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*Chapter One*

# GOD'S KINDNESS IN SALVATION

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*But when the kindness of God our Savior . . . appeared,  
He saved us. (Titus 3:4–5)*

**T**hey didn't deserve to be saved, at least that's how Jonah had it worked out in his heart. The people of Nineveh were Assyrians—mortal enemies of Israel. In fact, God's people had suffered greatly at the hands of the Assyrians who were often cruel to their enemies (2 Kings 19:17). Furthermore, they were an idolatrous people, worshipping false gods. By all standards, the Assyrian Ninevites deserved God's fierce judgment.

However, the Lord sent word to the prophet Jonah, son of Amittai, that he was to, "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me" (Jonah 1:2). God intends to send Jonah to preach repentance to this wicked people that they might turn from their sinfulness and be saved (3:8). Jonah, on the other hand, wants nothing to do with the restoration of

Israel's enemy and flees as far away as he can travel. The Lord famously pursues Jonah, sending a storm and a great fish, until finally Jonah relents and vows to obey the Lord.

In Jonah 3, he preaches against the Ninevites' wickedness, and they turn away from their sins. We read, "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them" (v. 10). But this does not sit well with Jonah at all. He becomes angry with the Lord, not because Jonah was a malicious person, but because He could not fathom the fact that God is "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity" (4:2); Jonah cannot tolerate God's kindness toward his enemies.

In the wake of Jonah's unrighteous anger, the Lord disciplines the weary prophet through a series of small trials (4:4–8). In the end, the Lord concludes that even if Jonah were able to have compassion on a tiny plant that provided shade over his head, then God was righteous to have compassion on the people of Nineveh. The final verse of Jonah's prophecy records the compassion of God on "more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand" (v. 11)—most likely a reference to children. With a population of likely several hundred thousand people, the salvation of Nineveh demonstrates one of the greatest single acts of divine kindness recorded in Scripture.

## **GOD'S SAVING KINDNESS AND THE PROBLEM OF SIN**

Many people today would not think to regard the notion of *salvation* as being a particular kindness of God. Why is salvation even necessary? From what are we being saved? The reason why God's saving action is not highly valued is because of a misunderstanding of the need for salvation at all. As we briefly discussed in the introduction, the entrance of sin into the world creates a dire need for salvation. But let's look at this again.

The word *sin* is an archery term meaning "a failure to hit the mark"—to "sin" the target is to miss the bullseye. However, we understand it to be a religious word, reflecting moral or ethical failing. These days, though, we often treat sin as if it were some innocuous scuff in the cosmic continuum. We tend not to regard sin as a very serious thing. We misunderstand its significance and underestimate its power. In doing so, not only have we missed the target, but we fail to realize that it is God's standard (His bullseye) that we have missed. But what is God's standard?

In short, God's standard is perfection. When giving the people of Israel His commands, God told them "I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44; 20:26; cf. 1 Peter 1:16). When the Lord Jesus gave His Sermon on the Mount, He exhorted His followers once more, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). God demands perfection. Why does God demand perfection? Because He Himself is perfect in every way.

The Bible teaches us much about the character and attributes of God. He is all-powerful (Gen. 18:14; Matt. 19:26), ever-present (Ps. 139:7–10; Jer. 23:23–24), all-knowing (Ps. 139:3–4; Job 37:16), unchanging (Ps. 102:25–27; Mal. 3:6), transcendent (Eph. 4:6), sovereign (Rev. 1:8), truthful (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18), etc. However, in order to better understand why sin is such an affront to God, we need to apprehend the concept of God’s *holiness* (Ps. 99:9; Isa. 1:4; 6:3). R. C. Sproul notes,

*The Bible never says that God is love, love, love; or mercy, mercy, mercy; or wrath, wrath, wrath; or justice, justice, justice. It does say that He is holy, holy, holy, that the whole earth is full of His glory.*<sup>1</sup>

In Scripture, the threefold repetition “holy, holy, holy” establishes the gravity and prominence of the statement. The word *holy* means “to set apart,” but with regard to God, it describes the height and depth of His perfection. In all ways, He is pure, righteous, and good. By comparison, in our attempt to be righteous, we jump like grasshoppers merely inches off the ground; God’s holiness reaches the sun—93 million miles away.

