

**The Gospel of John (20);
“Jesus, the Brazen Serpent, and Saving Faith” (part 3)**

Introduction:

Although we are addressing the larger passage of John 3:1-17, to begin this morning let us read for our immediate context **verses 14-17**.

¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁶For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

Last week we began to address the most well-known and most commonly quoted verse in the Bible, **John 3:16**. Because of its common misuse and misunderstanding of what it actually declares and of what it does not declare, we addressed three commonly held errors based on this verse. *First*, there is the common but errant belief based on this verse that *God loves all people everywhere in the same way and to the same degree*. No, God loves His people uniquely and specially, not those who are outside of Christ. We will speak more of this today.

A *second false doctrine* that is often argued from this verse is that *people have a free will and the ability to choose salvation for themselves*. They assume that because all people everywhere are offered salvation if they believe on Christ, that all people everywhere have the capability to believe on Christ. No, due to sin nobody would believe the gospel to be saved if only offered salvation. Just because an invitation is given, “whoever will”, does not mean that “anyone can”, that “everyone is capable of believing.” God must enable sinners by His grace to turn from their sin and believe the gospel. It is a testimony to the sinfulness of mankind that a person will not come to Christ for salvation unless God works powerfully by His grace to incline his wicked heart and enable their his corrupt will to come to faith in Jesus Christ.

A *third false doctrine* based on John 3:16 is that God bestows salvation on a *one-time decision* to believe on Christ. No, John 3:16 declares that those who *continually believe* on Christ are given eternal life. God does not promise salvation for a one-time decision to believe, but rather, eternal life is granted by God to those who are “believing.”

Regarding the teaching of God’s Word on God’s love for sinners, we emphasized last week that John 3:16 does not describe God’s *affection* for the world; rather, it speaks of *God’s loving action* toward fallen humanity, or, in other words, it speaks of His loving action even toward His enemies. The fallen world is the enemy of God. It is at enmity with God; in other words, the fallen world hates God and God hates the fallen world (Cf. Jam. 4:4). But God is loving in His actions toward His enemies. In fact, God is so loving toward this fallen world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him would not perish, but have everlasting life. But this loving action originates because God’s nature is love, not because He “has love” for all humanity. For there is a love that God has for His people that He does not have for all others in the world. This special love for His people is because of their union with Jesus Christ, whom God the Father loves with an infinite love. Before the foundation of the world, when God first elected His people from fallen humanity and purposed to save them unto Himself, from that time God regarded them “in Christ”, and so, where as He was merciful and compassionate to all the human race, He had His own upon His heart. He desired and purposed to deliver them from sin and condemnation, because He loved them with an everlasting love that is in Jesus Christ. Ephesians 1: speaks of this:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, ⁴*just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love*, ⁵having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, ⁶to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved. (Eph. 1:3-6)

We addressed last week **what the Holy Scriptures teach regarding God's loving action toward the entire human race**. It is important to distinguish between the *general love* that God shows to all people and the *special love* that He has only for His people. God's (general) love for sinners is manifest in that He is gracious and merciful to sinners, that He is slow to anger toward them, and that He is abundant in lovingkindness. God's (general) love for sinners is evident in that He relents from doing them harm. But again, the epitome of God's (general) love toward sinners is that *He gave His Son to die, so that sinners might be saved*.

What do we conclude from these considerations? (1) The nature of God's general love gives hope to poor, needy, repentant sinners. (2) And yet the nature of God's loving action aggravates the condemnation of unbelievers. (3) The nature of the general love of God for sinners is insufficient to save sinners. All of what we have set forward about the general love of God in His dealings toward people are external to them. All of what we have said has been a description of what God does *toward fallen man*, but unless God does something *in fallen man*, it will avail nothing; he will perish in his sin. For the general love of God for sinners that makes available salvation for anyone, secures salvation for no one. Only those who are the objects of God's special, covenant love are the objects of His saving grace. He truly loves them with an eternal, endearing, compassionate, covenant love.

Now last Lord's Day we first considered the grammar of John 3:16, and then we considered the general love that God shows to all humanity. Today, however, we will address...

III. God's special, covenant love for His people

We could begin in any number of places in God's Word, but I thought that we would look at Romans 8. This is an often-repeated portion of Scripture. I trust that you are familiar with it. Here we read quite clearly that God has a love for His people that is bound up in Jesus Christ, a love that God does not have for all people everywhere. Here we read that the love of God for His elect leads Him to bring His chosen people to receive salvation. Let us begin reading with Romans 8:28.

