

CHAPTER ONE

THIS GREAT SALVATION

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The week before I was scheduled to speak at a marriage retreat, my wife Carolyn mentioned a specific deficiency in our relationship. Actually, it was my own selfishness. I had become increasingly preoccupied with my studies and had failed to spend time with her in meaningful communication. Still, I felt so pressured to complete preparations for the retreat and the following Sunday message that I didn't respond or change. I thought I had a legitimate excuse.

But in the midst of my preparations, as I was developing the point that selfishness is a root problem in many marriages, I felt the Holy Spirit broadside me with all the force of Nathan's prophecy to King David: "Thou art the man!" My guilt was obvious. So I called Carolyn immediately to ask for her forgiveness. As I expected, she forgave me without hesitation. (Being married to me has given her lots of practice in that area.)

As I began to study again, though, I experienced the painful and all too familiar reality of accusation. An insistent thought interrupted my efforts: "What qualifies you to teach about marital intimacy in light of the fact that you've violated what you will be teaching? You even violated it while you were *preparing* it!"

I had no problem identifying the source of the guilt that threatened to paralyze me. The challenge was, how do I shake it?

Another scenario had confronted me just a week or two before. Apparently a number of the appliances in my home had conspired to break down simultaneously.

Meditate on Hebrews 10:19-24. What gives us the confidence to stand in God's holy presence?

“ A wise man has said that your Christian life is like a three-legged stool. The legs are doctrine, experience, and practice. In recent years many Christian people have not kept these three together.¹

”

— J.I. Packer

(Have you noticed how that happens? Why can't things break individually, in a sequence you can handle?) The vacuum cleaner broke. The microwave broke—a major disaster in my home. I have a hard time waiting 15 seconds for the microwave to nuke my food. Wait 15 minutes for the oven? No chance! In addition, it appeared that our heat pump was malfunctioning when we received our electric bill for twice the normal amount.

Before the week ended I faced one final surprise. Carolyn had gotten up early to jog. After stepping out of the house, she came back in and asked calmly, "Where's the car?" I just looked at her, unsure how to answer. *Where's the car?* I thought to myself. *It's in the driveway. That's where we put cars.* But it wasn't in the driveway. I waited a full 45 minutes before calling the authorities, fully expecting one of my friends to call and confess that it was a practical joke. The phone never rang. Later that day the police found my abandoned car miles away, intact except for the wheels. Stolen right out of my driveway!

How are we to respond to a nagging sense of guilt (accusation), combined with difficult and confusing circumstances (adversity)? You've probably experienced similar if not more serious things yourself. Too often we are

more aware of accusations than we are of God's grace; we're perplexed, even bitter during adversity rather than certain of God's sovereignty.

Please take a moment now to read Romans 8:28-39, before you proceed any further with this chapter. As incredible as it may seem, a solid grasp of the truths contained in these twelve verses will enable you to respond with a convincing "Yes!" to each of the questions in the box to the left. There's no more effective response to accusation and adversity than this magnificent section of Scripture.

For Further Study: If ever anyone had a right to complain about life's troubles, it was Job. Contrast his attitude before his revelation of God's sovereignty (Job 19:1-21) and after (Job 42:1-6).

1 For each of the questions below, put an "X" on that part of the scale that most accurately reflects your current condition.

Are you secure—not merely aware of, but consistently secure—in God's love for you? Are you amazed by God's grace?

←----->
No Somewhat Yes

Are you typically able to resist doubts and depression when experiencing trials?

←----->
No Somewhat Yes

Do You Know?

Two of the verses in our passage from Romans would qualify for any list of "Most Quoted" sections of the Bible:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (v. 28)

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? (v.31)

But let me submit something for your consideration. Too often I think we try to exhort and encourage each other with these verses without understanding the content of the two verses in between. It's a futile attempt, for unless we understand the context provided in verses 29 and 30, we can't fully appreciate the promises in verses 28, 31, and the passage that follows. Take a close look at these two pivotal verses:

For those God foreknew he also *predestined* to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also *called*; those he called, he also *justified*; those he justified, he also *glorified*. (v.29-30)

