
Christ's Redemption

Sandy Willson

The Gospel Coalition Booklets

Edited by **D. A. Carson & Timothy Keller**

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We believe that, moved by love and in obedience to his Father, the eternal Son became human: the Word became flesh, fully God and fully human being, one Person in two natures. The man Jesus, the promised Messiah of Israel, was conceived through the miraculous agency of the Holy Spirit, and was born of the virgin Mary. He perfectly obeyed his heavenly Father, lived a sinless life, performed miraculous signs, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, arose bodily from the dead on the third day, and ascended into heaven. As the mediatorial King, he is seated at the right hand of God the Father, exercising in heaven and on earth all of God's sovereignty, and is our High Priest and righteous Advocate. We believe that by his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus Christ acted as our representative and substitute. He did this so that in him we might become the righteousness of God: on the cross he canceled sin, propitiated God, and by bearing the full penalty of our sins, reconciled to God all those who believe. By his resurrection Christ Jesus was vindicated by his Father, broke the power of death and defeated Satan who once had power over it, and brought everlasting life to all his people; by his ascension he has been forever exalted as Lord and has prepared a place for us to be with him. We believe that salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved. Because God chose the lowly things of this world, the despised things, the things that are not, to nullify the things that are, no human being can ever boast before him—Christ Jesus has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption.

—THE GOSPEL COALITION STATEMENT OF FAITH

When one of my sons graduated from college, it was the tradition at his alma mater to have a bacalaureate service on the night before commencement. Historically, of course, bacalaureate services were established for a minister of the gospel to deliver a sermon. Today, however, unless the institution hosting the bacalaureate service is evangelical, one does not expect a Christian sermon to be preached, and I certainly wasn't expecting such a sermon in this case. As a matter of fact, a Jewish rabbi had been invited to deliver the bacalaureate address, a rabbi I happened to know. He is bright, winsome, and interesting, so I was not surprised to find his address uplifting, practical, and thoughtful. In fact, it is the best I remember; I found that I agreed with everything he said with no exceptions.

As I walked away from that experience, I couldn't help but reflect on the state of much Christian preaching today. It is usually less interesting than the rabbi's preaching, and it often contains nothing with which the rabbi himself would disagree. Many of the sermons preached on TV and radio and in church pulpits are sadly devoid of anything distinctly Christian. They often consist of "common sense" things with which people of good will are generally in agreement. We often simply offer the same practical "how to" wisdom that others offer, except that we make reference to a Bible story or a Bible truth. My friend the rabbi also uses stories and principles from both the Old Testament and the New Testament, and he does it exceedingly well. So what should be distinctive about Christian preaching?

Christian preaching is fundamentally about Jesus Christ and what he has done to redeem his people. The gospel proclaims him. The gospel glorifies God the Father by glorifying Christ. If we misunderstand or misinterpret who Christ is and what Christ did, we endanger our eternal salvation. At the heart of The Gospel Coalition's Confessional Statement, therefore, is our declaration concerning Jesus Christ and his great work of redemption. This is at the heart of what we teach, preach, and counsel.

Christ, the Eternal Son

“We believe that, moved by love and in obedience to his Father . . .”

From the beginning, our Confessional Statement addresses this question: “Why would Jesus Christ do what he did?” What we learn from the Bible is that there is only one explanation: Jesus Christ loves us, not because of who we are but because of who he is. There is no way to understand Jesus Christ apart from love. Love motivated everything he did. If we cannot receive love, we cannot receive Christ. If we cannot give love, we cannot serve Christ. The grand motive behind all of his words and deeds, behind his great sacrifice for us, is his undeserved, unmerited, unmitigated love for us.

What makes this love all the more amazing is that before Jesus Christ came to earth, he existed as the second person of the Godhead, the eternal Son of God. John says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). John also calls him the “One and Only” son (John 1:14). He was “before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light” (Nicene Creed). From all eternity he was perfectly happy, coequal with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. He was not in need of friends, for he had intimate, infinitely satisfying communion with his Father and thus enjoyed all the pleasures of eternal bliss.

