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Mission Accomplished

*“Jesus said, ‘Father...I glorified You on earth,
having accomplished the work that You gave Me to do’”
John 17:1, 4*

By delivering His people from sin's power and penalty, God has given every Christian a testimony—a story of sin and grace; justice and mercy; failure and redemption. Yet, a personal testimony of salvation in Christ is unique to all other stories we can tell. We might have warm-hearted stories of time spent with family or riveting stories of adventure and friendship. Our testimony of salvation in Christ is unique, however, for it is the story through which all our other stories find meaning and significance.

In this way, our testimony is both a blessing and a stewardship. It is a blessing because it reminds us of God's grace in our lives and renews our assurance of salvation. Our testimonies are a stewardship because they serve as evidence of God's continued work in the lives of sinners. We have been given a story *to tell*, not to keep to ourselves. Indeed, Jesus told His disciples, just prior to His ascension, that they were to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8). The word used here for witnesses is also translated in the New Testament as "testimony." When a person gives a testimony of salvation, they are standing as a witness to the power of the gospel and the reality of Jesus Christ.

We are grateful for the wise stewardship exercised by each of these contributors. By freely offering their testimonies for public readership, these writers are seeking to fulfill Jesus' commandment to be His witnesses. And, by obeying Christ, they are also serving others. Those who already believe the gospel will have found in these pages cause for much joy and encouragement; those who do not yet trust in Jesus will have discovered, I trust, good reasons to consider the claims of the gospel. Still, I am convinced that both sets of readers will be helped by considering how each of these testimonies demonstrates three essential truths about the nature of salvation.

A Complete Salvation

The first truth underscored by these testimonies is this: God’s salvation is a *complete* salvation. In the retelling of their experience of salvation, each of the contributors demonstrated that God’s grace was active and effective both in their conversion and in their life following their initial faith in Christ. In no case did God draw someone to Himself only to leave this new Christian with conversion and nothing more—as though the promise of heaven after death would be enough to stave off the inevitable temptations to sin and despair that these believers would encounter. In many cases, there were profound physical, emotional, and spiritual trials following conversion; but God remained faithful, providing everything needed for a life of faith and obedience.

According to the Bible, salvation promised is salvation provided, both now and in the future (Romans 8:28-39). Where God gives genuine conversion, He provides enduring faith in the gospel, desire for Christ, longing for Christian fellowship, passion for Scripture, love for the saints, gifts for ministry, and perseverance through suffering (Hebrews 10:39). While our affections may ebb and flow and our progress in godliness occasionally sputters and threatens to stall, the Spirit who first ignited faith in Christ promises to keep our hearts kindled with steadfast hope in a merciful God (Philippians 1:6).

A Diverse Salvation

The second truth highlighted by these testimonies relates to *how* God conducts His saving mission. Not only is it clear that God’s salvation is a complete salvation; we also see in these testimonies that God’s salvation is a *diverse* salvation. Now, by “diverse” I do not refer to salvation’s Author and Founder: Jesus Christ, who is the only way, truth, and life, and no one comes to the Father apart from Him (John 14:6). He is

the only Savior of the world, and forgiveness of sin, justification, and deliverance from eternal judgment is only found by repenting from one's sin and placing conscious faith in Christ alone. Clearly, there is only one Savior (Ephesians 4:4-6).

Rather, by "diverse" I refer to the varied ways that people are brought to believe the gospel. Some are rescued after walking through a series of life-threatening events, finally moved to trust Christ by the prayers, letters, and testimonies of other faithful Christians. Others grow up in the Church and enjoy a genuine relationship with Christ from a very early age. Some are delivered from external, man-made religion, others from paganism. Prior to their conversion, some are attracted to Christianity at some level, while others are repulsed by any thought of it. Some live many years under the pretense of a false conversion; others believe in Jesus the first time they hear the gospel.

Yet, this diversity of God's methods of drawing His people into salvation is not exclusive to the testimonies found in this book; this variety is showcased in the biblical narrative as well. Paul, previously a violent persecutor of the Christian Church is leveled by Christ in a dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19). Lydia, immediately upon hearing the gospel, places her faith in Christ as the Spirit opened her heart to understand the message the apostles spoke (Acts 16:13-16). A government official from Ethiopia, after studying the scroll of Isaiah on his chariot-ride back from Jerusalem, trusts in Christ after receiving clarifying instruction from Phillip as to the identity of the Suffering Servant (Acts 8:27-38). Cornelius, a soldier in the Italian Cohort, is visited first by an angel and then by the apostle Peter; the latter bringing the gospel message to this eager, God-fearing Gentile (Acts 10:1-33). Paul's ministry apprentice, Timothy, was led to Christ as a result of the early biblical tutelage he received from his faithful and godly mother and grandmother (2 Timothy 3:14-15).

