

**COMPLETE
IN HIM**

COMPLETE IN HIM

A Guide to Understanding
and Enjoying the Gospel

MICHAEL P. V. BARRETT



Reformation Heritage Books
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Complete in Him

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Reformation Heritage Books

3070 29th St. SE

Grand Rapids, MI 49512

616-977-0889

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www.heritagebooks.org

Printed in the United States of America

22 23 24 25 26 27/10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Barrett, Michael P. V., 1949- author.

Title: Complete in Him : a guide to understanding and enjoying the gospel / Michael P. V. Barrett.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Reformation Heritage Books, 2017. | Originally published: Belfast, Northern Ireland : Ambassador-Emerald International, 2000. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2017006648 (print) | LCCN 2017014265 (ebook) | ISBN 9781601785442 (epub) | ISBN 9781601785435 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Salvation—Christianity—Biblical teaching.

Classification: LCC BS2545.S25 (ebook) | LCC BS2545.S25 B37 2017 (print) | DDC 234—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017006648>

For additional Reformed literature, request a free book list from Reformation Heritage Books at the above regular or e-mail address.

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Preface

“Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding” (Prov. 4:7). Obtaining wisdom and understanding is possible, because “the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding” (Prov. 2:6). Ultimately, getting wisdom is getting Christ. Getting understanding is increasing in the knowledge that as Christians we are “in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). Christ is the gospel; nothing is more vital for life than understanding the gospel, and nothing is better in life than enjoying it. It has been my prayer and desire that *Complete in Him* may help guide readers to a deeper understanding and a greater enjoyment of what it means to be a Christian.

It has been most humbling and gratifying to see how the Lord has answered that prayer. This is a revised edition of the book first published in 2000. The Lord has been pleased to use the book in ways that I could never have imagined and certainly never expected. It has been out of print for some time, and copies have been difficult to find. Requests have been frequent and widespread to see it republished. I am most grateful to Reformation Heritage Books for their willingness to publish this edition and to Annette Gysen for her keen editing skills. Content changes are minimal, but the chief difference will be in the suggested study questions appended to each chapter. I thank Andrew Farr, my research assistant at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, for his work in

reading through the book and creating the questions. I trust that these will be of benefit and foster even more meditation on the wonderful truths and benefits of the gospel.

The Lord has given me the privilege for many years of teaching the Bible and ancillary subjects. Whether teaching theology or advanced Hebrew grammar or biblical archaeology, it has been my supreme objective and desire to set before my students the importance of knowing the Lord Jesus Christ and His glorious gospel. It is my prayer that to some degree my testimony may begin to approach that of Paul's: "For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). That is my objective for this book as well. May the Lord grant it to be true.

This book is not designed to be a scholarly analysis of the doctrine of soteriology, filled with critical analysis or interaction with scholars of differing schools of thought or theology. I have intentionally avoided footnotes, whose presence tends to intimidate some readers. Yet I have not designed this for casual reading either. There will be times when I want you to slow down and think carefully about the issues; the questions can help guide those thoughts. I hope that you will find devotional blessing as well as increased spiritual insight. After all, this is to be guide to both understanding and enjoyment.

Although I am not interacting with other literature, I will from time to time quote or refer to the historic, orthodox confessions and catechisms. The confessions give summary statements of the doctrines of Scripture in declarative paragraphs. The catechisms teach the truths in a question–answer format. I think you will find these references to be most instructive if you take the time to read and think through them. I quote them not only because they are classic statements but because I want to emphasize that what I am saying is not novel: it is the old-fashioned gospel. I have used both the Westminster and London Standards in order to show that I am not just proffering a particular denominational slant or peculiarity. The Westminster Standards (1646–1648) are those generally adopted among conservative, orthodox Presbyterians; and the

London Baptist Confession (1689), the precursor to the Philadelphia Confession, is the historic Baptist statement of faith. Bible believers differ on some points of interpretation, and that is okay. But regardless of denominational distinctives, all evangelical, conservative, orthodox believers should rejoice in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are part of His body, and one day we will all be with Him. What a day that will be!

Admittedly, I am responsible before God for what I have written, but I am indebted to many. I want to acknowledge those who introduced me to and taught me the gospel. I have enjoyed godly influences all my life. I must first express my gratitude to God for Christian parents who provided an environment in which the claims of Christ were put before me. I especially thank the Lord for the memory of my grandmother—to this day the godliest woman I have ever known. I had the privilege of growing up next door to her and witnessing a life that, through immense suffering, testified daily to the reality of the gospel. She now enjoys the presence of her Savior. For the first eighteen years of life, I had the advantage of growing up in a church that faithfully preached the gospel. My preacher, Rev. Kinnamin Crawford, had an evangelistic passion that remains an example. It was in the basement of that church that Mrs. Weir, my Sunday school teacher, used Romans 3:23 to convince me, as a young child, of my need of Christ.

Ultimate thanks and praise belong to the Lord for His faithfulness throughout the undertaking. I trust that this exposition of the gospel will be to the praise of the glory of His grace.

