

# THE SALVATION LETTERS: ROMANS, 1 AND 2 CORINTHIANS, GALATIANS

by Jim Usery

## Focus

Our first lesson on the letters of Paul is about the theme of salvation as it is expressed through Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians.

What does it mean to say that a believer is justified by faith? What is the place of “works” in the life of faith? What does it mean to be “crucified with Christ”?

These are a few of the weighty issues Paul deals with in his deeply theological letters. The relationship between law and grace is a crucial concern for everyone, including your young adults. While some may acknowledge that salvation is by faith in Christ alone, others may believe salvation consists of performing things dictated by the Church, rather than a daily, personal relationship with God. Additionally, some, who give mental assent to the doctrine of grace, may live as if their salvation depended on them.

Allow this lesson to introduce what Paul has to say about salvation. Take your time with the material. You may even want to devote several weeks to it—one week for each letter.

Be creative with what could be a dry, boring, technical study of Paul’s writings. Most of all, bathe your teaching with prayer, and let God work through you in these exciting and challenging weeks ahead.

## BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Romans 3:9, 21-26; 6:1-14; 12:1-2; 1 Corinthians 1:18—2:5; 2 Corinthians 5:10-21; Galatians 2:11-21

## COMMENTARY

**Use the Commentary as background information and discussion material as you prepare and facilitate this lesson.**

### Works of the Law or Faith in Christ? (Galatians 2:11-21)

What’s it going to take for us to be saved, works of the Law or faith in Jesus Christ? Paul presents this set of alternatives three times in our passage (2:11-21). But what is law? And what is faith?

#### Law

Paul is not against works of the Law as such, for he later speaks of “faith expressing itself through love” (Galatians 5:6). His point is that when works are seen as the way to earn our way into heaven, then there is no point in Christ’s death. “For if righteousness could be gained

through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (Galatians 2:21).

Contemporary “works of the law” can be attitudes or activities that attempt, consciously or not, to gain the grace of God. They can be seen, for example, in people who attempt to carve their own niches in life. These people feel that by their personal achievements they can establish inner peace and a personal relationship with God. They live with the illusion that God is somehow to be won over to their side. Salvation by works thus becomes a form of idolatry.

#### Faith

Faith is the genuine human response to God’s gracious deed in Christ. It is interesting that Paul never analyzes

faith, as he did with love in 1 Corinthians 13. Instead, he talks about faith as it is modeled in a person's life, like that of Abraham. Paul doesn't seem to be as interested in the detailed ingredients of faith as he does in the dynamic of faith.

Since Paul is primarily concerned with Christ, faith for him is essentially confession. Faith is meaningful only as it is a genuine, whole-life confession of Jesus Christ as Lord.

Yet, confusion exists today about the meaning of faith. There are at least three aspects of faith we should understand.

First, faith is not a possession which guarantees our status as believers, like a membership card or a birth certificate. It is a gift from God offered to us constantly. Faith cannot be controlled or manipulated. Faith cannot be claimed in order to put God in our debt so that He *has* to bless us.

Second, faith is not a work. Faith is never a precondition to God's grace, but is always the response to His grace. Faith is not something we perform in order to win God's approval or justification. Grace with strings attached is no grace at all.

Third, faith is not our accomplishment or a lack of our accomplishment. Faith is a trust in the accomplishments of God.

### Salvation by Faith

The watchword of the Protestant Reformation was *sola fide*, by "faith alone." Those words, used by Martin Luther to sum up what he read in the writings of Paul, ushered in a great turning point in history when many people were set free in their understanding from the legalistic control of the Church over their salvation.

Luther himself spent many years searching for relief from guilt and the burden of feeling worthless in God's eyes. The essential question for him, and us is, "How can I, a sinful person, find acceptance in the eyes of a holy and righteous God?" Luther's answer came from Paul, especially his words on our salvation by grace through faith in Christ. Luther, and countless others, at last personally experienced God's deed of love in Christ for us.

There is a danger, however, of becoming preoccupied with the personal individual experience of salvation. Several features of Galatians 2:11-21 should be noticed.

The context is not an individual encounter between one person and God, but a social setting. Gentiles are to be included with Jesus in God's communion table. God accepts people who have a different history and story to tell of His grace. God's salvation is "for us," as well as "for me."

