

And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

(Matthew 1:21)

Introduction

You are a sinner and you need a Saviour. Let those words sink in. Let them be on your heart. There is no more important self-realisation that you can have than this. Once you become aware of the truthfulness of this fact then you are in a position to embrace the most profound truth in the universe, namely, the gospel of God. For it is the gospel of God that tells those who know they need a Saviour that in fact they *have* one! And they have one because God Himself provided Him. In fact, God provided *Himself* as *the* Saviour, as the Scripture clearly testify (see 1 Timothy 2:3; 4:10; Titus 1:3; 2:10; 3:4).

Let me clarify a vital point: Believer, *you* are a sinner and *you* need the Saviour. Let those words sink in. Let them be on your heart. There is no more important self-realisation that *you* as a believer can have. In other words, though at one time in your past you embraced the gospel and were justified, for all time, you are continually blessed, by this same gospel to overcome sin. Yes, you have the Saviour who continues to save you from your sins. Is there any promise more glorious than this? I can't think of one.

In an earlier study we looked briefly at the gospel promise of Matthew 1:21 and rejoiced in this glorious truth of the Incarnation. We were assured from God's Word that Jesus will save His people from their sins. But since then, the more that I have reflected upon this verse the more encouraged I have become. I have come to a fresh realisation that I am still a sinner but that I have the promise that my Saviour *will* continue to save me from my sins.

Words fail to convey the encouragement and challenge that this gospel promise has been to me. For me, this gospel promise has made the year ahead a very promising one. I believe that Jesus is going to save me from my sins. He not only is going to continue to preserve me from the wrath that my sins deserve but He is also going to continue to purify me from these wrath-deserving sins. No, I will not achieve perfection, but because of this gospel promise I will be heading in that direction. And if you are one of "his people" then you too have this same hope because you *are* a recipient of this gospel promise.

It is essential that "his people" embrace the fact that we never outgrow the gospel. The longer that we have been saved the more we should appreciate the depth of God's salvific promise as exhibited and experienced in His gospel. In fact, it is only as we consistently live a gospel-centred life that we will experience the abundant life that Jesus promised to His people. I was reminded of this recently as I read a little book by C. J. Mahaney entitled *Christ Our Mediator*, in which he recounted an experience at his local coffee shop.

As he was waited on at the counter the worker asked him how he was doing and Mahaney responded with his customary, "Better than I deserve." The man protested by assuring Mahaney that in fact he was a good man and that since he had not killed robbed anyone he did in fact deserve good things to happen to him. Mahaney's response was simple: "No, you see, I am a sinner and I need a Saviour." That response struck with me tremendous force as I contemplated that this man has been converted for well over thirty years and that he has pastored for at least thirty years.

Thus he is a mature man of God who nevertheless has not lost sight of his need of the gospel. But secondly, Mahaney said that as he made this statement he felt as if he was on the verge of tears; tears produced by an appreciation of the glory of the gospel promise.

O, that we would make progress this year in such an appreciation of the gospel! In our next few studies in this text I wish to show you several wonderful reasons why we should glory in the gospel promise. As we meditate upon Matthew 1:21 may we be reminded that we are sinners but that we have the gospel promise of *the* Saviour who *will* save us from our sins! Indeed, may we be so moved, intellectually, emotionally and willingly that God's gospel will indeed be *the* promise that we live by.

The Promise is Extensive

The first reason that the promise of Matthew 1:21 is a promise to live by is because it is extensive: "He shall save his people." The implication, of course, is that He will save *all* His people. These are the people for whom He specifically came. He did not come for all people without exception, but rather for all *His* people. That is, He did not come to save *everyone*, but He did come to save every one of *His people*. He spoke of this certainty during His earthly ministry.

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day. The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, I am the bread which came down from heaven. And they said, Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? how is it then that he saith, I came down from heaven? Jesus therefore answered and said unto them, Murmur not among yourselves. No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.

(John 6:37–44)

The question that must be answered at this point is, who are "his people"? Who are the people whom Jesus came to save? Is this a reference to the Jews? Yes and no, for although there are certainly Jews who are of His people, this is not true of *all* Jews. "For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called ... Esaias also crieth concerning Israel, Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, a remnant shall be saved" (Romans 9:6–7, 27).

God's promise of salvation was not exclusively to the Jews. The promise of deliverance extends also to the Gentiles. Consider just a few texts.

