

THE NEARNESS OF YOUR SAVIOR

Robert J. Wieland



There is shocking, but very Good News:

Scholars have recently made discoveries in the Bible. It's like a dense fog has lifted, and the bright sun is shining through.

When enormous progress has been made in scientific discoveries on all levels, why shouldn't there be equally marvelous progress in understanding the Good News of God?

This is not about musty manuscripts found in a desert cave or dug out of the sands of Egypt, but about discoveries in the Bible itself, News that is better than most people have thought it can be.

God is more "with it" than the Internet or tomorrow's newscast, and like a personal Father to everybody willing to let Him be One, He can be trusted. Since He is infinite, He treats every one as if he/she were the only person on earth. And He has nothing but good will for undeserving people who desire a better life and relief from guilt and boredom.

The Good News is about what the Savior has done, is doing, and will finish doing for us (and in us). Not what He might do, maybe, perhaps, or IF. He became the world's Savior, not merely wanting to be—provided we first do something impossible. He is already listed in the Bible Yellow Pages as "the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe" (1 Timothy 4:10). He is in business, not waiting to be.

We humans don't know how to get out of the swamp that sin has made for us. The Savior has stepped in and taken the initiative to get us out.

Most people have thought that after His resurrection He went to heaven to relax as on an extended vacation. He did His part a long time ago, now we must get our act together, stop sinning, and do good works.

But scholars are discovering in the Bible that Jesus has never taken a vacation of any kind. He is on duty without a break in His "office"—which the

Bible speaks of as "the sanctuary" in heaven.

His full-time employment is saving sinners such as we. How? Rebuilding human wrecks, reaching for the worst down-and-outers, lifting up throwaways out of the ditch, listening to distraught cries and tearful prayers at three in the morning, whispering hope to depressed alcoholics and drug addicts, convincing teenagers that He understands and cares, urging would-be suicides not to do it, pricking the conscience of lazy, selfish "saints," melting hardened prostitutes, healing broken hearts, encouraging prisoners, giving abused children hope. He's busy? He's busy!

But not too busy to be closer and more true to you than a best friend could be. The Bible describes His day and night work as that of a "great High Priest." The best modern equivalent of that unusual title is Divine Psychiatrist, or Physician of our souls. Although He was sinless, He took our fallen, sinful nature and met our basic temptation to fallenness as we must meet it. He had to say "No!" to self just as we do. The Bible opens an

astounding window into His soul:

"Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and re-lease those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.... In all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest." (Hebrews 2:14-17)

His specialty is healing people of all kinds of hurts, even from childhood and before, problems they are not responsible for. But He never excuses us for cowardly going on in sin; He heals, forgives, cleanses, sets us free like an inmate walking out of jail, not mistrusted like a convict, but free.

He is "touched with the feeling of our infirmities" (KJV) so He can "sympathize with our weaknesses." The Bible urges us, "Come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:14-

16). We need to learn how to come, and be willing to.

But yes, there is a catch. It's not that you have to do something first. Rather, you must see something. You've got to realize that you are a sinner before your coming "boldly" can make any sense, for He is a Savior who doesn't help anybody but sinners. If you think you're a decent, good enough person on your own, you'll feel out of place trying to come. To Him, it's sinners who are the first-class people. He says, "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance." (Matthew 9:13)

He must have said that tongue-in-cheek, because He knew very well that the only kind of people there are on this planet are sinners, even if they think they are not. But the ones He invites are they who have known it, because God's holy law has penetrated all the barriers they have erected around their souls, and it has convinced them of sin.

Jesus was pressing a thorn into the self-complacent thinking of the so-called "good" people, making fun of those pathetic "saints" who think they are righteous and don't know what a mess they are in in the sight of heaven and on the stage of life before others. In honest truth, "there is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside" (Romans 3:10-12). They don't know what they need.

There are times when the fog lifts and we see this more clearly than at other times because the Holy Spirit presses home the conviction that we're all the same by nature—lost people who can't save ourselves. Not one of us by nature is any better than all the rest, because we're all made of the same dough, as Martin Luther wisely said. "All the world [has] become guilty before God" (Romans 3:19).

It's written all over all of us. Our very name is "Adam," which is the Bible name for all mankind. Adam was a sinner. When he sinned in the beginning, he was the entire human race in himself,

so that the whole human race sinned "in him." All the sin in the world was therefore included in Adam's sin when he sinned. As a vine is an extension of its root so we are an extension of Adam. His semen is all of humanity. Thus there is not a human on earth who has not come from Adam, with his sinful nature. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." (verse 23). But the Good News comes in the next half of the same sentence: and "[all are] being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (verse 24). The second half of that sentence more than cancels the first half. How?

