

# 8 GOD'S MESSAGE FOR YOU

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## BEN'S STORY PART 5

*While I was in jail, Sally renewed contact with some Christian friends of hers. Through their patient guidance and love, she made the decision to surrender her life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In her eagerness to help me, she permitted one of her friends to visit me in jail for the purpose of witnessing to me about Jesus' love for me. Very systematically, I tore apart every statement he made.*

*Often, in the jail, groups of young Christians who appeared happy and sincere would come to sing and talk to us, but I would respond in anger and bitterness. I dismissed them as simple-minded people who were intellectually challenged and operating from emotionalism rather than factual evidence. Although I argued with them and forcefully refuted their beliefs, they would still smile patiently and kindly. One of them even gave me a Bible, which I accepted and began to pore over to find statements I could disclaim.*

### TOPICS \_\_\_\_\_

*God Loves You*

*You Can Touch the Living God*

## GOD LOVES YOU

### **BEN'S STORY CONCLUDES**

*The young Christians gave one prisoner four pictorial gospel booklets. How we laughed and mocked as we poked fun at the stupidity of their contents. Nevertheless, as time passed we were all silently reading the material and even waiting eagerly for the next one to be passed on to us.*

*Then one day, as I was doing my assigned duties, I saw a distinguished-looking gentleman heading toward me. He looked like a preacher. We spoke for a few minutes, and he handed me a small book. After he left, I returned to my cell and began to read it. It was the testimony of another prisoner who had heard the gospel message, accepted Christ as his Savior, and learned the power of worshiping and praising God in every circumstance.*

*As I read the book, something strange happened to me. This was quite different from the many head trips I had experienced in my quest for spirituality. My whole body began to shake and hot tears began to roll down my cheeks. Although I didn't understand everything I was reading, the simple truth of the story gripped my heart, and I began to follow the example of the author and give thanks to God. There came over me then a peace, such as I had never experienced before. I could not comprehend it, but I knew instantly that this was what I had long been searching for. I couldn't wait for the preacher to return. When he did, I told him what happened and I asked him, "What's happening to me?" He responded with a broad smile, "You have touched the living God!"*

*Then we sat and talked, and he explained that God loved me and had a plan for my redemption from sin. He asked me to pray with him and ask the Lord to forgive me of my sin and take control of my life. In my prison cell, I got on my knees and surrendered my heart to Jesus Christ. My life was completely transformed! God gave me a great, unselfish love for others, and he healed my broken marriage. My only regret was that I had wasted so much time and for so many years had let my own pride blind me to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

Can you identify, in any way, with Ben's long struggle to find meaning in life? Many people who have been drawn to New Age philosophies say they had already tried Christianity and it failed them. As we have demonstrated throughout this book, there are many reasons this might be so. The main reason is these people never learned the truth that God loves them with an everlasting love and because of His great love He has given His own Son, Jesus Christ, as the one and only sacrifice for their sin. They have never learned that true joy comes from a total commitment to Jesus Christ and obedience to His will. They have never known the wonder of the salvation experience.

What do we mean by *the salvation experience*? Let's look at what happened to Ben as he read the gospel—the good news—of Jesus Christ. His body began to shake and tears rolled down his cheeks. Ben was experiencing the shame, guilt, and sorrow that come when one is face to face with one's own sinful condition. Shortly afterward, his Christian friend led him through repentance to a salvation experience.

We know from Scripture that repentance of sin involves sorrow for sin, confession of sin, turning away from sin, and in faith turning to Jesus Christ as the only way of forgiveness for sin. This turning to Christ involves confessing that He is one's Lord and Savior and committing one's life to Him.

Ben's salvation experience was a miraculous event that changed his life forever. The miracle occurred when God made him a new creation

(called *regeneration* by theologians) and declared him “not guilty” (called *justification*). Another aspect of this miracle was the perfecting of his nature (called *sanctification*). This is not to be equated to the New Age claim that one can by one’s own efforts achieve one’s “higher self” or a state of “utter perfection.” It is a miracle of an almighty, personal God, a God of love and compassion.

Let’s examine more closely what is involved in God’s justification of the sinner. I like Millard J. Erickson’s definition of *justification*, which describes it as an act of God on behalf of the repentant sinner:

In the New Testament, justification is the declarative act of God by which, *on the basis of the sufficiency of Christ’s atoning death*, he pronounces believers to have fulfilled all of the requirements of the law which pertain to them. Justification is a forensic [legal or declarative] act imputing the righteousness of Christ to the believer; it is not an actual infusing of holiness into the individual. It is a matter of declaring the person righteous, as a judge does in acquitting the accused. It is not a matter of making the person righteous or altering his or her actual spiritual condition.<sup>49</sup>

Several things are implied in the biblical doctrine of justification. **First, justification provides freedom from the penalty for sin:** “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). When Ben, the repentant sinner, by faith accepted Christ as his Savior, he was set free from the penalty for sin, which has been described as “spiritual, physical, and eternal” death.<sup>50</sup> This was made possible by the death of Christ: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness” (1 Peter 2:24).