- Luke 2:29–32—"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel."
- Romans 9:22–26—"What if God, willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles? As he saith also in Osee, I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved. And it

shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people; there shall they be called the children of the living God.”

- Romans 10:9–13, 20—“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed. For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved ... But Esaias is very bold, and saith, I was found of them that sought me not; I was made manifest unto them that asked not after me.”

But, of course, the promise is no more for the *entire* Gentile population as it is for the *entire* Jewish population. Only those who bow the knee to Christ will be saved. The promise then, rather than being exclusively and exhaustively for the Jews or exclusively and exhaustively for the Gentiles, is in fact exclusively and exhaustively for the church. Paul drew a distinction between “Jews,” “Gentiles” and “the church of God” (1 Corinthians 10:32). The implication is that “the church of God” comprises both saved Jews and saved Gentiles. And it is “the church of God” for whom He died. “Christ ... loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Ephesians 5:25).

The promise is extensive: *all* of Christ’s sheep will be saved. “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37). The promise is not for a group of supersaints, but for *all* Christ’s people. But the question that follows from this is an important one: What are the characteristics of Christ’s people? Allow me to suggest several things.

First, His people are those who realise that they are sinners in need of salvation. Horatius Bonar wrote these moving words in one of his hymns:

‘Twas I that shed that sacred blood,
I nailed him to the tree,
I crucified the Christ of God,
I joined the mockery.

Christ’s people realise that all is not well (Matthew 9:10–13). They feel the guilt of sin heavy upon them (Matthew 11:28–30). They distrust all purported saviours except Christ (John 14:6). Mahaney tells the story of a woman who battled for many years with a critical spirit. One day, God impressed upon her the gospel truth, upon which she broke down in tears and cried, “Oh, God, only You could make me see that I am a sinner and yet make that good news!” If you can easily shrug off the weight of sin that lies on your shoulders, then you are not one of Christ’s people. If you can glibly sin in the face of a holy God without remorse, then you are not one of His. He came to call *sinners* to *repentance*.

Second, Christ’s people respond positively to His voice. Again, Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). The Thessalonians proved that they were God’s people by hearing and responding to His Word. “For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13). Christ’s people today respond in the same way as did the Thessalonian believers to His Word.

Third, Christ’s people love Him, and thus they are willing subjects. They do not live life in a bed of roses, but they believe that “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who

are the called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). They love Him because He first loved them (1 John 4:19). They obey the command to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength (Matthew 22:37).

The Promise is Exhaustive

Not only is the promise extensive, but it is also exhaustive. "He shall *save* his people from their *sins*." The word "save" is an important word in this promise. It is a word that speaks of complete, holistic deliverance. Perhaps it would help to consider how the word is used in another New Testament passage. When Peter and John were questioned as to their authority to heal a paralysed man, Peter replied,

Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole. This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.

(Acts 4:10–12)

The word "whole," used here to describe the complete healing granted to the paralysed man, is the same word translated "save" in Matthew 1:21, and the same word is translated "saved" in v. 12. In the same way that the healing of the paralysed man was complete, so Jesus saves His people *completely* from their sins. This implies a deliverance from sin past, present and future. Christ's salvation promises deliverance from the penalty, the power, the pleasure, the practice and the very presence of sin. We are saved both from our sins of omission and our sins of commission, from sinful thoughts, sinful words, sinful deeds, from sins both big and small. There is no sin from which Jesus does not fully deliver His people. What a more gloriously thorough truth is there? Let's take this truth apart and examine it more closely.

Jesus Saves His People from the Penalty of Sin

I have often heard well-meaning preachers say, "Believing on Christ because you are scared of hell is not a worthy motive." And yet it is nevertheless a strong motive that God Himself gives to us. He warns us of the wrath to come if we refuse to embrace His Son, and there is surely a great multitude who will one day inhabit heaven who were saved because they feared God's wrath.

The Bible leaves us in no doubt that we need to be saved from the penalty of sin, which is eternity in the lake of fire. We need to be saved from the wrath of God.

- Romans 8:1—"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."
- Romans 6:23—"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."
- John 3:16—"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."
- Matthew 10:28—"And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."

Have no doubt: God warns of His wrath upon those who will not repent. The punishment for sin is severe, and it is a punishment from which we must be saved. In a very real sense, we need to be

saved from God. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31), but the glory of the gospel is that the very one from whom we need to be saved is the one who saves us!

