

The Way of Salvation

by Charles Finney

Salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ, who is our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

Scripture: Acts 16:30

Topics: "Faith", "Salvation"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the way of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, explaining that salvation encompasses justification, sanctification, and eternal life. He contrasts the original covenant of works with the new covenant of grace, highlighting that salvation is a gift from God, not based on human works. Finney elaborates on how Christ is our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, and stresses that faith is the means by which we receive these blessings. He urges believers to abandon reliance on their own efforts and fully trust in Christ for their salvation. The sermon concludes with a call to embrace faith as the key to spiritual life and holiness.

Transcript

TEXT.--"Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption."

-- Acts xvi.30, 31, with 1 Cor. 1. 30.

THERE can be no objection to putting these texts together in this manner as only a clause in the first of them is omitted, which is not essential to the sense, and which is irrelevant to my present purpose.

In the passage first quoted, the apostle tells the inquiring jailer, who wished to know what he must do to be saved, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." And in the other he adds the explanatory remark, telling what a Savior Jesus Christ is, "Who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." The following is the order in which I design to discuss the subject to-night:

I. Show what salvation is.

II. Show the way of salvation.

I. What is salvation?

Salvation includes several things; sanctification, justification, and eternal life and glory. The two prime ideas, are sanctification and justification. Sanctification is the purifying of the mind, or making it holy. Justification relates to the manner in which we are accepted and treated by God.

II. The way of salvation.

1. It is by faith, in opposition to works.

Here I design to take a brief view of the gospel plan of salvation, and exhibit it especially in contrast with the original plan on which it was proposed to save mankind.

Originally, the human race was put on the foundation of law for salvation; so that, if saved at all, they were to be saved on the ground of perfect and eternal obedience to the law of God. Adam was the natural head of the race. It has been supposed by many, that there was a covenant made with Adam such as this, that if he continued to obey the law for a limited period, all his posterity should be confirmed in holiness and happiness forever. What the reason is for this belief, I am unable to ascertain; I am not aware that the doctrine is taught in the Bible. And if it is true, the condition of mankind now, does not differ materially from what it was at first. If the salvation of the race originally turned wholly on the obedience of one man, I do not see how it could be called a covenant of works so far as the race is concerned. For if their weal or woe was suspended on the conduct of one head, it was a covenant of grace to them, in the same manner, that the present system is a covenant of grace. For according to that view, all that related to works depended on one man, just as it does under the gospel; and the rest of the race had no more to do with works, than they have now, but all that related to works was done by the representative. Now, I have supposed, and there is nothing in the Bible to the contrary, that if Adam had continued in obedience for ever, his posterity would have stood for ever on the same ground, and must have obeyed the law themselves for ever in order to be saved. It may have been, that if he had obeyed always, the natural influence of his example would have brought about such a state of things, that as a matter of fact all his posterity would have continued in holiness. But the salvation of each individual would still have depended on his own works. But if the works of the first father were to be so set to the account of the race, that on account of his obedience they were to be secured in holiness and happiness forever, I do not see wherein it differs materially from the covenant of grace, or the gospel.

As a matter of fact, Adam was the natural head of the human race, and his sin has involved them in its consequences, but not on the principle that his sin is literally accounted their sin. The truth is simply this; that from the relation in which he stood as their natural head, as a matter of fact his sin has resulted in the sin and ruin of his posterity. I suppose that mankind were originally all under a covenant of works, and that Adam was not so their head or representative, that his obedience or disobedience involved them irresistibly in sin and condemnation, irrespective of their own acts. As a fact it resulted so, that "by one man's disobedience many were made sinners;" as the apostle tells us in the 5th of Romans. So that, when Adam had fallen, there was not the least hope, by the law, of saving any of mankind. Then was revealed THE PLAN, which had been provided in the counsels of eternity, on foresight of this event, for saving mankind by a proceeding of mere grace. Salvation was now placed on an entire new foundation, by a Covenant of Redemption. You will find this covenant in the 89th Psalm, and other places in the Old Testament. This, you will observe, is a covenant between the Father and the Son, regarding the salvation of mankind, and is the foundation of another covenant, the covenant of grace. In the covenant of redemption, man is no party at all, but merely the subject of the covenant; the parties being God the Father and the Son. In this covenant, the Son is made the head or representative of his people. Adam was

the natural head of the human family, and Christ is the covenant head of his church.