If you had shown up at my house on the day my car was stolen and my microwave was malfunctioning, you

could have legitimately counseled me to believe that "all things work together for the good." I hope I would have responded to this biblical truth. Likewise, you could have exhorted me to reject the guilt that remained after I asked Carolyn's forgiveness by reminding me, "If God is for us, who can be against us? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies." Again, I couldn't dispute the accuracy of this truth. But if not understood in context, these promises can do no more than bring

“ You have heard the adage, 'Ignorance is the mother of superstition.' Unfortunately, many people's theology is the crystallizing of ignorance more than the systematizing of God's revelation. They wander about in the theological dark, formulating doctrines that belong in the world of witch doctors. Therefore, we need to say more than that everyone has a theology when asked, Why theology? We need to distinguish between right theology and wrong theology. For theology is like a backbone. Right theology will have you walking straight and fit. Wrong theology will have you hunchbacked and paralyzed.²

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— James Cantelon

temporary change or relief. Their effectiveness is limited until we understand the doctrines contained in verses 29 and 30.

As we read Romans 8:28-39, it's clear that Paul was convinced of the things he wrote. He *knew* that all things were working together for good in his life, despite trials and suffering of a nature that we'll never encounter. (Paul defined "good" not in terms of personal pleasure and pros-

For Further Study:

How could the man who lived through the experiences recorded in 2 Corinthians 11:23-33 write Romans 15:13?

perity, but being conformed to the image of Christ.) He *knew* that God had justified him even when he experienced accusation. He *knew* that nothing—adversity, persecution, accusation, demonic harassment, or even death itself—could separate him from the love of Christ (v.35). What gave him such confidence and assurance? It was his intimate familiarity with these five crucial doctrines: fore-

knowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification.

That same degree of conviction and faith will fill you as you meditate on the content of verses 29 and 30. You will be able to respond with confidence, “*It is God who justifies,*” whenever the accusations occur. You will be able to say with certainty, “*All things are working together for good in my life,*” even though you may be experiencing circumstances that appear confusing, perplexing, and even contradictory to what you desire.

Paul drew his confidence from the five doctrines cited in Romans 8:29-30: foreknowledge, predestination (or election), calling, justification, and glorification. In these words we have a description of God’s sovereign, redemptive plan.

If you read carefully, you’ll notice that Paul uses the past tense when listing each of these doctrines (e.g. “And

those he predestined, he also called”). There’s nothing tentative or speculative about these statements. Each aspect of God’s redemptive plan is referred to as if it has already been accomplished in our lives. That’s the eternal perspec-

tive, as Bible scholar F.F. Bruce has noted:

The foreknowing and foreordaining belong to God’s eternal counsel; the calling and justifying have taken place in his people’s experience; but the glory, so far as their experience is concerned, lies in the future. Why then does Paul use the same past tense for this as he does for the other acts of God? Perhaps he is imitating the Hebrew use of the ‘prophetic past,’ by which a predicted event is marked out as so certain

2 Which of the following would be most likely to rattle your confidence in the care or character of God?

- Major financial problems
- Diagnosis of cancer
- Sudden death of a close friend or family member
- Sustained unemployment
- The thought of hell
- Other _____

“ The conviction that Christian doctrine matters for Christian living is one of the most important growth points of the Christian life.³

”
— Sinclair Ferguson

of fulfillment that it is described as though it had already taken place. As a matter of history, the people of God have not yet been glorified. So far as divine decree is concerned, however, their glory has been determined from all eternity.⁴

Meditate on Hebrews

11:1. Do you assess your justification on the basis of personal emotion and experience or God's promise?

I had an experience a number of years ago that may help to clarify all this. As a native of the Washington, D.C. area and an avid sports fan, I was more than a little interested in the 1988 Superbowl match-up between the Washington Redskins and the Denver Broncos. I was also more than a little cynical about the Redskins' ability to perform under pressure—especially after watching Broncos quarterback John Elway throw an 80-yard touchdown on the first play. I spent the first quarter of the game in a certain degree of torment, my body contorting with each play as if my nervous, involuntary spasms would improve the Redskins' performance.

In the second quarter, however, the Redskins broke the game wide open as Doug Williams threw an unprecedented four touchdown passes. My cynicism slowly disappeared and the team went on to win convincingly.

