and when he rose from the dead, all those in him shared his resurrection. Now those in Christ may experience the first death of the body, but they are already in Christ and pass from life to life. In the meantime, Christ dwells richly in all those whom he has incorporated into himself. He takes our death and we take his life. We have ready and immediate access to God through him who now reigns as Lord of lords over all creation. He hears our prayers and by his Spirit within us, he prompts, teaches, and guides us through life. In this way, he deals with the continuing habits of sin that linger in the mind once we have come to Christ. What follows is a lifetime of growing closer to God and gaining mastery over the temptation to sin.

Saved to the Uttermost

Sin affects us in many different ways—not just one way. We often think of salvation, however, only in one respect, as forgiveness. This situation may be a result of the Protestant Reformation when the big question for the Reformers was “On what basis are we justified or made right with regard to sin?” The Reformers insisted that we are justified on the basis of faith. They were right. Justification by faith is clearly taught in Scripture, but there is more to salvation than forgiveness. Over the last two thousand years, other aspects of salvation have played a more central role in the life of the church as people dealt with different spiritual issues. At times the issue revolved around how to be free from the power of sin. At other times it involved how to inherit eternal life. The list goes on and on. Notice that the issues are not mutually exclusive. Freedom from sin is not an alternative theory of salvation; it is an additional benefit of salvation.

When the book of Hebrews talks about “such a great salvation” (2:3), what does it mean? The New Testament mentions a number of different dimensions of salvation. The variety of dimensions of salvation does not mean that some people are saved one way and some people are saved another way. Instead, it means that when we are saved, all of these dimensions of salvation happen, even if a person is not aware of it until years later. In addition to referring to “such a great salvation,” Hebrews also says that Jesus “is able to save completely those who come to God through him” (7:25). The King James Version translates this passage as “he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him.” Just as we experience

the effects of sin in many different ways, the salvation that Christ offers extends to all of these situations and continues into the future. The New Testament writers speak at length about the varied ways that Jesus saves those who come to God through him.

Redeemed from the Chain of Sin

Redemption is one of the most prominent aspects of salvation, but it is different from justification. Paul develops the idea of justification in his letter to the Galatians, but he also explains to them the idea of redemption:

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out “*Abba, Father.*” So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir. (Gal. 4:4–7)

Notice what Paul says. He does not say that Christ came to forgive, but that he came to redeem. Christ came into the world to redeem those under the Law. Paul refers to the condition of slavery in this passage. A number of places in the New Testament discuss redemption from the chain of sin, or from the slavery of sin.³ Redemption deals with a problem entirely different from forgiveness. All people have sensory knowledge of the world unless they have some physical disability that prevents it, but what we know through seeing is different from what we know through hearing. What we know through hearing is different from what we know through touching. In similar fashion, redemption differs from forgiveness, but both are aspects of salvation.

What does it mean to be redeemed? Redemption belongs to the terminology of the marketplace, specifically the pawnshop. Someone’s property is somewhere else, and not in his or her possession. This is the same terminology that God used of the children of Israel when they were slaves in Egypt. Through the prophet Isaiah, God reminded the people of the covenant that he had redeemed them from their bondage to Pharaoh. To re-

3. For a helpful discussion of several of the major dimensions of the death of Christ and their significance for salvation, see Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

deem something does not necessarily mean that you pay someone else for what is yours. No one has the right to hold what belongs to God any more than a thief has a right to hold my wallet. Neither Pharaoh, nor Satan, nor anyone else has the right to possess something or someone that belongs to God. The Bible also says that God is going to redeem us, but without money. Do you remember how he redeemed Israel—his property, his people, the ones to whom he had the right of possession and no one else? What did he pay Pharaoh to get Israel back? Plagues! Ten plagues, and then the deluge that drowned the Egyptian army.

The point is not that God pays to get what is his. Rather, God does whatever is necessary to recover his property. If we are in slavery but are meant to be God's children, God will come and bring his children back. We have been redeemed by Jesus Christ. God considers us his own, and he stopped at nothing to redeem the ones he loves, even entering this world in the flesh. As soon as you come into this world, you are susceptible to it. People can do anything to you. He came into a world in which they could nail him to a cross, and he shed his blood to redeem or to reclaim his own.