On this covenant of redemption was founded the covenant of grace. In the covenant of redemption, the Son stipulated with the Father, to work out an atonement; and the Father stipulated that he should have a seed, or people, gathered out of the human race. The covenant of grace was made with men and was revealed to Adam, after the fall, and more fully revealed to Abraham. Of this covenant, Jesus Christ was to be the Mediator, or he that should administer it. It was a covenant of grace, in opposition to the original covenant of works, under which Adam and his posterity were placed at the beginning; and salvation was now to be by faith, instead of works, because the obedience and death of Jesus Christ were to be regarded as the reason why any individual was to be saved, and not each one's personal obedience. Not that his obedience was, strictly speaking, performed for us. As a man, he was under the necessity of obeying, for himself; because he had not put himself under the law, and if he did not obey it he became personally a transgressor. And yet there is a sense in which it may be said that his obedience is reckoned to our account. His obedience has so highly honored the law, and his death has so fully satisfied the demands of public justice, that grace (not justice,) has reckoned his righteousness to us. If he had obeyed the law strictly for us, and had owed no obedience for himself, but was at liberty to obey only for us, then I cannot see why justice should not have accounted his obedience to us, and we could have obtained salvation on the score of right, instead of asking it on the score of grace or favor. But it is only in this sense accounted ours, that he, being God and man, having voluntarily assumed our nature, and then voluntarily laying down his life to make atonement, casts such a glory on the law of God, that grace is willing to consider his obedience in such a sense ours, as, on his account, to treat us as if we were righteous.

Christ is also the covenant head of those that believe. He is not the natural head, as Adam was, but our covenant relation to him is such, that whatever is given to him is given to us. Whatever he is, both in his divine and human nature; whatever he has done, either as God or man, is given to us by covenant, or promise, and is absolutely ours. I want you should understand this. The church, as a body, has never yet understood the fullness and richness of this covenant, and that all there is in Christ is made over to us in the covenant of grace.

And here let me say, that we receive this grace by faith. It is not by works, by any thing we do, more or less, previous to the exercise of faith, that we become interested in this righteousness. But as soon as we exercise faith, all that Christ has done, all there is of Christ, all that is contained in the covenant of grace, becomes ours by faith. Hence it is, that the inspired writers make so much of faith. Faith is the voluntary compliance, on our part, with the condition of the covenant. It is the eye that discerns, the hand that takes hold, the medium by which we become possessed of the blessings of the covenant. By the act of faith, the soul becomes actually possessed of all that is embraced is that act of faith. If there is not enough received to break the bonds of sin and set the soul at once at liberty, it is because the act has not embraced enough of what Christ is and what he has done.

I have read the verse from Corinthians, for the purpose of remarking on some of the fundamental things contained in this covenant of grace. "Of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." When Christ is received and believed on, he is made to us what is meant by these several particulars. But what is meant? How and in what sense is Christ our wisdom and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption? I will dwell a few moments on each.

This is a very peculiar verse, and my mind has long dwelt on it with great anxiety to know its exact and full meaning. I have prayed over it, as much as over any passage in the Bible, that I might be enlightened to understand its real import. I have long been in the habit, when my mind fastened on any passage that I did not understand, to pray over it till I felt satisfied. I have never dared to preach on this verse, because I never felt fully satisfied that I understood it. I think I understand it now. At all events, I am willing to give my opinion on it. And if I have any right knowledge respecting its meaning, I am sure I have received it from the Spirit of God.

1. In what sense is Christ our wisdom?

He is often called "the Wisdom of God." And in the Book of Proverbs he is called Wisdom. But how is he made to us wisdom?

One idea contained in it is, that we have absolutely all the benefits of his wisdom; and if we exercise the faith we ought, we are just as certain to be directed by it, and it is in all respects just as well for us, as if we had the same wisdom, originally, of our own. Else it cannot be true that he is made unto us wisdom. As he is the infinite source of wisdom, how can it be said that he is made unto us wisdom, unless we are partakers of his wisdom, and have it guaranteed to us; so that, at any time, if we trust in him, we may have it as certainly, and in any degree we need, to guide us as infallibly, as if we had it originally ourselves? This is what we need from the gospel, and what the gospel must furnish, to be suited to our necessities. And that man who has not learned this, has not known any thing as he ought. If he thinks his own theorising and speculating are going to bring him to any right knowledge on the subject of religion, he knows nothing at all, as yet. His carnal, earthly heart, can no more study out the realities of religion so as to get any available knowledge of them than the heart of a beast. "What man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of a man which is in him? Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God." What can we know, without experience, of the character or Spirit of God? Do you say, "We can reason about God." What if we do reason? What can reason do here? Suppose here was a mind that was all pure intellect, and had no other powers, and I should undertake to teach that pure intellect what it was to love. I could lecture on it, and instruct that pure intellect in the words, so that it could reason and philosophise about love, and yet any body can see that it is impossible to put that pure intellect in possession of the idea of what love is, unless it not only has power to exercise love, but has actually exercised it! It is just as if I should talk about colors to a man born blind. He hears the word, but what idea can he attach to it, unless he has seen? It is impossible to get the idea home to his mind, of the difference of colors. The term is a mere word.