Think about the enormity of what Jesus Christ has done for you and me. If you read the four Gospel accounts in the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), you will get a picture of one who came into the world for the sole purpose of doing the will of His Father (God). His birth was miraculous: He was born of a virgin, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. He was fully a human being, the perfect example of all a human being can be. He was fully God: His entire life was one of service to others in obedience to the will of God the Father. The Gospels record that as He went about doing good, great crowds followed Him, and He had great compassion on those who were in such physical and

spiritual need. He saw them as sheep without a shepherd. He healed the sick, He cast out demons, He blessed the children, He fed the hungry, He forgave sinners, and He taught them about the kingdom of God.

Then, in obedience to His Father's will, He went to the cross. There this sinless human being and Son of God endured the shame, dishonor, and excruciating pain placed upon Him by an angry mob who spit upon Him, placed a crown of thorns upon His head, cast lots for His clothes, and hanged Him on a cruel cross—the most infamous of deaths in that period of time. An old song based on Scripture says, “He could have called ten thousand angels, but He died alone, for you and me.” No wonder Ben's heart was broken as he contemplated God's great love as demonstrated by the death of Christ to atone or pay the penalty for his sin. The prophet Isaiah foretold Christ's atoning work in these compelling words:

But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.  
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to his own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

—Isaiah 53:5,6

**Second, Jesus Christ** not only set Ben free from the penalty of sin, but he also **restored him to favor with God, and His own righteousness was imputed or credited to Ben.** This does not mean Ben from that moment became a perfectly righteous individual in himself; rather, it means God *declared* him righteous. The source of this restoration and imputed righteousness was the grace of God (Romans 3:24)—God's unmerited favor granted to Ben—by the blood of Jesus. This justification was imputed as a response to Ben's faith in the atoning power of Christ's sacrifice (Romans 5:1).

This is a wonderful reassurance for Ben as he begins his Christian walk. He does not have to depend for his salvation on his own efforts to attain righteousness because he has been “*clothed with Christ*”

(Galatians 3:27). If he sins, the Lord Jesus Christ is his covering. How else could he stand before a holy God? As Tozer says, “We must take refuge from God [the Father] in God [the Son].”<sup>51</sup> This marvelous grace of God is further explained in Ephesians 2:1–10:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

This passage of Scripture describes God as being “rich in mercy.” Someone has explained the word *mercy* in this way: “Because God is *rich in mercy*, He *doesn’t* give us what we *do* deserve.” What we do deserve is eternal punishment. In contrast, the word *grace* is explained in this way: “Because of the *incomparable riches of His grace*, God *does* give us what we *don’t* deserve.” That is, He gives us eternal life in His presence when we put our faith in Him and confess Jesus as Lord.

**Third, justification is “an objective work taking place outside of us.** It has to do not with our spiritual *condition* but with our spiritual *relation*.”<sup>52</sup> Romans 4:1–8 gives two examples that illustrate this. Abraham illustrates the *grace* of God. God credited righteousness to Abraham because of Abraham’s faith in Him. King David illustrates the *mercy* of God. God did not count David’s sin against him because of David’s faith in Him.

We mentioned that another aspect of the miracle of salvation is the believer’s *sanctification*. This is described by theologians as an act of God having three time elements:

1. The initial act or *positional* sanctification by which God reckons to the believer the holiness of Christ<sup>53</sup> (see Acts 26:18; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Ephesians 5:25,26; Colossians 1:22; and Hebrews 10:10,29; 13:12).

2. The *process* of sanctification, which is described by Erickson as “the continuing work of God in the life of the believer, making him or her actually holy [or] bearing an actual likeness to God.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, being conformed to the image of Christ is a subjective, ongoing process in which the believer cooperates with the Holy Spirit to manifest the fruit of the Spirit described in Galatians 5:22,23 as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

The glory of the process of being sanctified or conformed to the image of Christ, as Ben begins to learn, is that as “holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix [their] thoughts on Jesus” (Hebrews 3:1), they become more and more like Him. This process is unique and progressive for every believer as each one learns to put self out of the way and live a life of holiness unto God. This is the exact opposite of the New Age focus on oneself which brings one to the erroneous, devil-inspired conclusion that “I am God.”

3. *Complete* and *final* sanctification. As we have already indicated, complete perfection will not occur in this life but will be realized at the death of the believer, or, for those who are still alive, when Christ raptures the Church. The apostle Paul wrote, “We know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears” (1 Corinthians 13:9). The apostle John clarifies the phrase, “when perfection comes”: “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he [Jesus Christ] appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he [Jesus] is pure” (1 John 3:2,3).

