

On Obstacles and Objections

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For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ... 1 Corinthians 15:3-4

It is nothing short of a miracle that the Bible has come to us through the Spirit-inspired writings of approximately 40 authors who wrote over a period of approximately 1,500 years, and yet all of it points to one central and essential message known as the *gospel* or the *good news* of God's grace in Jesus Christ. This message is not a secondary message, nor is it a message among messages. It is God's primary message to us, and it goes out into the world. It is a message of God's love, forgiveness, salvation, eternal life. It is a message of supreme importance, but falls most often on unhearing ears and unseeing eyes so that the words of Christ are proved true: "For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." (Matthew 7:14)

Rejection of the gospel message is a spiritual perception problem. It is a failure to perceive the truth regarding God's love and grace in Jesus Christ. This usually happens in a passive way, not willfully or mindfully. Many are already caught in errant belief systems, which are incompatible with the gospel. Still others, most others, simply live out their lives, accepting that they have an unknown but finite lifespan, and try to make the best of it. They don't spend much time asking big questions like, "Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?" For them, all you can really be sure of is what's right in

front of you. They consider themselves lucky if they are doing better than most, and they live for what this world has to offer, until it's over. Christians, on the other hand, share an identity and a destiny that is in Christ. Our faith is in a risen and living Savior who gave himself for us. We belong to him. We are his people. We exist for his service and his glory, and we share a sure hope and portion in his eternal kingdom.

For those who are given the privilege of hearing the gospel proclaimed, rejection for them takes on a number of common forms. For some, the message is dismissed because it seems too good to be true. The reasoning goes something like this: "How can something so precious as eternal life be free for the taking through faith in Jesus? Every good thing I have, I have worked hard for. Tell me what I have to do or what it will cost me and I'm listening, but tell me it's free and I'm suspicious. You get what you pay for. Nothing of great worth is free." While salvation is free to the believer, Christians are quick to point out that forgiveness of sin and eternal life are not free, but were purchased at great cost to God himself in the life and blood of the Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (see 1 Peter 1:18-19, Romans 8:32, 1 Corinthians 6:20, Revelation 5:9)

Others resist the gospel because the idea of human sacrifice for sin is primitive and offensive to their modern sensibilities. They might say something like, "I know I'm not perfect, but I'm better than most, and I'm certainly not bad enough that God has to die, really?" However, Christians can see the wisdom and beauty of the incarnation—that God took on flesh in Christ. Only Jesus was able to represent mankind before God and mediate between them, bringing peace and reconciliation. He did this by suffering and making payment or atonement for our sins at the Cross. How else could we understand the great offense of our sins to a holy God? How else could we understand how great is God's love that he should bear the burden and cost of our sins? (see 1 Timothy 2:5-6, Hebrews 2:17, Romans 5:8) In the end, the only person God had to

satisfy with respect to our sins was himself, and we dare not tell him what he should be satisfied with!

Some refuse the gift because they find fault with the gospel's adherents—sometimes angrily, bitterly, resentfully. They see in Christians the very height of arrogance, that we should consider ourselves sole possessors of the truth, when we are clearly no better than they are. Christians agree that we are no better. The only meaningful difference is that the believer has Christ, and that through no merit of his or her own. Christians understand that God has set them apart by his grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. There is nothing we can do to earn, retain or add to God's favor, which has been freely given in Jesus. Far from arrogance, this is the humblest of all realizations. Who am I Lord that you should have even the slightest regard for me, let alone bring me into the sphere of your blessings and promises in Christ?

Jesus spoke of a group of people who have had the seeds of the gospel sown in their hearts, but "the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown." (Matthew 13:19) How alarming to learn that we have an enemy, the devil or Satan, who works to keep unbelievers blinded to the truth! Yet Scripture teaches plainly that there exists an unseen wrestling over the hearts and minds of human beings, and their eternal destinies. (see 2 Corinthians 4:4) Jesus spoke of another group who hear the gospel and immediately receive it with joy only to fall away when hardship or persecution arises because of the message. (see Matthew 13:20-21) He also spoke of those who hear the word, but they are distracted by worldly concerns and riches, and prove fruitless. (see Matthew 13:22). These just have other priorities in life.