Just so it is in religion. One whose mind has not experienced it, may reason upon it. He may demonstrate the perfections of God, as he would demonstrate a proposition in Euclid. But that which is the spirit and life of the gospel, can no more be carried to the mind by mere words, without experience, than love to a pure intellect, or colors to a man born blind. You may so far give him the letter, as to crush him down to hell with conviction; but to give the spiritual meaning of things, without the Spirit of God, is as absurd as to lecture a blind man about colors.

These two things then are contained in the idea of wisdom. 1. As Christ is our representative, we are interested in all his wisdom, and all the wisdom he has is exercised for us. His infinite wisdom is actually employed for our benefit. And, 2. That his wisdom, just as much as is needed, is guaranteed to be always ready, to be imparted to us, whenever we exercise faith in him for wisdom. From his infinite fullness, in this respect, we may receive all we need. And if we do not receive from him the wisdom which we need, in any

and every case, it is because we do not exercise faith.

2. He is made unto us Righteousness. What is the meaning of this?

Here my mind has long labored to understand the distinction which the apostle intended to make between righteousness and sanctification. Righteousness means holiness or obedience to law; and sanctification means the same.

My present view of the distinction aimed at is, that by his being made unto us righteousness, the apostle meant to be understood, that Christ is our outward righteousness; or, that his obedience is, under the covenant of grace, accounted to us. Not in the sense that on the footing of justice he obeyed for us, and God accounts us just, because our substitute has obeyed; but that we are so interested in his obedience, that as a matter of grace, we are treated as if we had ourselves obeyed.

You are aware there is a view of this subject, which is maintained by some, different from this;--that the righteousness of Christ is so imputed to us, that we are considered as having been always holy. It was at one time extensively maintained that righteousness was so imputed to us, that we had a right to demand salvation, on the score of justice. My view of the matter is entirely different. It is, that Christ's righteousness becomes ours by gift. God has so united us to Christ, as on his account to treat us with favour. It is just like a case, where a father had done some signal service to his country, and the government thinks it proper to reward such signal service with signal reward; and not only is the individual himself rewarded, but all his family receive favours on his account, because they are the children of a father who had greatly benefited their country. Human governments do this, and the ground of it is very plain. It is just so in the divine government. Christ's disciples are in such a sense considered one with him, and God is so highly delighted with the single service he has done the kingdom, from the circumstances under which he became a Savior, that God accounts his righteousness to them as if it were their own; or in other words, treats them just as he would treat Christ himself. As the government of the country, under certain circumstances, treats the son of a father who had greatly benefited the country, just as they would treat the father, and bestow on him the same favors. You will bear in mind, that I am now speaking of what I called the outward righteousness; I mean, the reason out of the individual, why God accepts and saves them that believe in Christ. And this reason includes both the obedience of Christ to the law, and his obedience unto death, or suffering upon the cross to make atonement.

3. In what sense is Christ made unto us sanctification?

Sanctification is inward purity. And the meaning is, that he is our inward purity. The control which Christ himself exercises over us, his Spirit working in us, to will and to do, his shedding his love abroad in our hearts, so controlling us that we are ourselves, through the faith which is of the operation of God, made actually holy.

I wish you to get the exact idea here. When it is said that Christ is our sanctification, or our holiness, it is meant that he is the author of our holiness. He is not only the procuring cause, by his atonement and intercession, but by his direct intercourse with the soul he himself produces holiness. He is not the remote but the immediate cause of our being sanctified. He works our works in us, not by suspending our own agency, but he so controls our minds, by the influences of his Spirit in us, in a way perfectly consistent with our freedom, as to sanctify us. And this, also, is received by faith. It is by faith that Christ is received and enthroned as KING in our hearts; when the mind, from confidence in Christ, just yields itself up to him, to be led by his Spirit, and guided and controlled by his hand. The act of the mind, that thus throws the soul

into the hand of Christ for sanctification, is faith. Nothing is wanting, but for the mind to break off from any confidence in itself, and to give itself up to him, to be led and controlled by him, absolutely: just as the child puts out its little hand to its father, to have him lead it any where he pleases. If the child is distrustful, or not willing to be led, or if it has confidence in its own wisdom and strength, it will break away and try to run alone. But if all that self-confidence fails, it will cease from its own efforts, and come and give itself up to its father again, to be led entirely at his will. I suppose this is similar to the act of faith, by which an individual gives his mind up to be led and controlled by Christ. He ceases from his own efforts to guide and control and sanctify himself; and just gives himself up, as yielding as air, and leaves himself in the hands of Christ as his sanctification.