What's interesting is the way I watched the game as it was unfolding and the way I later watched the videotape of the game. The second time around was much different. I was relaxed. I was enjoying the food. I *knew* the outcome before I even started watching. No matter how much Broncos fans celebrated Elway's quick touchdown, I knew that within minutes

“ His sovereignty can never be successfully challenged. He's in charge. It's scary, but it also brings a deep sense of security. We're cared for.⁵

”

— James Cantelon

the domination would begin.

What's the point? God is as certain about the future as we are about the past. He wants to impart that certainty and security to us in the present. He wants us to *know* we have been justified, to *know* all things work together for good, to *know* nothing can separate us from Christ's love.

Do you know? Do you share Paul's certainty? Or do you still have doubts about the plan or providence of God?

God intends for us to embrace and enjoy his plan of redemption as an accomplished fact in our lives. Now it's true our glorification hasn't taken place yet—that won't happen until Jesus returns and we receive new bodies. But we are to live in the good of this plan that's being laid out for us, beginning in eternity past and extending into eterni-

Meditate on Isaiah

6:1-7. What prompted Isaiah to cry out, “Woe to me!” Have you ever seen yourself the way he did?

ty future. The impact on us in the present is that we can live both certain and secure that he who began a good work in us will bring it to completion until the day of Jesus Christ. When you understand foreknowledge (to the small degree that is possible), when you grasp election, when you appreciate call, when you benefit from justification, when you anticipate glorification, you realize that God is overwhelmingly, obviously *for* you. Nothing can separate you from the love of Jesus Christ! And even if your microwave nukes itself tomorrow or your car disappears, you can know that all things work together for the good because you love God and are called according to his purpose.

For the rest of our lives and throughout eternity we will be marveling at these aspects of God’s character and plan. How undeserving we are of his foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification! Though everything will be more understandable once we’re glorified with him, we will be no less in awe of our great salvation.

Let’s not wait for the end of the age, though. Exploring our great salvation *now* will make a huge difference in the way we respond to accusation and adversity as we serve the purpose of God.

The Power of Theology

A crucial transition occurs in Romans 8:31. Paul asks, “What then shall we say in response to this?” As it turns out, Paul has plenty to say in the next nine verses. And once we have acquainted ourselves with foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification, we’ll be able to respond to this great salvation with the intense conviction Paul exemplifies. Check this out.

God is for us (v.31). Could this be true? If you began this chapter unsure about God’s predisposition, wonder no more. *He is for you*. He has convincingly demonstrated that, as we’ll see in a few paragraphs. The basis for understanding whether or not God is for us is not subjective. Our emotional state is irrelevant. The objective, eternal fact of the matter is that God is for us.

Who can be against us (v.31)? This promise could easily be misinterpreted. Paul isn’t saying that no one will ever be against you. In fact, both he and Jesus guaranteed just the opposite! However, no one who is against you will ever ultimately be successful because God is for you. No adversary can successfully challenge his sovereignty.

For Further Study:

Authentic Christians will consistently draw flak and opposition from their society. Brace yourself by reading John 15:20-21 and 2 Timothy 3:12.

Consider the implications of this statement. Perhaps you are in a work situation where your boss appears to

“ God sometimes allows people to treat us unjustly. Sometimes he even allows their actions to seriously affect our careers or our futures viewed on a human plane. But God never allows people to make decisions about us that undermine his plan for us. God is for us, we are his children, he delights in us (Zep 3:17)...We can put this down as a bedrock truth: God will never allow any action against you that is not in accord with his will for you. And his will is always directed to our good.”

— Jerry Bridges

have something personal against you. Maybe he has even promoted others despite the fact that you were most qualified. That can be a very difficult test. So what do you do in that situation? You could begin looking for a new job, or go home and relieve your stress by watching tropical fish for a while. But there's a better way: Remind yourself that the sovereign God is for you. No matter what your employer does, Almighty God is for you and his purpose for your life will not be frustrated.