Jesus Saves His People from the Power of Sin

Perhaps fear of judgement is not the purest motive to be saved, but it is nevertheless a strong motive that God uses to draw people to Christ. And yet if we never progress beyond a simple fear of judgement, if we are content *only* to be saved from the penalty of sin, it is quite safe to say that we have not been saved at all. For Jesus, who saves His people from their sins, saves them also from the power of sin. This is what Paul meant when he asked to know “the power of [Christ’s] resurrection” (Philippians 3:10). And it is what he wrote of to the Romans:

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptised into Jesus Christ were baptised into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin.

(Romans 6:1–7)

Clearly, Christ’s people have been freed from the power of sin. There is evidence in their lives that they are overcoming sinful tendencies. Therefore, if you are merely content with a supposed deliverance from the penalty of sin, but are pleased to live as you like, don’t assume that you have indeed been delivered from the penalty of sin! Those who have been born again *want* to be holy, they *want* to be like Christ.

Jesus Saves His People from the Practise of Sin

Being delivered from the power of sin is not simply a meaningless promise. If we have been saved from the penalty and the power of sin, it will be evidenced in us being saved from the practise of sin. That is, when Christ saves a person, it is evidenced by that person ceasing to practise specific sins to which they were formerly enslaved. Again, hear the words of Paul to the Romans:

Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God.

(Romans 6:9–13)

In 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 Paul lists specific sins that Christ’s people are delivered from. Having enumerated the various sins he adds these glorious words: “And such *were* some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.” Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery, “Go, and sin no more” (John 8:11). The

command was for her to stop committing adultery, to cease practising a specific sin to which she was once enslaved.

Believers, those who have been saved by Christ, are not content to live with their sin. They are not content with a critical spirit or a lustful heart: The cry of their heart is to be delivered from the practise of sin.

Believer, what sins do you want to stop practising? Be specific! Do you need to overcome lust, drunkenness, lying, gossiping, anger, impatience, materialism or arrogance? Enumerate the sins that you wish to overcome. If you will be delivered from the practise of sin, you must properly identify your sin, and then beg God for the grace to change. Those who are characterised by the practise of sin have little reason for hope, for Jesus delivers His people from the practise of sin.

John Newton was once a slave trader, but when God saved him he became instrumental in the abolition of slavery in England. Time and again I have heard testimonies of believers who have been completely changed from former lifestyles by Christ the Saviour. And *every* believer knows something of this powerful change, for “if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Bible describes the Christian walk as “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). That is, our “hope” is ultimately in full and final salvation, which necessitates deliverance from the practise of sin right now. And hope in the Bible is not a hope-so leap in the dark, but a desire with a guaranteed fulfilment. Therefore, we are guaranteed that, by the power of Christ, we can overcome sin. We do not have to wait till glory in order to be changed. Certainly it is only then that we will be *fully* changed, but we can experience the power of change in our lives even now by the grace of God.

Jesus Saves His People from the Pleasure of Sin

A fourth glorious truth to consider is the fact that Jesus saves His people from the pleasure of sin. At one time, we took pleasure in sin, but now we have a new affection. That is why John wrote, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world” (1 John 2:15–16). Certainly there is a struggle, for our flesh still wants to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, and yet we increasingly find ourselves taking pleasure in the things of God rather than in the things of this world.

For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

(Romans 7:22–25)

Let us be realistic: Even believers struggle with the fleeting pleasure of sin. We act like spiritual fools and give into temptation, telling ourselves that the sin will give us pleasure. And indeed we may find it pleasurable, but we soon find that the pleasure of sin is fleeting. It gives us no real joy. Our joy is found in Christ alone, and in obedience to His Word.

As Christ works in us a new affection, we find ourselves hating the things of the world as we grow in our affection for the Father. We are no longer slaves to evil desires, but are instead slaves to righteousness.

Jesus Saves His People from the Presence of Sin

I have a wife and five daughters, and every now and again I find myself sitting and watching an episode of *Total Makeover*, or some similar show. It is often incredible to see the difference in the person before and after the makeover. And yet a physical makeover is *nothing* compared to the spiritual makeover to which we look forward. As believers in Christ, we are headed for a *complete* personality makeover. This makeover begins in life at the new birth, and culminates at death.