4. It is said Christ is made of God unto us redemption. What are we to understand by that?

Here the apostle plainly refers to the Jewish practice of redeeming estates, or redeeming relatives that had been sold for debt. When an estate had been sold out of the family, or an individual had been deprived of liberty for debt, they could be redeemed, by paying the price of redemption. There are very frequent allusions in the Bible to this practice of redemption. And where Christ is spoken of as our redemption, I suppose it means just what it says. While we are in our sins, under the law, we are sold as slaves, in the hand of public justice, bound over to death, and have no possible way to redeem ourselves from the curse of the law. Now, Christ makes himself the price of our redemption. In other words, he is our redemption money; he buys us out from under the law, by paying himself as a ransom. Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us; and thus, also, redeems us from the power of sin. But I must leave this train of thought, and return to a consideration of the plan of salvation.

Under this covenant of grace, our own works, or any thing that we do, or can do, as works of law, have no more to do with our salvation, than if we had never existed. I wish your minds to separate entirely between salvation by works, and salvation by grace. Our salvation by grace is founded on a reason entirely separate from and out of ourselves. Before, it depended on ourselves. Now we receive salvation, as a free gift, solely on account of Jesus Christ. He is the sole author, ground, and reason of our salvation. Whether we love God or do not love God, so far as it is a ground of our salvation, is of no account. The whole is entirely a matter of grace, through Jesus Christ. You will not understand me as saying that there is no necessity for love to God or good works. I know that "without holiness no man shall see the Lord." But the necessity of holiness is not at all on this ground. Our own holiness does not enter at all into the ground or reason for our acceptance and salvation. We are not going to be indebted to Christ for awhile, until we are sanctified, and all the rest of the time stand in our own righteousness. But however perfect and holy we may become, in this life, or to all eternity, Jesus Christ will for ever be the sole reason in the universe why we are not in hell. Because, however holy we may become, it will be for ever true that we have sinned, and in the eye of justice, nothing in us, short of our eternal damnation can satisfy the law. But now, Jesus Christ has undertaken to help, and he forever remains the sole ground of our salvation.

According to this plan, we have the benefit of his obedience to the law, just as if he had obeyed it for us. Not that he did obey for us, in distinction from himself, but we have the benefits of his obedience, by the gift of grace, the same as if he had done so.

I meant to dwell on the idea of Christ as our Light, and our Life, and our Strength. But I find there is not time to-night. I wish to touch a little on this question, "How does faith put us in possession of Christ, in all these relations?"

Faith in Christ puts us in possession of Christ, as the sum and substance of the blessings of the gospel. Christ was the very blessing promised in the Abrahamic covenant. And throughout the scriptures, he is held forth as the sum and substance of all God's favors to man.--He is the Bread of life, the Water of life, our Strength, our All. The gospel has taxed all the powers of language to describe the vast variety of his relations, and to show that faith is to put believers in possession of Jesus Christ, in all these relations.

The manner in which Faith puts the mind in possession of all these blessings is this: It annihilates all those things that stand in the way of our intercourse with Christ. He says, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock; if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me." Here is a door, an obstacle to our intercourse with Christ, something that stands in the way. Take the particular of wisdom. Why do we not receive Christ as our wisdom? Because we depend on our own wisdom, and think we have ourselves some available knowledge of the things of God, and as long as we depend on this, we keep the door shut. That is the door. Now, let us just throw this all away, and give up all wisdom of our own, and see how infinitely empty we are of any available knowledge, as much so as a beast that perisheth, as to the way of salvation, until Christ shall teach us. Until we feel this, there is a door between us and Christ. We have something of our own instead of coming and throwing ourselves perfectly into the hands of Christ, we just come to him to help out our own wisdom.

