

A Pentecostal Finds Grace

by Roscoe Barnes III

I felt a flash of anger when I looked at a tract on the plan of salvation that I had written. What bothered me was the comment made by Ron Bupp, a friend I'd asked to critique the manuscript.

Bupp made a number of good suggestions. But near the end of the tract where I offered a "sinner's prayer," he wrote a question that sent me reeling.

"This sounds like 'Lordship Salvation,'" he wrote. "Is this what you believe?"

That single question became the impetus for my personal journey into grace. The journey would take me through two years of relentless study on the topic of salvation and eternal security, challenging me to choose Scripture over tradition. The result would be the greatest discovery I have made since trusting Christ as my personal Savior.

Finding Christ and Seeking Assurance

I placed my trust in Christ back in 1976 when I was 15. I was a poor black kid living in the Mississippi Delta. In those days, churches with sound doctrinal teaching were scarce in the black community. Consequently, I fell prey to a number of radical Pentecostal groups. At times I even fed on the teaching of Charismatic TV preachers.

For the first six months following my new birth experience, my assurance wavered. I went to many churches asking how I could be sure of my salvation, but tragically no one had a good answer. In one desperate moment, I picked up a phone directory and highlighted all the names that had "Rev." beside them. For an entire night, I called each "Rev." in the book in search of an answer. But when it was all over, I was more confused than when I started.

One day I happened across a book that said assurance was gained by simply taking God at His word. It was merely a matter of trusting His promises.

That brought me some relief, but I still had questions. In my search, I joined a group that taught we need faith to be saved, but we need holiness to *stay* saved. Furthermore, they taught that if anyone died with unconfessed sins, they would go to hell. Not surprisingly, fear of hell became the motivating factor for everything we did in the church.

Each Sunday I'd go to church and repent and be saved all over again. I did that for months. Then one day the pastor pulled me aside. He said that I needed to sacrifice, clean up, and become holy. Then I needed to fast and pray. Beyond that, I needed to cut my long hair, which in those days was an afro.

I did all of that, but I still lived with the constant fear of losing my salvation. It was a fear that grew with each mistake I made. Sometimes the fear was so paralyzing, I could hardly pray or think, or even read my Bible. I couldn't see any way out.

Thoughts of Suicide

At one time in particular, the fear became so debilitating that I wanted to take my own life. That happened during my teen years when I backslid into immorality.

I will never forget what followed. I went without food and sleep for days. At church, people laid hands on me and prayed for my deliverance. Some thought that I might even have a demon that needed to be cast out.

I wanted so badly to be forgiven. Begging God to forgive me and to save me, I wept for many nights. I was so ashamed of myself and overwhelmed with guilt that I was willing to do anything to prove my love for God. When it seemed that I could not be saved again, I felt suicide was the answer.

I truly wanted to please God but didn't know how. I needed help but found no one to turn to. Still, I kept praying and hoping. And when I was able, I began to read my Bible again, sometimes doing it for five hours a day. I memorized entire chapters and hundreds of passages. Despite all of that, I lived every day in fear.

The Sin of Apostasy

I eventually found a church that preached about faith. At the same time, it stressed the dangers of apostasy.

"We believe in *conditional* eternal security," a member said. "You can be saved as long as you want to be. But if you ever turn your back on Christ, you'll be lost forever."

That church did not believe you could be lost by committing "small" sins: You had to actually reject Christ and His forgiveness—and really mean it. You had to become an apostate.

As strange as it may seem, I found comfort in that teaching. Though I had sinned, I never considered turning my back on Christ. I never wanted to reject Him or His forgiveness. Consequently, I felt safe. And when I entered the ministry, I clung to the teaching with all my might. Many times during my sermons I would say, "Once saved, always saved' is a doctrine of the devil."

The Turning Point

Things took a turn in the summer of 1999, when I met Ron Bupp during a weekend drill with the Pennsylvania National Guard. Bupp was a chaplain with Good News Jail & Prison Ministry. He and I were serving in the military as chaplain's assistants.

It was in the spring of 2000 when he read my tract and provided healthy criticism. Though stunned by his comment on "lordship salvation," I was impressed by his approach. He did not attack me and he made his case without arguing or even raising his voice.

At that time, I had not followed the "lordship vs. free grace" debate. I had always considered it a non-issue. But Bupp's question was enough to get me thinking. Even more, his question led to other questions, such as, "What's wrong with the lordship teaching?" and "What exactly is the free grace gospel?"

The biggest question for me was, "How do these doctrines relate to eternal security?"

Eventually, I discovered the works of Zane Hodges, Charles Ryrie, Charlie Bing, and Charles Stanley. By the time I had devoured their writings, I was pretty much convinced of the truth of eternal security.

Reading Romans

I felt directed to read the book of Romans, which had a tremendous impact on the life of Luther. So I delved into it with an open mind, praying to be objective. I read Romans over and over in various translations. I even went to the original Greek. I also purchased new commentaries on the book and studied them each day for over a year.

Then one day, the light came on. My friend, Ron Bupp, had been talking to an inmate who asked about eternal security. Bupp had directed him to the doctrine of justification by faith which excluded works.

"So Chaplain," the inmate asked him. "Since salvation is not based on works, if I could lose it, then it would be based on works, wouldn't it?"

That question pierced my heart. I was so moved by it, I rushed home and went back to Romans. I stopped at Romans 3:21-22:

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction.

As I read that passage, along with Romans 4, I started to see the truth of the grace gospel. For the first time in my life, I began to see that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone.

I thought. "Why didn't I see this 20 years ago?"

For the next few months, I lived in Romans 3 and 4. Because Jesus promises eternal life to all who simply believe in Him, I came to realize that to doubt eternal security was to question justification by faith alone. Furthermore, to reject the doctrine of eternal security would be to reject the free grace of God.

Conclusion

Looking back, I can honestly say that the discovery of the grace gospel has had a profound impact on my life, my theology, and my ministry.

A more accurate method of hermeneutics has led to fresh insights into Scripture. It has also led to a renewed prayer life, more confidence in ministry, plus an invigorating sense of hope for the present and the future.

Shortly after I accepted the gospel, I eagerly shared it with an elderly couple who had stopped by my office to chat. When I finished sharing the message, the woman gasped.

"Wow," she said with a big smile. "That isn't just Good News. That's *great* news!"

She was right on target.

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