The love that moved him to leave his blessed environment and come to this earth is a love he shares with his Father from all eternity—for us! Jesus said that he came to do his Father’s will, and his Father’s will is that his people should be saved. The Son of God shares completely in that loving intention—a love so pure, so powerful, and so gracious that men and angels can never comprehend it.

Christ, Our Humble Savior

“ . . . the eternal Son became human . . . ”

One of the most remarkable characteristics of Jesus Christ is his humility. One cannot fathom the depth of humility that is required to leave heaven’s throne to be born on earth of a poor peasant woman. Thousands of hymns and poems have been written in an attempt to capture this amazing reality.

Thou Who wast rich beyond all splendor,
All for love’s sake becamest poor;

Thrones for a manger didst surrender,
Sapphire-paved courts for stable floor.
Thou Who wast rich beyond all spendor,
All for love's sake becamest poor.¹

Paul joins the chorus when he says: “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil. 2:6–8).

This humility was necessary for human beings to be saved from our plight. Our circumstances were such that we could not be saved by human effort. What Jesus Christ did for us, we could never do for ourselves. The only way we could ever be rescued was for God to condescend to our miserable condition in our broken world. He had to come and get us. And that's exactly what he did.

The life of Jesus Christ can be divided into two historical sequences: his humiliation and his exaltation. When we speak of his humiliation, we usually include his incarnation, his perfect submission to the law of God, and his suffering, death, and burial. One can see this sequence in our Confessional Statement. Each of these aspects of his humiliation is essential to the redemption of God's people, and, therefore, it is right and good for us to believe these things, to contemplate them, to celebrate them, and to live in light of them.

His Incarnation

“ . . . the Word became flesh, fully God and fully human being, one Person in two natures. The man Jesus, the promised Messiah of Israel, was conceived through the miraculous agency of the Holy Spirit, and was born of the virgin Mary.”

The conception and birth of Jesus Christ is not just unusual or miraculous but rather *sui generis* (of its own kind; unique). To be sure, in the Old Testament there are some highly unusual conceptions and births, the chief of which would be Abraham (ninety-nine years of age) and Sarah (ninety years of age) giving birth to Isaac. There are also the peculiar births of Samuel (1 Samuel 1), Samson (Judges 13), and John the Baptist (Luke 1), but all these, as well as

every other birth that has ever occurred, involved a human father and a human mother.

Only in the case of Jesus of Nazareth was a human being conceived and born of only one human parent and God. Through the years, and even today, some have said that the doctrine of the virgin birth is nice but not necessary, something we should not fight over, or about which we should not get too exercised. On the contrary, the great theologian Athanasius (AD 296–373) taught that the full humanity of Christ was necessary because God could save only what Christ became, so if Christ were not fully human, humans could not be fully saved. Anselm (AD 1033–1109) taught that Christ must be fully God in order for his sacrifice to be sufficient for all God’s people; otherwise one man could, at best, be substituted for only one other person.

We still believe this today, not primarily because Anselm and Athanasius taught it, but because Matthew’s and Luke’s God-breathed writings teach it (Matthew 1; Luke 1–2). How can we understand the depth of Christ’s humility in the incarnation? If Bill and Melinda Gates left their palatial home on the West Coast and took up residence in the middle of the Kibera slums in Nairobi, Kenya, they still would not touch the level of self-denial that Jesus endured to take on our flesh. What a loving Savior, indeed!

His Perfect Submission to the Father

“He perfectly obeyed his heavenly Father, lived a sinless life, performed miraculous signs . . .”

Not too long ago, my church, Second Presbyterian in Memphis, Tennessee, gave my wife and me a sabbatical, and we spent four weeks traveling about. On each Sunday we visited a different church, and I was shocked to hear preachers on two consecutive Sundays, hundreds of miles apart, make apologies to their congregations for Christ’s impatience, testiness, and insensitivity. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. Who do these preachers think they are? Do they understand the implications of their heresy? Do they realize that if Christ were a sinner of any type or degree that he would have been a “blemished” sacrifice, unworthy to atone for our sins?