Some keep putting off their decision to trust in Christ. They think, "Maybe when I've studied more and understand more, then I'll be ready," but the gospel is the deepest well. The most devoted disciples of Christ will never fully plumb its depths. It

must be so when the finite considers the infinite. More importantly, salvation is by grace through faith in Christ, and not a result of works. (see Ephesians 2:8-9) Salvation is not an academic achievement. Jesus demands, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 19:14)

Others delay for fear of a better offer: "Maybe there's something else out there, something I'm missing, something I could give my life to, something that's better." Better than what? To know the love and acceptance of the one who created you? To know his good purpose for your life? To have a hope that extends beyond the grave? Better than that? If you still haven't found that better something you are looking for, at least consider that it doesn't exist. The message of God's love in Jesus Christ presents itself as nothing less than the ultimate truth of our existence. While God's terms and conditions are absolute and non-negotiable, they are so favorable towards human beings!

Still there are some who question, "Why?" Why would God create, only to allow his creation to fall into sin, brokenness, curse, death, and then redeem at such a great cost to himself? Why go through all the "trouble?" The Bible makes clear God's desire and purpose to reveal himself, to make himself known. If God stopped short of sending the Savior, then all would die in their sins and face God's judgment and righteous wrath, and no one would be able to accuse him of any wrongdoing. We would simply be getting what we deserve. However, something would be terribly missing regarding what God wants to make known about himself—namely his love, mercy and grace. When God wanted to reveal himself in the fullness of who he is, he sent his one and only Son. Just as Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9, see also Colossians 1:15) Jesus even defines our salvation in terms of

knowing God: “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (John 17:3)

Some may protest that it is unfair that we are born without choice into a fallen condition, saddled with a sinful nature, and then held responsible for it. However, if God was primarily concerned about fairness, he would not have ordained that the sinless Lord Christ would stand in the place of guilt and shame for sinners. Indeed, we are all caught up in something much bigger than ourselves. It is God who has set the universe and his redemptive plan in motion, and he will see these to his predetermined conclusion. We trust him in this, even as we play our small but significant roles, and we own our sin and our faith, just as Scripture teaches. (see Romans 3:23, 1 John 1:8, Mark 1:15, Acts 16:31, John 20:31)

Finally, some will sincerely ask, “How can you be so sure of what you cannot see?” Christ made it clear that most of his followers in history would not have the advantage of seeing him with their own eyes, but his full expectation was that they would believe in him, and he called them “blessed.” (John 20:29, see also 1 Peter 1:8-9) Christ taught that in order to see the kingdom of God, one “must be born again,” or “born of the Spirit.” (John 3:3-8, see also 1 Peter 1:3, Titus 3:5) This is not optional. The Spirit must make us “come alive” to the gospel and so respond in faith. The sinful nature in human beings is so thoroughly corrupting, that left to ourselves, we would never seek God. (see Romans 3:10-12) What then is conversion to faith in Christ if not a spiritual resurrection? We are brought from spiritual death to life, from darkness to light, we were lost but found, we were blind but now we see. (see Colossians 2:13, Ephesians 2:4-5) We should never think that we came to faith in Christ because we were so spiritually astute or possessed some inherent good. Again, salvation is not a human achievement. It is the work of God, who provides for our redemption at the Cross of

Christ and brings us to faith in the Savior, sustaining and strengthening that same faith in the Christian's life. (see 1 Peter 1:5, 1 Corinthians 1:8) Thus, our salvation is really something that happens to us or for us, just as the biblical word *salvation* implies. If you were not aware of the Spirit's action in your conversion to faith in Christ, but you are among those who make the good declaration of faith in him, no worries. You were given this new spiritual birth when you were brought to faith in Jesus. If you find yourself convicted of your sin and in need of Christ, consider that the Spirit of Christ is at work, and may the Lord God pursue you with the same grace that found even me.