—Michael P. V. Barrett

Introduction

What is the gospel? What does it mean to be saved? The answers to these questions are simple yet profound. The gospel is Christ, and being saved is having Christ: “He that hath the Son hath life” (1 John 5:12). That is elemental enough for a child to understand yet complex enough to challenge every believer to a greater understanding and enjoyment of saving grace. Being saved does not require an academic degree in theology, but the more believers understand the fullness and vastness of salvation, the more they can enjoy all the blessings God has graciously provided in His Son and our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Scripture declares that Christ is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14) and that believers are “complete in him” (Col. 2:10). For Christians, everything—both their eternal destiny and their earthly journey—depends on what they think of Christ. That Christ is everything and that Christians are complete in Him ought to generate joyous satisfaction in every believing heart.

The Problem

Tragically, however, many genuine believers plod along the earthly journey on their way to eternal glory without much conscious thought of Christ. Testifying that they have been saved, these plodders tend to relegate salvation to a past decision and then struggle through life with little more than a “cross-your-fingers” assurance that all will be well in the end. They define Christianity in terms of rigid, conservative lifestyles fueled more by guilt than by faith. On

the whole, they exhibit a woeful ignorance of how to apply gospel truths. In my teaching ministry over the years, I have encountered many young people who have grown up in professedly Christian environments. They have been immersed in rules and regulations that may be good and proper, but either they have never been taught or they have never personally put forth the faith to link the code of conduct to the core truths of the gospel. Consequently, I have seen professing believers either rebelling against the Christian lifestyle because they don't know the why of it, or burdened by guilt because their performance of duty does not measure up to some perceived standard. The extremes of excessive license or oppressive bondage result, neither of which include the joy nor utilize the power of the gospel.

One of the foremost objectives in my ministry has been to bring students to see and understand something of the Savior: who He is, what He has done, and what their place in Him is. I have often grieved, having expounded some essential gospel truth such as justification by faith or union with Christ, that so many students confessed they had never heard such truths before. The general consensus seems to be that whereas the gospel message is essential for evangelism, edification requires something beyond those simple facts. Such a reaction to the gospel betrays a sad unfamiliarity with its power and scope. Although I have rejoiced to see many come into the true liberty of the gospel, I have lamented that what I teach from Scripture seems so novel to so many.

Why is it that what is common in the Bible has become so foreign to those who profess belief in it? Too often there has been a rush to achieve visible results without giving the necessary attention to the means to and reasons for those desired results. Inviting people to walk an aisle has been equated with "getting people saved." Motivating people to live by conservative standards has been equated with living for Christ. Reminding people that "once saved always saved—after all you can't make God a liar" has become the only thread of assurance for doubting hearts to cling to. Consequently, some churches are filled with people whose only

argument for salvation is a date written on the flyleaf of a seldom-used Bible and whose only concept of living for Christ is being in church whenever the doors are open. Sadly, churches are filled with professing Christians who have “done it all” and convinced themselves that all is well with their souls when in reality they have no saving interest in Christ. On the other hand, there are those who confess Christ but who remain in doubt because they cannot convince themselves that what they have done was sincere enough, fervent enough, or real enough. Faulty views of the gospel can lead to these extremes: non-Christians who think they are, and genuine Christians who fear they aren’t.

The Solution

Assigning blame for this tragic state of spiritual affairs is not really the solution. Pulpit and pew alike share the culpability, and both must strive to sharpen the focus on Christ and the gospel if there is to be a resolution to the problem. I have told my students, perhaps thousands of times over the years, that *right thinking about the gospel produces right living in the gospel*. It is truth, not activity, that makes Christianity distinct. We cannot ignore the link between gospel doctrine and gospel duty if we hope to approach genuine Christian life and successful Christian living. Contrary to some notions in modern evangelical Christianity, doctrine does not destroy life—it defines it. Therefore, it is the responsibility of preachers to proclaim the essential truths of the gospel and point their people to the proper implications and applications of those truths to daily life. It is likewise the responsibility of each believer to appropriate by faith the unchangeable truths of the gospel and to live consciously in the reality of those truths. Experiencing truth is the aim of preaching and the target for living.

The Purpose and Plan

What I have tried to do in my classroom and pulpit ministry is what I want to do in this venue. I want simply to expound and

apply the gospel of saving grace: what the gospel is and what it means to be saved. The Bible defines the gospel and salvation in both general and specific terms. Comparing salvation to a strong, unbreakable chain composed of many individual yet inseparable links illustrates this general and specific revelation. Sometimes Scripture presents the entire chain in overview (macroscopically); sometimes it examines the individual links in particular (microscopically). Although a particular passage may be focusing on a single link, that link does not and cannot exist alone. If one link exists, the whole chain exists. It is impossible to have one element of salvation without having the whole of salvation. If there is election, there is justification. If there is justification, there is sanctification. If there is sanctification, there is glorification. And on it goes. These components are so closely linked that even when the Bible is concentrating on one microscopically, it is impossible for us to keep the related components out of our field of vision.