But, praise God, the Bible declares that he is a worthy sacrifice for us because, although tempted in every way as we are, he never sinned—in thought, word, or deed. Not only is his life a worthy sacrifice for

our sins, but also the Bible teaches that he willingly put himself under the law, in order that he might accomplish for all of us what our first human father, Adam, failed to do. Jesus was “born under the law” (Gal. 4:4–7), circumcised (Luke 2), parented (Luke 2), and baptized by John (John 1) in order to fulfill all righteousness on our behalf.

His Suffering, Death, and Burial

“ . . . was crucified under Pontius Pilate . . . ”

Jesus suffered many things during his three years of public ministry: the demands of the poor and the lame and the bereaved, the contempt of the religious leaders, the unbelief of his own disciples, and the brutality of the Roman occupiers in Israel. But his greatest suffering came at the hands of his own Father. The night before his crucifixion in the garden of Gethsemane, under great stress and anguish, he prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). And then, from the cross, in fulfillment of the messianic psalm (Psalm 22), Jesus cried out to his Father, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46)

Why would God allow, even foreordain, such a seeming travesty of justice? (Acts 2:22–23). The Qur’an proposes an answer to that question: Jesus did not actually die. It was someone else who died (Judas) who merely appeared to be Jesus. The Qur’an conceives that a righteous prophet like Jesus could never have been so humiliated; God would not allow it. But—amazing thing—God not only allowed it, but decreed it from all eternity (1 Pet. 1:19–20). Jesus, out of love for us, suffered the ultimate indignity of being whipped and crucified like a common criminal. *Amazing love! How can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*

Christ, Our Exalted Lord

One can only imagine the quiet desperation of the disciples on the Saturday following the crucifixion of Jesus. They had believed that he was the long-awaited Messiah. But everybody knows that messiahs reign; and to reign, they must be alive. Jesus was now dead. His death contradicted everything they heard and saw in him for the three years they traveled with him.

They served with him, ate with him, slept with him, and prayed with him, and they never heard a sinful word, saw a bad attitude, or wit-

nessed lack of love toward the needy, and they never saw him stumped by clergy and scholars. They saw him calm the wind and the waves, cast out demons, heal the blind, and even raise the dead. They called him “the Christ,” and he assured them that the Holy Spirit had revealed that truth to them. Everything pointed to his messiahship. How could he be dead? A “dead messiah” is an oxymoron, like “fried ice.”

On the Sunday morning following his Friday crucifixion, some of the women made their way to Jesus’ tomb in order to care for and honor his remains with spices. They became the first known human witnesses to the greatest reversal of fortune ever experienced by any human being. Jesus had been dead. He was now alive! What theologians call the exaltation of Christ had been inaugurated. The exaltation of Christ consists of his resurrection, his ascension, his session (sitting) at God’s right hand, and his glorious return.

His Resurrection

“ . . . arose bodily from the dead on the third day . . . ”

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the crowning event of all God’s mighty works of redemption—more magnificent than the dividing of the Red Sea, more awesome than the quaking of Mount Sinai, more tremendous than the tumbling of Jericho’s walls, more impressive than David’s triumph over Goliath. The future of the created order rests upon this one great act of God. The hope of every true believer rests solidly on the historical reality of this event.

The resurrection of Christ was not, as some claim, just an idea, not a “spiritual resurrection” of sorts, but a bodily resurrection of the same body that had agonized and died on Calvary’s tree. This is what the early disciples powerfully, courageously, and relentlessly proclaimed: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). The disciples took great joy in the fact that their Lord Jesus had been completely vindicated and most highly exalted “and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:4).

His Ascension

“ . . . and ascended into heaven . . . ”

The disciples were joyful not only because they knew that Jesus is alive, but because they watched him ascend into heaven (Luke 24;

Acts 1). By the cross and empty tomb, he had conquered all his and our enemies, and now, before their eyes, returns home as King. No longer could he be subject to the pride of the Pharisees, the plots of the Sadducees, or the cruelties of the Romans. No longer would he be manhandled by Caiaphas, Pilate, and their minions—or by the Devil himself. He ascended to the right hand of God, forever safe, forever secure, forever happy, forever King.

