

CONTENTS

With Gratitude	9
Introduction	11

PART ONE OUR GREAT SALVATION

1. Sin: The Need for Salvation	15
2. Justification: The Verdict of Salvation	31
3. Redemption: The Payment for Salvation	47
4. Propitiation: The Requirement for Salvation	63
5. Reconciliation: The Relationship of Salvation	79
6. Regeneration: The Miracle of Salvation	95
7. Grace: The Gift of Salvation	109
8. Sanctification: The Progress of Salvation	127

PART TWO
THE ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

9. Assurance and Certainty	145
10. Assurance and Grace	159
11. Assurance and Faith	173
12. Assurance and Self-Examination	189
13. Assurance and Discipleship	203
14. Assurance and Spiritual Failure	217
15. Assurance and Eternal Life	235
16. Assurance and Rewards	247

PART THREE
THE CASE FOR ETERNAL SECURITY

17. The Importance of Eternal Security	261
18. The Passion of Eternal Security	273
19. The Process of Eternal Security	283
20. The Payment of Eternal Security	297
21. The Protection of Eternal Security	309
22. The Power of Eternal Security	321
23. The Perseverance of Eternal Security	331
24. The Privilege of Eternal Security	341
Conclusion	353
Index of Scripture	355
Index of Subjects	363

1 SIN: THE NEED FOR SALVATION

It's safe to say that some words don't mean what they used to mean.

Modern technology is responsible for a lot of these changes in meaning. For instance, if you stop a person on the street and ask what *windows* are, the chances are good that the answer will relate to a computer program instead of clear panes of glass that people look through.

The word *help* is another example. It used to mean a cry of desperation by someone in trouble. But today it's just an option on a computer's toolbar (although for some computer users, clicking on the help icon still represents a cry of desperation by someone in trouble!).

Here's one more example: the words *save* or *saved*. To a twenty-first century mind, "save" is a command whereby the data in a computer file is preserved, and "saved" describes the condition of the file

after this command is performed. The world may consider the spiritual meaning of the word *saved* to be a relic from a previous generation, but it's a good biblical word that we ought not abandon.

The Philippian jailer who fell down before the apostle Paul and cried, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30) knew that something was radically wrong and that he needed a radical solution. When the Bible says that people need to be saved, it communicates the message that they are lost. Jesus Himself said He came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10).

It is vital that people understand that they are eternally lost without Jesus Christ and they desperately need to be saved. In fact, the basic thesis of this book is that we need to be totally saved because we are totally lost and without hope for eternity apart from Christ.

The biblical teaching of salvation not only makes many people in the world uncomfortable, but it has also made some liberal theologians and church people feel embarrassed. Over the years, liberal teachers have tried to move away from the idea of "being saved" because they think it smacks too much of the backwoods, sawdust-trail evangelism of an earlier era. These folk want us to talk nice to people about joining the church or discovering the god within them, and not get them all upset talking about their lost condition.

But let me tell you something: Lost people had better be walking on *something*, whether it's sawdust or plush carpet, to get to Jesus, because the Bible says, "There is salvation in no one else" (Acts 4:12)! After pointing out that God held the people of Israel responsible to obey the Mosaic Law, the writer of Hebrews asked this important question about our greater responsibility to turn to Christ: "How will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (2:3).

This salvation we have is a great salvation. It's beyond human description, and yet God has given us the means to describe and understand it to the degree that we're able. So in this first section of the book, I want to consider our great salvation as we study great concepts such as justification, propitiation, redemption, reconciliation, forgiveness, and other biblical terms that are replete with depth and meaning and significance.

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We'll explore each of these truths in turn as we consider what it means to be totally saved. But first I want to talk about the reality of sin and our need for salvation. This is one place where the Bible's teaching and the world's view part company, because the prevailing view today is that sin isn't all that bad.

THE CONCEPT OF SIN

One observer said that contemporary America has "defined deviancy downward." Our culture has made sin seem so acceptable that things that used to be considered deviant are now considered almost normal.

But make no mistake. God has not defined sin downward. His concept of sin is the same today as it was in eternity past when Lucifer and one-third of the angels rebelled against Him. Sin is anything that fails to conform to the holy and perfect character of God.

Failing to Measure Up

God said to Moses, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). Sin becomes sin when it is measured against the standard of God. When the prophet Habakkuk encountered God, he said, "My inward parts trembled, at the sound [of God] my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble" (3:16). Isaiah had a similar experience in God's holy presence. The prophet saw the Lord in His holy temple and cried out, "Woe is me" (Isaiah 6:5).