Examples could be multiplied. Still, the above cases suffice to illustrate Jesus' mysterious statement to Nicodemus recorded in the Gospel of John. After explaining the necessity of spiritual rebirth to this reputed teacher of Israel, Jesus concludes His discussion with an enigmatic sentence: *"The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes"* (John 3:8). While Nicodemus and the other Jews desired a predictable religion they could control and dispense through extra-biblical rule and ritual, Jesus spoke of something infinitely better: a sovereign Spirit that descends upon whomever He will, who is neither deterred by someone's religious, ethnic, social, or educational background, nor obligated to action by the same. The Spirit saves whomever He desires, however He desires, uncontrolled by human methods. Often, we find that He saves those whom we least expect. Indeed, He delights to do so (see 1 Corinthians 1:18-31).

Yet, God is also a God of means, and He is pleased to use a myriad of different circumstances to draw people into relationship with Christ. Actually, while it may be tempting to conclude that God started working toward our salvation at a specific point in our life—perhaps after a family crisis or an evangelistic encounter that really got us thinking about spiritual things—the truth is that God has been orchestrating the salvation of His elect since before creation, from eternity past! God the Father *"chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world"* (Ephesians 1:3). Our upbringing, our geographic location, our personality, our jobs, our families, our friends, and our experiences are all vital aspects of our testimony because they are what God used to bring us to repentance and faith in Christ (Acts 17:26-27). To give our testimony of Christ's grace in our lives is to exalt the sovereignty of God.

I have told the glad news of deliverance

*in the great congregation;
Behold, I have not restrained my lips,
as You know, O LORD.
I have not hidden Your deliverance within my heart;
I have spoken of Your faithfulness and Your salvation;
I have not concealed Your steadfast love
and Your faithfulness from the great congregation
(Psalm 40:9-10).*

A Compelling Salvation

The third truth that these testimonies illustrate is that God's salvation is a *compelling* salvation. While some people may be unwilling to investigate Christianity on its own terms because they doubt the Bible's veracity or because they find little power in erudite, rational defenses of Scripture's truth claims, it is unlikely that they will remain unmoved in the face of a genuine testimony of God's life-changing grace. A clear testimony of one's recognition of their sin, repentance, and faith in Jesus coupled with a presentation of the objective truths of the gospel can serve as a powerful means to encourage faith in others.

Apologetically, these testimonies demonstrate the reality of Christ and the truth of the gospel. Jesus has truly risen from the dead and He is in the business—right now—of changing lives for eternity. Although we believe unashamedly that Scripture is sufficient in and of itself to turn a sinner to Christ, we also thank God that He has seen fit to use our personal testimonies as a means to draw attention to the truth of God's Word and the beauty of the gospel.

Testimonies Encouragement Evangelism

As we consider the three biblical truths highlighted by these testimonies, we should find ourselves encouraged to share the gospel with others. If there is one thing we hope you take away from this book, it is this: God can save anyone! There is no heart

too hard, no hypocrisy too entrenched, no life too lost, no lifestyle too sinful, that God is unable to break through the wall of unbelief and, by His grace, rescue those for whom His Son died. “*And this is the will of Him who sent me,*” Jesus proclaimed to His listeners centuries ago, “*that I should lose nothing of all that [the Father] has given Me, but raise it up on the last day*” (John 6:39). Nothing can stop Jesus from building His Church, not even the powers of hell (Matthew 16:18). Those whom God draws to Christ will believe the gospel and, despite the worst of trials, come safely into His eternal kingdom (Romans 8:30).

Over the years you may have allowed yourself to become convinced that there are friends, family members, and colleagues in your life who are beyond the hope of God’s grace. If so, let these testimonies and the truth of God’s Word realign your mind and heart. We have concrete proof of God’s power to save in the previous pages. The stubborn unbelief of your dad, co-worker, or neighbor is no match for the God who will unfailingly fulfill His purposes, the Christ who freely shed His blood for his sheep, and the Spirit who blows upon whom He will. God can save anyone (Romans 10:13).

Many Stories, One Gospel

It is essential to keep in mind, however, that the foundational reason we can celebrate a diversity of salvation stories is because there is one and only one gospel. Jesus did not commission us with good news that is relevant only to particular cultures and limited to particular eras of history; the gospel is vitally relevant for *everyone at all times*. But how can this be? How can a message delivered some two-thousand years ago carry significance today? The gospel itself answers that question.