In the garden of Eden, God gave Adam a command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and if he disobeyed, the punishment would be death (Gen. 2:17). But by chapter 3, Eve is deceived into believing the lie that eating from the forbidden tree would make them like God Himself (v. 5). Not only did they fail to trust and obey God;

their rebellion demonstrated a rejection of God's righteous standard.

Surely God cannot tolerate spiritual insurrection, can He? Can He simply look the other way, pretending that this was only a little gaffe? Of course not! His perfect character will not allow it. His righteousness will not permit it. His sense of justice cannot comprehend it. Why? Because if God were to fail to oppose and punish sin, He would be guilty of aiding and abetting sin, which would impugn His righteous character. But that's simply not possible. Even the apostle Paul exclaimed, "May it never be!" (Rom. 6:2).

Consider a man who drinks himself into oblivion and then gets behind the wheel of his truck. On his way home from the bar, he runs a red light and kills a seventeen-year-old girl on her way back from her summertime job. When the man is brought into court for his crime, would a good judge let him go scot-free? But the man is a nice guy who does volunteer work in his community. Why not let him off with a reprimand? We understand that a good judge would not allow the man's crime to go unpunished because it would be completely unjust. Beyond the fact that the college-bound teenage girl will never live to realize her dreams, the family, who will grieve her loss for the rest of their lives, would be dishonored and sinned against if their daughter's killer walked without punishment.

And so, just as a good judge would not let this driver off, a good and holy God can't excuse our sin. In fact, what we might perceive to be even a minor sin is actually an attack on

the righteous character of God. Therefore, the Bible teaches us that, apart from the saving work of Christ, God punishes even the smallest infraction with severe and righteous judgment—an eternity in hell. James 2:10 says, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.” The Bible teaches that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23), and further, that “all have sinned” (Rom. 3:23); none are truly righteous.

Once again, if the center bullseye is God’s perfect holiness, then to *sin* the target is to fail to achieve His righteous standard. It is, in essence, to “fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). But more than simply failing to hit a mark, the apostle John tells us that “sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4). Further, J. C. Ryle defines sin as “doing, saying, thinking, or imagining, anything that is not in perfect conformity with the mind and law of God.”<sup>2</sup> It is spiritual anarchy and rebellion. More than being simply a series of flaws, missteps, peccadillos, or blunders, sin is a serious affront to the goodness and holiness of God. It is an attack on the throne of the King.

Sin is terminal, spiritual cancer—it hardens us, defiles us, degrades us, poisons us, enslaves us, kills us. But the greater impact falls not to us, but to God. Sin enrages Him, insults Him, assaults Him, undermines Him, attacks Him. And He responds with fierce wrath, burning anger, severe judgment, and eternal condemnation. To God, sin is not a light thing; it is an immense evil that is destined to be judged and eradicated.

Does this seem too harsh? If so, it is because we tend to

think of justice from a human perspective. But in truth, all sin affects someone somehow. And if we can comprehend the concept of justice in a *human* court, how much higher the demand for absolute justice must exist in the court of heaven presided over by a perfectly righteous God? In short, God *must* punish any and all sin to the fullest measure. Otherwise, He would not be truly just or righteous. Yet, in God's own kindness, He provides a way of escape for those who have broken His law.

## **THE LOVINGKINDNESS OF GOD**

In the Old Testament, we see the salvation of God's people bound up in His own kindness toward them. The Hebrew word *hesed* (pronounced "khesed") is often translated as "lovingkindness" in many English translations. But it is also rendered in other ways, like "steadfast love" (ESV) or "covenant faithfulness," for example.<sup>3</sup> The key idea is that, because of God's own gracious character, He makes an unbreakable promise (covenant) to save His people. We see this expressed in Moses' song of deliverance for the Israelites: "In Your lovingkindness [*hesed*] You have led the people whom You have redeemed; in Your strength You have guided them to Your holy habitation" (Ex. 15:13, emphasis added). God does not save and redeem because it is owed to them. Rather, He saves because of His own goodness and lovingkindness.