One reason we don't have a high view of sin today is that we have a low view of God. We haven't visited Him lately in His holy temple, because when we are in His presence we don't feel so good about ourselves anymore. We've become too comfortable living in an age that devalues God's standard and makes acceptable that which He hates.

David understood the seriousness of sin in relation to God's holiness. Following his sin with Bathsheba and the arranged murder of

Uriah, David confessed to God, “Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight” (Psalm 51:4). David knew that sin is first and foremost an offense against a holy God.

The apostle John wrote, “God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). He is absolute perfection in every detail. Some theologians consider the holiness of God to be His controlling attribute. That is, all the other divine attributes are referenced from God’s holiness. He is totally set apart from sin.

In the same epistle, John gave a more formal definition of sin. “Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin” (1 John 3:4–5). These verses not only characterize sin as rebellion against God by the breaking of His Law. They also teach that sin is anything in creation that is contrary to the nature of the Creator.

Sin makes us self-centered and self-dependent instead of God-centered and God-dependent. You know you’re getting deeper into sin, the deeper you get into independence—the idea that you can run your own life and don’t need God. The less you need God, the more sinful you have become, because you are trying to function independently of the Creator.

Therefore, we can say that sin is the failure to reflect God’s holy character and obey His righteous Laws. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). We may come off looking pretty good when we compare ourselves to other people. But when God is the standard, we all come so far short of measuring up that it’s a waste of time to compare ourselves to each other.

Like most big cities, Dallas has some tall buildings. We could compare one building to another and say, for instance, that building A is thirty stories taller than building B. That’s a big difference from our perspective. But if we’re talking about the distance from these two buildings to the moon, our comparison means nothing because the moon is so far away that a few hundred feet of difference means nothing.

That’s the problem with using the wrong standard of measure-

ment. You may be a nicer person than your neighbor, but when God is the standard, we all come up short. All of us have sinned, whereas in God there is no sin at all.

The Deep Roots of Sin

Where does sin find its roots? This question takes us all the way back to some point in eternity past, before the creation of the world, when the angel Lucifer decided he was tired of being less than God. This beautiful being, the highest-ranking of all God's angels, led one-third of the angelic host in a rebellion designed to topple God from His throne.

Lucifer's rebellion is described in Ezekiel 28:11–19 and Isaiah 14:12–14. We learn that God created him with stunning beauty and that his heart welled up with pride. Lucifer decided to assert his independence by making his famous "I will" statements in Isaiah 14. Lucifer tried to impose his will in opposition to God, but he was defeated and judged and became Satan, the deceiver and "the accuser of [the] brethren" (Revelation 12:9–10).

Satan's rebellion shows that the root of sin is pride, the creature thinking more highly of himself than he ought to think (see Romans 12:3). Sin began in heaven, and it began with pride. Satan allowed pride to grow in his heart and he tried to make himself equal with God because he forgot that he was a creature, not the Creator. Satan was totally dependent on God for his existence, just as we are.

Pride is such a pervasive thing that it's good for us to remind ourselves regularly who is in charge here. If the Creator ever decided to withhold oxygen, water, or food, you and I wouldn't even be here, let alone start acting like we're the Creator. Everything we enjoy comes from something that God made.

Only pride could make any creature claim equality with God, as Satan did. Paul warned of this when he cautioned Timothy not to appoint a new believer to leadership in the church, "so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil" (1 Timothy 3:6).

The Bible says that Satan was beautiful and had great musical ability as he led the angels in worshiping God. Satan was called “the anointed cherub” (Ezekiel 28:14). But he forgot who he was, and the root of sin sprang up in his heart.

Satan’s pride and desire for independence from God spread to others in the angelic world, and then to the human race when the serpent came to Eve in Eden. Here again, sin’s root can be traced to pride and a desire for independence from God.

God had commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because “in the day that you eat from it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17).

The question that everybody asks is why God put the forbidden tree in the garden in the first place. The presence of this tree was a test of Adam’s and Eve’s obedience, and a reminder of the Creator/creature distinction we have been talking about. That is, the forbidden tree reminded our first parents that they could not do whatever they wanted to do whenever they wanted to do it, because they were limited, created beings who owed obedience and loyalty to their Creator. The tree reminded Adam and Eve of their “creatureliness” in contrast to God.

People focus on the one prohibition that God established in Eden, but that still left every other tree in the garden for Adam and Eve to enjoy. There may have been one hundred or one thousand trees in the garden, but whatever the number Adam and Eve still had the run of the place.