²⁸And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. ²⁹For whom He *foreknew*, He also *predestined* to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. ³⁰Moreover whom He predestined, these He also *called*; whom He called, these He also *justified*; and whom He justified, these He also *glorified*.

³¹What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³²He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? ³³Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. ³⁵*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?* Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written:

“For Your sake we are killed all day long;
We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.”

³⁷Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors *through Him who loved us*. ³⁸For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come,

³⁹nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from *the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord*.

Here we see that there is a love of God “which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”, a love that He has toward His people. God’s love for His people is an everlasting love. It is redemptive love. It is a love that moves God to draw effectually His chosen people unto Himself, in order to save them from their sin and glorify them (and Himself) in Jesus Christ. God’s love for His people is of such a nature and to such a degree that He gives all for His own, even giving His own Son, so as to secure their everlasting wellbeing. Because God loves His people, He saves them from sin and glorifies them before Him.

The love of God for His people is seen in the working of His sovereign power to save His people. We often read Romans 8:28. It is a familiar verse. “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.” But what Paul is emphasizing here is that God in His sovereignty controls all things for the benefit of His people. Because He loved them, He purposed to save them. Here in this passage of Romans 8, we read of the special covenant love that God has for His elect. Let us consider the various ways that God manifests His love to His people. And here we see quite clearly that He does not manifest this love for those who will die in their sins.

A. God’s love for His people is from eternity--“*For whom He foreknew* (Rom. 8:29a)

The love of God for His people is eternal. We love God, but it is due to the fact that He first loved us. He first loved us even before the foundation of the world. His love for His people was from eternity. We can say this for the Scriptures tell us that we enjoy the love of God that was in His Son from eternity. We read of this love in John 17:23 and 24, in which our Lord was speaking to His Father:

I in them, and You in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that *You* sent Me, and *have loved them as You have loved Me*. Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world

When the Bible sets forth God’s love for us before time, it often does so through the word, “foreknew.” This is what we have in Romans 8:29, “For whom He *foreknew*, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.” Before God created the heavens and the earth, God foreknew every one of His people; that is, God “fore loved”, each and all of His chosen people. That is the basic idea of God foreknowing His people. When you first believed on Jesus Christ, you came to know Him, but He knew you before the foundation of the world—He foreknew you. This is not to simply say that He knew all about you, which is true of every member of the human race, but that He foreknew you, if you are a true Christian or if one day you become a true Christian.

The ones whom the Father foreknew, had been *chosen* by Him. We may read of this in numbers of places, but let us look at the opening two verses of 1 Peter 1:1f,

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, *elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father*, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied.

Note how Peter describes them, they were *chosen* of God because they were *foreknown* of God. God knew them, and therefore chose them to be recipients of His grace unto salvation. God the Father’s choice of them was not due to any foreseen merit in them. The Bible nowhere says that God foresaw something good in us or some good thing that we would do and therefore God chose us. That would give His people some basis of boasting, of being better than others or of deserving His favor. That would make God a respecter of persons, but that could never be. No, is affirmed in **Ephesians 1:3 and 4**,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ, just as He *chose* us in Him before the foundation of the world, *that we should be holy and without blame before him in love*...

He chose us *not because* He saw that we would one day be holy and without blame before Him in love.” He first chose us *so that* we would become holy and without blame.

The ones whom the Father foreknew and chose, were given to His Son. In **John 17** we have recorded a prayer that our Lord Jesus gave to His Father shortly before He was crucified. Here we are given insight into God’s purpose for His chosen people. From this passage the following may be said:

1. True believers are a gift from the Father to the Son. Seven times in the prayer our Lord refers to the believers as those who have been given to Him by the Father.

- a. “As many as You have given Him” (v. 2)
- b. “The men (people) whom You have given Me” (v. 6)
- c. “You gave them to Me” (v. 6)
- d. “Them whom You have given to Me” (v. 9)
- e. “Those whom You gave Me I have kept” (v. 12)
- f. “They also, whom You have given me” (v. 24)

One does not *first* give himself, or give his heart, to the Lord in salvation. First in order of salvation is that certain ones who were chosen by God the Father were given to His Son. Our relationship to the Saviour is not established upon the basis of anything that we do, but upon what has already been done by God on our behalf. In all of this we are viewed as completely passive. We were chosen by the Father and given to His Son, all because of His love that He had for us in Christ before the foundation of the world.