As expected in any chain construction, there will be overlaps—something that keeps the whole together. What secures all the components of salvation is the gospel of Jesus Christ. So regardless of the specific aspect of salvation in focus, Scripture consistently couples it to some truth about the person or work of the Savior. The Bible always defines salvation in terms of the Savior, and we must too if we are going to understand the gospel as we ought. Every link has its objective cause in Christ and must be subjectively understood and enjoyed in terms of Christ. That is why, on the one hand, salvation is as simple as having Christ. Yet on the other hand, the more those who have Christ can learn about the chain of salvation, the more confidence they will enjoy and the more guilt-free motivation they will experience as they seek to live the Christian life.

Salvation does not and cannot exist in a mental vacuum. Truth must be known before it can have any effect. Orthodoxy (doctrinal truth) isolated in the head is dangerous, but the head is nonetheless where it starts. Remember my statement: right thinking about the gospel produces right living in the gospel. The Bible sets the

pattern of first knowing (Rom. 6:3, 6, 9), then believing (Rom. 6:11), and then doing (Rom. 6:12–13). To reverse that order or to omit a step is deleterious to a successful Christian life. I want us first to know and then to do. So that is the objective of this book: to teach the truth and to offer guidance in using truth practically.

Each of the following chapters will focus on a fundamental of the gospel. Before beginning the analysis of the benefits of the gospel, I will lay the foundation with two chapters: condemnation as the need of the gospel and Christ as the essence of the gospel. Truths from these chapters will necessarily reappear throughout the book. Next I will consider such themes as conversion, regeneration, justification, adoption, reconciliation, union with Christ, and sanctification. As we contemplate together these great gospel truths, I want not only to define biblically and precisely the particular doctrine (component or link of the gospel) but also to suggest the relevant implications and applications. Sometimes I will collate key texts from throughout the Bible and discuss the doctrine thematically. I will do my best not to interpret or use any passage out of its context—always a potential problem of proof texts. In other instances, I will discuss the doctrine by expounding a key passage that comprehensively elucidates the specific truth. In every chapter I intend to demonstrate conclusively that the particular benefit of salvation under discussion links to Christ. Please do not tire of what may appear to be mere repetition. Linking everything to Christ is what I want us all to learn and to practice. It is my prayer that Christians live in the reality of what they are in Christ, that they become increasingly overwhelmed with their salvation—in short, that they reach a state in which they can't get over being saved.

The title of this book, *Complete in Him*, suggests the overriding and underlying premise that is foundational to any true understanding and enjoyment of salvation. Paul's emphasis on the preeminence of Christ in the book of Colossians sparked the title. In chapter 1, Paul highlights the imperial Christ who is our confidence, the incarnate Christ who is our peace, and the indwelling Christ who is our hope. In Colossians 2 he expresses his desire

that those to whom he has ministered might experience “all [the] riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgment of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (vv. 2–3). Then, having declared that in Christ “dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily,” he proclaims, “Ye are complete in him” (vv. 9–10). That’s the secret. The thrill of all the benefits and blessings of saving grace will be in proportion to how much we reflect on the completeness of Christ and our completeness in Him. So as we consider what it means to be saved, let us echo the words of the hymn:

Complete in Thee—each want supplied,
And no good thing to me denied;
Since Thou my portion, Lord, wilt be,
I ask no more—complete in Thee.
(Aaron R. Wolfe, “Complete in Thee”)

Questions for Thought

1. Why should we endeavor to understand more of the fullness and vastness of salvation?
2. What are some of the factors that cause Christians to miss the enjoyment of completeness in Christ? Are there any factors present in your life preventing you from enjoying completeness? What are they?
3. What is the essence of the gospel?
4. From where does experiencing the joy of all the benefits and blessings of saving grace come?

CHAPTER 1

CONDEMNATION: The Need of the Gospel

“No news is good news.” That adage may have happy relevance to the ordinary routines of life, but it does not apply to humankind’s spiritual condition. Spiritually speaking, no news is bad news. Without the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the headline over humanity reads nothing but bad news. Without Christ, humanity is without God and, consequently, without any hope in the world (Eph. 2:12). But the good news is that “there is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). Let me state the obvious: that there is no condemnation to those in Christ means that those not in Christ are under condemnation. The news could not be worse.

It may, perhaps, seem odd for me to begin a book about understanding and enjoying the good news of the gospel with a chapter on the bad news about humanity’s guilt and condemnation before God. We will never understand the greatness of the gospel, however, until we understand the need for the gospel. We cannot appreciate the good news if we are unaware of the bad news. Unless and until sinners know they are lost and without hope, they will never see their need for Christ. The common advice given to aspiring evangelists is that they have to get sinners to see their lost and desperate condition before the evangelist can lead them to Christ for their only hope of salvation. Thus is the logic of the Heidelberg Catechism that begins with people’s misery before expounding deliverance from that misery and the consequent gratitude for that deliverance.

Misery comes first. The point is that you have to know you are lost before panic sets in. Let me offer this illustration: I love to hunt and to be in the woods, but admittedly, I am not the best woodsman around. My sense of direction is often skewed. When walking through the woods scouting for deer sign, my tendency is to take the path of least resistance. Walking around a briar patch is much easier than walking through one. More than once, my sense of relaxation at being in the woods has turned to panic when it dawns on me that I have no idea where I am. When I look at my compass to get my bearings, I realize that knowing where north is helps little in knowing where my truck is. You have to check the compass before going into the woods if it is going to help coming out. It is always a great feeling when I either recognize a landmark or aimlessly find my way out. Being lost in the woods can be scary, but being lost in sin means eternal damnation. And in contrast to my fortuitous exits from the woods, there is no way sinners are going to find their way out on their own. That ought to be a fearful thought for every sinner.