The word "justified" means to be straightened out, put right, or vindicated. (Remember, only sinners need to be straightened out!) Please look carefully, because all this was done before we ourselves could possibly do anything good. He justified us, put us straight, redeemed us, saved us as the human race without any contribution from ourselves.

It's wrong to say or think that our faith saves

us. Faith is not our Savior. "By grace you have been saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8). That agrees with what we just read in Romans 3:24—we were saved before we had faith, but our faith is what grabs hold of that blessed fact and makes it real in our own personal experience. This Good News is clear in Romans 3:23,24.

"All" are "justified." That means the entire human race. This truth is the cure for depression, despair, low self-respect. Believe it, and henceforth you cannot help but hold your head high anytime, anywhere. But how does this change come about?

These "all" are justified "freely." No admission ticket required. Anything "free" is for everybody, no exceptions. No one can say, "This isn't for me" (unless of course you are from Mars or you haven't sinned—pre-posterous assumptions). Stop wasting precious spiritual energy worrying about whether God has accepted you. Come into His presence like the prince or princess that you are—in His sight. You've already been adopted into His family "in Christ"!

Someone says, "How can that be? I'm not a real Christian and never have been!" The answer is that the entire human race was corporately in Christ as the second Adam, just as it was in the first Adam by nature. Therefore you were included. When Christ was baptized, the Father said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). He was talking about us all, for He counted us "in Him." A writer who understood says that that word "embraces humanity. God spoke to Jesus as our representative."²

The "all" are justified "by His grace." Note that the word "faith" is not there. Your faith or your lack of faith had nothing to do with Christ giving His life for you, justifying you by His sacrifice. And remember that "grace" is not meant for good people but for those who don't deserve it. "To him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness" (Romans 4:4,5). This accomplishment redeems everyone "in Christ

Jesus."

"Wait a minute! All this is given free to bad people?" Yes, the Bible says, "all," If "your Father in heaven ... makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45), it must include bad people. That has to be the meaning of "grace," or it isn't grace.

Imagine the surprise that this is going to be. Many millions haven't realized what the Son of God has done! The very shock of learning this will capture their attention, for most have never been told that Christ accomplished such a feat as this. (Even atheists are going to be shocked, for no one could have invented this idea.)

By now we're taking a deep breath. This is shocking to all of us as well. What evidence do we have in the Bible that the Good News is this good?

When the Father sent His Son into the world, He was given explicit instructions that His job was

to "save the world" for He says, "I did not come to judge the world but to save the world," and "to give [My] life a ransom for many" (John 12:47; Matthew 20:28).

And when He was about to die He prayed, "I have finished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 17:4).

Probably the first people to recognize this amazing truth were the Samaritans of the village of Sychar who said, "We... know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world" (John 4:42). They got the idea—He's not only the Savior of the Jews or of a handful of Gentiles who believe and obey, but He is everybody's Savior!

As the "last Adam" (1 Corinthians 15:45), He became "us" as truly as Adam was us. Thus when He died in our place, He actually died as us. "You are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power" (Colossians 2:10). You died "in Him," were resurrected "in Him," and will live eternally "in Him." (see Romans 6:3-6; 8:9;

Ephesians 1:3-12)

He won't force you to be saved against your will. You can say "No!" and forfeit your birthright even as Esau sold his for a mess of lentil stew (see Genesis 25:29-33). Many will. But the "birthright" has been yours because you are a member of the human race.

You are not an exception. Are you a sinner? You are the reason why He came to do this. Can you believe that you have been redeemed? That's what the Bible is saying. Is the gift given to us already? That's what the words "grace" and "given freely" mean.

"Isn't there something I must do?" Yes, of course. Something big and very important: you must believe this Good News that you have heard and let it move your soul. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). It's true, and no one has a right to add any words that Jesus did not

say, such as "you must do this" or "you must do that," or that "nothing happens unless you take the initiative. "He has taken the initiative; He has loved; He has given.

But this does not mean that faith is a mere mental assent to an equation like believing that $2 + 2 = 4$. To believe means to appreciate what it cost God to love us like that and to give His Son to die for us. This is the much bigger truth that many are now beginning to discover is in the Bible. Such faith takes up the whole heart—nothing left over for the selfishness of the world. The heart-appreciation is big because you realize what Jesus did was big.

The death that He died for us was not merely enduring some physical pain for a few hours, which was terrible enough. He died what the Bible calls "the second death," the death without personal hope, "the pouring out of His soul unto death" that Isaiah speaks of (53:12; Revelation 2:11; 20:14). In other words, out of love for us He gave Himself to go to hell, truly giving Himself forever. (The most

wonderful hero in the world who died for somebody else couldn't go that far!)

