



**GOOD
ENOUGH?**



Leon Morris

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GOOD ENOUGH?

NICE PEOPLE, of course, don't need to be saved.

We never put it to ourselves quite like that, but something very like it is often at the back of our minds when we give thought (if ever we do!) to the subject of salvation. We think that sort of thing all very well for people who like big meetings and high pressure evangelism, or for people who really are bad, criminals and drunkards and such like. But as for people like us, well, the subject doesn't even bear mentioning.

And yet the Bible knows of only two final classes, the saved and the lost. There is no in-between niche for nice people, a kind of pass degree for those who are good enough. In the last resort we must be found in one or other of these two classes, the saved or the lost, and the second doesn't sound inviting. How are we going to avoid finding ourselves in it?

This means looking into a big subject, for salvation in the Bible is the big, comprehensive term. Other words, like justification or sanctification, may refer to part of the process, but salvation means the whole. So that if we are to understand salvation we must understand the great central truths of the Bible. And since we may as well do the thing in order, let us begin by looking at what salvation is from, then go on to think about the means of salvation and finish with a consideration of its scope.

PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT NICE

One thing the Bible keeps talking about, and of which most of us prefer to say little, is sin. To people of our day this word has a nasty ring about it. It sounds unpleasant, and somehow ecclesiastical. It is the kind of word we can imagine parsons using. Indeed, we rather think they should use it, but not other people. And as for applying the term to ourselves — we wouldn't dream of it.

Have you heard the story of the Scot who paid a visit to London? When he re-

turned to his native heath they asked him how he had fared.

'It was all right,' he said, 'but they're funny folk down there!'

'How's that?'

'Well, one night, about two o'clock in the morning a man came banging on my hotel door. He yelled and banged and was in a terrible temper. He sounded as though he might kill me if he could get in.'

'And what did you do?'

'I didn't do anything. I just kept on quietly playing my bagpipes!'

Like the Scot, we find it easy to see the faults in other people, but it rarely occurs to us that there is any real fault in ourselves. Of course, we generously admit, we are not perfect, but to call those little flaws in us 'sins' is to lose all sense of proportion. There is all the difference in the world between our minor peccadilloes and big sins, sins that really deserve the name, like, say, murder.

It is an interesting thing, this habit of ours of explaining our own sins as minor shortcomings, and simultaneously of being very bothered by the sins of other people. Am

I bad-tempered? Then I say something like, 'I know I fly off the handle sometimes, but that really is not very important. I thank God I'm not a spiritless, spineless individual like so-and-so.' Am I miserly and mean? I can argue, 'I may be a bit careful with my money, but these days you have to be. It's much worse to be a spendthrift.' The gentleman who drinks too much sees nothing amiss in his carousals (or very little), but he is appalled at the killjoy spirit of the militant prohibitionist. The open sinner thanks God he is not a hypocrite, and the hypocrite returns the compliment, maintaining that at least he does not flaunt his shortcomings in the face of all men.

The truth is that each one of us is so constituted that there are some wrong things which we think to be very wrong and we blame people who do them. Other wrong things we do not consider so very bad. And, by a curious coincidence, the wrongs that we ourselves do are always the little ones.

And yet, on reflection there must be more to it than personal opinion. If we all are to be judges in our own cause, then no-one will be condemned. But are we to be our

own judges? The solemn truth is that ultimately we must stand before God. It is His verdict that counts, not ours. So we must measure ourselves against His standards and not against our own. And His standards are absolute perfection. 'Be ye therefore perfect' said Jesus, and lest we might have some thought that a relative, merely human kind of perfection is meant, He added 'even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect'. So there it is. God hates all sin, the sin you do not mind as well as the sin you do care about. With Him there is no favoured class of sin which secures exemption. He demands that we abjure all sin and that we be perfect. Alongside that standard who will dare to say that he measures up?

And if a man does not measure up he is a sinner. It is as simple as that.

Or put it this way. The good deeds of men present no problem. They are simply a matter for rejoicing. But what are we to do in the light of our bad deeds? How can sinful man ever stand before a holy God? How can men laden with their sins find a place in a spotless heaven? We are told

explicitly that 'there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth' (Revelation 21: 27). Clearly something must be done about our sins.

Indeed the position is even more serious than this indicates. We like to think of ourselves as sound at heart even though now and then we may commit some minor misdemeanours. Our exterior may be somewhat rugged, and people may misunderstand us, but we mean well. Or so we say.