This is unmistakably the logic used by the most prolific of gospel writers in the New Testament, and particularly so in the most extensive of his inspired gospel treatises, the book of Romans. Before Paul says anything about justification, reconciliation, redemption, adoption, sanctification, glorification, or any other aspect of the gospel, he first announces the bad news that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18). He then presents irrefutable evidence of humanity’s sin, taking away every excuse and rendering the whole world guilty before God (Rom. 3:19). In the light of God’s just sentence upon guilty sinners, how magnificently wonderful is the good news that God has given His Son to be the only way whereby guilty sinners can escape their lost estate.

Understanding the full weight of this just condemnation requires some comprehension of the serious nature of sin and why, as an affront against the holy and righteous God, it deserves such a terrible penalty. Without developing the biblical theology of sin

and defining all the terms for it, let me remind you of the apostle John's simple definition of sin: "Sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4). Translated more literally, it reads, "Sin is lawlessness." The word "sin" is the most general term used in the New Testament that reflects the image of its Old Testament counterpart, which pictures sin as missing a target. The Old Testament defines sin as the failure to meet the demands and requirements of a fixed standard—God's inflexible law. Hence, sin is breaking the law of God, either by deliberate violations or unwary infractions.

Law without penalty for breach of law is impotent. Since "the righteous LORD loveth righteousness" (Ps. 11:7), any and all breaches of His righteous law deserve the severest penalty: "Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone" (Ps. 11:6). The apostle Paul summed up the horrible consequence of sin when he concluded that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Succinctly and scripturally, the Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC) captures both the essence of sin and the extent of its consequence in questions 14 and 19, respectively:

Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.

All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever.

Remembering the misery of our lost estate will aid both in increasing our appreciation for God's wondrous grace that is greater than our sin and in motivating our love and praise for Christ as our Savior. This is the point Christ intended in the parable He told Simon concerning the two debtors who were incapable of repaying their debt (Luke 7:40–50). One owed five hundred pence and the other fifty, and both were graciously forgiven. Christ asked Simon, who was appalled at the sinful woman's anointing Christ's feet with expensive ointment and tears, "Tell me therefore, which of them will love [the creditor] most?" (v. 42). According to the Lord Jesus,

Simon answered correctly when he replied, “I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most” (v. 43). Just as the debtor in the parable and the sinful woman responded with gratitude because they were forgiven much (v. 47), we will be more conscious of the greatness of our salvation as we become more conscious of the depths of our sin and its horrific consequences.

Do not misunderstand what I want us to think about. It is not good for Christians to dwell on the specifics of past sins. But it is good for each of us to remember that God through Christ has “brought [us] up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set [our] feet upon a rock, and established [our] goings” (Ps. 40:2). For this reason, I want us to consider what the Bible teaches about humanity’s sinful condition that justly condemns them before God and to rejoice in the amazing truth that humanity’s total depravity is cured by God’s infinite grace. God’s indictment against sinners is all-inclusive: “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10; see also Ps. 14:1–3). The evidence that proves the indictment is undeniable: “For all have sinned [missed the target], and come short [constantly lacking] of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). I want simply to consider what sinners are by nature (Eph. 2:3) in order to heighten the beauty of what saints are by grace (Eph. 2:5). Because of what they are, sinners need a gospel.

Sinners Are Spiritually Dead

In Ephesians 2:1, Paul identifies the state of believers prior to salvation as being “dead in trespasses and sins.” In this context, being dead refers to the absence not of physical life but of spiritual life. Being spiritually dead renders one insensitive and unresponsive to the things of God (1 Cor. 2:14). The most important part of a human being’s person, his or her eternal soul, is dead to the most vital part of life, God. The grammar of this statement means that either sinners are dead within the sphere of trespasses and sins (surrounded by sin) or that they are dead because of trespasses and sins. Both ideas are tragic and theologically true. Because of

trespasses and sins, people are spiritually dead. It is the fact of original sin that renders every person spiritually dead; it is the fact of spiritual death that impels every person to actual sin. Spiritual death buries a person in the dirt of sin and renders each of us thoroughly corrupt (as stinking corpses) and completely incapable of generating spiritual life. Theologically, we refer to this condition as total depravity and total inability. Scripture presents two important perspectives of this universal problem of spiritual death.

Dead in Adam

The Bible teaches and experience verifies that sin is universal. According to Scripture, the explanation for this universal presence of sin in the human heart lies in Adam's first sin, the fall of the human race. First Corinthians 15:22 declares explicitly, "In Adam all die." Romans 5 is a weighty text for many reasons, particularly for its explanation linking our guilt to Adam's sin: "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (v. 12). Consider also these statements: "for if through the offence of one many be dead" (v. 15); "for the judgment was by one to condemnation" (v. 16); "for if by one man's offence death reigned by one" (v. 17); "by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation" (v. 18); and "for as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners" (v. 19).