Not only does God's saving grace disregard human merit, it breaks down barriers. This is not always easy to accept. Peter eventually realized that God accepts Gentiles like Cornelius because, "God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35). Paul, at his conversion, finally

understood that he had been persecuting the Lord through his persecution of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Soon after, he became a missionary to the Gentiles (Acts 9:1-15). These illustrations affirm that salvation by grace includes all peoples, so that Paul can write, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Individualism and self-reliance are the unfortunate objectives of modern humanity. Yet the Christian faith is never a solo performance. We see in Paul's writings and throughout the New Testament that God's love in Christ draws people from their isolation and self-reliance into a community of faith, the Church.

### Crucified with Christ

For Paul, the cross of Christ is the ground of our salvation. Paul puts it this way, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

Jesus Christ's crucifixion under Pontius Pilate is an established historical fact. But what does Paul mean by writing that *he* has been crucified with Christ? Physically, of course, it is untrue; spiritually it's hard to understand.

Paul is referring to the power God gives in saving His people. It's noteworthy that Paul uses the Greek perfect tense, "I have been and continue to be crucified with Christ," indicating a past event which continues to shape the present. Dying with Christ is thus a description of what it means to live. "The life I live in the body," with all its pain, suffering, and injustice is now lived "by faith," by risking the confession that life can be found in death, by trusting the One "who loved me and gave himself for me."

Therefore God's salvation is received as both a gift and power. This means, as Paul tells us in Galatians, that living out the righteousness of God is not just a personal discipline but a corporate reality. We are to live no longer to ourselves but for others, whose history and culture may be different ethnically, economically, and politically.

### Christ, the Power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18-19)

At first sight the linking of power and the Cross is a startling paradox (see 2 Corinthians 13:4). But as Paul states confidently in 1 Corinthians 1:18, to those "who are being saved" it is the epitome of divine power.

Yet, the Jews found the Cross to be "a stumbling block" (1 Corinthians 1:23). They demanded all sorts of "signs" (Matthew 12:38-42; Luke 11:29-32), and still refused to believe that a crucified man could be their Messiah. They demanded credentials.

The Greeks saw the theology of the Cross as foolishness and inconsistent with their philosophy (1 Corinthians 1:23). It contradicted their love of wisdom and their belief that the gods could not be touched with suffering or pain. This is illustrated in one of the Greek plays by Aristophanes, *The Frogs*. Two people are traveling in the under-

world of Hades, each claiming to be divine. A test is devised to tell which one is the god:

You should flog him well,  
For if he is god he won't feel it.  
Whichever of the two you first see  
Flinching or crying out—he's not the god.

But Paul tells us that “the power of God” was revealed in the Cross because God entered human life at every level, and tasted death at its worst for you and for me.

### **Christ, the Wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:20—2:5)**

Paul “preached Christ crucified” which is “the wisdom of God” (1:23-24). This was clear because Paul, while in Corinth, determined “to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:2).

The Corinthian culture was founded on wisdom, philosophy, and scholarship. Paul’s message to this society was a straightforward presentation of the Cross, which sounded foolish to the educated people of Corinth. Indeed, Paul proclaimed to them that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing” (1:18). But “God [has] made foolish the wisdom of the world” (1:20).

Paul’s point is that the preaching of the Cross does not rely on human wisdom for its persuasiveness and appeal. It is always presented with dependence on the Holy Spirit (2:4).

“Wisdom” plays a key role in Paul’s discussion. (In chapters 1—3 it is mentioned 16 times. “The wise person” occurs 10 times in these chapters.) It is used in a negative sense when referring to the Greek wise man who flaunts his eloquence in debate (1:22) and those whose wisdom is an arrogance that has no room for the Cross (2:6).

Paul cites the good side of wisdom as the gift of eloquence as a Christian virtue (1 Corinthians 12:8); and wisdom as an understanding of God’s saving plan (1:24, 30; 2:6).

### **Christ, Our Motive (2 Corinthians 5:10-15)**

Paul takes the coming Judgment Day seriously (5:10). But this was not a cause for fear because he knew his trust was in Christ. To some he seemed out of his mind, but Paul explained otherwise. Paul was motivated by Christ’s love, and it was that primary impetus which compelled him to share the good news that Christ had died on humanity’s behalf and that they should now live for Him (5:14-15).