What a glorious hope this is! In this life, Ben will struggle against imperfection, and he will not be able of himself to live a perfect life. But through the agency or enablement of the Holy Spirit and by fixing his eyes upon Jesus, he is given the possibility of growing into Christ-likeness and separating himself more and more unto service for God.

The process of sanctification in this life does not imply that Ben, as a new believer, must work for his salvation, for he is justified freely by the grace of God through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The *result*

of his salvation experience is that he desires to serve the Lord and obey Him, thereby being conformed, day by day, into His likeness. Obedience and abiding in Christ (John 15:5; 1 John 3:6) are prime requisites to maintaining sanctification and progressing in conformity to the likeness of Jesus.

What a blessing it is for Ben to know that in his *standing* before God his sin is covered by the righteousness of Christ and that in his *position* before God, he has been set apart unto holiness and is enabled to live a life of holiness, without which no one shall see God.

The salvation experience is a miracle because it transforms people's lives. When Christ comes into their hearts, people are changed forever. They have no more desire for the things of the world, but their desire is to do the will of the One who saved them from the penalty of sin. Their testimonies, like Ben's, are told in every language, in every nation, tribe, city, and village all over the world. They have changed their hopeless, sinful state for the blessings of God throughout all of eternity.

## YOU CAN TOUCH THE LIVING GOD

Miracle of miracles, God loves you and me! The extent of His love is well expressed in the following two Scripture passages:

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16,17)

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

You may be saying, "But I don't know *how* to ask God to forgive me." Let me say, first, that this does not have to be an emotional event, although sometimes it is, but it does have to be sincere. One might begin by saying something like the prodigal son said to his father: "Father [God], I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Luke 15:21). You might continue by confessing your known sins. For example, Ben might have said, "Father, I have sinned against my wife and children, I have broken my marriage vows, and I have rejected Your Word and your Son. I have broken many

of the Ten Commandments, and I have opened myself to evil spirits. I confess my sin and I ask You to forgive me and restore my fellowship with You. Create in me a pure heart. I accept Jesus Christ, Your Son, as my Lord and Savior. Help me to be a committed Christian who puts You first in my life.”

I have no doubt that once you begin to pray a prayer like this, words will come from your heart as you confess your sin and ask forgiveness. I believe as you pray you will sense the cleansing of Jesus Christ. The Bible says, *“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come”* (2 Corinthians 5:17).

It may also be helpful for you to read Romans, chapters 7 and 8. You may need to read the chapters several times. You can see that the apostle Paul struggled with the same things we all struggle with: the sin problem. But we can be overcomers “through Him who loved us” (Jesus Christ). Whenever we sin (even after becoming a Christian), we come to Him and confess our sin, and it is forgiven. It bears repeating that we do not come to God in our own righteousness because none of us is righteous enough to do that. We come to Him clothed in the righteousness of Christ. He paid the penalty of sin for all of us ONCE FOR ALL, the Bible says. In 1 John 2:1,2 we have this assurance:

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

Also, I encourage you to read all of the Epistle of 1 John—it’s only five chapters long. (It is near the end of the New Testament, just after 2 Peter). It is my prayer that as you read, God will let these words penetrate your heart so you will see just how great God’s love is for you. Then respond to the words of invitation in this old song written by Lelia N. Morris (1862–1929):

If you are tired of the load of your sin,  
Let Jesus come into your heart.  
If you desire a new life to begin,  
Let Jesus come into your heart.

Just now, your doubtings give o'er;  
Just now, reject Him no more;  
Just now, throw open the door;  
Let Jesus come into your heart.

You have reached the end of this study. We have examined the New Age worldview and found it inadequate. We have presented the Christian worldview as one that abundantly passes the tests of reason, inner and outer experience, and practice. It provides the answers to life's toughest problems; it brings joy and peace in this life in every circumstance we face; and it provides the sure hope of eternal life with our Creator and Lord, who loves us and gave himself for us. It is our prayer that you will claim the Christian worldview as your own and share the love of God with others.

## EPILOGUE TO BEN'S STORY

*As I look back at my life now, I must say I have one serious regret, and that is that I did not give my heart to Jesus a whole lot sooner and avoid the horrible pain of walking in sin.*

*Few who have walked in the deep things of sin share the fact that sin permanently scars. Jesus can and does remove the pain from the mental and emotional scars of sin. But scars are scars. The only reason I can deal with it now is that the Lord has brought a lot of healing into my life. The first few times I shared my testimony I never finished the story, because I ALWAYS ended up weeping!*

*Finally, I need to say that the longer I walk with the Lord, the more my story about my life before I became a Christian shames me. It is nothing of which to be proud. Most people who have "bad" testimonies usually forget to mention that it's not necessary to have a testimony*

*of a past “bad” life in order to glorify Jesus. Today, I am much more impressed with testimonies of the keeping power of Jesus. Nothing thrills me more than to see young people in this crazy world who are standing tall for Jesus when that is not the popular thing to do. That’s a powerful testimony.*