But when Satan approached Eve in the form of the serpent, he focused on the one prohibition God had made to teach Adam and Eve that they were not their own gods. Satan had tried to make himself equal with God and had failed, so he used the same tactic on Eve because he knew how seductive the temptation is to imagine that we can be like God, having His knowledge and power.

The serpent was too “crafty” (Genesis 3:1) to call God an outright liar. He questioned God’s goodness in putting this tree off-limits for Adam and Eve (v. 5), suggesting that God was being selfish in keeping His deity to Himself. The serpent also promised Eve the



opposite of death, the judgment God had decreed for disobedience. Eve was promised godlike status that would erase the Creator/creature distinction. Satan was saying to Eve, “There’s no reason that God has to be up high while you’re down low. You can erase that line by eating this fruit.”

According to Genesis 3:6, Eve bought the lie and sinned. Not wanting to go down alone, she got Adam to sin with her. Adam allowed Eve to be god in his life at that moment, and it cost dearly. Anytime we let another human being become more important to us than God, that’s sin.

Sin on Mankind’s Charge Account

Now when Adam ate of the forbidden fruit and sinned against God, something very important happened. His sin was imputed, or charged, to the whole human race. Paul wrote, “Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). This is the doctrine known as imputation, which simply means to post a charge against someone’s account.

All of us understand how a charge account works. You accumulate a debt on your account, which must be paid off in full in order to clear your account. That’s the basic idea here. When Adam sinned, God posted a debt of sin to the account of every person who would ever be born.

The reason is that Adam was acting as the covenantal representative of the human race. Adam was given a position of headship by God, so his sin affected all who would come after him. That’s why Paul said sin passed to every person through Adam, the “one man” the apostle was talking about.

The usual reaction to the teaching of Adam’s representative status is that it’s not fair for one person’s sin to corrupt the race. After all, you and I didn’t ask Adam to represent us. We’re in this mess because of what he did. Most people want to be their own representatives because they figure they can do a better job than Adam did.

Let me make several observations here. First, God has the prerogative to establish the conditions under which His creatures will function. He's God and we're not. Besides, Adam was a lot better representative than you and I would be. Why? Because Adam was created perfectly in a perfect environment. If he fell into sin in that setting, how long do you think we would last? Satan wouldn't have needed a serpent to seduce us. Don't ever think you'd be better off if you could have been your own representative.

Here's something else to think about: The principle of representation is a well-established part of human life. We call our elected officials our representatives, and when they make decisions for us, we have to live with the consequences. If the Congress declares war, for example, all Americans are affected. We can't say, "Don't bring me into this. I didn't make that decision." If the president decides to go after a group of terrorists, all Americans become potential targets for retaliation. We're affected because the president made his decision as the duly elected representative head of our nation.

Even the world of team sports operates by the principle of representation. When a football player jumps offside, the entire team is penalized. You don't see the other players refusing to move back because they weren't the one who committed the penalty. The team is a unit.

Adam sinned as the head of the human race, so his sin was imputed or charged to mankind's account. When this happened, Adam and Eve's sin was inherited by their offspring. We inherited a sin nature from our first parents, and that nature is passed on to every generation. We call this original sin, the nature that was transferred from Adam to every human being. David said in Psalm 51:5, "In sin my mother conceived me." Adam and Eve passed on their spiritual genes to their children.

You look the way you do because you are a combination of the DNA you inherited from your father and mother. Every physical feature you have was passed on to you by your parents.

But your mom and dad passed something else on to you that they inherited from their parents, a spiritual gene called the sin

nature. That is, they passed on to you a capacity and a bent to rebel against God. The only thing you lacked at birth was enough knowledge and time to work this sin thing out. But the nature was there. Sin is imputed or charged to the human race and is inherited through conception.

THE CORRUPTION OF SIN

This inherited sin nature we possess brings us to another theological term that's important to understand. It's called depravity, which means that every facet of human nature has been polluted, defiled, and contaminated by sin. We are talking about inborn corruption.

Sin's Corruption Is Complete

Jeremiah 17:9 says of human nature, "The heart [the seat of our being] is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" Jeremiah was referring to this capacity all of us have to function in rebellion against God.

Paul said of himself, "I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh" (Romans 7:18).

And Paul was not alone, because in Ephesians 2:1 he said, "You were dead in your trespasses and sins." The Bible declares that we are spiritually contaminated and are "by nature children of wrath" (v. 3). By nature we are destined to incur God's wrath because depravity also means that there is nothing within us to commend us to God or cause Him to accept us.