But do we? Sometimes we catch ourselves almost unawares, as when a rival obtains a promotion we think we have deserved and our first reaction is naked jealousy or even downright hatred. Then we pull ourselves together. We put as good a face on it as we can. Perhaps we even offer congratulations. Or, when we hear of some misfortune overtaking someone we dislike we are prone to feel a malicious glee. Then we realize that this is unworthy, so we restrain ourselves. We may even offer to help him.

Now these first reactions of ours are not thought out. They come from the depths of our being. They spring from what we

are, not from what we think we are or would like to be. And the significant thing is that we cannot feel neutral about them. We are ashamed of them. We do not admit them to others and sometimes not even to ourselves. We are ashamed of what we *are*, as well as of what we do. The Bible speaks accurately when it speaks of us as having sinful natures as well as committing acts of sin.

The first point that we make then is that by God's standards we are all sinners, every one of us. This is serious, for it excludes us from fellowship with God.

THE WRATH OF GOD

It does more. It exposes us to the wrath of God.

This is an unpleasant subject, but it is important, for the Bible is insistent that this wrath is exercised towards all who sin. This is another idea that we don't particularly like and many are the attempts we make to explain it away.

A favourite one is to lay it down firmly that wrath is an evil passion. Then we go

on to assert that, while we are only too familiar with it in human experience, in the nature of a God who is love there is no place for such an evil thing.

This will never do. It rests on a confusion of thought. The opposite of love is not wrath, but hate, and while we might well say that it is impossible for love and hate to exist together, it is not at all the same thing to say that love and wrath are incompatible. Indeed our own experience shows that they are not, but that a very loving father may well be very angry with his son when he does wrong, and indeed if he really loves his son he will be angry under such circumstances. The man who is unmoved by evil in his own boy shows by that very fact that he has no deep love for him. He may have a benevolent sentimentality, but that is not the same thing. Sentimentality is too lazy to bestir itself. Sentimentality will not do something unpleasant even though it is salutary. Sentimentality is content to live and let live.

Not so love. True love is deeply concerned for the well-being of the loved one, and it will not hesitate to take strong action,

even though it be distasteful, in the best interests of the loved one. So the fact that God loves us means that His wrath will be extended towards every evil that appears in us. He wants us to be the very best that we can be, and He knows how our sin cuts us off from that. God's wrath is His love blazing out in fiery indignation against every evil in His beloved ones.

Then there are some who feel that the Bible teaches us that the wrath of God stands only for some impersonal process. When we sin some disaster follows, and this is an inevitable process. The Bible writers described it as 'the wrath of God', but we should understand it differently.

I do not think this can be sustained either. In the first place it is just not true to say that the Bible writers thought of anything like an impersonal process. Again and again they make use of forceful and vivid language to show that God is personally active in the unpleasant consequences that follow sin. He does not remain an uninterested spectator, but He punishes the evil-doer, sometimes immediately and sometimes not. But no-one who has taken the

trouble to work through the biblical references to wrath will be in any doubt as to the fact that God opposes all evil. I have counted five hundred and eighty-five references to wrath in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament wrath is still well represented; and the idea is often found even when the actual word 'wrath' is not specifically employed (e.g. in 2 Thessalonians 1: 7-9).

Quite apart from the fact that the Bible is so clear on the point, it is also to be borne in mind that some such idea as the wrath of God is a necessary one. Are we to suggest that finally the lot of the evil man is to be the same as that of the just? If not, are we to say that all this takes place independently of God? How can anything be independent of God in the universe that He has made? The more we hold to the reality of God the more surely are we bound to see that in the last resort the punishment of the wicked must be thought of as due to Him. It is the way He has made things.

And as to the reality of that final state of those who are not saved we are left in no doubt. There are those who think

that notions of hell and the like are due to the Church, and that in the teaching of the loving Christ they have no place. Such ideas can arise only from ignorance. Jesus taught positively that there is such a thing as 'the hell of fire' (Matthew 5: 22, RSV) or 'the eternal fire' (Matthew 18: 8, RSV). He told people plainly that 'except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish' (Luke 13: 3, 5), and of one sin, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, He said there is no forgiveness (Mark 3: 29). Of Judas He said 'good were it for that man if he had never been born' (Mark 14: 21). On the day of judgment the verdict on certain people will be 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire' (Matthew 25: 41, RSV).

There is much more to the same effect, but enough has been said to make the position clear. Jesus did not think of sin as some light thing, which matters little, but as something solemn, an evil necessarily bringing eternal consequences in its train. If we take our cue from our Lord in this matter we will not be guilty of underestimating the seriousness of sin or of discounting the punishment that it inevitably incurs.

