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GOD'S WORK IN SALVATION

While waiting to board a plane at Chicago's O'Hare airport, I experienced a very special conversation with a medical doctor and his wife. After watching several planes jet into the darkness, the wife wistfully remarked, "I wish I could vanish into space just like that plane and start life all over again."

She was an attractive woman of considerable wealth and position, yet her life was filled with regrets. Why did she want to escape? Why did she want a new start? Because the stained hand of her past was spoiling the present.

One of our national news magazines recently featured an article about Americans emigrating to Australia. Some of the modern "pilgrims" indicated they were seeking adventure; however, most expressed a desire to get away from it all. Distressed by rising crime, corroding values, and soaring prices, they wanted to escape and experience a new start.

In A.D. 1212, Europe witnessed a startling event. The spirit of the Crusades charmed a young boy named Stephen, who took up a cross and started marching. Soon, hundreds of children, tired of tending sheep and working on the farms, started to follow him. Stephen promised to lead them over the mountains and through the seas to God. Carrying their wooden crosses, they sang while they marched down the hills and valleys of Italy. They came—by the thousands they came—with but one chorus on their lips, “We are going to God.”

Historians tell us that the real reason for the Children’s Crusade was that these young people were trying to escape from the burdens of everyday life. Probably this is why so many children were inspired by Stephen’s call to adventure.

But did they escape? Sadly, the answer is no. When they came to Genoa and Venice, they were met by every kind of vice. Slave traders carried some of them off to Egypt. Some became ill and died, while others were robbed and molested. Some turned back, without a cross and without a song. Most were disillusioned.

Why do people want a new start? Because life on the natural plane is incomplete intellectually, morally, and spiritually. We know what is good and right, and yet on every side we experience evil and wrong. Daily we’re confronted with corruption in government, dishonesty in business, and cheating in marriage. Our faith in others and even in ourselves is shattered.

A new start is necessary because *life on the natural plane is incomplete*. We were created for fellowship and friendship with God. However, the original condition of mankind has been broken by disobedience and sin. Isaiah the prophet writes, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6). By our attitudes, conversation, and actions, we continually cry, “Give me more.” And yet, always, there’s a big hole begging to be filled. We pour into that vacuum an astonishing collection of things: work projects, television, athletics, club memberships, travel, entertainment, volunteer service, study, parties, barbiturates. But if we’re honest, we have to admit that any satisfaction gained through our efforts only creates a greater longing for something more. The deep want of all is to find what some have called “at oneness,” or, better yet, “peace with God.” Apart from being reconciled to God, we will always be unfulfilled.

Second, *life on the natural plane is disappointing*. Little in life measures up to our expectations.

William Saroyan, in his classic play, *The Human Comedy*, graphically illustrates the disappointment of life on the natural plane. Saroyan introduces us to an immigrant father, Mr. Ara, and his three-year-old boy, John, in their produce store in Ithica, California. The son asks his father for an apple, but after the boy is granted this request and has eaten the apple, it still fails to make him happy. The son then asks for an orange, but

this too results in disappointment. “Give me candy,” asks the boy. The father selected the most popular bar of candy, only to discover that his boy was disappointed, finding the candy to be “Nothing, truly nothing.”

After repeating this search with a variety of things, the exasperated father looks at his boy and says, “You want apple. I give you apple. You want orange. I give you orange. You want candy. I give you candy. You want banana. I give you banana. What you want now?”

Then, speaking to his son, and at the same time speaking to everyone, everywhere, Aralamens, “Everybody wants things . . . Nobody knows what he wants. He just want. He look at God and say, ‘Give me dis. Give me dat,’—but he never satisfied. Always he want. Always he feel bad.”¹

In our heart of hearts, we’re forced to confess that nothing measures up to life’s expectations, simply because we are panting creatures who are made for so much more.

Third, *life on the natural plane is sinful.*

The Bible teaches, “The whole world is under the control of the evil one” (1 John 5:19, NIV). Each of us senses through an accusing conscience that we have fallen short of what God requires. The passing of time may dull the reminders of sinful deeds and thoughts, but time can’t remove the longing to escape its results. A deed once committed will return to haunt us unless it is faced, confessed, and forsaken.

Life on the natural plane is sinful, and therefore it robs us of the glory of living—so that we continually look and long for a new beginning.