This specific kindness of God in salvation is further demonstrated over and against the wickedness of humanity.

We read in Psalm 5,

*For You are not a God who takes pleasure in  
wickedness;  
No evil dwells with You.  
The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes;  
You hate all who do iniquity.  
You destroy those who speak falsehood;  
The LORD abhors the man of bloodshed and  
deceit.  
(vv. 4-6)*

However, David rejoices, “But as for me, *by Your abundant lovingkindness [hesed]* I will enter Your house, at Your holy temple I will bow in reverence for You” (v. 7, emphasis added). Again, David is not claiming that He is granted access to God because he is somehow better than other sinners, but because of God’s own “abundant lovingkindness” to him as an object of grace and mercy.

This stark contrast between human sinfulness and God’s saving kindness is beautifully expressed through the marriage of Hosea. The book of Hosea tells the story of a prophet named Hosea and his wife, Gomer. In the opening chapter, we learn that Gomer has violated her marriage covenant and committed adultery. However, because of his love for his wife, Hosea forgives her and takes her back. God uses the whole ordeal as a picture of Israel’s spiritual adultery against God and His own desire to restore her and receive her back to Himself. In redeeming her, the Lord declares, “I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me

in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness [*hesed*] and in compassion, and I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the LORD” (Hos. 2:19–20). The Lord saves Israel, not because she is faithful or virtuous—she has sinned grievously!—but because God desires to save her by His own lovingkindness and steadfast love.

After Lot had embedded himself within the wicked culture of the people of Sodom, the Lord sent two angels to rescue him and his family from destruction. God, in His own righteous judgment, had every right to destroy the entire city and all its inhabitants, but He made a way for Lot’s family to escape by the help of two angels. As he is fleeing the city, Lot cries out to the Lord’s angels, “Now behold, your servant has found favor in your sight, and you have magnified your lovingkindness, which you have shown me by saving my life” (Gen. 19:19).

Over and over again, the lovingkindness of the Lord is extolled as the reason why He provides salvation for His people. Not that sinners deserve to be saved, but God extends His own heart to them and sets His love upon them. This remarkable act is what motivates God’s people to say, “Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, my lips will praise You” (Ps. 63:3).

## **DYING FOR HIS ENEMIES**

In many ways, the stark contrast between humanity’s sinfulness and God’s kindness is even more pronounced in

the New Testament. While it does not include the specific language of “kindness,” Romans 5 illustrates the amazing love of God to extend salvation to those who are worthy of death. In explaining the gospel to his audience, the apostle Paul reasons that, in terms of self-sacrifice, “one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die” (Rom. 5:7). In other words, if our best friend was standing in oncoming traffic, it is likely that we would risk our own life to save them. Most people could conceive of dying for a righteous person.

However, Paul turns the whole thing on its head by saying, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (v. 8). And not just “sinners”—we read in verse 10 that we were even “enemies” of God! Now the illustration has changed. It’s no longer the idea of someone stepping out into oncoming traffic to save their best friend; instead, the person who is about to be killed is someone who betrayed, slandered, and hurt you severely—an *enemy*! How many people would give their own life to save their sworn enemy? Nobody would do that.

Yet God essentially does something like this. In our fallen condition, we were God’s own enemies. In our sinfulness, we despised God and purposed in our hearts to rebel against Him at every turn. We hated Him. This is why Ephesians 2:1–2 tells us that we “were dead in [our] trespasses and sins, in which [we] formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.”

This spiritual deadness rendered us as “children of wrath” (v. 3). Were God not to intervene on our behalf, we would be cast into the fires of judgment along with every other sinner who has ever existed.