On His cross He felt to the full the pain of abandonment by God, and sobbed out, "Why have You forsaken Me?" There we see the "width and length and depth and height" of love. It's agape, a love as different from what we call love as day is from night (Ephesians 3:18). When our shriveled up little hearts begin to appreciate that, we begin to live. We are like dead people resurrected. In fact, our hearts have never been so moved. We don't realize our potential for loving people who we never dreamed we could love, the tremendous capacity for devotion to Christ we didn't know is buried deep in our hearts. This discovery about yourself is magnificent. It's a resurrection to new life even now.

To have faith is not merely to trust the Lord like you trust the bank or the insurance company. You can do that and still remain as selfish as you were before, because such trust is a self-centered concern. The John 3:16 idea of faith solves the

problem and lifts our naturally self-centered hearts out of a dark cave into the sunlight: faith is a heart-melting appreciation of what it cost the Son of God to save us.

We know this from several texts that tell us what faith is. Those two things that God did in John 3:16 are: (a) He so loved the world that He (b) gave His only begotten Son. Those two trigger (c): we believe. The (a) and the (b) come before^ the (c)! If your heart says "Thanks!" for (a) and (b), then you've already begun (c). But just begun, for one's selfish heart only begins to come alive; you grow; the hardness is melted day by day. And that kind of faith "works through love" (agape). Your motives and your conduct are transformed from the inside out. Don't get discouraged if progress seems slow. The Holy Spirit is working!

In other words, faith couldn't even exist unless first of all there was the revelation of that love at the cross {agape). All of this is just another way of saying that salvation is by grace, "not of works, lest anyone should boast." (Ephesians 2:9)

So might I hide my blushing face
When His dear cross appears;
Dissolve my heart in thankfulness,
And melt mine eyes to tears.

But drops of grief can ne'er repay
This debt of love I owe.
Here Lord, I give myself away,
'Tis all that I can do.
—Isaac Watts

If faith "works through love," then there is no end to the good works that it will continually motivate us to do. Here is the victory over every kind of evil the devil tempts us to do. No addict is beyond the Savior's reach. Stop carrying a load of guilt. Faith is itself a change of heart. It reconciles an alienated, selfish heart to God; and since no one can be reconciled to God and not at the same time be reconciled to His holy law, such faith immediately makes the believer become obedient to all ten of the joyous commandments of God. The love of Christ supplies an infinitely powerful

motivation.

From then on, it's not a matter of "what do I have to do in order to be saved?" but "how can I say Thank You enough for saving my soul from hell itself?" It's an entirely new situation, for "behold, all things have become new," for "all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation." (2 Corinthians 5:17,18)

That is also part of the Good News—you will become a "helper," and in some wonderful way you cannot understand, proclaim to somebody else "the word of reconciliation" that has so changed you (verse 19). Maybe it will seem to you a very tiny bit of help, but the Holy Spirit will enable you to give it. If God picked you up and set you in heaven itself you couldn't be happier, because there is no thrill known to humans more delightful than that of being the channel through which this life flows to another human being.

You're probably shocked by all this almost

incredible Good News. It is spelled out in startling clarity in Romans 5. Let's look and try to grasp what it's saying:

(15) "God's act of grace is out of all proportion to Adam's wrongdoing. For if the wrongdoing of that one man brought death upon so many [the Greek says the many, that is, everyone] its effect is vastly exceeded by the grace of God and the gift that came to so many [everyone] by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ. (16) And again, the gift of God is not to be compared in its effect with that one man's sin; for the judicial action, following on the one offense, resulted in a verdict of condemnation, but the act of grace, following on so many misdeeds, resulted in a verdict of acquittal.... (18) It follows, then, that as the result of one misdeed was condemnation for all people, so the result of one righteous act is acquittal and life for all" (Revised English Bible).

Here is where many people are waking up to see something astounding.

Adam's act of sin brought a "verdict of condemnation" on "all people." But amazingly, Christ's "one righteous act" brought "a verdict of acquittal" on the same "all people." In other words, all the evil that Adam did to the entire human race was reversed by Christ. How could He do it? He is the divine Son of God, the Creator Himself! He became a man, but in doing so did not cease to remain what He was—God. His name "Immanuel" means He is with us. (see Matthew 1:23)

This explains how "all" have been "justified freely" by the sacrifice of Christ. "The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). None left over.