2. True believers were originally the Father’s possession (v. 6).

The Saviour stated to God the Father, “they were Yours” (v. 6). Since the entire passage has a redemptive setting and the believers are seen as separate from the world throughout, the reference could not be to the Father’s ownership in the sense of creation. This would encompass all mankind and the statement would be without meaning in such a context. The only reasonable explanation of these words is that the believers belonged to the Father by election. This is viewed as an absolute right--so much so that they may be given as specific individuals in the form of gifts from the Father to the Son. Observe that this is *personal* and *individual*, rather than corporate election. This is indicated by the repetition of the personal pronouns.

3. The believers are the objects of Christ’s mercy and ministry.

In distinction to the world (i.e., the mass of humanity) these believers are set aside for His blessing in several aspects:

a. They are given eternal life (vs. 1, 2). We read,

Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him.” (John 17:1f)

While our Lord achieved supreme authority “over all flesh”, He does not grant eternal life to all. Only those previously marked out in the election-gift receive salvation. This is a ministry limited to the chosen ones. There is a discriminatory grace set forth here toward the ones loved of God.

b. They are the objects of Christ's intercession (v. 9). We read Jesus' words,

"I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours."

Jesus does not pray for the world, except for the ones that the Father gave Him out of the world. Here is a selected group and a limited ministry. It goes no wider than to those who have been individually and specifically chosen by God the Father in election.

c. They are divinely kept (vv. 11, 12). Jesus said,

"Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are. ¹²While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.

Worldlings, in the guise of believers, are not kept from falling. Such was Judas, and he is lost. Here again is a special, but limited ministry of the Lord. Only His own are kept from falling.

d. They will be with Him in glory (v. 24). Jesus prayed to His Father:

"Father, I desire that *they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am*, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world."

Those who have been given to Christ by the Father will behold His glory in heaven. This is guaranteed. The mere professor, however, has no such "blessed hope." This is, once more, a limited ministry of Christ, extended only to the elect. The non-elect will not see His glory, except in judgment.

And so, God *foreknew*, that is, God foreloved His people from eternity. He thereafter purposed to bless them with salvation.

B. God's love for His people is seen in His purpose for them -- He *predestined* them for glory.

Again, **Romans 8:29** reads, "For whom He foreknew, He also *predestined* to be conformed to the image of His Son." God has chosen a people from fallen humanity to be the objects of His love; that is the nature of God's election of His people. But God chose them for a purpose. Election speaks of God's *choice* of individuals; predestination speaks of God's *purpose* for which they were chosen. He chose His people (election) to the end that they would experience His salvation (predestination).

Because God loved His people, He determined that they would be saved from their sinful, ruined, condition. He saves His people by removing their guilt for of having broken His laws--forgiving their sins--and by making them holy. It is expressed here that God purposed that *the people He foreknew would be made to be holy like His Son*. God loved His Son, and He loved His people as He has loved His Son. He decreed before creation that one day they would be like His Son. This is the promise of salvation, that is, the promise of their being delivered from death due to sin to a resurrection onto everlasting life. God has determined that we would be like His Son. He has predestined that it would be so.

But what does this mean, "to be conformed to His image?" It means that God has determined that His people will be like Jesus Christ and that they will share in His life. God has predestined His people to be conformed to the image of His Son in at least four ways.

1. God has predestined that we will be like our Lord in His *relationship* to the Father--He has predestined that His chosen people would be His *children*.

We read verse 29 again, “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, **that He might be the first born among many brethren.**” Paul declared the same truth in similar words in Ephesians 1:4. It states that God has predestined the ones He has chosen to become His children.

Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us **to the adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself**, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace. (Eph. 1:4).

We see that God did not love us because we are His children. He loved us; therefore, He determined that He would make us His children. God decreed it would be so. He predestined that this will be realized in His people, all because He loved His own with an everlasting love.