The God who created this breathtaking universe and abundant earth also created man in His image (Genesis 1:26). Sadly, God’s image-bearers, though originally created

without sin, soon turned disobedience, away from trust in their Creator. The first man and woman each took and ate fruit from a tree from which they were forbidden (Genesis 3:6-7). They had believed the lie of God's enemy Satan who had told them they would not die if they took from the tree in question; a direct contradiction to what God had previously told Adam: *"And the LORD commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it you shall surely die' "* (Genesis 2:16-17).

That day in the Garden of Eden, mankind fell into sin and ruin, and the effects of their disobedience were immediate. Adam and Eve were, for the first time, ashamed of their nakedness. Recognizing that something wasn't right, they attempted to cover themselves with self-made loin coverings. The man who was expected to lead and protect his wife, sat passively by while she was beguiled by Satan, and then blamed her (and ultimately God, for He had given her to Adam) for their mess. The woman, also not willing to share any of the blame, pointed her finger at the serpent, in effect saying, "The devil made me do it!" (Genesis 3:8-13).

As a result and reminder of their sin, God cursed the entire creation, including the man and the woman. Difficulty, stress, and futility would now attend work; pain would now be a regular aspect of child bearing. Man's proclivity to passivity and the woman's desire to rule over her husband would now constantly threaten to undo the harmony of every marriage and the family structure (Genesis 3:16-19). Soon, envy, hatred, and murder would enter God's world through Adam and Eve's children (Genesis 4:1-16). And, even if you could avoid murder from an angry neighbor or relative, you would eventually die (Genesis 5:1ff).

But mercy would prevail. Even before the pronouncement of the curse, God promised the man and woman that He would send another man—the offspring of a woman—to crush the serpent. This rescue mission, however, would be costly and the One tasked with crushing the serpent would suffer. Yes, He would be victorious—He would destroy the serpent (Romans 16:20)—but He would not escape the fray unscathed. The serpent would, as the text says, “*bruise his heel*” (Genesis 3:15). Deliverance from sin and its dreaded effects was certainly on the way; but even here, in the earliest chapters of the Bible, we find hints of a suffering Savior.

God would carry out His promised deliverance over many centuries, first by drawing specific people to Himself (like Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—later named Israel), then by rescuing an entire nation from the clutches of Egyptian slavery so that they would be His people and He would be their God (Jeremiah 32:38).

As His chosen people, God provided the nation of Israel with a multitude of pictures—all embedded into their religious and civil life—of a coming Deliverer. Israel needed an upright King would to lead them (2 Sam 7:1-17), a sinless High Priest to intercede for them (Psalm 110:4), a selfless Shepherd to protect them (Ezekiel 34:15-23; Psalm 23), a trustworthy Prophet to speak God’s words to them (Deuteronomy 18:18), and a righteous Substitute to die for their countless transgressions (Isaiah 53:1-12). Not only this, but Israel also looked forward to the time when God Himself would come down from His heavenly throne and fulfill the many promises He had made to His people over the past several centuries (Isaiah 9:6; 64:1).

Finally, at the perfect time, He came (Galatians 4:4). The Deliverer God had promised entered into the world through the womb of a virgin. Only the very Son of God could fulfill the numerous roles described above, so God’s Spirit fell upon Mary, a young

Jewish girl in the line of David, and she conceived a child (Luke 1:30-35). The eternal Son of God, formally enthroned in glory with his Father from all eternity would become a human being and enter the world through a miraculous conception (Isaiah 7:14).

But He wasn't what Israel expected. He didn't descend upon the earth in a glorious entourage of angels, ready to defeat Israel's earthly enemies in one victorious flash. He came as a baby, a baby born in a dirty stable suitable only for animals and feed—the most unlikely of places for a triumphant king. And His name would be Jesus, for He had come to save His people, not from earthly enemies, but from that which had cast the world into ruin many centuries ago; He had come to save his people from their sin (Matthew 1:21).

Because Jesus didn't fit the description of what many of the Jews expected of their coming king and savior, He wasn't warmly embraced by the religious leaders. Besides, not only did He not fit the Jews' notion of what their deliverer should look like, He further aggravated their discontent by challenging their spiritual apathy, confronting their hypocrisy, and denouncing their self-righteousness (Matthew 23). He called for repentance from self-reliance and self-justification, and He offered salvation to anyone who came to Him looking for rest from the burden of religious requirements to earn God's favor. Jesus was their King, but as in the case with David, Israel's most famous monarch of old, suffering would come *before* glory.

Neither Jesus' message of true righteousness nor His plan to suffer on the behalf of His people sat well with the Jewish leaders. While some appeared to believe in him on a superficial level, most of them joined in a conspiracy to kill this itinerant preacher (John 7:1). After three years of teaching, healing, and disciple-making, Jesus' time had come.