THE DIVINE INITIATIVE

But if it is true that God reacts in the strongest possible fashion against sin, it is also true that He takes steps to overcome it. Because He loves man He does not leave him to the consequences of his misdeeds. The Bible has been called 'The History of Redemption' and the title has this merit, that it directs attention to the great fact that in the whole Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, we see the love of God taking action to put away man's sin.

We ought to be clear about this. Most of the world's great religions teach man that his salvation is in his own hands. He may have sinned, but he can undo that sin, and so they direct him to this way or that and urge him to be busy about his purification. It is the unique message of Christianity that it teaches us that our cleansing is due to God and not to us.

When you think about it that is logical. Suppose that now, this moment, you could pull yourself together in such fashion that you would never commit another sin for the rest of your life. If you did manage to do

that, you would only be what you ought to be. Quite apart from any sin that you have committed in the past, you ought to be the very best that you can be. Therefore in doing good you would not be performing some great and meritorious work which would wipe out the past. You would simply be doing your plain duty.

Think of it this way. If a business firm found itself in difficulties the partners would not decide to write round to their creditors saying that, as they were quite unable to meet their current commitments, they were simply wiping them off the books, but that for the future everything would be all right: from now on they intended to honour all obligations, so that none need fear to trade with them. No firm would make such a proposal, and no-one would take them seriously if they did.

But the tragedy of it is that many seem to think that some such reasoning can be applied to our dealings with God. Yet the Bible is plain and clear, 'God requireth that which is past.' We cannot just shrug it off. I have heard men talk about misdeeds in the distant past in an amused sort of fashion, as

though the years had somehow altered their character. But we must learn that the mere passage of time does nothing to wipe away sin. It is still there.

Our position before God is then a hazardous one. We cannot live perfectly, yet this is the standard (Matthew 5: 48). We cannot wipe away our past sins, because anything we do that is good and right is nothing more than our plain duty. We are just not able to do that little extra which we feel might avail. We can expect nothing but condemnation.

But in this situation God takes action. The Bible is full of it. From earliest days He kept calling men to face the situation, to repent of their misdeeds, and to look to Him for the means of their salvation. In particular, He provided the system of sacrifices and He freely forgave those who came to Him in contrition. But always, in both Old and New Testaments, it is God who takes the initiative. So great is His love that He will not accept as final a situation in which those whom He has made are left to the penalty of their sins. Rather He steps in and makes the way of salvation.

THE MEANS OF SALVATION

It is instructive to study in the Old Testament the sacrificial system which God appointed, with a view to eliciting the principles on which it operated. For we find these principles still in operation in the New Testament, where Christ's work for us is illustrated from these same sacrifices.

When a man came to offer a sacrifice he had first of all to choose out an unblemished animal, for only a spotless victim can take away sin. Then he had to bring it to the place of slaughter and lay his hands on its head. In later times he also had to make confession of his sins as he performed the laying on of hands, but whether he did this or not, something of the sort is implied. There are many statements to the effect that sacrifice offered in the wrong spirit availed nothing. Sin must be faced and acknowledged if it is to be dealt with.

Then the worshipper (not the priest) had to slay the animal. In symbol he recognized that his sin was deserving of death. But God, in His mercy, allowed the animal to be substituted for the man, and thus the death

penalty fell on the sacrificial victim instead of on the worshipper. The priest proceeded to carry out certain prescribed actions with the blood, the purpose of which seems to be the presentation of the evidence that a death has taken place in accordance with the law of God. The sacrifice concluded with some or all of the animal being offered on the altar, and the remainder being disposed of in various ways, sometimes in a meal of fellowship shared by the worshippers.

The sacrificial ritual seems strange to us, and it is remote from our thinking. But it enshrines principles of permanent validity. Thus it underlines the seriousness of sin. No man who followed this system intelligently could fail to notice that in God's eyes sin matters, since He has gone to all the trouble of establishing such a way of expiating it. It stressed also that the way of atonement was through the offering of a pure victim. As the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews put it, 'almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission' (Hebrews 9: 22). The system was of divine origin. Man could not work out any way that pleased

him and approach Jehovah by it. Right dispositions were required in the worshipper, for it is insisted upon over and over again that there is no merit in sacrifices as such; they must be offered as the outpouring of a heart full of penitence for sin and love for God.

So through the centuries the sacrificial system operated and hammered home its lessons. Then in the fullness of time, God sent His Son who was to perform in reality all that the sacrifices foreshadowed.