Now, the Bible describes God’s people as His children by **adoption**. God has only one only begotten Son--Jesus Christ. He alone is the eternally begotten Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity. But **God has determined (predestined) that His Son would not be an only child in the family of God.** He would have “many brethren”; that is, brothers and sisters. It is the Father’s purpose that His only Son be the “firstborn”, that is, as the eldest brother, the head of His household that will include “many” brothers and sisters.

That makes God **our** Father, the Father of believers uniquely. We **become** the children of God, the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, when God regenerates us and we place our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We are then adopted into the family of God with all of the blessings and honor that come with that relationship. Paul wrote to Christians, “You are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:26).

2. God has predestined that we will be like our Lord in His character.

God decreed that He would not only work on **behalf** of His people to **adopt** them as His children, but He also purposed to so work **in their hearts** so that they **behave** like His children. God determined in eternity that He would work grace in the ones He loves so as **to make them like Jesus**. One of the major characteristics of the Lord Jesus was that of His obedience and conformity to the will of His Father. Jesus Christ is holy as the Father is holy. In eternity God predetermined that the ones He foreknew would be like His Son in holiness; He would so work grace in them that they would be obedient to the Father.

Let us look again at Ephesians 1:4.

Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, **that we should be holy and without blame before Him** in love, having predestined us to the adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace. (Eph. 1:4).

Again, we see both election and predestination in this verse. “He chose us” speaks of His **election** of us. Having “predestined us to the adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself” speaks of His **predestination** of His elect. The way that He will accomplish the presentation of His chosen people before Him as holy and without blame is to make them like the Son of His love, Jesus. “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined **to be conformed to the image of His Son.**”

At least two aspects of predestination unto the image of His Son are suggested here:

(1) He removes our guilt and condemnation. He has purposed that we would one day stand before Him “**without blame.**” If this is to occur the guilt due us must be dealt with. It was, of course, in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. He paid fully the debt we owed to God’s law when He died on our behalf.

(2) He enables us to become holy in His sight. Not only has He determined that we would stand before Him blameless, but He purposed that we would one day stand before Him “**holy.**” There are two aspects of our becoming “holy” before Him.

(a) When we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, we are thereafter regarded by God as “righteous”, we are set apart as “holy.” He *treats* us as if we were righteous. This is why Christians are called “saints,” because they are regarded as “holy” because they are regarded as having the righteousness of Christ. This is our *justification*, in which He imputes righteousness to us.

(b) Through the power of the Holy Spirit, He *makes* us righteous; this speaks of our *sanctification*. Salvation involves God not only treating us as if we were righteous (our justification), salvation involves God making us righteous (our sanctification). God has predestined that this will be so.

3. God has predestined that we will be like our Lord in His *suffering*.

As Jesus Christ bore a cross, so He would have us bear a cross after Him. Our Lord Jesus said, “If anyone will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matt. 16:24). This is the calling of all true disciples of Jesus Christ, that is, all true believers. What this means is that God has appointed His people to suffer as His Son suffered.

1 Peter 4:12, “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you.

Philippians 1:29, “For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake.”

2 Timothy 3:12, “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.”

1 Thess. 3:4, “For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know.”

Acts 14:12, “We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.”

Our American culture knows little about the theology of suffering. (That ignorance may be corrected in coming years given the way our society is going.) The point is this, we are children of God living in a world that is hostile toward God. The world will, therefore, be hostile toward God’s people. All down through history this has been so. In most parts of the world this is so today. Jesus told His disciples,

“If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. ¹⁹If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me.” (John 15:18ff)

But thankfully, *suffering brings spiritual benefit to God’s children*. If it did not bring benefit, God would not allow it to occur to His children. Suffering establishes proper priorities in our lives. Suffering sets our minds upon the Lord rather than our sinful pleasures. Suffering severs the affections of our hearts from the things of this fallen world and instills a desire in us to enter the world to come. Suffering moves us to see our own weakness and need for God’s strengthening. Suffering enables us to better see our sinfulness and its effects, and our need for the Lord Jesus. Ultimately, our suffering leads us to have faith in, and hope for, the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ when we will be delivered once and for all from the presence of all sin. Without suffering we would not realize these things in our lives, so God has predestined that we will be conformed to Christ in His sufferings.

4. God has predestined that we will be like our Lord in His *resurrection glory*.

Suffering is a prelude to glory. One leads to and results in the other. Let us look again to Romans 8. The context speaks of suffering and its relationship to our future glorification. Romans 8:18 reads,

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 waits for the manifestation of the children of God.