All this raises an important and legitimate question: If Adam did it, why am I guilty? Theologians have long debated the answer to this question, often allowing the limitations of finite reason and a perverted, selfish sense of fairness to cloud the evidence of Scripture. There are many wrong answers to this question and one right answer. Properly understanding the relationship between Adam's sin and our guilt is essential to understanding the relationship between Christ's righteousness and our freedom from guilt. Even the doctrine of condemnation relates to the doctrine of Christ.

To examine critically all the wrong answers in detail would require more space and knowledge than I have. Notwithstanding

these limitations, it will not hurt to present a cursory synopsis of these wrong theories. Keep in mind that each of them has tenets related to but beyond the specific issue of our relationship to Adam.

Wrong answer: Pelagianism. For instance, a theory called Pelagianism denies that there is any constitutional connection between Adam's sin and the guilt of humanity. This view holds that all humanity, just like Adam, comes into the world balanced on the fence of morality, with an equal chance of sinning or not sinning. Accordingly, because he was morally indifferent, Adam alone bore the responsibility for his sin, and neither his sin nor its consequences affect the human race. At worst, Adam set a bad example, and his descendants simply follow his bad example by sinning themselves. On the surface, the notion of individual responsibility sounds fair, but it ignores the explicit biblical data and wipes away the other side of Paul's argument in Romans 5 that links Christ's obedience to justification. If Adam's sin was just a bad example, then it follows that Christ's obedience was just a good example that ultimately contributes nothing to the salvation of sinners. Every person would be left to his or her own attempts to be perfect— attempts that are doomed to failure. That is hardly good news. This is an obvious and deleterious error.

Wrong answer: semi-Pelagianism. An adaptation of Pelagianism called semi-Pelagianism teaches that all Adam's descendants inherited from him a moral corruption that renders them spiritually sick but not dead. Semi-Pelagians define sin as conscious voluntary acts; sin is not a condition, just a type of behavior. Since descendants of Adam were not voluntary participants in Adam's transgression, they cannot be liable for Adam's guilt. Though not sin, inherited corruption gives occasion to actual sins. Although people may theoretically be capable of not sinning, this sickness and corruption render them hard-pressed not to sin without God's help. Notwithstanding sinful urges, people, in spite of their innate moral sickness, can, without divine intervention, initiate right

behavior toward God, who then responds to their feeble efforts with aiding grace. Semi-Pelagianism led eventually to what we know more commonly as Arminianism. Rather than saying God responds with aiding grace to a person's initiating efforts, Arminianism asserts that God gives grace equally to all people, enabling them to believe if they so choose. This is generally designated as prevenient grace, a term derived from Latin meaning "to come before." Arminianism argues that it is God's prevenient grace in the soul of every person that renders those who are spiritually sick capable of responding to the gospel and thus by their response making the gospel personally effective. Again, the emphasis on individualism and personal responsibility makes this sound fair, but it hardly agrees with the biblical data that declares human beings spiritually dead, not just morally sick. Salvation is reduced to possibility rather than actuality.

Wrong answer: New School or New Haven theology. The last wrong answer I will mention is a system of doctrine that is called New School or New Haven theology, because it evolved out of Yale University in the early nineteenth century. Concerning the matter of Adam's sin, this theory teaches that people inherit from Adam an inherent tendency to sin. Although this tendency invariably leads to sin, the tendency itself is not sin because, according to this view also, sin consists exclusively in conscious, intentional violations of the law. Interestingly, this guiltless tendency to sin is remarkably similar to the Roman Catholic doctrine of concupiscence, the inherent lust. Although this lust is not sinful, it does occasion sin. In simple terms, people are not corrupt because they are guilty in Adam; they are guilty because they are corrupt. People are guilty sinners only because they sin. This view essentially claims that behavior determines nature, whereas the Bible teaches that nature determines behavior. Bob Jones Sr., an evangelist of the early twentieth century, had a saying that nicely counters the error of New Haven theology: "Men are not sinners because they sin; men sin because they are sinners." A most insightful and a most scriptural aphorism.

The right answer: federal theology. The answer of federal theology best explains the connection between Adam's sin and humankind's consequent guilt. Federal theology essentially affirms that God ordained Adam as the representative head of the human race. This is going to get a bit thick, but stay with me. I believe this best explains the language of Scripture, particularly in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15.

As the first man, Adam stands naturally as the father of humankind. All human beings who have ever lived can trace their ancestry back to Adam by natural generation. As evidence of the real humanity of Jesus Christ, Luke traced the Savior's lineage back to Adam (Luke 3:38). If we believe what the Bible teaches about creation, recognizing the natural headship of Adam is easy enough. Federal theology also maintains that Adam was the covenant head of the human race. God established Adam as the representative head not only in a parental sense but also in a federal sense—the human race was in union with him. In the first covenant, which dictated the terms of life and death (Gen. 2:16–17), God would deal with the race as He dealt with Adam. After all, when God dealt with Adam in this covenant, Adam *was* the human race.