Because Christ died as our representative, Paul says it has affected our lives forever. Because Christ was raised from the dead, we are now to live by His life, with His love guiding everything we do.

### **Christ, Our Message (2 Corinthians 5:16-21)**

Paul informs us that God has given us His message of reconciliation (5:19). The term “reconciliation” does not mean some sort of compromise between two parties, but the radical action of God on our behalf against our sin.

Paul states it bluntly: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (5:19); “God made him who had no sin to be sin” (5:21).

The unbelievable good news is that not only has God delivered us from sin through Christ, but we are a part of God’s saving vision. We are His “ambassadors” (5:20). This means we have a great responsibility, for as Christ’s ambassadors, what we say and do affects how the world perceives Jesus. Just as He is our representative before God, we are His representatives before others.

### **Romans**

Paul’s letter to the Romans is probably the most doctrinal theological treatise in the New Testament. It deals with the serious and deep issues of sin, righteousness, election, and living by faith. Romans has impacted countless lives throughout history, not least of which were Martin Luther and John Wesley.

### **All Have Sinned (Romans 3:9, 21-26)**

Paul uses the first three chapters in Romans to demonstrate that all humanity is spiritually dead, and thus under God’s judgment. Humanity has a universal sin problem. He said, “Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin” (3:9).

Just as he devotes the first part of his letter to the “bad news” about humanity, he spends the rest of his time referring to the “good news” of a right relationship with God, apart from Law. The “gospel of God” (1:1) is simply the message that God forgives guilty sinners on the basis of Christ’s death.

### **Dead to Sin, Alive in Christ (Romans 6:1-14; 12:1-2)**

Just as sin is associated with and expresses spiritual death, so righteousness is associated with and expresses spiritual life, through Jesus. Here, Paul describes the great paradox: We who were dead through Adam lived in sin; now we who are alive through Jesus are dead to sin.

Paul raises questions of imaginary opponents, and then answers them: “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” (6:1-2).

But what happened to the sin nature? There have been many different approaches to this question.

*Eradication.* According to this idea, when a person becomes a Christian, the sin nature itself dies, so that a Christian’s choices flow from the new in him or her and not the old.

*Suppression.* This view holds that Christians are given the power to control the sin nature while it still remains within a believer. The Christian is responsible to hold down the sinful desire. This struggle is described by Paul in Romans 7.

*Self-crucifixion.* Since we were crucified with Christ (Romans 6:6; Galatians 2:20), this view says that our sin

nature is always struggling to get off the Cross again. It is the believer's responsibility to live the "crucified life," with each temptation calling for renewed surrender to God.

**Penalism.** This approach sees all temptations as attacks of Satan. The problem is never located within us; it's always the fault of Satan.

Regardless of which view one takes, the fact remains; what Paul teaches in Romans 6 is that through Christ's

work on the Cross, our sin nature is rendered powerless. We are no longer slaves to sin!

Because of this ability to live the victorious life in Christ, we can live transformed lives (12:1-2). The world is powerless to squeeze us into its mold. Instead, we have the power to live out God's will for our lives, which not only draws us closer to God daily, but increases the quality of our interpersonal relationships.

## N-SESSION COMMUNITY BUILDING OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to begin building bridges between students as you introduce today's subject.

### 1. Who Is Paul?

To test their knowledge of this man of God, begin your class time by passing out note cards and pens and asking your students the following questions about the apostle Paul. After everyone has jotted down their answers, refer to the biographical sketch of Paul found in *Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1A*, which adds insight to the brief answers listed in the parentheses below.

- **What was Paul's original name?** (Saul)
- **How many of Paul's letters do we have in the New Testament?** (13; Hebrews' authorship is uncertain)
- **Can you list all (or any) of Paul's letters.** (See list on the handout.)
- **What did Paul look like?** (Refer to biographical sketch.)

### 2. Your Letter Writing

Ask the following questions about your students' letter and email writing habits, and allow as many to respond to each question as wish:

- **How many in here write letters or emails regularly? (How often do you write?)**
- **To whom do you write regularly?**

- **About what do you write?**

- **If someone collected every letter and email you had ever written, what would they know about you?**

As a transition into the presentation section, tell your students that as a class you are going to attempt to understand the life and passion of one man through his letters.