“But God,” Paul wrote, “demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners”—even *enemies*—“Christ died for us.” Why would God do this? It is because of His goodness and lovingkindness toward us. But how is salvation accomplished and made possible to us?

I remember when I was a kid, there was a local store owner with a bad reputation in town. He was proud, opinionated, even belligerent at times. His store was always fully stocked with large amounts of beer, cigarettes, and pornography, and he liked it that way. When Christians in town stopped by to share the gospel, he cursed at them and kicked them out of his store. But then, one day, after hearing the gospel again, he believed.

Suddenly, his whole life began to change. He started reading his Bible and praying. He began attending church, to the amazement and joy of the people in town who had been witnessing to him for years. Before long, his conscience became pricked to the point where he no longer wanted to profit off of the things that damaged other people, so he sold his store. As his love and zeal for the Lord continued to increase, his desire to share the gospel became insatiable. Today, he travels the country full-time as an evangelist. Formerly an enemy of God, he is now His servant and friend.

## OUR SALVATION THROUGH CHRIST

Just like the Old Testament, the New Testament teaches that this wonderful salvation is extended to us as a *kindness*. Paul opens his letter to the Ephesians by talking about God’s gracious work of salvation toward His people. In saving His people, God “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself” (Eph. 1:4–5a). What is the basis of God’s saving work? We read that it is “according to the *kind intention* of His will” (Eph. 1:5; cf. Eph. 1:9, emphasis added). We are saved because God extends His own lovingkindness to us.

Furthermore, despite being “dead in [our] trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1), God “made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)” (v. 5). Why? It is “so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace *in kindness toward us* in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:7, emphasis added). Through His own act of salvation, God puts His loving character on display, and we are presented as trophies of His divine grace.

Similarly, in Paul’s letter to Titus, we see another expression of God’s kindness in salvation. We read, “But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us . . .” (Titus 3:4–5a). In this verse, we essentially see Jesus Christ as God’s kindness personified. One could almost picture God’s own *love* and *kindness* wrapped in the person of Jesus who comes and redeems us.<sup>4</sup> What a glorious picture!

The Bible teaches that the Lord Jesus Christ, who is Himself God in human flesh (John 1:1–3, 14), came to earth and lived in perfect obedience to every law of God, thus perfectly fulfilling the divine standard. Jesus lived sinlessly (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22), and thereby gave Himself up to be killed as an atoning sacrifice—a *propitiation*—for sin (1 John 2:2). Being the only acceptable sacrifice for sin, Jesus Christ died in the place of sinners as a *substitute* (1 Peter 2:24), paying a ransom to the Father; *redeeming* us from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13).

Through the sacrificial death of Jesus, we can have our sins *forgiven* by God (Col. 2:13), and we are *justified*—declared righteous and pardoned by God, even though we're guilty and unrighteous (Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:16). It is the work of Jesus Christ on the cross that makes the forgiveness of sin possible for us. And not only forgiveness, but *reconciliation* to God—the restoration of relationship. More than this, God actually *adopts* us as His own (Rom. 8:12–17; Gal. 4:4–7). Now, we who were formerly His enemies have now become God's children.

It is only by the death of Christ that we will find any hope of forgiveness for sin. All other attempts to “get right with God” are doomed to fail. Why? Because, by nature, we are sinful creatures, and when we try to accomplish anything of redeeming value, God turns up His nose and is repulsed by the gesture (Isa. 64:6–7). Any attempt we make to justify ourselves before Him is insulting and futile. Only the perfect work of Jesus Christ on our behalf is pleasing to the Father.

## THE KINDNESS OF GOD

All in all, we see that God's offer of salvation to sinners is a glorious demonstration of His goodness and kindness. When we truly comprehend this truth, we can exclaim with the psalmist: "But I have trusted in Your lovingkindness; my heart shall rejoice in Your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because He has dealt bountifully with me" (Ps. 13:5–6).