One of Jesus' twelve apostles, Judas, having feigned loyalty during the entirety of Jesus' ministry, finally ended his façade and sold his Master to the religious leaders for thirty pieces of silver. A covert arrest, a set of false charges, and a mock trial would eventually land Jesus into the hands of Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea (Mark 15:1). Caving to the pressure of the Jewish leaders and buckling under his fear of Caesar, Pilate acquiesced to the demands of those who sought Jesus' demise. "Crucify Him!," the fickle mob cried only days after many of them had cordially greeted Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem (Mark 15:13). Pilate complied. Having already been scourged and beaten, Jesus would then be nailed to a cross alongside two criminals outside Jerusalem's city limits.

Some would write Jesus and His apostles off as a rogue group of religious zealots whose plan went awry, disquieted by the untimely death of their leader. Jesus, seemingly unwilling to talk His way out of an assortment of exaggerated accusations, was now dead, the victim of His own silence. With a little clean up and preemption, His short-lived but troublesome movement could be quickly laid to rest.

What the Jewish leaders couldn't see, blinded as they were by their own rage and self-righteousness, was that the God (whom they claimed to worship) had brought about the entire ordeal. Although the people who conspired against Jesus and lobbied for His execution were guilty of great sin—for they had acted freely out of their own evil desires—it had been God who planned from before the beginning of time that his Son would die in the place of sinners (Acts 4:27-28). It would please the Father to crush His Son because His Son's willing death would secure the salvation of God's people while simultaneously upholding God's righteousness. God would remain just while justifying those who put their faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26).

Essential to God's plan to justify sinners, however, was a component to Jesus' mission that neither the Jewish leaders nor Jesus' own disciples recognized, despite Jesus' clear and repeated teaching on the subject. In order to defeat man's three great enemies—sin, death, and Satan—Jesus had to rise again from the dead.

By living a life of flawless obedience to His Father as their representative and taking the punishment they deserved, Jesus had landed a decisive blow to Satan, for the adversary could no longer accuse God's people of their unrighteousness. Those who believed the gospel now possessed a perfect righteousness that was found, not in themselves, but in Christ alone (Romans 3:21-26). Plus, by freeing His people from the condemnation they had incurred for breaking God's law, Jesus removed the dominion of sin over their life. At the cross, sin was soundly defeated because sin's power, the condemnation of the law, had been dismantled by Jesus' substitutionary death (Colossians 2:13-14). But these two glorious realities could only come to full realization if Jesus defeated man's third great enemy, death.

From the moment that Adam and Eve disobeyed God's commandment in the Garden of Eden they were subjected to physical and spiritual death. Death was God's penalty for disobedience (Genesis 2:17), and in their refusal to trust God's good Word, the first man and woman opened the floodgates of mortality upon the entire human race (Romans 5:12). The promised Deliverer, then, in order to crush the serpent and rescue mankind from eternal misery, had to bring death to a complete end.

So, in another garden, approximately two-thousand years ago, a few of Jesus' closest disciples would discover an empty tomb. Yet, one of His followers, Mary Magdalene, would find more than an abandoned grave:

Mary stood weeping outside the tomb and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angles in white, sitting where the body of Jesus was laid, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him." Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary" (John 20:11-16a).

The Savior was no longer dead; He was alive! Jesus had completed His mission by taking the place of His people, fulfilling every righteous requirement of the law in their place, bearing the penalty of their sin by dying on the cross, and rising bodily from the grave.

Now seated at the right hand of His Father, Jesus calls sinners to receive a sure and irrevocable pardon from heaven. He calls you to stop using sophisticated excuses to hide from God. He pleads with you to be done with your attempts to mask your sin with the threadbare coverings of religious ritual and good works. He invites you to trade an unfulfilling life of self-indulgence for the satisfying life of faith in Christ and ministry to others. He commands you to repent from your hypocrisy, self-righteousness, self-seeking, and self-reliance and believe in a gospel of grace and truth (Acts 17:30-31).

If you place genuine faith in Jesus Christ, you will find in him a *complete salvation*. You will find justification, forgiveness of sin, reconciliation with God, hope for the future, power over sin, strength for ministry, and wisdom for living a life that truly pleases God. And, although you will inevitably face trials and persecution for your allegiance to Jesus, don't worry. The troubles of this life are but a mere moment when compared to the eternity of unspeakable joy that Christ has in store for those who love Him.

*Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and he who has no money, come buy and eat!
Incline your ear, and come to Me;
hear, that your soul may live...
Seek the LORD while He may be found;
call upon Him while He is near;
let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the LORD, that He may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon
Isaiah 55:1, 3, 6-7.*