### 3. What is Salvation?

Write the word "salvation" on the chalk/marker board. Ask your students, **What do you think of when you see or hear that word?** Write their responses under "salvation" on the chalk/marker board. Encourage all possible responses. Allow this to introduce today's lesson on the salvation letters of Paul.

### 4. Word Association

Tell your students that you want them to call out the first thing they think of when they hear the following words: **Apostle, epistle, faith, law, sin, grace, crucified.**

After each word, wait for several responses. After they respond, share any definitions that are still unclear. Inform them that these words point to the lesson today on salvation as seen in four letters of the apostle Paul.

## PRESENTATION OPTIONS

Select one or more of the following activities to present today's topic.

### 1. Lecture/Discussion

This lesson contains more than enough material to be covered in one session. Do not feel pressured to try to cover it all in one lesson. Due to the nature of the material, the lecture format would be one way to present the lesson, allowing for class discussion as you present the material.

*Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1B* provides a brief outline with the scriptures from each of the "Salvation Letters" that are covered in the Commentary, as well as a "highlight" verse on it from each letter. As you present the lesson, refer to these key verses to highlight the meaning and purpose of each letter presented here.

### 2. Group Study

Divide your class into four groups and assign one of

the four "Salvation Letters" to each. Have each group answer their question, and report their results to the class. Supplement this activity with pertinent material from the Commentary section. *Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1C* provides a listing of passages and questions that you can post at the front of class, or distribute.

Group 1: Galatians 2:14-21. What did Paul teach Peter about receiving salvation?

Group 2: 1 Corinthians 1:18—2:10. What are different ways that Christ is both our power and our wisdom? What does this have to do with salvation?

Group 3: 2 Corinthians 5:11-21. Based on Paul's description of salvation, how are we to view ourselves and others differently?

Group 4: Romans 6:1-14. What does salvation do for us in relation to sin? What is our part in all this? What is God's part?

Allow about 15 minutes for each group to work on their responses, then provide your own summary of the lesson after each group has presented its findings to the class.

### 3. Team Teaching: The Search for Salvation

At least five days prior to class, contact four members of your group. Explain to them that you would like them to

be responsible for presenting to the group the teaching of Paul on salvation as found in one of his letters. To help them prepare, provide them with a copy of the Commentary section dealing with their scriptures. If you or your church has any commentaries, make these available as well.

- Presentation 1: Galatians 2:11-21
- Presentation 2: 1 Corinthians 1:18—2:5
- Presentation 3: 2 Corinthians 5:11-21
- Presentation 4: Romans 6:1-14; 12:1-2

Give about 10 minutes for each presentation, and encourage questions from other class members.

## SUMMARY OPTIONS

**Select one or more of these activities to summarize and give opportunity for students to apply the truth learned through this lesson.**

### 1. Write a Letter

Provide paper and pens and invite your young adults to write a letter to someone this week. Encourage them to write some thoughts about what the salvation of Jesus Christ means to them personally. It may be uncomfortable for them, but challenge them to actually mail the letter to someone. You might ask for a few volunteers to read what they wrote, if there is time.

### 2. You Are a Letter!

Read 2 Corinthians 3:2-3 to your students. Highlight the fact that we are each "a letter from Christ." Then ask your young adults what type of letter best describes their lives as a Christian, and why?

- a business letter
- a love letter
- a memo

—a "Dear John" letter

—a letter of recommendation

—a letter of intent

### 3. Enough Love

A paraphrase of Galatians 2:20 suggests, "If He loved me enough to give himself for me, then He loves me enough to live out His life in me." Share this paraphrase, and ask each class member to meditate on it as a closing prayer.

### 4. In the Word

Encourage your young adults to read one of the New Testament books discussed in today's lesson in its entirety this week. Have them write down any thoughts or questions they may have and be prepared to discuss them next week.

Use *INTERSECT: College Chat Discussion Starters* to continue discussion on this lesson in a weekday Bible study session, as a take-home resource for further thought after today's lesson, or to supplement your in-session teaching of this lesson.

## Selected Bibliography

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