We never have to teach our children how to sin. No child ever needed a class on how to be selfish or disobedient. No, we have to teach children how to love, to share, to be kind to one another, to stop fighting. The bad stuff is automatic. The capacity for sin is present when a child is developing in the womb. As I said before, all that's lacking is information and opportunity for sin to express itself.

the petals were about to fall off. The reason is they were dead—and they died the moment they were picked and disconnected from their life source. The proof that those flowers were already dead is that they drooped over and wilted. Putting them in a vase with water only postponed the full expression of their death.

So ladies, don't get too excited when a man brings you roses, because he's bringing you death. They may be red death, pink death, or white death, but they're nothing but death. As pretty as those roses look, give them time and they will demonstrate that what you have sitting in your den or on your dining room table is death.

God told Adam and Eve that on the day they ate from the tree He commanded them not to eat from, they would die (Genesis 2:17). They died spiritually that same day, and eventually they died physically. In our sinful condition, the human race has been cut off from its life source and is dead. And the proof that we are dead spiritually is the fact that we will die physically someday.

The Bible says that all of us will die "in Adam" (1 Corinthians 15:22), just as Adam himself died. To put it another way, your birth certificate is also your death certificate. "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

Sin's Corruption Is Obvious

Sin expresses itself in both personal and corporate ways. We've just talked about the personal expression of sin, which we are all guilty of because of our inherited sin nature and our disposition to sin. We sin because we are sinners, so we can't point the finger at Adam and tell ourselves that if only he hadn't sinned, we'd be all right.

Sin can also be collective, as when an entire nation or group of people systematically participates in and supports evil. Slavery is an example of collective sin. We see in the Bible that God judged whole groups of people for the sins they practiced. That doesn't necessarily mean that every person in that group was guilty of the particular sin, but that the group was so characterized by and corrupted by the sin that the people came under judgment collectively. Sin is

also collective in the sense that the entire creation has been affected by sin.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

The Bible is very clear about the consequences of sin. “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Death in the Bible never means the cessation of our existence. Death means separation, and the Bible talks about three kinds of death, all of which have come about as a consequence of sin.

The Death That Results from Sin

One type of death is spiritual death, which we read about in Ephesians 2. Spiritual death is separation from the life of God. The first thing Adam and Eve did after they sinned was to hide from God because their fellowship with Him was severed (see Genesis 3:8–10). All of us are born spiritually dead.

The second manifestation of death, the one we’re most familiar with, is physical death or the separation of the soul and spirit from the body. The proof that we are all sinners is the fact that we all die.

There’s a third kind of death in Scripture, which is eternal death or separation from God for eternity in the place of punishment and suffering called hell. Spiritual death can be reversed by salvation, and physical death will be reversed by resurrection. But there is no reversal of eternal death. The horror of eternal death is total separation from God.

In hell, there is no presence of God in the sense that there is no righteous provision of His goodness. God is everywhere, including hell, because He is all-present. But in hell there is no experience of God’s goodness. There is nothing to balance or temper the presence of pure evil. Hell is the worst form of bondage because people are locked in their sin forever.

Some people live in neighborhoods that are controlled by evil. They live behind locked doors and bars on their windows. The chil-

dren can't go outside and play; they're trapped inside. These neighborhoods are miserable places to live because of the atmosphere that dominates them. That's a good picture of hell, being locked away in total evil and the total absence of God's goodness.

Sin's Devastation on the Creation

I also want to mention another consequence of sin, which is its impact on the whole of creation. Paul taught in Romans 8 that "the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption" when Jesus comes to complete our redemption (v. 21).

All of creation, what we call nature, was affected by sin. The reason we have all the disturbances and destructiveness of nature is that sin has spoiled God's creation. God's grace keeps sin from having total domination in nature, but even the natural world "groans" (Romans 8:22) under the weight of sin.

There is a direct relationship between man and nature. When God created Adam, He put him in the Garden of Eden "to cultivate it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15). When Adam sinned, God cursed the ground as one of the consequences (3:17-18). Suddenly, nothing grew right anymore. Thorns and thistles appeared. Sin spoiled every part of God's good creation.

THE CURE FOR SIN

Sin is a dread disease from which all of creation is crying out for a cure. Now a terrible disease without a cure is bad news, but the news concerning a cure for sin is good. God has a remedy for this scourge, which is found in the atonement of Jesus Christ.

