

A Voice from the Past:

SALVATION BY GRACE¹

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Editor's Note: This is a delightful testimony of how God revealed His grace to a modern-day Pharisee. Overholtzer's humility and love for the Free Grace gospel is evident again and again in this article. I hope you enjoy it as much as I have.

I. Introduction

Salvation is a free gift. Oh, sinner, believe it! Salvation is *free!* Oh, believer, proclaim it! We are saved by grace, and rewarded for service. I know it is too good to be true, and yet it is gloriously true, as true as the infallible Word of God (Rom 6:23; Eph 2:8-9).

A deacon in the church, a church member for twenty-two years, sent for me to come to see him. This was in the country and he took me way out behind the barn, out of hearing of every one. I wondered what was coming. He was about to tell me that he was not saved. Is it any wonder that he wanted to be where none of his family would hear such a confession? Can you understand the agony of soul and the courage required for him to make this acknowledgment?

¹ This article appeared originally as the first three chapters in J. Irvin Overholtzer's book by the same title, *Salvation by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Child Evangelism Fellowship Press, 1958). Minor adjustments have been made in spelling (e.g., Saviour to Savior) and capitalization (words in upper case were converted to lower case italics). A few sections of the article were excised for various reasons and are noted where they occur.

² Jesse Irvin Overholtzer (1877-1955) was raised in a church that taught that praying and religion was for adults. He came to faith in Christ at the age of 20. Later, pastor J. Irvin Overholtzer began to be burdened for the salvation of children. He knew that if properly taught, children could understand the good news of salvation. With the help of Dr. Paul W. Rood and Dr. Harry A. Ironside, Overholtzer founded Child Evangelism Fellowship in May 1937.

This is what he said, "My daughter has something that I do not have, and I want to know how to get it." I soon found that through all the years he had been working to get himself saved. He had accepted Christ only as one of those necessary good works. Never had he seen that salvation was a free gift.

When I had shown him, by the Word of God, that salvation could be had instantly by a single, simple act of faith, he said, "If I could believe that I would be the happiest man in Glenn County." But he could not believe it. However, a ray of light had entered his works-darkened soul, and he was now willing to let others know that he was a "seeker" for salvation, though a deacon.

I called his daughter and asked her to tell her father how she had come into possession of that which he had seen in her. She gave a simple testimony of how she had realized that she was a sinner and that Jesus had died on the cross for her. That she had simply accepted Him as her Savior and that He had saved her. The father listened eagerly but said, "It is too good to be true." I could not convince him, and as it was growing late I had to leave him.

The next day I met him again and even before he spoke his shining face proclaimed the good news. Sometime in the night he had come to believe the blessed Gospel, and his soul had been flooded with the joy of salvation, and he was one of the happiest men in the county. I said one, for I was in that county too.

What this man had needed for more than twenty years was someone to teach him in all simplicity the blessed Gospel of grace. Oh, why had it not been done!³

II. An Unbelieving World

Paul faced a world that did not believe his message, very much the same kind of a world that we face, yet he had the only Gospel that could save them in time or in eternity. Oh, yes, they believed in a god, for few people have lived who did not believe in a god, but they did not believe in the true God whose "only-begotten Son" (John 3:16) was the God-man, Jesus of Nazareth. Did he compromise with these unbelievers? He did not. He could not and be true to them or to God.

They also believed in sin and in salvation. Few have lived who have not believed that sin was real and that they were sinners; but the world

³A section entitled "By Grace Through Faith" was excluded at this point due to length-of-article restrictions and enhanced readability.

has always believed, or professed to believe, either that death would end all and thus prove their savior, or that by some scheme of good works God would be satisfied, or that perfection could be attained.

All of this Paul denied as Christ had done before him. He taught that salvation was alone in Christ the Son of God who died on the cross as a substitute for sinners (Acts 4:12). He taught that Christ having died did no one any good unless they knew what He had done for them and then believed on Him (Rom 10:13-14). But he was just as emphatic that even belief in Christ would avail nothing unless the person believing came to Christ on the ground of grace (Gal 2:16). That is to say that he must renounce all trust and dependence in good works, and in any and all other means of salvation, and trust in the finished work of Jesus as Sin-bearer only, as the ground of getting right with God and obtaining forgiveness of sin.

III. The Galatian Error

No sooner had this glorious Gospel been declared and believed by many, to their inexpressible joy, than Jewish teachers appeared on the scene and began to corrupt the message of grace. They said it was proper and right to believe in Christ—even to believe in Him as the God-man, Sin-bearer; but this alone would not save, that certain ordinances must be observed, that certain commandments must be obeyed, in addition to believing, or one would not be saved, or at least keep saved. Paul wrote the Galatian letter to refute this fundamental error. Here he stated with burning emphasis that such a corruption of the Gospel left no gospel at all and instead of bringing the salvation of God, only brought the curse of God upon those who taught these things (Gal 1:6-9).