In Philippians Paul wrote how suffering gives way to glory.

That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his *sufferings*, being made conformable unto his death; if by any means I might attain unto *the resurrection of the dead*. (Phi. 3:10).

Peter connected the two ideas. 1 Peter 4:12 speaks of the fact that God has decreed that we suffer, and then verse 13 he connects the idea of suffering with glorification.

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; ¹³but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's *sufferings*, that when His *glory* is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. (1 Peter 4:12f)

The point is this, since suffering is a prelude to glory, all of us, if we are true Christians, will encounter it. If you have not yet, be sure that it is coming. Suffering assures us that we are the children of God and that one day we will reign in glory with Jesus Christ. We have the promise of 2 Tim. 2:12 (and elsewhere), "If we suffer, we shall also reign with Him."

The point that we make is this, God, because of His great love for us, has not only *chosen* us to experience His redemptive love, but He has *predestined* that we do so. All that we face, all that we encounter in this life, is a manifestation of His great love for us. He has predetermined that we will be like His Son in every way, in our relationship with the Father, in the character, in the sufferings, and in the glory of His Son. May or Lord give us eyes of understanding to see and believe these things.

Let us now look at the next manifestation of God's grace to them who are in object of His love.

C. God's love for His people is seen in His calling them to salvation--"These He also called" (Rom. 8:30)

This speaks of the time and manner in which God brought us to experience His salvation. Our election and predestination were set in eternity, before the foundation of the world. Our calling, however, refers to the specific occasion in history when He brings each of His beloved ones to receive Christ as Lord and Savior. This is an essential aspect of the love of God that He has for His people.

The Bible speaks of God calling people to salvation in two ways--God's general call and His effectual call. When we speak of God's calling as taught in the Scriptures, it is important to distinguish between these two kinds of calling. Let us consider these.

1. The general call (or, universal or external Call) of God to salvation

The general call of God is not restricted to God's elect, but it speaks of God calling everyone everywhere to turn from sin and believe on Jesus Christ for salvation. There is a universal call of all men to serve and worship the living God. This call is made by the understanding of God derived from *nature* and in the *human conscience*. This general call of God also comes through the message of the *gospel* to every one everywhere, inviting them to come to Christ and receive freely the salvation that is in Him. When we witness to others, or preach to others, we are extending a call to them to turn from sin and believe on the Lord Jesus.

The general call of God to salvation is frequently rejected entirely. In fact, the general call of God, if alone, will always be rejected by sinners. Something more needs to be done than simply make a plan of salvation known. Sinners will reject Christ unless and until something more than an external invitation of the gospel is performed. This rejection of the grace of God in His external call may be seen in Jerusalem's rejection of Christ. The Lord Jesus declared their rejection of Him:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and *you would not!*” (Matt. 23:37)

This is always the response of fallen man to the invitation of the gospel. A few verses farther in John 3 we read, “And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). Men will not come to Christ because they love darkness and hate Christ.

Isaiah recorded God's words respecting Israel. “But to Israel he said, All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people.” God had called to them through the prophets, but they would not hear. Proverbs 1:24 records the rejection of God who had called to people to respond to Him. “Because I have called, and you refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded.”

Again, as we stated, the grace of God in the general call of the gospel alone is insufficient to bring people to salvation. People need more than just hearing the gospel. The Holy Spirit must apply the gospel to an individual's mind and heart before salvation can take place. And so, the general call of God, if alone, will be rejected by sinners.

The general offer of the gospel is insufficient to bring salvation apart from an inward work of grace by God leading and enabling a sinner to receive and respond to the gospel.

John Gill wrote, “It (the general call) is always insufficient and ineffectual of itself unto real conversion, without the powerful and efficacious grace of God.” What is needed is more than a general call, an effectual, or inward call of God must bring a sinner to receive Christ in the gospel. This is an act of special grace whereby God applies salvation to His people.

2. The effectual call (or, special, internal call) of God to salvation

This is the call that Paul wrote of in Romans 8:29f, “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. ³⁰Moreover whom He predestined, these He also *called*...”

This call of God is effectual, that is, it always accomplishes the purpose for which it was issued--the salvation of God's chosen ones. Paul described his own experience of this effectual call of God:

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and *called me by His grace*, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood. (Gal 1:15).