How does faith put us in possession of the Righteousness of Christ? This is the way. Until our mind takes hold on the righteousness of Christ, we are alive to [our] own righteousness. We are naturally engaged in working out a righteousness of our own, and until we cease entirely from our own works, by absolutely throwing ourselves on Christ for righteousness, we do not come to Christ. Christ will not patch up our own righteousness, to make it answer the purpose. If we depend on our prayers, our tears, our charities, or any thing we have done, or expect to do, he will not receive us. We must have none of this. But the moment an individual takes hold on Christ, he receives and appropriates all Christ's righteousness as his own; as a perfect and unchangeable reason for his acceptance with God, by grace.

It is just so, with regard to Sanctification and Redemption. I cannot dwell on them so particularly as I wished. Until an individual receives Christ, he does not cease from his own works. The moment he does that, by this very act he throws the entire responsibility upon Christ. The moment the mind does fairly yield itself up to Christ, the responsibility comes upon him, just as the person who undertakes to conduct a blind man is responsible for his safe conduct. The believer by the act of faith pledges Christ for his obedience and sanctification. By giving himself up to Christ, all the veracity of the Godhead are put at stake, that he shall be led aright or made holy.

And with regard to Redemption, as long as the sinner supposes that his own sufferings, his prayers or tears, or mental agony, are of any avail, he will never receive Christ. But as soon as he receives Christ, he sinks down as lost and condemned, as in fact a dead person, unless redeemed by Christ.

REMARKS.

I. There is no such thing as spiritual life in us, or any thing acceptable to God, until we actually believe in Christ.

The very act of believing, receives Christ as just that influence which alone can wake up the mind to spiritual life.

II. We are nothing, as Christians, any farther than we believe in Christ.

III. Many seem to be waiting to do something first, before they receive Christ.

Some wait to become more dead to the world. Some to get a broken heart. Some to get their doubts cleared up, before they come to Christ. THIS IS A GRAND MISTAKE. It is expecting to do that first, before faith, which is only the result of faith. Your heart will not be broken, your doubts will not be cleared up, you will never die to the world, until you believe. The moment you grasp the things of Christ, your mind will see, as in the light of eternity, the emptiness of the world, of reputation, riches, honor and pleasure. To expect this first, preparatory to the exercise of faith, is beginning at the wrong end. It is seeking that as a preparation for faith, which is always the result of faith.

IV. Perfect faith will produce perfect love.

When the mind duly recognizes Christ, and receives him, in his various relations; when the faith is unwavering and the views clear, there will be nothing left in the mind contrary to the law of God.

V. Abiding faith would produce abiding love.

Faith increasing, would produce increasing love. And here you ought to observe, that love may be perfect at all times, and yet be in different degrees at different times. An individual may love God perfectly and eternally, and yet his love may increase in vigor to all eternity, as I suppose it will. As the saints in glory see more and more of God's excellencies, they will love him more and more, and yet will have perfect love all the time. That is, there will be nothing inconsistent with love in the mind, while the degrees of love will be different as their views of the character of God unfold. As God opens to their view the wonders of his glorious benevolence, they will have their souls thrilled with new love to God. In this life, the exercises of love vary greatly in degree. Sometimes God unfolds to his saints the wonders of his government, and gives them such views as well-nigh prostrate the body, and then love is greatly raised in degree. And yet the love may have been perfect before; that is, the love of God was supreme and single, without any mixture of inconsistent affections. And it is not unreasonable to suppose, that it will be so to all eternity; that occasions will occur in which the love of the saints will be brought into more lively exercise by new unfoldings of God's glory. As God develops to them wonder after wonder, their love will be increased indefinitely, and they will have continually enlarged accessions of its strength and fervor, to all eternity.

I designed to mention some things on the subject of instantaneous and progressive sanctification. But there is not time tonight, and they must be postponed.

VI. You see, beloved, from this subject, the way in which you can be made holy, and when you can be sanctified.

Whenever you come to Christ, and receive him for all that he is, and accept a whole salvation by grace, you will have all that Christ is to you, wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption. There is nothing but unbelief to hinder you from now enjoying it all. You need not wait for any preparation. There is no preparation that is of any avail. You must RECEIVE a whole salvation, as a FREE GIFT. When will you thus lay hold on Christ? When will you believe? Faith, true faith, always works by love, and purifies the heart, and overcomes the world. Whenever you find any difficulty in your way, you may know what is the matter. It is a want of faith. No matter what may befall you outwardly: if you find yourself thrown back in religion, or your mind thrown all into confusion, unbelief is the cause, and faith the remedy. If you lay hold on Christ, and keep hold, all the devils in hell can never drive you away from God, or put out your light. But if you let unbelief prevail, you may go on in this miserable, halting way, talking about

sanctification, using words without knowledge, and dishonoring God, till you die.

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