THE CROSS

The Son of God lived out a perfect life in an outlying province of the ancient Roman Empire, and finally He died on the cross. This was a shattering blow to His followers at first, and they appear as a very dispirited and hopeless band on that first Good Friday. However, that was not the end. Good Friday was followed by Easter Day, and Easter Day by the ascension and the sending forth of the Holy Spirit. The rest of the New Testament tells of the living out of the implications of all this.

For our present purpose we notice that the cross is central in the teaching of the New Testament writers. For them it is God's answer to the problem of man's sin.

We have already noticed that it is the uniform view of the Bible that sin is a serious matter, and Paul sums this up succinctly when he says, 'The wages of sin is death' (Romans 6: 23). But that penalty for sin which we should have borne was borne instead, in the providence of God, by Another, even the Son of God Himself, for 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life' (John 3: 16). It is the great wonder of all time that God, the high and holy One, should take such action for the salvation of creatures like you and me. But the Bible is full of it. This is the gospel, the good news, the message that man is not left to his own devices, but that God has put forth His arm to bring us salvation. It was at terrible cost, but He did not shrink from it, for this was the way by which He would bring His children home to Himself.

The New Testament constantly dwells on

this great theme. It is plain enough in verses like the one we have quoted. It is emphasized also in the picturesque words used to describe what was done on the cross. At least, these words were picturesque and vivid to the men of the New Testament, though we have largely made them conventional and ecclesiastical. Take *redemption*, for example. For us it is a conventional term, more or less equivalent to the Christian salvation. But in the first century it denoted the payment of a price whereby someone who was in great extremity was released. It was used of the buying of prisoners of war out of captivity, or of the release of slaves, or in certain cases of the process whereby one who was under sentence of death had the sentence cancelled. Sinners are in the position of being slaves to sin (John 8: 34), they are under condemnation of death (Romans 6: 23). But Christ has paid the price and so they may go free.

Or the process can be likened to a *reconciliation*. In the Garden of Eden we see God and man in perfect fellowship. But as soon as sin entered, that harmony was des-

troysed and a state of enmity set in. Now in this life we know that a state of enmity can be done away only when the cause of the quarrel has been dealt with and taken out of the way. This Christ did when He died to take our sin upon Him, and thus to make the way back to God wide open, so that 'whosoever will may come'.

And so we might go on. *Propitiation* means the turning away of wrath, and the death of Christ is likened to a process of removing the wrath of God from us, Christ having suffered in our stead. *Justification* turns our thoughts to legal channels and to the process of acquittal. This happens to the saved, on the New Testament view, because the Saviour has satisfied all the law's demands. Over and over the men of the New Testament stressed the place of the death of Christ. They seized on any word that would help them convey some fraction of the vast meaning that they saw in Calvary. They wanted us to be in no doubt that that death really dealt with our sin and that neither now, nor at any time, need we fear. Calvary represents God in action against our sin, and the victory remains

with God.

There have been many theories as to the way the atonement wrought by Christ works, and this is not the place to go into them. Suffice to say that the very multiplication of theories is itself evidence of the importance of this fact. It is the central fact of the Christian faith. And the really important thing to get hold of is that it does deal with sin. Any theories which leave doubt as to this, or leave it to the sinner ultimately to accomplish his own salvation, are false to the New Testament. There it is clear that the victory has been won, the price has been paid, the sacrifice has been offered, the wrath has been averted, the penalty has been borne. Thus it is that the men of the New Testament could and did proclaim a full and a free salvation.

THE PLACE OF FAITH

This leads some to the happy conclusion that all men are automatically saved and there is no need for us to concern ourselves with the problem at all. Whether we want it or not Christ has died for us and thus

ultimately, in the next world if not in this, God's purpose must triumph and all men must be brought into life. This sounds attractive, and even plausible, but it is not the Bible picture. The best-known text in the whole Bible, one which we have already quoted, tells us that 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life' (John 3: 16). It is not all who are saved, but all who *believe*.

The Bible never pictures man as nothing more than an automaton to be moved about like a piece on a chess-board. God has made man a responsible being. His messengers appeal to man in many parts of the Bible to turn away from all that is evil and to return to the God who made him. Let us not delude ourselves as to the seriousness of what is involved. If we choose the self-centred life we reject God, and we are responsible for our decision. Peter could say, 'Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out' (Acts 3: 19), and his words apply to us as well as to the people of Jerusalem so long ago. We

ought to be very clear on the fact that we are responsible men and women and that we shall be called upon to give account of ourselves before God.