Here then are principal truths according to Scripture, and presented in succinct form. God is the *creator* of all things. (see Genesis 1:1) God is *spirit*. (see John 4:24) Existentially speaking, this means that all we can see and handle in the physical universe has come from God who is unseen. (see Hebrews 11:3) The Bible also teaches that in his essential nature, God is *triune*, which is to say that God exists as a community of three distinct personalities, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who are so united in being and purpose that they are rightly considered as one God. (see Mark 12:29, John 1:31-34, 2 Corinthians 13:14, Ephesians 1:17) Admittedly, the *triunity* or *trinity* is difficult for us to conceptualize, but difficult to understand has never meant untrue. Among world religions and philosophies, you predictably find views of no god, one god, and a multiplicity of gods, but never a "three-in-one" or triune God. God's triune nature is a truth that can only be received by God's revelation of himself in his written Word, the Bible.

Scripture teaches that the Father sent the Son into the world in order to save the world through him, and this God did out of love for the world. (see John 3:16-17, Mark 10:45) The second person of the triune God, the eternal Son, entered our reality by the power of the Holy Spirit and the miracle of the virgin birth, and was named Jesus, still fully God, but now fully human as well, yet without sin. (see Luke 1:30-35, Matthew 1:20-21, Hebrews 4:15) In a singular cosmic breach, Jesus came to us, he came for us, on a rescue mission to save us. During his earthly ministry, Jesus taught the people with the wisdom and authority of God, and performed many miracles. These things signified that he was the *Christ* or *Messiah*, which means he was the *anointed one* of God, (see Mark 8:29, John 11:27) to whom all the Law and Prophets were pointing. (see John 5:39-40)

In order to receive the gospel for the good news that it is, it is prerequisite that we understand the bad news about ourselves. The Bible makes plain that all are sinners, that we are accountable to God for it, and that after death all will face judgment. (see Romans 3:23, 1 John 1:8, Hebrews 4:13, Hebrews 9:27, Romans 2:16) Our sinful condition makes us enemies of God and objects of his righteous wrath. (see Romans 5:10, Ephesians 2:3, Romans 2:8) Jesus spoke often of hell, calling it “the unquenchable fire,” (Mark 9:43) “the outer darkness” and a place “where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 8:12) Hell is a real place, where God has withdrawn his presence, a place of regret and torment. We do well to fear God who “has authority to cast into hell.” (Luke 12:5, see also John 3:18)

The Christ’s great saving or redemptive act was to offer himself up at the Cross as a sacrifice for sins, acceptable to God. (see John 10:17-18, 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, Philippians 2:6-8) At the Cross, our sins were placed on Jesus and he suffered the separation, condemnation and wrath that should have been ours to bear. It is a blessed

substitution, the righteous for the unrighteous. (see 2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 Peter 3:18)

While the immediate human instruments of Christ's death were the Jewish and Roman leaders of the day, the Bible is clear that the crucifixion of Christ happened just as God determined it would. (see Acts 4:27-28) And just as nothing could keep the Cross from happening, nothing could keep Jesus from being raised the third day, (see Matthew 28:5-6) vindicated and victorious over death, then ascended to heaven, (see Luke 24:51) from where he promises to return. (see John 14:3, Philippians 3:20)

This then is the good news: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) The reason Christians make so much of Jesus Christ is because Jesus is the gift, God's provision for us, the greatest gift that has ever been given, and the greatest gift that can ever be received. There's nothing you can do to earn this. It is a gift, and we receive the gift by trusting in the gift. (see Romans 3:23-25) We trust in Jesus and what he has accomplished for us at the Cross. This is what it means to believe in Jesus, or to put one's faith in Jesus. If you want the gift, there is no magical prayer to be said, but you might find your expression in something like this:

Lord Jesus, I agree that I am a sinner, and that my sin separates me from God. As best I know how, I am trusting in you and what you did at the Cross to make all the difference for me.

Help me to glorify you with my life. I belong to you now. Amen.