As the covenant head, Adam's behavior toward the terms of the covenant affected the whole race both because he represented the race and because literally the entire race was in him. Had Adam obeyed the conditions of the probation placed on him in Eden, he would have earned for himself and his descendants eternal life. Unlike the Pelagian notion, federal theology maintains that Adam was not created tottering precariously on the edge of right and wrong, but with a positive bias toward God with spiritual knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness (see Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). Since God gave Adam every spiritual advantage, it was hard for him to sin. This increases the heinousness and seriousness of his sin. Adam did not uncontrollably slip and slide into sin. Solomon said that God made man upright but that, contrary to that original righteousness, he sought out many schemes (Eccl. 7:29). Remember how plainly Paul explained it: "Adam was not deceived...in the

transgression” (1 Tim. 2:14). Let’s be sure to base our theology of Adam’s fall on Scripture and not on nursery rhymes. I certainly agree that Humpty Dumpty had a great fall and that despite the efforts of all the king’s horses and all the king’s men, Humpty could not be put back together again. But Humpty—that is, Adam—was not an egg balanced on a wall. He was put in the middle of Paradise, and he had to take a long, running jump to get over the wall God had erected. Not easy for an egg.

When Adam deliberately and willfully disobeyed God, he corrupted himself, incurred guilt, and became subject to death. But Adam’s disobedience was not confined to himself. Because he was our federal representative, we shared equally in his disobedience and consequent guilt. God justly imputed Adam’s sin of breaking the terms of the covenant to the human race, which was in Adam and which consequently was involved in his sin. Through the disobedience of Adam, the entire race is justly considered guilty and is condemned before God (Rom. 5:17–19). Therefore, all people are conceived in iniquity, born in sin, and are naturally guilty. The immediate results of Adam’s first sin have persisted throughout his race: shame (Gen. 3:7); alienation from God (Gen. 3:8); guilt (Gen. 3:10); and the sentence of death (Gen. 3:19, 22). Note that we are not responsible for any of Adam’s subsequent sins, only the first sin that plunged humanity into guilt and spiritual death. Observe again what Paul says: “By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned” (Rom. 5:12). That’s pretty clear. From the beginning of our existence, therefore, we have needed a gospel.

Although our guilt in Adam may seem logically complicated and the implications of it unflattering, the biblical declarations of it are forthright. Consider the statements of the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC) and the Baptist Confession of Faith (BCF), which remarkably abstract the key points of Scripture.

The covenant being made with Adam as a publick person, not for himself only, but for his posterity, all mankind

descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in that first transgression. (WLC, Q. 22)

This sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consisteth in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of that righteousness wherein he was created, and the corruption of his nature, whereby he is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually; which is commonly called Original Sin, and from which do proceed all actual transgressions. (WLC, Q. 25)

Our first parents, by this sin, fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and we in them whereby death came upon all: all becoming dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of body and soul. They being the root, and by God's appointment, standing in the room and stead of all mankind, the guilt of sin was imputed, and corrupted nature conveyed, to their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation, being now conceived in sin, and by nature the children of wrath, the servants of sin, the subjects of death, and all other miseries, spiritual, temporal and eternal, unless the Lord Jesus set them free. (BCE, 6.2–3)

In a nutshell, this is what I have been trying to say.

Let me address one final question related to Adam's sin and our guilt that bears directly on the gospel: How was Christ affected by Adam's sin? You can see the surface problem. If all people are guilty in Adam and Christ is truly human, then how can it be that unlike every other descendant of Adam, Christ is absolutely sinless? Scripture unequivocally teaches the impeccability of Jesus Christ. He was not sinless just because He did not sin; rather, He did not sin because He is sinless. Remember this principle: behavior does not determine nature; rather, nature determines behavior. That

applies to Christ just as it does to us. Remember, as well, that sin is not an essential element of human nature as it was originally created. Follow again Paul's logic in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15, and you will find that God established both Adam and Christ as the representative heads of a people. Note how Paul says that Adam was a figure of another to come (Rom. 5:14) and how he speaks of the first Adam and the last Adam, the first man and the second man (1 Cor. 15:45, 47). Although Jesus was a natural descendant of Adam and a real part of the human race, He was not subject to the sin that incurred guilt on the rest of humanity. Mysteriously and miraculously, the Holy Spirit took true human substance from the seed of the woman and produced the sinless humanity of Christ (see Gen. 3:15 and Gal. 4:4). I cannot explain this great mystery but can only take the angel's word of explanation to Mary as the indisputable fact: "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Therefore, Adam's sin had no effect on Him, and with His sinless nature He fulfilled all the terms of the covenant of works that Adam violated. As the second Adam, He is the representative head whose complete obedience is the basis for redeeming a believing humanity from Adam's curse. Although Adam failed as the representative head, he—perhaps ironically but certainly by divine grace—personally believed God's promise of the Seed of the woman who would reverse what he had just done (Gen. 3:15). Adam received grace and was in Christ. As a public man, he condemned his race. As a private man, Adam knew Christ as his representative head and was a member of Christ's redeemed race. The truth is that grace is greater than sin, even original sin. But we must understand that God ultimately deals with all humanity in terms of these two men. In union with representative Adam, all die; in union with representative Christ, all live. This is why I say we have to understand condemnation if we are going to understand grace.

