

SUCH A GREAT SALVATION

PART 1



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A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Such a Great Salvation: Part 1

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *Such a Great Salvation: Part 1*

The first readers of the book of Hebrews were in danger of neglecting their great salvation. For various reasons, they were lapsing into familiar and comfortable ways. And the writer warned them that it would be a terrible thing if they suddenly discovered themselves to be not saved at all.

But the writer of Hebrews knew better, and he wanted to encourage his readers to shake off their fears and stir up their souls to seek the great salvation of the Lord with greater vigor and faithfulness. His challenge to them speaks to our generation as well, when many who believe in Jesus Christ appear to have settled into an experience of salvation that might be “good enough” for them, but does not begin to approach the full and abundant life Jesus has gained for us.

In this three-part series we will examine just how great our salvation is, and try to stir up an unquenchable desire for more of the fullness of life that is ours in Jesus Christ. We begin in Part 1 by considering the present state of salvation among many believers, and pointing to a farther, brighter horizon of faith than many of us have ever known.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We’re happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you’ll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 It's *Grreaaaaat!*

For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation...? Hebrews 2.2, 3

Who says?

These days, apart from diagnoses by doctors or auto mechanics, we tend to assess things subjectively. That is, we reserve the right to decide what is to be loved, and how much; what is worthwhile, and how worthy; and what is great and what is merely “Meh.”

For example, some friends recently raved about a new film they'd just seen, using the word “great” again and again. The next day, I read a review of the film which panned it utterly.

Great, not so great.

Or consider foods: Some think that eggplant Parmesan is just great, while others, with perhaps more sensitive palates, politely decline. Some insist that a certain breakfast cereal is “*Grreaaaaat!*” Others consider that it's merely “OK” or perhaps even not good for you.

And so it goes. TV programs, video games, novels, jobs, hair styles, fashion, sports teams, diversions of all kinds, seasons of the year: some think certain things are great, while others reserve that descriptor for things their friends regard as trivial, just OK, or simply not-for-them.

Most Christians would say that the salvation they have in Jesus Christ is *great*. They're glad to have it. It gives them hope, assurance, peace, and an overall sense of wellbeing. They wouldn't trade it for the religion of the most fanatically jubilant pagan.

But, in our age of every-man-for-himself-opinions-and-values, what seems *great* to Christians is not great at all to many of their co-workers, neighbors, or fellow students. And, as we have learned that we are not likely to tempt the stubborn to try eggplant Parmesan, we've concluded that it's no use attempting to convince the unbelievers in our life that our salvation is really great. They don't think so, and well, they're entitled to their opinion.

In other words, salvation is great for us, because we have it and delight in it. It makes us feel safe and happy and hopeful, especially when we're having a bowl of it with our Christian friends – *Grreaaaaat!*

But when the writer of Hebrews mentions our “great salvation,” this is not what he intends, at least, not in the first instance.

So very great indeed!

The Greek word which the NKJV translates “so great” (τηλικούτος) does not indicate a subjective and relative condition. It refers to the size or degree or magnitude of something *outside* the experience of the perceiver. An earthquake is *great*, whether we experience it or not (Rev. 16.18). A ship is *great* in size compared to the small rudder that directs its course (Jms. 3.4). “So great” means something more like “so very great, indeed, and that on its own terms,” quite apart from our opinion or experience.

The Grand Canyon is truly *grand* whether or not you've ever experienced it.

The great wall of China is *very great, indeed*, and it doesn't matter if it doesn't *feel* all that great to you.

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The great tsunami of a few years back was one of the greatest ever recorded, even though it probably didn't affect you at all.

And our salvation is *great* – so great that, as the Psalmist explained, “My mouth shall tell of Your righteousness and Your salvation all the day, for *I do not know their limits* (Ps. 71.15). So deep, so vast, so profound, so all-encompassing, so all-transforming and all-renewing, so powerful, so glorious and joyous and fruitful and inspiring and world-uprighting is our great salvation, that we can never get to the bottom of its grandeur, comprehend the scope of its greatness, or exhaust the vastness of its power.

Our salvation is greater than we know. Or ever will know. It is certainly greater than those episodic fits of bliss we experience in worship, or that sense of “I'm OK” we derive from a few minutes in prayer. It is greater than the feel-good experience of Jesus proffered in so many churches, hyped in so much contemporary praise music, and testified to by countless breathless Christians, who Monday through Saturday don't give much thought to the call to holiness and are quite content to allow their neighbors to have their own opinion, however erroneous, of the faith of Jesus Christ.

A condition and a consequence

Ours is a *great* salvation, and as great as it has been for you or to you, as great as has been your experience of being in Jesus Christ, I think it's not saying too much to insist that you ain't seen nothin' yet.

Or at least, not all that much.

Most Christians today have merely *tasted* of the Lord and His goodness, and have concluded that He's pretty *great*. Or that He's great enough for them. For now. And perhaps for the duration.

The Word of God sets forth a diagnosis for this condition of being too-easily satisfied with the state of our salvation; this practice of feeling good about Jesus on Sundays but stifling our exuberance the rest of the time; this “good-enough-for-me-for-now” approach to Christian faith.

The diagnosis is *neglect*.

And the consequence of neglecting our great salvation provokes an ominous question: “How shall we escape?”

For reflection

1. How would you explain to an unbelieving friend what it means to be “saved”?
2. Do you consider your salvation to be “great”? Why or why not?
3. What does it look like when someone is *neglecting* their *great salvation*? Should this be a cause for concern?