Before we ever called on Him to save us, He called on us to save us. This calling is *the inward call of the Holy Spirit* whereby He enables us to hear, understand, and respond to the gospel. It is frequently referred to as an *effectual calling* because it *always* results in bringing the one called to faith in Jesus Christ. Here is a definition:

Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, He does persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered us in the gospel.

This is the call of the gospel that goes out to specific individuals. This is the call of God that is heard by them “who have ears to hear.” The Holy Spirit issues this effectual call to the elect through the general call of the gospel. Paul wrote of the conversions of the Christians at Thessalonica in this way:

But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, ¹⁴*to which He called you by our gospel*, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thess. 2:13f)

Notice that Paul felt “bound” to thank God for their salvation. Why? Because they had been converted to Christ through His grace alone. He had chosen them “from the beginning” -- they had been elected. When the time arrived for them to begin to receive salvation to which they were destined, He “sanctified” them, that is, God set them apart from sin and the world. God had determined to save them through the work of the Holy Spirit in them so that they would believe the truth of the gospel. This work of bringing His chosen ones to Christ is described here as God’s action. Paul wrote that God had “called” the Thessalonian Christians through the means of the gospel. This call of God unto salvation is effectual, always accomplishing the purpose for which it was issued--the salvation of God’s chosen ones.

We may read of this calling of God unto salvation in numerous other places. **2 Timothy 1:9**, “(God) has saved us, and called us with *a holy calling*, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.” We read of God’s calling in Jeremiah. God said of His people Israel, which is also true of all His people, “I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have *I drawn thee*” (Jer. 31:2f). God *drawing* His people to Himself is His calling.

D. God’s love for His people is seen in His justifying them before Him -- “These He also justified” (Rom. 8:30)

This occurred when we first placed our faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. When God was calling us by His Spirit unto salvation, He revealed to us our *sinful condition*. He showed us how sinfully ignorant and derelict we had been with regard to our responsibility before our Creator. He revealed to us who God is and to a measure what He is like. The Spirit revealed to our minds and hearts that we had been living in sinful neglect of Him and of His claims upon our lives. We saw that we were lost, undone, and incapable of raising ourselves from our sinful, guilty condition. The Holy Spirit convinced us of sin and judgment through God’s law that was written on our hearts, written in His Word, and proclaimed in our hearing. He showed us that we could not earn His favor; we only deserved His wrath. We came to understand that there was no hope for us apart from the grace of God that is through Jesus Christ.

And so, the Holy Spirit revealed to us the truth of the *gospel of Jesus Christ*. He showed to us the love of God in Christ Jesus. That God, in order to bring us to salvation, sent His only begotten Son to be our Savior. Jesus would do for us what we could not do for ourselves. He came into the world and lived before God without sin, something we could only dream of doing. He kept all of the commandments of God perfectly throughout His life. He alone was a righteous man. And yet He died, but not for Himself, but He died for us, in our place, as a substitute for us, so that we not incur the death penalty for having transgressed God’s laws. He endured God’s wrath that was justly due us. Thus, God’s justice, which His holy nature demanded, that His holy law required was satisfied. Our debt to His justice was paid in full. God testified to His acceptance of Jesus Christ’s life and sacrifice by raising Him from the dead, exalting Him to the highest seat of authority in heaven and earth, enabling our Lord Jesus to freely and justly bestow the benefits of His life and death to His people through faith. *God now justifies sinners who come unto Him through faith in Christ*; that is, God forgives sin entirely and treats believers as though they themselves are righteous because of Christ their Savior. He does all of this because He loved them with an everlasting love.

What then is justification?

Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

1. What occurs when God justifies a believer?

(1) God forgives the believer of the guilt of all his sins--past, present, and future sins.

God is able to do this because of the *passive obedience* of Christ on the sinner's behalf when He died on the cross. Christ is regarded by the Father to have died on the cross in the place of the believing sinner. The believer's sins are forgiven him. His debt had been paid.

(2) God treats the believer as if he were perfectly righteous

God does this because of the *active obedience* of Christ. Christ kept the Law perfectly and that His righteous life is credited to the believing sinner as though he himself had lived that holy life. Thus God regards the believing sinner as righteous. He is seen to be as sinless and holy and righteous as God's own Son, Jesus Christ, for the Father views the believing sinner to be united with Him, to be *in Him*. Thus in and through Christ, the believing sinner has a righteousness that entitles him to everlasting life. Only those united to Christ in justification have this blessing.