Scripture simply says, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Though some have sinned more than others, we’ve all fallen abysmally short of what God requires.

Fourth, *life on the natural plane can be changed*. There is an answer to our incompleteness, disappointment, and sin. A new start is possible. God’s salvation is shared throughout the Bible. The apostle Paul expresses it this way: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

This new start that Paul speaks of is not necessarily found in a new geographic location. It’s natural to look for another place to begin life again. Historically, groups and individuals have moved to other locations seeking escape from the evils of life, only to find that sin is everywhere because the individual is the problem.

I know a young woman who speaks of going to another place and another job simply because she can’t get along with her parents. However, it is not a new place, or a new mate, or even new surroundings that will provide a new start.

The chance for a new start is found in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

Each person is either in Christ or not in Christ. There is no middle ground. Scripture reminds us, “And He Himself [Jesus] is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (1 John 2:2). This simply means that Jesus died in our place as our substitute. He alone, as the sinless One, is qualified to be our substitute.

When a person is “in Christ,” he is justified before God. Christ’s death makes the sinner acceptable to God, as stated in Romans 3:24 and 2 Corinthians 5:19–21. *Justification*, applied to the believer, is that judicial act based on the merit of Jesus by which we are declared righteous. This is one of the results of God’s salvation. Upon our profession of faith, we are declared righteous. All that Christ is, God places to our account so that we stand fully acquitted and forgiven in His sight.

In Christ, we are also *sanctified*. This is another result of salvation. The word *sanctified* means “set apart.” There are three aspects to our sanctification. As believers in Jesus Christ, we are “set apart” *positionally* by becoming members of God’s family (1 Corinthians 6:11). However, we are also “set apart” for God’s glory in our day-to-day attempt to be like Christ (1 Peter 1:16). Though we are not sinless, as we grow in grace we will sin less and less. This is the *practical* aspect of a day-by-day sanctification. Ultimately, each believer in Christ will be with Him forever, set apart, so that his practice will correspond fully with our position (Ephesians 5:26–27; Jude 24–25).

This theme will be explored in greater detail in chapter 2.

Writing to the followers of Christ in Rome, Paul said, “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, *you will be saved*” (Romans 10:9; emphasis added). True salvation is provided by God through the sacrificial death of His Son, Jesus.

I began this chapter by telling about a couple who longed for a new start. I had the indescribable privilege of sharing God’s work of salvation with them. The apostle Paul wrote, “For the love of Christ constrains us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again” (2 Corinthians 5:14–15).

From the Scriptures, I shared that each human being is dead in trespasses and sins and therefore, helpless, defeated, and incapable of saving himself. I also shared that only God could intervene to save us because we are by birth, nature, and choice in bondage to self and sin. Something had to be done in us and for us before we could become new creatures. I then told them how Jesus, on the cross, freely became our sin bearer, so that we might experience God’s salvation. “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” (2 Corinthians 5:18–19, NIV). Simply and earnestly, they repented of their sins and, by faith in Christ’s death, received Him as Lord and Savior. They experienced a new start.

When a follower of Christ grasps, even in a limited way, God’s great love; when we catch a glimpse of God’s absolute holiness; when we understand, even in a measure, God’s condescension to visit Earth in human form at Bethlehem; when we realize the willingness of Jesus to bear our sins in His body on the cross; when we enter, even to a small degree, into His sufferings for our sins—then our only reasonable response is to give ourselves to Him so that His purpose will be fulfilled, which is stated plainly in Scripture: “To be conformed to the image of His Son” (Romans 8:29). This is God’s plan for each Christian. To miss this is to miss the Christian life.

God’s awesome work of salvation is our primary motivation . . . *to continue the Christian life.*

QUESTIONS

1. Why does everyone need a new beginning?
2. Suggest several verses of Scripture that call for a new beginning.
3. Give several reasons for the logic of continuing the Christian life.
4. Discuss several of the works of God in salvation.

NOTE

1. William Saroyan, *The Human Comedy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943).

As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written. “Be holy, for I am holy.”

1 PETER 1:15–16

The destined end of man is not happiness, nor health, but holiness. . . . [God's] one aim is the production of saints. He is not an eternal blessing machine for men; He did not come to save men out of pity: He came to save men because He had created them to be holy!

Oswald Chambers
MY UTMOST FOR HIS HIGHEST