The terminology also suggests that people whom Christ has redeemed are no longer slaves to sin. They have some other options.

Forgiven of the Blame of Sin

The feeling of guilt occurs when we realize that we are to blame for doing something wrong. It is our fault, and we know it. Religion may soothe our consciences and make us feel better, but it does not take away the blame as Hebrews teaches about the old ceremonial law with its rituals and sacrifices: "This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper" (9:9). In other words, religion cannot rid the conscience of guilt. You can go through the ritual, but the conscience of the worshiper remains unaffected by ritual and ceremonies. Jesus Christ came to do something about the guiltiness or feeling of blame: "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!" (9:14). The feeling of guilt can stop us in our tracks. God wants us to move on.

Cleansed of the Stain of Sin

Salvation from sin also involves another kind of cleansing. In John's vision of heaven found in Revelation, this dimension of cleansing occurs:

Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?"

I answered, "Sir, you know."

And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." (Rev. 7:13–15)

This is the idea of being cleansed from the stain, the pollution, and the defilement of sin. The aspect of us that cannot appear in the presence of God is removed. Cleansing removes every trace that would be incompatible with the nature of God, that would be offensive to God, or that would bar us from the presence of God. The sin does not exist anymore.

Freedom from the Reign of Sin

Jesus Christ has freed us from the reign of sin. This experience of sin corresponds to being under the control of a despot or a totalitarian dictator. In the New Testament it would have been Caesar who had total control and authority over everything within the empire. Paul explained this idea to the Romans so that they could understand the purpose of the laws of the old covenant:

The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom. 5:20–21)

Paul means that sin has reigned over our lives the same way Caesar reigned over the Roman Empire. Notice that in this passage he is writing to the Christians in the city of Rome. They saw up close what it meant to have the tyrant Nero reigning over people. Jesus Christ has freed us from that kind of dominion; we do not have to live in subjugation to sin. We may obey our

sinful desires, but we do not have to. To sin now, after being freed from the reign of sin, is a tragic thing.

Ransomed from the Captivity of Sin

A ransom involves something different from redemption. Redemption means recovering what belongs to you; ransom means putting yourself in the place of another. Today we think of being held for ransom. The purpose of kidnapping someone is to exchange them for something the kidnapper wants. The biblical idea of ransom involves the exchange of Christ for those held captive by their own sin. Jesus Christ became the ransom for the human race. He took our place, he entered our death, he bore our sin, and he ransomed us. Salvation involves an exchange, a prisoner exchange:

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time. (1 Tim. 2:5–6)

As our substitute who stood ransom for us, Jesus bore the death related to our sin and we will never endure what he endured.

Healed from the Pain of Sin

Jesus Christ has healed us from the pain of sin. The prophet Isaiah foretold this healing of the wounds of sin: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isa. 53:5).

The intriguing thing about most effects of sin is that we are only aware of them when we are experiencing them. Not everyone experiences the pain of sin, and you are blessed if you do not. But many people do experience the pain of sin as emotional pain. When we experience physical pain, we feel incredible relief when it is over. The idea is that even when there is pain connected with sin, Christ will heal the pain and you will get over it. For some people it is instantaneous. I have seen people suddenly healed of the pain. In these cases it usually involves an emotional pain connected with sin. For others, the pain may be so severe that it takes a while, but Christ does heal us of the pain connected with sin.

Empowered from the Impotence of Sin

The issue of empowerment has been a great theme in American society in recent years. So many people feel powerless, or helpless, in their life situation. One of the promises of Christ is that in salvation we shall receive power. He told the disciples, just before he ascended into heaven, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you" (Acts 1:8). To Timothy Paul wrote, "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7). We are able; we are no longer helpless. The very Spirit of God himself dwells in every believer. He has empowered us to live life.