If you can comprehend this, I guarantee that you will walk into your workplace tomorrow with a different attitude. Rather than resenting or resisting your employer, you'll be motivated to *serve* him or her! Such a dramatic transformation can only take place if you have grasped foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification. A right understanding of the doctrines of grace will forever change the way you view and respond to circumstances. Rather than taking revenge on your adversaries, you'll be able to love, pray for, and serve them.

Not even Satan can successfully oppose us. His power and authority tend to be overrated, anyway. We should be aware of him and maintain a certain degree of respect for his devices, but he is a created being. He cannot do anything without receiving permission from God. And listen—God is not indifferent to your situation. He has chosen you. He knows you by name. He is for you.

God gave his own Son for us (v.32). If you need proof that God is for you, look no further than the Cross. I cannot imagine what pain the Father must have experienced when he heard Jesus cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He forsook his own Son so that we might know him as Father and never be forsaken ourselves. What further demonstration do we need? That bloody form hung there on the Cross to make this eternal proclamation: “I AM FOR YOU!”

For Further Study:

How should we respond to feelings and thoughts (including accusations) that contradict the promises of God's Word? (See 2 Corinthians 10:4-5)

3 Using an NIV translation of the Bible, fill in the missing blanks from Revelation 12:10:

“Now have come the _____ and the _____ and the _____ of our God, and the authority of his _____. For the _____ of our brothers, who _____ them before our God _____ and _____, has been _____.”

**Meditate on
1 Corinthians 15:3.**

What significance did Paul attach to the crucifixion when presenting the gospel?

“ Justification has eschatological implications. It means that the verdict which God will pronounce over us on the Day of Judgment has been brought into the present. We therefore do not need to fear the Judgment Day; we who believe in Christ have already crossed over from death to life.⁷

— **Anthony Hoekema**

No one can bring any charge against those God has chosen (v.33).

You may be among those who know the torment of accusation. Past sins and failures relentlessly come to mind. No matter how many times you confess your sin, the memory of what you’ve done returns. But verse 33 is a legally binding statement: “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.” The holy and just Judge of all has rendered a verdict that cannot be reversed. He has declared that because of the substitutionary sacrifice of his Son, you are now justified before him. Every time you hear accusations,

affirm and declare that you have been justified by the finished work of Christ.

Who is he that condemns (v.34)? As liberating as it is to shake off demonic accusations, of ultimate importance is the fact that God himself will not condemn us. On that day when every knee bows before the judgment seat of Christ, countless multitudes will hear the horrific, irreversible words, “I never knew you. Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” God doesn’t *desire* to say this to anyone. He has put the Cross squarely in our path so that we can be spared these dreadful words. But those who have stubbornly gone around it, who have refused to submit to it, will be sentenced to eternal torment. Yet because you

have received Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice, no one can successfully bring a charge against you—not only in this lifetime but also at that critical moment when you stand before the judgment seat of God.

There’s no more effective way to fight condemnation than to focus on the Cross. If you’re lacking assurance or acceptance, fill your

thoughts, your heart, and your worship with the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is interceding for us (v.34). In addition to the

wonder of his willing death on our behalf, our Lord prays for us from his authoritative position at the Father's right

4 Write down the one problem or situation that's troubling you most right now.

Doesn't it encourage you to know that Jesus himself is praying for your needs at this very moment?

hand. He's not passively waiting for the end of the age, occasionally looking at his watch. Nor is he simply relaxing and receiving the sacrifice of our worship and service. He spends your entire life-time interceding for you—by name.

Doesn't it encourage you to know Jesus himself is praying for your needs at this very moment?

Nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ (vv.35-39). When Paul says nothing, he means *nothing*. Trouble. Hardship. Persecution. Famine. Danger. Death. None of these

can come between us and our Lord's love.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Ro 8:38-39).

When pounded by accusation or hounded by adversity, we can feel separated from God's love, as if he has abandoned us.

“ Nothing in the expanses of space (nor height, nor depth) or in the course of time (nor things present, nor things to come), nothing in the whole universe of God (nor any other creature) can sever the children of God from their Father's love, secured to them in Christ.⁸

”
— F.F. Bruce

An understanding of foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification delivers us from the unbiblical and unhelpful dependence on our fluctuating emotions at that time.