Dead in Person

Although we are guilty in Adam, we cannot blame him for our own spiritual lifelessness. Other than Jesus Christ, no one is personally exempt from guilt and corruption. Ecclesiastes 7:20 says, “There is not a just man upon earth.” We have to face it: all people from the beginning of their physical lives bear the defilement and guilt of sin. David confessed, “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 51:5). When excoriating the people of Israel because of sin, the Lord declared, “Thou... wast called a transgressor from the womb” (Isa. 48:8). We are by nature children of disobedience and of wrath (Eph. 2:2–3).

What Scripture expressly asserts it also vividly illustrates. Two significant object lessons in the Old Testament dispensation depicted the natural corruption that coexisted with the beginning of life. Though the object lessons are no longer operative, the truth portrayed is still the truth. The first was the ceremony of circumcision, which required the excision of the foreskin of the flesh, itself a symbol of sin and corruption. Significantly, the New Testament equates being dead in sins to the uncircumcision of the flesh (Col. 2:13). Although the significance of circumcision as a sign of the covenant has many important implications (see Gen. 17:10–14), at the very least the fact that it was performed on an infant suggests that sin is a problem from birth.

The second object lesson was one of the laws defining ceremonial cleanness and uncleanness. The overall purpose of these laws—dealing with everything from diet to household scum—was to teach the people that fellowship with God demanded purity and that sin precluded such fellowship. Interestingly, one of the natural circumstances of life that rendered a woman ceremonially unclean was childbirth (see Leviticus 12). Children are without question a wonderful gift from the Lord, and having children is an occasion for happiness (Psalm 127). But regardless of how cute and cuddly the newborn child, God wanted all to know that that child was born a sinner. Job’s question and his own answer sum up the perpetual

problem of “man that is born of a woman” (Job 14:1): “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one” (Job 14:4).

Not only does the Bible make clear that people are sinners from the start of life, but it also teaches that guilt and corruption infest their innermost being. Not only are all human beings sinners, but all of a human being is sinful. People are totally depraved—void of any good that can please God. He is without any spark that could possibly flame into spiritual life. Sin is a matter of the heart: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jer. 17:9). Jeremiah describes the heart as being a “Jacob” (same basic word as “deceitful”) and as completely malignant and pernicious. Throughout Scripture, the heart designates the inner person—the mind, the emotions, and the will. The natural mind is incapable of understanding anything spiritual (1 Cor. 2:14), because the understanding is darkened (Eph. 4:18). The whole “mind and conscience is defiled” (Titus 1:15). The natural affections are void of any love of God (John 5:42), being spiritually callous—past feeling (Eph. 4:19). The natural will deliberately chooses the way of death, rejecting the way of life (Prov. 8:36; note that the words “hate” and “love” are primarily volitional rather than emotional terms).

Romans 3:11–18 is perhaps the most extensive catalog of the human sin nature in the New Testament. Note the following statements that particularly focus on the condition of the naturally depraved heart. First, that “there is no fear of God before their eyes” (Rom. 3:18) suggests the depraved disposition of natural human beings. The sinner lives without the awareness of God that checks and restricts the evil passions. If Job’s fear of God caused him to turn from evil (Job 1:1), it follows that without the fear of God, people turn to evil, following a mind-set that is hostile to God (Rom. 8:7). The sinner lives without any holy motive or impulse. Second, that “there is none that understandeth” (Rom. 3:11) suggests the imbecility of the depraved mind. In this total spiritual ignorance, even the beauty of Christ and the claims and offer of His gospel make no sense. Third, that “there is none that seeketh after God” (Rom. 3:11) plots the course of the depraved

will. Nowhere is the depravity of humankind more painfully vivid than in the exercise of the fallen will. The first act of Adam's fallen will was not to seek God but to hide from Him. That is always the direction sinners take when following their natural inclinations. Those who are in the flesh can mind only the things of the flesh (Rom. 8:5). Similarly, Jeremiah described the cursed person as one "whose heart departeth from the LORD" (Jer. 17:5). To have such a heart is death (Rom. 8:6).

Left alone, people are in serious trouble because they cannot resurrect themselves from this spiritual death or cure themselves from this spiritual depravity. As the Ethiopian (or anyone else, for that matter) is incapable of changing his skin, and a leopard (or any other animal) is incapable of changing its appearance, so sinners, who are "accustomed to do evil," are unable to do anything that is good (Jer. 13:23). "They that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:8). Total inability to change nature is the inevitable corollary to total depravity. Admitting and remembering our helpless estate puts the grace of the gospel in the right perspective.