Empowerment is a major thing we can easily take for granted. You can see the difference in the life of Peter, who was powerless the night Jesus was arrested. Yet on the day of Pentecost, he was able to stand up before a multitude of people whom he had feared would kill him just a few weeks earlier on the night when Jesus was arrested, and there he boldly proclaimed the gospel. He had the power to live that overcame the crippling experience of fear. Paul would pray, "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen" (Eph. 3:20–21). Notice the focus of what Paul says: the power at work within us. Christ Jesus empowers us by his Spirit to live above the impotence of sin.

Reconciled from the Alienation of Sin

The world today is a torn world. The world a thousand years ago was a world torn and alienated. The world three thousand years ago was just as torn. We have not changed a bit since the dawn of time. Look at Cain and Abel. They were brothers alienated from each other. Christ reconciles us to God and gives us the ministry of reconciliation. This sort of thing has particular meaning for families, for parents and children, for brothers and sisters. On a larger scale, however, it extends across social, economic, racial, and ethnic barriers. It is the will of God that we be reconciled to one another, but before he placed the expectation on us, he reconciled us to himself. Paul explained to the Corinthians:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. (2 Cor. 5:18–20)

Reconciliation is a gift of salvation. We are reconciled from the alienation of sin. We are reconciled to God, and God gives us the power, if we are willing, to be reconciled to other people.

Enlightened from the Darkness of Sin

Sin involves a darkening of the mind, but through the salvation Christ brings, we are enlightened from the darkness of sin.

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God. (John 3:19–21)

Jesus declared that he is the light of the world who enlightens our minds. He makes it possible for us to understand the difference between sin and righteousness. He makes it possible to begin to read Scripture and understand what God is saying to us. He makes our minds and our hearts to see the world in a different way, in a way that is enlightened by him. He is the light that shines in darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome him.

Regenerated from the Death of Sin

Sin kills like a cancer, but in salvation we are regenerated from the death of sin. We are born again; we are new creations in Christ Jesus. We tend to think that being forgiven of sin and being born again are the same thing, but they are entirely different. What happens in the courthouse and what

happens in the pediatric ward are two radically different kinds of things. I could sin, and God could say, "I forgive you." Then I hit seventy years old, and I die, that is it. The fact that you are forgiven does not mean that you have eternal life. It means you can die knowing that God does not hold anything against you.

Not only does he forgive us our sins; he fills us with his Spirit and makes us his children. He changes our very nature from being children of the dust to children of heaven. We are born again. It is a marvelous thing. It is an incredible thing. I understand why Nicodemus was so thick that he did not understand it (John 3:1–16). If I were the first one to hear something like that, I would not have understood it either. The whole idea of being brought not only into the presence of God but into the family of God is unthinkable; and yet, that is what Jesus was explaining to Nicodemus. Salvation is not just the legal matter of sin being forgiven. Forgiveness pales in comparison to this incredible matter that God makes us his children. We are born again.

Found from the Lostness of Sin

We have observed earlier that Jesus told three little stories about lost things: a sheep, a coin, a son (Luke 15:3–32). Jesus explained those stories while having a meal with Zaccheus. People were saying, "Why in the world are you having a meal with Zaccheus?" Jesus said to them, "Today salvation has come to this house because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (19:10). In salvation, we are found from the lostness of sin. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way" (Isa. 53:6a KJV). We are lost. Every generation is a lost generation. It is a characteristic of every generation trying to find itself. Lost and out of place, you do not know your purpose. People do not fit into the universe until they are where they belong in their relationship to God. When you are there, you begin to find your place and know where you belonged all along.

Hope from the Despair of Sin

While under arrest, Paul spoke before Felix, the Roman governor. He said, "and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a

resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked” (Acts 24:15). In salvation we receive hope in place of the despair of sin. Sin eventually leads to despair and futility. For many, it is much later; for some it is sooner. On the basis of the resurrection, Paul had hope. He spoke of it to Felix, to the Athenians (17:31–32), before Agrippa (26:22–23), and in his letter to the Ephesians in his great prayer (Eph. 1:19–20). The resurrection is a concrete basis for hope. Jesus did not need to rise from the dead for his own benefit. He could have zipped right on back to heaven. It was not for him that the resurrection occurred; it was so we would know that he had conquered darkness, sin, and death. Having done that, there is nothing he cannot conquer. There is no darkness in any life that he cannot conquer. He is our hope.