2. What is the nature of justification?

Justification is a judicial act of God. It is a single, one time forever, act of God in which He declares the guilty sinner to be pardoned of sin and regarded as righteous by God. Justification does not involve God making you to become righteous over time (that is God's work of sanctification in your life). No, justification has to do with a single, one-time act of God in which He ***declares*** you to be fully pardoned and regarded as righteous. A person can be a guilty, condemned sinner one moment, the very next moment he is justified.

Justification is a declaration of God regarding the sinner's case before Him as Judge. It is as though at the time of believing your case was brought before the judgment bar of God. It was laid out before you and before Him. You saw your guiltiness before Him (conviction). And you saw that He saw you guiltiness. You were without excuse, without hope in and of yourself. You plead that Christ stand in your stead. The Father sees Christ, accepts His life and work in your place. He pronounces you pardoned and righteous. Cleared of all charges. This occurred at the moment you truly believed on the Lord Jesus. Your case was heard and dealt with once and forever. It was declared that there is no condemnation for the one in Christ.

Justification has to do with your actual guiltiness before God for having broken His laws. It is not a matter that deals directly with your *feelings* of guilt. This is a great error among evangelicals. We have been so influenced by secular, worldly psychology so that feelings of guilt are seen as the great evil that needs relief. Feelings of guilt are seen to be the major problem with the human condition. The gospel has been corrupted by many in evangelicalism to be a means of relieving people of their feelings of guilt. Justification has to do with your ***actual*** guilt before a holy God. The fact is, even people who are filled with feelings of guilt frequently have no conception of their guiltiness before God. They could even become offended if you would suggest the fact. Guilty feelings is an issue of assurance, which is certainly related with justification, but it is not so directly. Justification has to do with your legal guilt as a condemned sinner before the judgment bar of God.

Justification is complete, knowing of no degrees. Justification is the same for every true believer in Jesus Christ. One believer is not more justified than another believer. Every true believer is equally justified in God's sight because each one stands in the perfect, unchangeable, undiminished righteousness of Jesus Christ.

E. God's love for His people is seen in His glorifying them before Him -- "These He also glorified" (Rom. 8:30)

This speaks of the certainty that we will receive all that God has promised us in Christ. One day we will be glorified. It is stated here in the past tense, "**He has glorified**", to show that it has been decreed by God to come to pass. He has purposed that each and all of His people will be glorified. The certainty in the way that it is stated should strengthen our assurance of the glorious destiny that He has in store for us.

This, again, this is a manifestation of the great love with which He loved us in Christ from eternity. "**Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?** Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" No, nothing can, and nothing will. God's power and purpose will be realized. Of Jesus it is written, "Having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end." You could no more change the certainty of this fact than you could change the nature of God Himself.

Our glorification will take place at the resurrection, when these mortal bodies will be raised and transformed, when we will be fitted for our eternal existence in glory. This transformation will be one that will be a cause for amazement and wonder to us all. In your glorified state, you are going to be "dazzling" to all who see you. Paul wrote of the nature of this transformation earlier in Romans 8.

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs -heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ; if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider 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 creation eagerly waits for **the revealing of the sons of God**. (Rom. 8:16-19)

Our glorification will be in some ways like a coronation as king of one who was not known by his peers as an heir of a throne. We often do not appear nor act in a manner fitting with our destiny. We appear weak, undignified, and impoverished. But one day a transformation will take place. All of God's children will be robed in splendor. We will be given honor and authority. Now we have little voice and authority; then we will share in Christ's rule over all that exists. We will judge even angels. And those, who know not God, especially those who give so much grief to God's people in this world, will be compelled by God to bow and do homage at the feet of His children. It was to the church at Philadelphia, in the region of what is now western Turkey, that our Lord gave these words,

Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and **to know that I have loved thee**. (Rev. 3:9)

This love that God has for His own will not be more than it is now or was even when we were in our sins, or even before creation, when he had us on His heart. His love for us is everlasting. His love for us is what moves Him to superintend history and every detail of our lives in order to bring us to enjoy Him forever. May He enable each of us who know Him through faith to believe these things and live in the light of them. Amen.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love... (Eph. 1:3, 4)