Look, ye saints, the sight is glorious:
See the Man of Sorrows now;
From the fight returned victorious,
Ev'ry knee to Him shall bow;
Crown Him, Crown Him,
Crown Him, Crown Him,
Crowns become the Victor's brow,
Crowns become the Victor's brow. . . .

Hark, those bursts of acclamation!
Hark, those loud triumphant chords!
Jesus takes the highest station;
O what joy the sight affords!
Crown Him! Crown Him,
Crown Him! Crown Him,
King of kings and Lord of lords!
King of kings and Lord of lords!²

His Session

“As the mediatorial King, he is seated at the right hand of God the Father, exercising in heaven and on earth all of God’s sovereignty, and is our High Priest and righteous Advocate.”

Some years ago I was leading a prayer group of pastors, missionaries, and their spouses. Before we prayed, I asked them to close their eyes and simply imagine Jesus Christ. After a few moments I asked them to share with the group what they “saw” in their imaginations. One person saw him loving and blessing the little children; one saw him teaching the multitudes; one saw him multiplying the loaves and fishes; one saw him praying in the garden of Gethsemane.

Upon reflection, we realized something significant (besides the fact that most of our images came from the simple pictures in an old

King James family Bible): all our pictures of him were pre-ascension. We were not thinking of Jesus as he *is*, but as he once *was*. The exaltation of Jesus Christ is not only a historical event, but also a present reality. Jesus is no longer clothed in perishable flesh, but in imperishable glory. When the apostle John, in a vision, sees Jesus as he *is*, John falls down as though dead. Only God himself can revive him (Rev. 1:17).

This overwhelmingly radiant, exalted Christ is the Christ whom John came to know, love, worship, and serve. Christ now reigns as mediatorial King, interceding for us, ruling over us, and advocating for us. He has taken our flesh into the councils of the triune God where we are perfectly represented and continually protected. We, therefore, have nothing to fear but God himself (Matt. 10:28).

His Glorious Return

Christ will return in glory to consummate all things and to take his rightful place as King and exalted Lord, in whom and under whom the entire cosmos is unified in endless praise (Eph. 1:10).

Christ, Our Representative and Substitute

“We believe that by his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus Christ acted as our representative and substitute. He did this so that in him we might become the righteousness of God . . .”

We would have sufficient cause to praise and adore Jesus Christ if all we knew of him were the things already discussed in this booklet: his eternal deity, his loving obedience to his Father, his humility, and his unrivaled glory at the right hand of God. The Bible, however, gives us even more personal reasons to love and serve him. Everything he did, he did *for us*.

He was born into this world for us (Gal. 4:4–7); he was crucified for our sins (Gal. 3:13); he was raised for our justification (Rom. 4:25); he ascended to heaven to prepare a place for us (John 14:12). We learn in the Scriptures that the way Christ did this was to become our substitute so that he could do in our place what we could not do for ourselves. This concept is at the very heart of the Christian faith, and without it, the gospel loses its unique power.

Many religions teach us that we need to reform, and some of them give us the great prototypes we should emulate: Abraham and Moses (Judaism), Jesus (Christianity), Muhammed (Islam), Buddha and the

Dali Lama (Buddhism), Confucius (Confucianism), etc. But only one religion (evangelical Christianity) teaches us that someone else has already, in our place (1) lived that life; (2) taken the punishment we deserved for all our sins; and (3) attained resurrected life and exalted status, so that we are, spiritually speaking, already seated at the right hand of God. This is the deep mystery of the Christian faith (Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 3:16): through the substitutionary life and death of our Lord Jesus Christ we become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

A Sinless Life for Us

The Bible teaches that Adam, the first man, was actually our first representative (Rom. 5:12). As our representative, if he succeeded, we would succeed; but if he failed, we would fail. He failed. We failed. He sinned, so we sinned. He became a sinner, so we are sinners. Sound unfair? Think you would have done better than he? There goes your pride, proving once again that you are a sinner.