But iniquity (or sin) brings a sure result—death, the real thing. Our sin brought death to Him. Christ has "taste[d] death for everyone" (Hebrews 2:9). What we call "death," the Bible calls "sleep" (John 11:11-14; 1 Thessalonians 4:15,16). But this is what the Bible calls "the second death," what's final (Revelation 2:11). He died your second death. Take a deep breath, and ponder that. There is no

reason under heaven why you should have to die that same second death, unless you choose to tell Him "No" and resist His Holy Spirit.

Grace is seen to be stronger than sin, even as light is stronger than darkness. All the sins that the devil and his evil angels can ever invent are outdone by the grace of Christ that is "out of all proportion" to human sin. Good News? It's astonishing!

Furthermore, grace gives a "gift"—that "verdict of acquittal," a precious justification before the universe. When Christ took on Himself "the iniquity of us all," He took our guilt, leaving us pronounced free, and treated us as though we were innocent, even though we weren't. "Not fair"? If so, it is gloriously unfair, because Christ has taken our place; He became us. It's not that God is satisfied for an innocent man to be executed instead of the guilty one (which would be unfair indeed), but Christ took us all into Himself. We who are the guilty ones died "in Christ" because He put Himself into the human race, and now we are "in

Him." Not only did He die instead of us, He died as us. And then, what is the next step? We begin living as Jesus lived—in obedience to God's holy law.

This is the Good News Christ commanded us to proclaim to everyone. When the sinner hears it and his heart responds, Satan can't stop it from happening. The sinner experiences justification by faith, which is simply being put right, straightened out, your life renovated because now you have a new heart. This is much more than a mere "verdict of acquittal." It has dynamite-like power to change selfish hearts into loving ones.

Jesus came so close to us that He became one of us; He felt how we feel inside. It's not a sin to be tempted—everyone is, in one way or another. Even a thousand temptations do not equal one sin. The sin comes only in yielding to the temptation. "We do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). The double negative = a positive; we have such a

Savior.

No matter what your problem is, He knows, He understands, He sympathizes with you, and you can trust His goodness. But it doesn't mean that He sympathizes with the sin or that He excuses you for going on to commit it. He knows the sin will kill you, which is why He hates it. If you were standing on the windowsill of a skyscraper, He wouldn't say sweetly, "I know how you are discouraged, so it's OK with me for you to jump." No, He would yell at you, "Get back in here! Don't you dare do this! I know how you feel, for I too have been tempted to despair, but I overcame it, and I freely give you grace to overcome it too!" Why would He talk so strongly? Because He loves you. You will appreciate Him more when you understand why He can't stand your continued sinning. He has a better life for you.

That same grace which has justified you is given you to overcome every sin, every addiction. It is not merely offered to you provisionally IF ... It is given to you: "Let us therefore come boldly to

the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (verse 16)

Let's Check Out this Promise

- Suppose you are an alcoholic, (a) The "mercy" gives you hope for forgiveness, (b) The "grace" assures you that you don't deserve it and that you can't save yourself—the basic principle of the famous Twelve Steps, (c) The "help" is deliverance from the addiction itself, not merely transferring it to other drugs or nicotine, (d) The "throne" tells you that the true so-called "Higher Power" is Jesus Christ, the Son of God Himself (alcoholism is more than a disease, it is sin against Him and against His holy law that says, "Thou shalt not kill," KJV). (e) The deliverance is from the root of it all—self-indulgence. The Good News is this: the deliverance gives us the grace to be able to say "No!" to temptation every time it comes up. You "overcome" as "also [He] overcame" (Revelation 3:21). You are never alone, for you are with Him. His Holy Spirit gets to the root of your problem; healing is from inside out.

- Suppose you are addicted to drugs. While Christ was in unspeakable agony on the cross, kind people offered Him a drug that would ease His pain. He was terribly tempted to bite down on that saturated sponge and get relief, but "He would not drink" (Matthew 27:34). He chose to keep His mind clear so He could finish His work of becoming our Savior from addiction. He was tempted as we are, "yet without sin." You can never duplicate what He did, but by His grace you can keep your mind clear so you can appreciate what He did for you.

- Suppose you are into gambling. Many are. This insidious habit eats the soul out like acid. But what you could not do, "God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh" (Romans 8:3). If He "condemned sin" it must mean that He outlawed it, trampled it under foot, defeated it. In Christ you have freedom from this addiction. Use "the hand of faith" to grab it, and hang on to it. Don't make the vain promise never to gamble

again, but (a) choose not to, and then (b) ask your Savior to save you from it, and (c) thank Him for doing it. It's simple: you keep on making the choice, maybe a thousand times a day. That's the ABC of conquering this problem.