Forgiven from the Transgression of Sin

Salvation involves more than forgiveness, but let us not suggest that forgiveness is a small matter. It is enormous:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. (Col. 2:13–14)

We have been pardoned from the transgression of our sin. The Bible speaks of forgiveness in many ways. It says that God forgets sin as though it had never been; he remembers it no more (Isa. 43:25). Now this is a remarkable thing. The God of glory, the omnipotent God who knows everything, apparently does not know any longer that I sinned. It sounds a bit like the philosophical puzzle: “Can God make a rock so big that he can’t move it?” The puzzle is one of the mental games we play. Yet, the God who knows everything will forget my sin, perhaps the same way I forget where I put my glasses. It is not there anymore.

Freed from the Prison of Sin

I am now more than fifty years old. When I was younger my beard was jet black. When I was younger I did not have spurs on the nape of my neck.

When I was younger I did not have a pulled muscle in my shoulder. When I was younger I did not have these knees that do not do what they are supposed to do. When I was younger I did not have to use reading glasses. I am going downhill fast. I am a prisoner of my body. We are all prisoners of our bodies. Some of us are in prison, while some of us seem to be in palaces, but only for a time. My body is a prison. I am restricted by it; I am limited by it. It will grow more and more constricting the older I get. Sin operates the same way. Sin is like a prison. We are held by it. We are constrained by it. It restricts us and Christ has opened the prison door. We are free. As Paul observed:

But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. (Gal. 3:22–23)

Conclusion

Why take up so much time and space talking about things most Christians already know? This chapter does not contain anything new or original. The average Christian will have read and possibly thought, “Oh yes, well, I know that.” For the last hundred years, evangelical Christians have tended to present only the forgiveness of sins when we have presented the gospel. What I want to suggest is that we all know people for whom the forgiveness of sins or the experience of guilt is not their big spiritual issue. They do not know what this great salvation means for what preoccupies them.

Some years ago, I preached a series of revival meetings at a rural Kentucky church near Fort Knox. During the week I went with the pastor to visit people who had visited the church recently. We went to see a man who had been a top sergeant in the army—a man used to getting things done, having authority—a tough man. He was struggling with this issue of salvation. He believed it all, almost. He had come to the point where he believed Jesus was the Son of God, there is only one God, God made the heavens and the earth, God speaks to us through the Bible, he hears prayer, Jesus died for our sins, he arose from the dead, he ascended to the right hand of God

where he rules over the universe, he is coming again at the end of time to judge the quick and the dead—and he believed he was going to hell. His response baffled me, because he had “the list” checked off. At that point in my life, I had a rather rational approach to faith and thought that if you just believe all these things about Jesus, you are saved. He believed all those things, but he was not saved. He knew he was not saved and I realized he was not saved. I could not figure it out. The pastor I was with asked the man, “Don’t you want to be born again?” The man said, “Yes, I do.”

“Well, Jesus forgives us of our sins and you can go to heaven,” the pastor explained. He went through the third chapter of John several times, explaining how Jesus forgives us from our sins. Then it struck me: John 3 is not about how Jesus forgives us of our sins. It is about how the Holy Spirit of God makes us new creatures. Now the issue for this top sergeant was that he did not want to become a Christian until he knew he could “do it.” He did not want to be a hypocrite, and he knew he was powerless to live the Christian life. I explained to him that when we trust Jesus Christ, his Spirit comes into our life and he begins to live his life through us. He produces in us the character of his life, called the “fruit of the Spirit.” He changes us from glory unto glory. I explained that no one in history has ever lived the Christian life except Jesus Christ. He has promised to live his life through those who trust him. Salvation is not a thing to be grasped but a relationship with God by which “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). When the man understood what it means for the Holy Spirit to regenerate a person and begin sanctification, he was gloriously saved. Christ taught me something in that moment. Christ accomplished so much in salvation, and his message of salvation touches every spiritual issue.

The things that weigh upon people are the spiritual issues of life. Jesus Christ stands ready to save all who will turn to him.