This terrible corrupting of the Gospel of grace has been ever with us since that time. It has taken many forms. We have added many things to simple faith as the condition of salvation. We have demanded that all sin be forsaken as a condition of salvation. This is not the Gospel of grace at all. Sin is to be forsaken after Christ receives us and gives us His power with which to forsake the sin. We have demanded that a promise to obey Christ as Lord must be made—that we give our hearts to Him. This is not grace. Grace presents salvation to helpless sinners as a free gift (Rom 6:23; Eph 2:8). If promises are to be exacted, the salvation obtained would be anything but a gift (Rom 4:4-5). But the tragedy is, no salvation at all would be had. We have demanded that a certain creed be subscribed to. All of these are but forms of the Galatian error. They are under the condemnation of God.

Again a certain amount of sorrow for sin, or a certain kind of sorrow, has been demanded. We have required a public confession of Christ as a condition of justification. This, Christ and the apostles never did. Confession of Christ should follow and not precede faith in Christ. The salvation mentioned in Romans 10:9 and 10 refers to something beyond justification, as the context shows.

In the Galatian church those who accepted these errors lost their "blessing," even if they were already saved, which left them without the Holy Spirit's witness and guidance. This has always been true where any form of salvation by works has been accepted. This explains the loss of spiritual blessing in many a Christian life. Teachers who teach any form of salvation by works cannot have the blessing of God upon them, for they are really leading people away from salvation instead of to the only Savior who can save.

IV. Sixteen Years in Error

I spent about sixteen years in the Galatian error, and can testify to the loss of the Holy Spirit's witness and blessing during those years. At twenty years of age I came to Christ. I had been a great sinner, and while I knew but little of the plan of salvation, I knew that Christ alone was the Savior and that I was so sinful that anything I had done or could do could not count toward my salvation. I threw myself on God's mercy, in Christ, and instantly received peace, and as soon as I had publicly confessed Christ I received a gracious witness and blessing of the Holy Spirit. This brought me great joy and freedom in witnessing for Christ. This happy experience was short-lived.

Soon temptation came and sometimes I yielded, never deliberately, but through weakness and not knowing how to obtain victory. These sins I confessed to God and sought His forgiveness, but gradually Satan tempted me to question whether a sinning Christian was still saved. I began doubting my salvation, for I was now looking to my conduct instead of to the merits of Christ. This grieved the Holy Spirit and I soon lost His witness, not to return for sixteen long weary years.

Then in addition to falling into sin, as I studied the Bible, I found that there were many commandments to keep and many duties for a Christian to perform. Was a person really saved unless all these commandments were being kept? Was I saved unless all the requirements of duty were met? Then it was sometimes hard to know what the requirements of duty were, so how could I be sure I was doing right? And if not doing right was I still saved? You see I had turned away from grace,

unconsciously, but nevertheless really, and was now depending on my works, my conduct, and my commandment keeping, as the ground of my acceptance with God. I still believed Christ died for me but my justification depended on more than my simple faith in Him as my Savior.

V. The Bondage of Works

When I had lost the witness of the Holy Spirit, how miserable I was! But instead of casting myself on God's mercy in Christ again I thought my conduct was not pure enough and that He was grieved because of that. Perhaps I was not obeying His commandments sufficiently well. Perhaps He wanted me to make greater sacrifice in Christian service. I became more and more strict in every way, hoping to get back my joy. I began preparing for the ministry, longing through service to regain His favor. I volunteered as a missionary to a foreign field. I did everything that suggested itself, or that others suggested, to bring my life to the place where I would be good enough to claim salvation. The years were passing, with my soul oh, so hungry. I was now preaching—in the pastorate—doing some evangelistic work—preaching a gospel of works. Few responded to my message and these gave but little evidence of being born again. They had come to Christ on the ground of works. They were told that they must do other things in addition to simply believing if they would be saved. They believed the preacher and failed to find Christ!

I worked on and on, harder and harder; now so strict that in my zeal I found myself differing with almost everyone on questions of conduct and of doctrine. By this time I had a family of children and was so strict with them that they well-nigh lost their love for me; all to get salvation, to keep it, or to regain it, but still no blessing. There was no blessing in any department of my life. No blessing in my business and no blessing in my prayer life. My prayers seemed to get no higher than the ceiling; there were no answers. Oh! The agony of soul. I would have given my right arm to know that I was saved, to get my blessing back.