I know a man in England who could have reacted to his circumstances by charging God. I met Henry years

ago at a conference. He is a respected Bible teacher and author in England and a man of proven character. In our interactions over the years I've been impressed with the kindness and care he consistently demonstrates.

During a recent visit to England I learned that Henry's wife had a serious illness and wasn't expected to live more than six months. I was surprised to see them present at the conference. Even more surprising was the joy so evident in their facial expressions. Almost unbelievable was

**Meditate on Philip-
pians 1:21.** How does
this view of death
compare with the
world's view?

the way they were reaching out to other people. Instead of secluding themselves in self-pity, they were continuing to serve as normal. I was deeply affected.

Henry and I met at breakfast one morning during the conference. "C.J.," he said, "I'm sure you know what's happening with my wife. I've sought God, I've seen him heal many people, but I have no word that she'll be healed." I didn't know what to say. I was thinking to myself, *How can I respond? The next time I see him, his wife won't be with him.*

As it turned out I didn't need to say anything, because for the next 15 minutes Henry shared with me an invaluable lesson from Scripture and Church history on the subject of death. He quoted Charles Spurgeon, who described being most aware of God's glory when at the bedside of a dying saint. He also cited this statement made by John Wesley of an earlier generation: "Our people die well."

Henry's sorrow was evident. He made no attempt to conceal his grief. But he was convinced that death could

“ How then does the Christian view death? He learns to see it in its proper perspective. He does not lightly and superficially dismiss it. Nor does he allow his life to be paralysed by the fear of it. He recognizes that death is an enemy, but he rejoices in the assurance that not even death can separate him from the love of Christ.”

— Sinclair Ferguson

not separate him or his wife from the love of Jesus Christ. Decades of studying and teaching the great truths of foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification had convinced them of God's sovereignty and love. They weren't afraid. They were secure. As Henry stood up and left I commented to a friend, "That's the power of

understanding the doctrine of grace to change someone's life and sustain them in the midst of adversity."

At another point in the conference I was standing behind Henry as he worshiped. He turned back to me and said, "I'm going through my library and I have select books for certain men that I want to pass on to other generations. I'm going to be sending you a book." Not only was he prepared for his wife's death, but Henry was laboring to equip the next generation of leaders.

Don't feel sorry for him. I was the one all broken up inside. There he was, worshiping with a soft smile on his face. Why wasn't he bitter, depressed, complaining, or withdrawn? How could he minister joy to people in the midst of such deep, personal sorrow? Because Romans

8:38-39 was engraved on his heart: He knew that nothing could separate him from the love of Christ.

As the truths about this great salvation penetrate your heart, the result will be an ability to respond to accusation and adversity knowing and declaring that if God is for you no one can successfully oppose you, that he has justified you, and that nothing can separate you from his love.

If this book attempted to explore all five doctrines highlighted in this first chapter—foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification—it would be several hundred pages longer. (Actually, we would still be in the process of writing it!) We have opted to use the next six studies to focus on just one: the magnificent doctrine of justification by faith.

As you work through these pages, please don't be intimidated by the theology and doctrine you will cover. This stuff is full of life...and it will change your life. You will be awe-struck by the gift of justification that Jesus secured for us at the Cross. You will become convinced that God is for you, that all things are working together for good in your life, and that no one ultimately can oppose you with any degree of success. How overwhelming! And how totally undeserved. Truly this is amazing grace. ■

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What's your single biggest fear?
2. An understanding of our great salvation is the perfect remedy for two common ailments. What are they? (Page 4)
3. Have you ever blamed God when something went wrong?
4. How do you handle anxiety and stress?
5. Is there any area where Satan consistently accuses you?
6. Glance back at the Superbowl story on page 5. How does this affect your understanding of Romans 8:29-30?
7. How did you respond to Question #4 on page 9?
8. It's too easy to keep theology locked up in our brains rather than letting it influence our behavior. What effect will this chapter have on your daily life?

RECOMMENDED *God's Words: Studies of Key Bible Themes* by J.I. Packer
READING (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981)

The Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan (various editions available, including an inexpensive Penguin Classic)

Romans by John Stott (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995)

Still Sovereign by Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000)