What we have been saying up till now means that the issues are serious. It means, also, that the way is wide open and 'whosoever will may come'. But come he must if he would be there. He need not expect that God will drag him in quite irrespective of his attitude to the whole process. God offers the gift of salvation; but if a man is to be saved the gift must be accepted. We must bear in mind that acceptance is a positive thing. If we simply do nothing we have not accepted the gift, and we need not be surprised if we do not have it.

The means whereby we accept it is faith. Paul says 'by grace are ye saved through faith' (Ephesians 2: 8). He adds to this words which underline the point we have been at pains to make clear, namely that salvation is the result of God's activity for us and not our own endeavours: 'and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.' It is God's free gift and it is ours through faith.

Faith in this sense does not mean a mere intellectual assent, as when I say that I believe the sun is some millions of miles from the earth. It does have its intellectual content; but it is primarily *trust*, an attitude which relies humbly on God. It is not a fleeting mood, for it represents a change in the whole attitude of the man. But it is not something which is so difficult that we may well despair. Any man may perform the act of faith.

Let us look at it this way. From his boyhood onwards the ordinary man is interested very largely in his own concerns. He wants to advance his own interests, and self is at first the centre of all that he does. As he grows he learns all sorts of things, one being that there are better ways of getting what he wants than yelling for it. In some of us that is about the most important change that takes place ever, for self remains at the centre of our lives. Of course, we don't put it quite like that. We dignify it and cover up the position to some extent. Thus I will tend to speak of ambition, not selfishness, of the importance of making a success of life, rather than greed. I will talk about

security for my dependants, about setting forward the interests of my community and so on, but it is always *my* success, *my* dependants, *my* community. I remain as the boss of my life.

The great change when a man becomes a Christian is that this state of affairs becomes altered. He realizes that God has made man to serve something other than self. He realizes that his sin has disrupted the divine pattern and that it has brought him into condemnation, that it is an utterly evil thing and he repents of it. He comes to see also that the death of Christ on Calvary's cross was not just an event in ancient history, but that it is relevant to the needs of today, that it is God's answer to the problem of his sin. And seeing it he abandons trust in his own activities, he turns away from all his selfishness, crude or refined as the case may be, and comes to put his trust in God.

This means a reorientation of the whole of his life. Formerly self was at the centre, now God is there. Formerly he trusted in what he himself did, now he trusts in what Christ has done for him. This great change can be spoken of in various ways. It is a

conversion, for he was going in the wrong direction, and now he is turned into the right way. It is a *being born again*, for he has died to the old way and he has entered what amounts to a new life. It can be spoken of as a *decision* for Christ, for the critical point of his life has been reached. It can be spoken of as a *new creation*, for his former life has been remade in decisive fashion. It can be referred to as *believing*, for he now has faith as his decisive principle. And there are other ways of looking at it.

'Salvation' is the name we give to the whole process. It includes all the partial aspects and preserves for us the great truth that the saved person has passed from death to life. And this salvation demands from us the response of faith. Obviously if we are intent on going on in our own way, if our selfish concerns are primary with us, then we cut ourselves off, by that very fact, from the salvation that Christ died to bring. But when we take His way instead of our own the miracle of grace takes place in our lives.

THE SCOPE OF SALVATION

Salvation has its negative side and it means that the saved man is no longer liable to condemnation. He has been saved from God's wrath with all that that means. But it is not only, nor is it mainly, negative. He is saved into the fellowship of God's people. This means that he now enjoys peace with God, the sense of sin forgiven, and the assurance that God is watching over him day by day, so that he never goes beyond the scope of God's love and His care.

He is saved into a new life of victory. Where before he was not able to master the evil in his life, now, in the strength of Christ, he is triumphant. He experiences the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; he knows the power of God, he grows in grace. An essential part of salvation is the living out of his faith day by day. The saved man is introduced into a new quality of life. He is sanctified, set apart for the service of God.

Then, too, he is brought into the fellowship of the Church. As John Wesley tells us, 'The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.' The saved are not left to live out

the life that is set before them as best they may, as a series of individuals. They become part of God's own people, they are members of His Church. They have the joy of fellowship with one another on the way of life.

Nor does salvation finish there. The Bible speaks much of the future bliss that awaits God's own. At the end of this age the Lord Jesus will return in His glory and that of the holy angels, and the kingdoms of this world will be done away to become the kingdom of our Lord. In that day the Christian need fear nothing, for he will still be in Christ and Christ will still be his Saviour. Nothing now, nor in all the ages to come, need be feared by those who have been saved by Christ Jesus the Lord.

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Price: Twopence

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