Atonement for Sin Is Necessary

When a disease is ravaging your body, you don't want your doctor to skip over it and send you away, knowing that the illness will ultimately kill you. Disease demands a cure because it's not going

to go away by itself. And a truly competent and caring physician will insist that you undergo the cure, no matter what it demands, because of the awful consequences of not dealing with the problem.

It was necessary that sin be atoned for, because God is too holy and just to ignore sin, and too loving to let us plunge headlong into judgment and hell. And as we'll see, Christ is the only One who could pay the terrible price that sin demanded. In other words, just saying "I'm sorry" doesn't atone for sin. Sin must be addressed in a way that is acceptable to the one who has been offended.

If I borrow your car and run it up over the curb, bending the rim and smashing the car into a pole, you're not likely to be completely satisfied if I just hand you the keys and say, "I'm deeply sorry I wrecked your car."

You might say, "Tony, I'm glad you're sorry, and I forgive you. Now let's talk about your insurance coverage, because being sorry won't fix my car. Someone will have to pay for the repairs, and I believe that person is you." You would rightly expect me to atone, or pay, for the damage I caused.

Atonement is paying what must be paid to settle the claim, because damage has been done. Sin is an attack on the character of God, and therefore, it must be atoned for by a payment that is acceptable to Him. The only payment that God ever accepted for sin is death (see Romans 6:23). God told Adam concerning the fruit of the forbidden tree, "In the day that you eat from it you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17). The Bible says, "The Lord will by no means leave the guilty unpunished" (Nahum 1:3).

God Permitted a Substitute to Die

Sin's death penalty would be very bad news for us, except for one exciting truth. Although God didn't lessen the penalty for sin, He did allow a substitute to bear the penalty for guilty sinners. A substitute, of course, is someone who goes out in the place of another person. In sports, a substitute player has to take the place of and fulfill the responsibilities of the player he replaces.

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The principle of substitution also goes back to the beginning. After Adam and Eve sinned, God responded by slaying an animal to clothe them. Adam and Eve had their own substitute in mind, but it was a fig leaf substitute, which was completely unacceptable to God. The only sacrifice that He accepts, and that will properly atone for sin, is the shedding of blood.

God's economy has always operated this way. According to Leviticus 17:11, "The life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement."

Blood is the only means of atonement that satisfies God's righteous retribution against sin. Before Christ came, God accepted the blood of sacrificial animals as a substitute for man's blood, and no sinner dared to approach God and seek forgiveness without an acceptable substitute. That's why the writer of Hebrews said, "Without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (9:22).

Jesus Is Our Substitute

When Jesus came, the sacrificial system came to an end as He became the final sacrifice for sin. We know that sin must be paid for, and that the penalty is death. We deserved to die on the cross, but Jesus Christ took our place by becoming our Substitute and bearing the penalty for the guilt we had incurred.

This is why we refer to the atonement of Christ as substitutionary. Jesus didn't die just to leave us a good example, or show us how to bear up under suffering. Our guilt was transferred to Him, and therefore He took the death stroke that should have fallen on us for all eternity. That's a great salvation!

I will never forget an incident that happened when I was a student at Dallas Theological Seminary. Two of my classmates were robbed, and the police caught the robbers. They were tried and sentenced to a year and a half in jail.

When the sentence was pronounced, one of my classmates who was a robbery victim stood up in court and said to the judge, "Your

Honor, I would like to take the penalty for the gentlemen who robbed me.”

The judge was startled. “Why in the world do you want to do something like that?”

My friend replied, “Because I want to demonstrate to these men what God did for me when Jesus Christ took my penalty on the cross.” This student was offering himself as an atonement to satisfy the demands of justice against the guilty parties. This wasn’t allowed, but my friend was legally qualified to make the offer because he had no crime of his own to pay for.

This is something you need to know about Jesus Christ. To serve as our Substitute, He had to be free of the guilt of sin Himself. You and I can’t depend on another sinner to help us out, because everyone else has the same problem we have. Only the sinless Son of God could stand up in God’s court and say, “Your Honor, I would like to take the penalty for these guilty ones.”

In the Old Testament, the lambs and other animals that were brought for sacrifice had to be without any spot or blemish. This was a picture of Jesus Christ, the sinless Lamb of God who would be the perfect atoning sacrifice for sin.

Let me tell you something else about your Substitute. He had to be a Man, one of us who wore the same flesh that we wear. Hebrews 10:4 says, “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” Animals were only a temporary solution to the problem of sin’s guilt.