The Bible speaks of this final deliverance from sin as “the redemption of our body” (Romans 8:23) and “the redemption of the purchased possession” (Ephesians 1:14). Paul speaks elsewhere of this glorious event in lofty terms.

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life.

(2 Corinthians 4:17–5:4)

What other truth can carry us through the now and through the always? Surely there is no other! This is indeed *the* promise to live by.

The Promise is Expansive

The promise is not only extensive (going to His people) and expansive (saving His people from *all* their sin), but it is also expansive. This aspect of the promise may not be explicit in the text, but it is certainly and necessarily implied. As Jesus saves His people from their sins, a whole lot of other things are saved as well. Let me explain.

When Jesus saves His people from their sins, families and marriages are saved. Some time ago I heard of a Christian marriage that was undergoing tremendous strain. At that point the marriage was all but over. The family concerned was heartbroken, but was encouraged to pray for the situation and to do whatever was necessary to come alongside and help. Prayer continued to be lifted to God for many months, and recently I received the wonderful news that a profound change has occurred in that marriage. Perhaps your marriage needs to be saved. If so, your hope lies in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus saves His people from their sins, nations are saved. Jonah preached the gospel to Nineveh and the entire population believed and repented. I am not suggesting that our preaching will always have the same numeric effect that Jonah’s had, but certainly the gospel is God’s power to change nations. God used the gospel ministries of the Wesley brothers and George Whitefield to save England. He used the gospel ministry of William Carey to save India. And there is no part of our world, no matter how closed to the gospel, that cannot be rescued by the grace of our sovereign God. How does God save nations? By saving people from their sins. As people are saved from their sins, they become salt and light to the nation in which they live.

When Jesus saves His people from their sins, the environment is saved. There is much talk today about global warming and holes in the ozone layer, and I do not deny that these are very real issues we face. And yet, whilst we should be careful about how we treat the environment (and believers *will* be careful in their stewardship of God's creation), there is no reason to panic. The Scriptures assure us that creation looks forward to a wonderful deliverance.

For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.

(Romans 8:18–22)

The Great Commission is a major key to the environmental problems faced by our world today. As Bible-believing evangelicals we ought to understand that. Too often we sing, "This world is not my home," without realising at the same time that "this is my Father's world." As the Great Commission infiltrates lives and nations, people will become more responsible in their stewardship of God's creation, and the environment will be bettered.

When Jesus saves His people from their sins, churches are saved. During his years of mission ministry, Paul stayed at the church in Ephesus longer than at any other church he founded. When he left, his young disciple Timothy assumed the pastorate of the church. Obviously, it was a daunting task for Timothy, perhaps only in his early thirties, to fill the shoes of the great apostle Paul. And so Paul wrote two letters near the end of his life to encourage the young pastor. In the first of those letters, we find these words:

Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity. Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all. Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.

(1 Timothy 4:12–16)

Notice carefully Paul's charge to young Timothy: "Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, *and them that hear thee*" (v. 16). Paul was not speaking of salvation from the penalty of sin, but salvation from the power, the practise and the pleasure of sin. As Timothy meditated on the gospel truth, he would be changed *and the church that he pastored would be changed with him*. The entire assembly would grow in Christlikeness as the gospel took root in the church.

When I was in university, the chancellor of the school often said that everything rises and falls on leadership. I have never forgotten those words, and the truth of them sometimes haunts me. I say the truth haunts me because I am painfully aware, whenever I see a failure in the church, that I, along with my fellow elders, am partly responsible for the failure. This is not to suggest that the failures of others is my fault (or that of the eldership), but we have a great responsibility to lead others in such a way that they grow in Christlikeness.

I have had to face many of my own failures, both personal and pastoral, as I have meditated on this verse. But, like the testimony of the woman I mentioned earlier, I have seen the good news in the midst of my failures. And I have been able to take heart that, as I experience more of Christ's saving power in my own life, I can expect to see that flow to my family, my community and my church. And if you will lay hold of the promise of Matthew 1:21 you can expect the same. What will be the result? Nothing less than a holy, delightful joy in God our Saviour.

Conclusion

As we reflect on the truth of this promise, may we see a greater expansion of Christ's salvation. May we be more effective in our evangelism, may we enjoy improved marriages and family life, may we see a changed society, and may we see a church awakened to biblical reform. Let us reflect on the fact that we are sinners in need of a Saviour, and may the promise of Matthew 1:21 be the one by which we live by the grace of God.

sAMEN