The beauty of the story, however, is that after man's fall God immediately promised a new representative, a seed of Eve that would one day crush our enemy, Satan (Gen. 3:15). Jesus is that seed, the second Adam, and he lived perfectly for us so that when we put our trust in him, we receive all the benefits of his perfect performance, his perfect obedience to the Father. Everything he did goes on our record. When God looks at the "performance record" of Christians, he sees the record accomplished by his beloved Son Jesus. We are clothed in Christ, and God has imputed to us the merits of his Son's perfect life. It is blessedly true that Jesus lived a sinless life *for us*.

A Painful Death for Us

We often badly underestimate the extent of our moral and spiritual problems. As a result of the fall of Adam, we are guilty sinners who are objects of God's wrath; we are corrupt in all aspects of our human nature; we are alienated from God, having become his enemies; and we are morally and spiritually helpless to change or save ourselves. Only the substitutionary death of our Lord Jesus Christ can solve these profound problems.

Jesus died in our place. He did not deserve to die. We did. He died because God, for his own glory and out of his infinite grace toward us, imputed our sins to his own beloved Son. And Jesus Christ, by his sac-

rificial death (his own blood), bore our sins in his body, taking them away from us. John the Baptist pointed to Jesus, saying, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29, 36 ESV). Jesus Christ expiated (removed) our sin by taking our sin to himself. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

Paul explains why Jesus actually died on a wooden cross: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree’” (Gal. 3:13). By becoming a curse for us, Jesus Christ satisfied the righteous wrath of God against all who sin; that is, Christ “propitiated” God. He turned God’s wrath away from us. He satisfied the righteous demands of God’s justice. This substitutionary sacrifice is necessary for our salvation because “whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him” (John 3:36).

Paul described us in our natural, fallen condition as “dead in [our] transgressions and sins. . . . By nature objects of wrath” (Eph. 2:1, 3). But while we were still sinners, enemies of God, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). Ultimately, the blood of Christ, his sacrificial death for us, reconciles us to God so that we recover the intimacy with him that we lost in the garden of Eden by our sin. Paul puts it this way: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18–19). His painful death was *for us*.

A Triumphant Resurrection for Us

Because of our sins, we became subject to all the miseries of this life, death, and everlasting hell. By his substitutionary, redemptive work, Jesus vanquished sin, death, and all the principalities and powers that seek to destroy us. By his resurrection from the tomb, we are finally and forever justified before God and are resurrected to everlasting life. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we are already spiritually raised with him, and one day we shall become like him in new, resurrected bodies. Our future is bound up in him: just as our humiliation became his humiliation, so his exaltation becomes our exaltation. We are resur-

rected; we ascend to God's presence; we reign with Christ; and we shall one day be like him in glorified bodies. His triumphant resurrection was *for us*.

A Glorious Ascension for Us

When Jesus was with his disciples in the upper room, he anticipated their anxiety about his future departure. He explained to them that his going away was actually a good thing, for two reasons. First, he would send them the Holy Spirit, the Counselor, who would guide, encourage, and teach them. Second, he would go to his Father's house in order to prepare a place there for them.

When I was a child, one of the highlights of my existence was to visit my maternal grandmother, usually once a year, and we would stay in her small house for several days. She was a simple woman who lived in a small, rustic village in the Smoky Mountains. One might wonder why an eight-year-old would be excited to visit a place with no TV, basketball court, or modern toys, and with only a small general store down the road. It was because Granny had been waiting for us for months. When we arrived, she was waiting on the little back stoop of her house. We ran to get our affectionate hug. She had a nickname for each one of us. We went upstairs to our bedroom just under the tin roof that made glorious sounds when it rained at night, and later we were treated to all the luscious dishes and desserts that Granny had prepared for us. We went on hikes and tours and did simple activities that Granny had planned. Most of all, we simply basked in the unmitigated, effervescent, unremitting love that our mother's mother had for us.