VI. A Pharisee and His Bible

I had become a Pharisee, having stumbled at the stone over which they stumbled (Rom 9:32). I was trying to provide a righteousness of my own instead of taking, by faith, the one God had provided (Rom 3:22). I knew my Bible in those days, could quote a great deal of it, but the texts that

stressed works were my favorites. I did not know what to do with the ones that mention grace. They had no place in my thinking—in my theology. Had I been asked to define the word grace I could not have done it. It had never caught my attention. One of my favorite texts was, “Work out your own salvation”; never realizing that the next verse taught that God had already worked that salvation in me and I was only to work out what He had worked in (Phil 2:12-13).

The book of James was my favorite book of the New Testament and the second chapter the big chapter. Little did I understand that while James referred to the life of Abraham to prove salvation by works, he was talking of salvation in the sight of men, while Paul in Romans 4 taught that salvation in the sight of God was by faith alone without any works, and he also used Abraham as an illustration. Here is perfect agreement. James believed in grace as much as Paul. He was not discussing how we get *salvation*, but how we *show* it—show it to men. Of course, we show that we are saved by our works, for men cannot see our faith, but God can, and He saves us on the basis of the faith He sees.

My pursuit of a righteousness on the basis of my own conduct was fast leading me to despair, for if after sixteen years of earnest effort I was not saved, was there any reasonable prospect that I ever would be? Then what message did I have for others who wanted salvation? The best I had to offer them was an opportunity to yield to Christ in obedience, and start to working for their salvation as I was doing.

I believed, of course, that God forgave my sins from time to time, but was I ever free from sin when I was not perfect, and what if I should die in such a state? I feared death. I longed to have the witness of the Holy Spirit again. I was not in the position of those who fall into the error of salvation by works before they get to Christ for salvation, for they have never tasted of the bliss of the Holy Spirit’s witness, and do not know what it is, and what they are missing; but I once had enjoyed this blessing and it was agony to live without it.

Little by little I came to the place where I was willing to be taught. I wanted God to bring me to the truth, no matter how, or by whom. When this place was reached God could give me light, which He had longed to do through the years. It is wonderful to look back and see how wonderfully He worked.

VII. God Seeking a Wanderer

The first clear ray of light came through reading the life of D. L. Moody. I saw that he had something which I did not have—the Holy Spirit’s presence and blessing in his life and ministry. But it is very won-

derful how I came to read the life of Moody. I had, of course, heard of his great meetings, but in my pharisaical bigotry I had refused to become interested in his work, for since he failed to obey some of the commandments of Jesus which I held so essential he could not possibly have God's blessing upon him. I admitted that he had power, whether through natural ability or from Satan I did not know, but I felt sure it was not from God.

One day I was passing the express office in the town where I held my pastorate and out of curiosity I stopped a moment while some unclaimed packages were auctioned off, among them a bundle of books. For these I bid twenty-five cents, not really wanting them, and little expecting to get them. To my surprise I found I had made a purchase. When I took them home I found among them a life of Moody, and while I did not at first read it, I could not get rid of the desire to do so in spite of my deep-seated prejudice. After reading it my unhappiness increased more and more, but it was a long time before I was willing to investigate the questions which it raised, though I could not get away from the conviction that here lay a possible solution to my problem.

VIII. God Using the Weak Things

The next thing that influenced me greatly was the life of a little girl, perhaps thirteen years of age. She had been raised in the Salvation Army and had been saved at a very early age. She joined the Sunday School class of which I was the teacher. She knew the Lord in the most real and precious fellowship, yet lived without any thought of making a show of the Holy Spirit's blessing in her life. Had she been an adult my prejudice might have found some explanation of her seeming blessing from God, for I could not believe her a Christian because in those days I thought no one could be saved until they were properly baptized, and she had never been baptized at all. Yet she was a constant rebuke to my theology and to my Christian life, for I could see that she was a better Christian than I was.

About this time an elderly man moved into the neighborhood. Before his conversion he had been a terrible drunkard and after he was saved he gave up drink instantly, but either the use of liquor, or giving it up, had affected his mind so that he became to some extent simple-minded. In spite of this he was very clear on salvation by grace and enjoyed the great blessing of the Holy Spirit's presence.

God used him to bring me the message which I needed and in a sense longed for. Had the Lord sent someone mentally capable I think I would

have argued with him and received no help. On two different occasions this man came to my home, delivered me a little sermon of about a minute's length, turned on his heel and was gone before I could answer him. Each time the message was just what I needed to convict and enlighten me. The gist of his two "sermons" was, salvation can be received instantaneously. He told me long afterward, when I had gotten my blessing back, that God sent him to me both of those times and revealed to him what he should say.