- Suppose you are a slave to appetite. Same struggle, same victory. When Christ began His ministry, His first battle was with appetite, and He won a total victory for us (Matthew 4:2-4). Again, your victory has already been given you by grace; but you realize it "through faith." Immerse yourself in the story of Christ's battle and His victory. Let your mind grasp what happened. It's useless to pray the Lord to take away temptation, for food is everywhere. He couldn't answer your prayer unless He shut down all the supermarkets and restaurants in the world. But you can pray that His Holy Spirit may help you to grasp how grace is stronger than appetite. Thus your faith will grow in strength. You don't need to fall even once. You simply let the Lord hold you by the hand. All He must have is your permission!

- Suppose you are a prostitute, into kinky sex, or a porn addict. The root of slavery to lust is that same self-love that started this worldwide rule of sin in the beginning. But there is hope. You need to understand that there is healing in the cross of Christ: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:14,15)

From the very beginning, sin has been the murder of the Son of God, repeated all over again in our natural state of "enmity against God" (Romans 8:7). Enmity (or hatred) always leads to murder if it is given a chance (1 John 3:15). Those who refuse repentance "crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame" (Hebrews 6:6). The healing medicine will burn like healing acid down to the toes, but it will cleanse away this love of self. It's a heavenly work, but this is what the High Priest does as our Divine Psychiatrist—He cauterizes and heals the wound.

The blessing is coming, for He has promised to

"pour" on the world "the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they have pierced.... In that day a fountain shall be opened ... for sin and for uncleanness" (Zechariah 12:10, 13:1). Blessed "fountain" for those who will accept the gift. For those who reject it there will come in a final Judgment the realization of what they have done.

Don't try to take a detour away from God's holy law, and dance around that cross. Fall on your knees, let the tears come freely, let your soul be melted, beg for Him to do His work, because, like a surgeon who will not operate without your full permission, He is too polite to do His work of cleansing your heart and healing you unless you give Him your full consent for the necessary "surgery" to take place. He has never lost a patient!

Worst of ail, suppose you are a hard-hearted, selfish, worldly professed "Christian." You are a church member somewhere, lukewarm, and you don't know how to get over it for it's like a drunken stupor. You want to wake up but you're paralyzed.

You know in your own heart you are a disgrace to the Savior. Like the self-sufficient scribes and Pharisees who crucified Him, you make people think you are pious and religious, but you know it's a lie. Yes, your case is the most difficult for Him to handle. Saving perverts and criminals is easier than healing a lukewarm church that is deluded, thinking it is "rich, and increased with goods, and [has] need of nothing" (Revelation 3:17, KJV). Jesus said that "harlots enter the kingdom of God before" such people. (Matthew 21:31)

But there is hope, even for these people. He commands us, "Be zealous and repent" (Revelation 3:19). It's useless to think we repent when we try to confess the few "little sins" we are half proud of. Real repentance includes the sin we didn't realize was in our hearts. Deep down, we-tare no better than anyone else. That stabs us awake, but it's true, because we have no righteousness of our own (Isaiah 64:6). Therefore, the sin of somebody else would be our sin but for the grace of Christ.

The entire human race would be in ruin if

Christ had not saved us, and you and I are a part of it. If the sin of the whole world was Adam's, then it's our sin. When we confess that, then we are ready to receive the gift of repentance. The greater we recognize the sin to be, the greater the joy of realizing forgiveness from it.

Mary Magdalene's story explains what it means. This lady knew she had been possessed by "seven devils" which Jesus had cast out. "Seven" means all; therefore she saw herself as the "chief of sinners." She saw she was no better than anybody else. The sins of the whole world were hers. She was a basket case, in hopeless despair, throwing herself away, nuthin' goin' nowhere. Discerning at last the full extent of her sin, she was ready to realize the full extent of Christ's forgiveness, and there was her salvation. Her heart overflowing with gratitude, she broke her alabaster flask of "very precious" ointment and extravagantly anointed the feet of the Son of God and washed them with her tears. Jesus told her, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace" (Luke 7:50). Jesus taught a pointed lesson: the one who has been forgiven much loves

much, but the one who thinks he needs only a little forgiveness, "the same loves little." (verse 47)

Can you confess that your problem is those same "seven devils"? If you stop short of that full realization, you have not done what John says is the secret of deliverance: "If we confess our sins [the whole lot!], He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). It's the self-righteous ones who can't see the whole lot.

But It's All Good News

The Savior is the Lover of your soul, with His hand on you now. Welcome Him into your life and into your heart. Let Him lead you all the way.

"Your ears shall hear a word behind you saying, This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left" (Isaiah 30:21). That's 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week service, better than any 1-800 number to call. Your Savior's "office" is never closed, not

even Christmas or New Year's.