Now, if my seventy-five-year-old grandmother with her very limited resources and finite imagination was able to prepare an exciting place for me, can you envision what the Lord Jesus Christ, with his vast resources, his infinite power and imagination, and his boundless love will do for us? He eagerly awaits our arrival; he has a nickname prepared for every one of his people; he has prepared his estate to bring us constant joy. We will swim in the ocean of his affection for us. His glorious ascension was *for us*.

Christ, Our Only Hope

"We believe that salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved."

There are several aspects of the Christian faith which nonbelievers through the centuries have found offensive. These include the natural depravity of the human heart, man's helplessness in trying to rescue himself from his lost condition, and the reality of hell. In the time of the apostle Paul, there were other teachings that also provoked hostile responses: God's judgment on Israel, the church's inclusion of the Gentiles, and our freedom from the ritual laws of the Old Testament.

Perhaps one of the most offensive doctrines in our own day, one that the contemporary media is sure to address in religious interviews with evangelical Christians, is the Bible's teaching on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the way to eternal life. The reason for the offense is obvious: Christians are claiming that they alone know and proclaim the one, true, and living God, that everyone else is substantively in the wrong, and that the consequences for such error are terrifyingly brutal.

Furthermore, some Christians take this stand with insufferable arrogance and with seeming insensitivity to the implied judgment upon every non-Christian and every other religious group. Why, then, would we in The Gospel Coalition make this doctrine one of our non-negotiable doctrinal commitments? Here's why:

- 1) Unless one embraces this truth wholeheartedly, he or she does not understand the gospel of Christ at all. If we believe what the Bible teaches about the plight of fallen humanity (our moral depravity, our spiritual death, our just judgment of eternal hell), only then we will fully understand and embrace the unique remedy God offers, the only remedy that could possibly redeem us from our condition. Because we have no righteousness of our own, we must trust in the righteousness of Christ alone. Because we by nature are dead in our trespasses and sins, we must receive the miracle of resurrected life from Christ. Because God's justice against our sin must be completely satisfied, we must receive the perfect, substitutionary atonement of Christ. Because we cannot come to God on our merits, we must rely on Christ's advocacy for us before the throne of God. These are the unique accomplishments of Christ's redeeming work that uniquely solve our sin problem. "I am the way and the truth and the life," said Jesus. "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).
- 2) If there were some other way to receive eternal life, God would be guilty of the most massive violation of justice in the history of the

cosmos. The crucifixion of Christ, on a merely human level, was the greatest travesty of justice in all of human history. Jesus, as we have seen, is the only human being who never uttered an evil word, harbored a wicked thought, or committed a sinful deed. He lovingly served the poor, he had compassion upon the weak and lonely, and he healed the sick. He was the greatest human being who ever lived, and yet he suffered the most severe punishment of any criminal in history. More amazingly, God ordained this debacle; he handed his Son over to wicked men to face the excruciating agony of death on a wooden cross (Acts 2:23). If there were some other way for people to be saved from their sinful plight, if God had a Plan B that worked equally as well as “the Jesus way,” then one would have to conclude that the death of Jesus Christ was not really necessary for the salvation of sinners. He would further have to conclude that God was the perpetrator of a senseless and grotesque violation of his justice. But Jesus is the only way, and therefore God’s solemn decree to sacrifice his one and only Son is not the world’s greatest act of injustice but rather the greatest act of love ever accomplished.

- 3) If there were some other way to be saved, it would have to be based on human moral performance, for the Christian gospel alone saves by grace; therefore, any other way of salvation directly contradicts salvation by grace alone, especially as Paul teaches in his letters. If there were any other way of salvation, the notion of grace would be futile and useless, and there would therefore be no Christian gospel at all.
- 4) If there were some alternate way of salvation, it would be impossible to reconcile that idea with the clear statements of Scripture (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; Rom. 3:19–20; 1 Tim. 2:5–6). If Scripture can’t be trusted to give an accurate account of this cardinal doctrine, how can we trust the Bible’s accuracy in any other area?
- 5) If there were some alternate way of salvation, presumably it would be designed for those who have never heard the gospel but who want to go to heaven. But what makes folks think that the natural person wants to go to heaven? The Bible teaches us that the citizens of heaven are obsessed with the praise of Jesus Christ—the very thing the natural person eschews. Anyone not in love with Christ would naturally despise heaven. On the other hand, it can be truly said that no one who truly desires to go to heaven would ever be excluded. The hearts of sinful humans are given a longing for heaven only by hearing and believing the gos-

pel, which, of course, means that the church's obedience to the Great Commission is of the utmost importance.