Sinners Are Morally Corrupt

People may be dead in trespasses and sins, but paradoxically they are quite actively living in sin. Like spiritual zombies, sinners live unconscious of their death. The apostle Paul describes this zombie-like condition in Ephesians 2:1–3 when he details how the spiritually dead walk:

You...were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

Both the ideas of “walking” and “conversation” imply the course, habits, and tendencies of life. The text identifies the three morbid guides that the spiritually dead follow. First, they follow the world. This refers to that transient system that is inherently opposed to truth, righteousness, and God. To follow this world and the spirit of this age is to be at enmity with God. Second, they follow the devil. This accuser, tempter, corrupter, and arch-liar is at the head of the parade leading to eternal death. Elsewhere, the Bible calls him “the god of this world” who blinds the eyes of unbelievers (2 Cor. 4:4) and holds them captive at his will (2 Tim. 2:26). Third, they follow the lusts of the flesh. Nature again rules. The bent of natural inclinations yields to the passions of sin, and the desires of the mind are inherently predisposed to evil. It would be impossible to list all the conceivable sins that human beings are capable of committing against God and His law that render them culpable before Him and subject to the just penalty of the broken law. Some sins are outward acts; others are inward thoughts. Some sins are against fellow human beings; other sins are against self. Some sins are more heinous than others, but all sins are against God (Ps. 51:4).

This is the problem with having a rotten heart: out of the heart come all the issues of life (Prov. 4:23). Consequently, from the evil heart proceed all kinds of defilement (Matt. 7:17; Luke 6:45). The original sin that corrupts the heart always issues forth into actual sins. We do what we do because we are what we are. We don’t necessarily do everything we are capable of doing in the sphere of sin, but the great pity is that we are capable of doing the worst. In that catalog of sin in Romans 3, Paul’s attention to people’s depraved nature leads to his focus on people’s depraved behavior. Since there is none righteous (v. 10), it follows that “there is none that doeth good, no, not one” (v. 12). Read verses 13–14 and see how the mouth mirrors the heart. From the abundance of the spiritually dead heart emanate untruthfulness, slander, and profanity. Verses 15–17 describe a lifestyle characterized by violence, ruin, distress, affliction, and wretchedness. Sin defiles everything. If we are left alone, it doesn’t look good for us.

Sinners Are Justly Condemned

God warned Adam and Eve from the start that the penalty of sin would be death (Gen. 2:17). Along with all the other miseries earned by sin (Gen. 3:16–19), death entered the world—immediate spiritual death, inevitable physical death, and eventual eternal death. To be spiritually dead and morally corrupt is to be under divine wrath and condemnation (Eph. 2:3). To be under that divine wrath is to be inexcusable at the judgment (Rom. 3:19). The Bible makes it unmistakably clear that God’s judgment is “according to truth” (Rom. 2:2) and that He will infallibly and impartially “render to every man according to his deeds” (Rom. 2:6, 11). There is hardly a more fearful and sobering thought than to receive from God on that day of judgment what we deserve. What sinners deserve and what they will certainly receive is “indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish” (Rom. 2:8–9). Outside of Christ, the sinner’s only prospect is the “certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation” (Heb. 10:27). After that judgment, condemned sinners, having been sentenced “according to their works,” are cast—body and soul—into the everlasting lake of fire, designated as the second death (Rev. 20:12–14). Eternal death is the certain end of spiritual death. The prophet’s questions should haunt every sinner: “Who can stand before his indignation? and who can abide in the fierceness of his anger?” (Nah. 1:6).

It is beyond my purpose to discuss what the Bible teaches about eternal punishment; for now I want us to see the reality and the justice of God’s condemnation of sinful people. Reflecting on the horrors of sin’s punishment, however, should be an incentive for sinners to seek the Lord while He may be found and for saints to rejoice that Christ has delivered us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:10) and that we therefore will never see hell. Let me refer you to the statements in the Westminster Larger Catechism, questions 28 and 29, that detail the sinner’s punishment both in this world and in the future. They are sobering words that deserve

serious reflection. David summed it well when he said, “Many sorrows shall be to the wicked” (Ps. 32:10).

The punishments of sin in this world are either inward, as blindness of mind, a reprobate sense, strong delusions, hardness of heart, horror of conscience, and vile affections; or outward, as the curse of God upon the creatures for our sakes, and all other evils that befall us in our bodies, names, estates, relations, and employments; together with death itself.

The punishments of sin in the world to come, are everlasting separation from the comfortable presence of God, and most grievous torments in soul and body, without intermission, in hell-fire for ever.

Note particularly how part of the punishment of sin in this world is sin itself. God’s abandoning sinners to their own ways is condemnation in action. Condemnation is bad now, but the worst is yet to come.

I hope the point is clear. By nature, we are dead, corrupt, and condemned, and by ourselves we can do nothing about it. We desperately need a gospel. If God were to leave people alone to receive the wages for sin, He would be perfectly just. But the beauty of the gospel is that God has not left people alone. No news for sinners would be bad news indeed, but there is good news. I have drawn attention in this chapter several times to the first three verses of Ephesians 2—the bad news. I love the transition in verses 4–5, the good news: “But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ.” Spiritual life is the only answer to spiritual death. God, by His grace, gives undeserving, condemned sinners that life in union with His Son. As we begin to consider all that we have in Christ and what it means to be saved, let us with the inspired apostle “thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord”

because He has delivered us from the body of this death (Rom. 7:24–25). Amazing grace—I once was lost, but now I’m found!

Questions for Thought

1. How does the Bible define sin?
2. What are the consequences of spiritual death?
3. Why is sin a universal problem?
4. If Adam sinned, why are we guilty?
5. What three types of death resulted from Adam’s sin?
6. What is your personal testimony regarding misery, deliverance, and gratitude?