IX. Too Busy to Find the Truth

By this time I was really eager to know the truth at any cost. It seemed clear to me that the wise course was to restudy my Bible, asking God in simple faith to give me the light, with a determination to follow it even though the heavens fell. But my program was so full that I did not see any possible way of finding so much time as I knew this would require. Just then my family was quarantined for scarlet fever. Only one of the children was very ill but by taking their turns the quarantine was prolonged for thirteen weeks. This gave me the opportunity. How I improved it! I studied my Bible almost night and day. I soon discovered the word grace. I next made a list of the texts which taught that we were saved alone by believing. At first it seemed that these could not possibly mean that a sinner could be instantaneously saved by a simple act of faith without any added or preceding good works or reformation of conduct. But the more I studied them the more the Holy Spirit convicted me that this was the truth. I committed them to memory and set over against them the texts which I had been taught imposed works as a condition of getting salvation, and of keeping it as well. One by one these texts were illumined by the Holy Spirit until I saw that they referred to rewards, etc.

X. Counting the Cost

Now I stood at the parting of the ways. I was at last convinced with my head that salvation was secured alone by believing. Here another great problem arose. If I should accept this truth, I was now sure I would regain my lost blessing; but how could I face my people and tell them I had been teaching them error all the years? I was afraid my church would repudiate me and I would be cast adrift with a large family and little means and no friends. It was a terrible struggle lasting for days—yes, and nights. At last the ground was all canvassed. I would follow the truth

and trust God. The moment arrived when I yielded my will and gave up my old belief in works and accepted salvation by faith alone. Having memorized all of the texts that taught salvation by believing, I repeated them to myself many, many times. At last I said to myself, "It must be true" (that salvation *is* just through believing). Finally I said, "It is true." At that moment I had the peace of God. My soul was flooded with the Holy Spirit's witness. I was too happy for words. This had all happened in secret. Even my own family did not know of the struggle through which I had been passing. Now came the cross of telling it. It was a cross to tell my family, my people; but what a joyous cross it proved to be. Oh, the blessing that came to myself and others in the telling!

XI. A New Gospel Brings a New Ministry

I had taken up my cross, and sometimes the road was thorny, but the joy-bells were ringing in my heart. I knew I was saved! I had the witness of the Holy Spirit constantly. The blessing of God was upon my ministry. Opposition resulted only in new opportunities for God to manifest His presence and blessing. His *blessing* was upon my preaching. I now had a Gospel—*Good News*—to preach. I now had a testimony to give. In private and in public it was a delight to explain the way of salvation, and many were eager to hear. Soon I had my first convert and he has endured through the years, with the grace of God in evidence in his life. Soon there was another, then another, and another—all young men. What a joy it has been to follow these first four and to see the Gospel of grace prove itself true in experience.

Sometimes the old processes of thought would recur for a brief time. Usually this was brought about by coming in contact with men, often preachers, much more able than myself in every way, who taught works in one or the other of its subtle forms. It seemed there were few Christians whom I knew who were trusting alone in the finished work of Christ for justification. But these few showed in their very countenances that the Lord was with them. On these occasions of doubt there was but one recourse. I would turn to the Word again and reread the many texts which teach clearly that salvation is a gift received simply by believing. Soon the fog would lift and my joy would return.⁴

⁴Ed. Note: At this point the author included a long list of Bible texts proving that salvation is a free gift, is not of works, and is simply by faith. These were excluded to aid the flow of the article.

XII. Salvation By Simple Faith in Christ Crucified for Us

Salvation is *free*. Jesus died for me, and if I will admit my guilt, and have a willingness to be saved, and accept Him, He will give me the full benefit of His death on the cross as a *free gift*. I need not wait to reform. I need not promise anything in return. If I did, it would not be a free gift. I simply accept, and immediately I am forgiven, and I pass from death unto life.

XIII. The Place of Service in the Plan of Salvation

When I was “facing out” salvation by grace it seemed too good to be true that God would save me without waiting for me to quit my sins, or before I had rendered any service. Then again I thought this would encourage laxity of living. Many have raised this same objection since. But in my experience it worked just the reverse. When I really knew that I was saved and that God was good enough to save me instantly and without any merit on my part, I was overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude that has never left me. It had seemed to me utterly unthinkable that I should not do my utmost to obey the Christ who has set me free. I soon found that the measure of service I had rendered before was not now enough even to satisfy my own grateful soul.

Then the Holy Spirit had become a real and abiding “Presence,” and He taught me new concepts of service. I am sure that the soul who is saved by grace and continues to trust in the finished work of Christ alone, and then does not grieve the Holy Spirit, or disregard His promptings, will serve and serve and serve. The Holy Spirit soon taught me that all my prior service had been superficial. I had never given my life to God in full once-for-all consecration, that He might take it and plan it in His own way forever. This I now gladly did as the “reasonable service” (Rom 12:1-2) of a saved soul. It resulted in new blessings through the Holy Spirit’s power and also God’s work of “pruning” the branch of the vine that was now wholly His and that He must bring to greater fruitfulness (John 15:1-2).