The one who has discovered the love of God in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ is actually not shocked that God has provided only one way to be saved; rather, he is increasingly confounded and befuddled that God provided any way at all. As the Christian disciple grows in his self-understanding, becoming aware of his intense selfishness, his enormous pride, his willful neglect of the needs of others, and his inexcusable rebellion against the holy commandments of Almighty God, he wonders in staggered amazement at the unspeakable kindness, patience, mercy, and faithfulness of God.

Why would God save anyone? For his glory. That is why he chose to demonstrate his grace toward unworthy sinners. Christians have never bothered to write hymns entitled, "Amazing Justice" or "Amazing Wrath"—his wrath and justice do not surprise us. We were duly warned of his wrath in the garden of Eden. No, Christians have written "Amazing Grace" (John Newton) and "And Can It Be" (Charles Wesley).

Among all those religious leaders who have made claims to helping, guiding, and saving people, only Jesus Christ has truly done it, and he did it at the cost of his own blood.

Christ, Our All in All

The Gospel Coalition Confessional Statement says, "Because God chose the lowly things of this world, the despised things, the things that are not, to nullify the things that are, no human being can ever boast before him—Christ Jesus has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption" (see 1 Cor. 1:28–30).

About twenty years ago immediately after Sunday morning worship, I thought I had delivered a particularly good sermon (theologically sound, exegetically insightful, helpfully illustrated) and had received several compliments from parishioners to confirm my sanguine assessment. Then one of our dear older ladies hung back after the service to speak with me. Expecting her to fall in line with the other grateful worshipers, I was arrested and profoundly humbled when she said, "Pastor, thank you for your brilliant sermon; but next week would you just tell us about Jesus?" I realized in that moment that I had failed to make Jesus my all in all in my preaching and to some extent in my life.

In order to make Christ our all in all, we must do two things. First, we must empty ourselves. We proclaim him to others only when we know how desperately we need him. The apostle Paul says that certain people will not inherit the kingdom of God: the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, practicing homosexuals, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, and swindlers. Then he says, “and such were some of you” (1 Cor. 6:9–11 ESV).

When describing the natural backgrounds of the Corinthian Christians, Paul writes, “Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” (1 Cor. 1:26 ESV). God did not choose us because we had done something or would do something that merits his favor in the least. Rather, his choice of us is completely gratuitous. He chose us in spite of our unworthiness. Paul explains the effect of this reality on our self-assessment: “Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded” (Rom. 3:27 ESV). If we are saved by the gospel, we acknowledge that “nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh” (Rom. 7:18 ESV).

Second, if we must cease boasting in ourselves when we come to Christ, we must also begin boasting in Christ. “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14 ESV). We now have one boast: God himself. King David exclaims, “My soul makes its boast in the LORD. . . . O, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together!” (Ps. 34:2–3 ESV). Why do we boast of him? Because he alone has accomplished for us everything of enduring value: our acceptance before God, our joy in life, our wisdom for living, and our hopes for the future. He is our all in all. Christ, because of his glorious redemption of sinners, has become the center of our lives.

We can survey the gospel accounts to see what it means to have Christ as the center of one's life. In Matthew's Gospel, for example, we learn that if we have a Christ-centered life, we worship his majesty (Matthew 2); we believe his message (Matthew 4); we obey his teaching (Matthew 5–7); we call God “Father” (Matthew 6); we experience his healing (Matthew 8–9); we engage his mission (Matthew 10); we take up our cross (Matthew 16); we love his church (Matthew 18); we return his love (Matthew 26); we boast in his cross (Matthew 27); we celebrate his resurrection (Matthew 28). This is what real life is all about.

In light of our emptiness and his fullness, our sin and his righteousness, our foolishness and his wisdom, there are some obvious implications to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ:

- 1) We must find our contentment solely in him. Let us cease our complaining and our restless striving for this world's pleasures. Is he not enough for us? If you have him, can you possibly be any more content? Look at Paul's complete contentment, regardless of his trying circumstances, in Philippians 4:10–20.
- 2) We must suffuse our Christian ministries with the gospel of Christ. Our preaching and teaching must be focused on him; our counseling within the church must be focused on our relationship with him (the ultimate answer to every counseling problem); our worship services and prayer meetings must be centered on him; all our church programs and mission efforts must end in him. Here's why: when we glorify the Lord Jesus Christ and revel in his redeeming work, we glorify the triune God, who has made himself fully known in Christ.

Christ's redemption is at the heart of Christian theology. May it also be at the heart of every Christian.

Notes

1. Frank Houghton, "Thou Who Wast Rich" (1894–1972).
2. Thomas Kelly, "Look, Ye Saints! The Sight Is Glorious" (1809)

The Gospel Coalition

The Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We have become deeply concerned about some movements within traditional evangelicalism that seem to be diminishing the church's life and leading us away from our historic beliefs and practices. On the one hand, we are troubled by the idolatry of personal consumerism and the politicization of faith; on the other hand, we are distressed by the unchallenged acceptance of theological and moral relativism. These movements have led to the easy abandonment of both biblical truth and the transformed living mandated by our historic faith. We not only hear of these influences; we see their effects. We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

We believe that in many evangelical churches a deep and broad consensus exists regarding the truths of the gospel. Yet we often see the celebration of our union with Christ replaced by the age-old attractions of power and affluence or by monastic retreats into ritual, liturgy, and sacrament. What replaces the gospel will never promote a mission-hearted faith anchored in enduring truth working itself out in unashamed discipleship eager to stand the tests of kingdom calling and sacrifice. We desire to advance along the King's highway, always aiming to provide gospel advocacy, encouragement, and education so that current- and next-generation church leaders are better equipped to fuel their ministries with principles and practices that glorify the Savior and do good to those for whom he shed his life's blood.

We want to generate a unified effort among all peoples—an effort that is zealous to honor Christ and multiply his disciples, joining in a true coalition for Jesus. Such a biblically grounded and united mission is the only enduring future for the church. This reality compels us to stand with others who are stirred by the conviction that the mercy of God in Jesus Christ is our only hope of eternal salvation. We desire to champion this gospel with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy—gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines.

Our desire is to serve the church we love by inviting all of our brothers and sisters to join us in an effort to renew the contemporary church in the ancient gospel of Christ so that we truly speak and live for him in a way that clearly communicates to our age. We intend to do this through the ordinary means of his grace: prayer, the ministry of the Word, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the fellowship of the saints. We yearn to work with all who, in addition to embracing the confession and vision set out here, seek the lordship of Christ over the whole of life with unabashed hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform individuals, communities, and cultures.

“Perhaps one of the most offensive doctrines in our own day, one that the contemporary media is assured to address in religious interviews with evangelical Christians, is the Bible’s teaching on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the way to eternal life. The reason for the offense is obvious: Christians are claiming that they alone know and proclaim the one, true, and living God, that everyone else is substantively in the wrong, and that the consequences for such error are terrifyingly brutal. [And yet,] the one who has discovered the love of God in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ is actually not shocked that God has provided only one way to be saved; rather he is increasingly confounded and befuddled that God provided any way at all!”

—From the booklet

These Gospel Coalition booklets are edited by D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller and are designed to offer thoughtful explanations of the ministry’s confessional statement. The Gospel Coalition is an evangelical movement dedicated to the gospel of Christ and a Scripture-based reformation of ministry practices.

Sandy Willson (MDiv, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary) is senior minister of Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee. He is also cofounder and board member of the Memphis Center for Urban Theological Studies and serves on the board of directors for World Relief.