Next steps – Preparation: Reflect on your answers to the questions above. Use your answers to lead you into a time of silent meditation and prayer, waiting on the Lord to convict, affirm, and direct you as He will. Share with a Christian friend that you are beginning a study of our great salvation, and invite your friend to join you.

2 How Shall We Escape?

*...but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love. Psalm 147:11
For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation...? Hebrews 2:2, 3*

No spiritual vacuum

A consistent teaching of Scripture is that the creation is pervaded by spiritual presences – including human beings – and that these spiritual presences are divided into two opposing camps. One camp seeks to exalt, exemplify, and extol the God of heaven and earth, unto righteousness, peace, and joy in all things; while the other camp labors tirelessly to wrest His dominion from Him and advance a kingdom of darkness, confusion, fear, corruption, and death.

We see this conflict of spiritual powers as early as Genesis 3. It pervades the Old Testament in the form of Israel's struggle to remain loyal to the God Who delivered them from bondage, and to resist the allure and powers of false deities and the people who serve them. In the New Testament, the struggle for spiritual supremacy shows up early and often, beginning with the slaughter of the innocents in Matthew 2, the temptation of our Lord Jesus in the wilderness, His many exorcisms of and warnings against dark spiritual powers, and His ultimate triumph over them on the cross and out of the tomb.

The apostles continue to remind us of this ongoing conflict of spiritual powers, and they urge us to arm ourselves for the conflict, to recognize that it flares up in what we might regard as unlikely places and ways, and to be always ready to recognize, resist, and rout dark spiritual powers wherever they seek to intrude. The apostles warn us that this conflict threatens to rob us of the gift of time which God bestows upon us every moment, turning His precious gift to evil purposes *in our own hands* (Eph. 5:15-17).

This conflict of spiritual powers is continuous and all-pervasive. No places or persons exist which are not of interest to each side in the conflict. Jesus Christ is Lord of all and is working to advance His rule of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit into every nook and niche of creation. He declares of every place, person, and thing, "Mine!" in those riveting words of Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper. The would-be usurper of His place, the enemy of our souls, is equally devoted to holding on to and reclaiming as much of everything as he can for his dark, wicked, corrupting, and deadly rule.

Those, therefore, who have come to possess the salvation of the Lord must not fail to work continuously for its full realization (Phil. 2:12). Failure to do so, at every moment and for every aspect of our lives, is to neglect our salvation; and where such neglect is present, there being no spiritual vacuum in the cosmos, neglectful believers will not escape the power of evil to invade and usurp and undermine their time and purpose, and turn their confession of faith into a sham.

Things that accompany salvation?

This had become the situation with those readers to whom the author of the book of Hebrews addressed his epistle. Under pressure from their unbelieving neighbors, they had left off the whole-hearted pursuit of their salvation, and were clinging only to its most foundational teachings. They showed no interest in increasing in knowledge and understanding of their salvation, were leaving off the good works which had characterized them in the beginning, and were seeking accommodation with the unbelieving convictions and false religion of the people among whom they lived, moved, and had their being.

They were *neglecting* their salvation. They had professed faith in Jesus and been baptized. They had united with a body of believers like themselves, where they found friendship, comfort, and assurance against the

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mounting threats of unbelievers. They had left off growing in the Lord, so much so, that none of them was effective in teaching or making disciples of others, and together they returned to the same basic Christian teachings again and again, pinning their hopes on milk and declining to pursue the meat of doctrine and Christian life.

In their everyday lives, meanwhile, like spiritual Brer Rabbits, they “lay low.” They did not talk about their faith with their neighbors or co-workers. They were not actively pursuing the holiness, without which, no one will see the Lord. They were neglecting the study of God’s Word and the disciplines of prayer and sanctification and witness that issue from such study. And they were lapsing back into unbelieving ways, taking up practices of their former false faith, for the sake of getting along with the people around them.

The “things that accompany salvation” (Heb. 6.9) were quickly evaporating, though the writer of Hebrews earnestly sought to shore them up and renew his readers in them, thus calling into doubt their claim of being saved at all.

The many faces of neglect

The first readers of the book of Hebrews were neglecting their salvation. They had little interest in growing in the Word of God. They had become silent about their witness for the Lord, because they did not wish to upset their acquaintances any more than they already were. The good works they had shown early on in their walk with the Lord had become scarce. Their worship was being compromised with forms and practices unbefitting the Lord Jesus Christ and inconsistent with His salvation. And they had become content with the meagerest profession of faith and doctrinal belief, so that none of them was able to teach anyone else the ways of the Lord.

Into this black hole of neglect, spiritual forces of wickedness had poured, set up shop, and were about the business of robbing the faithful of their true experience of Jesus. If the neglect of salvation they were showing continued, their profession of faith would not save them. They would fall from a faith they never truly embraced, and renewing them in the true faith of Jesus Christ would be virtually impossible.

If we neglect our great salvation, we will not escape the powers of darkness and their ability to deceive, divert, distract, and destroy us. Unless we are continually attending to and growing in our great salvation, we will fall into the black hole of neglect, where spiritual forces of wickedness in high places delight to lead us in the ways of compromise, complacency, corruption, convenience, comfort, confusion, and death.

Make no mistake: It is a serious, serious miscalculation ever to consider your salvation to be just “good enough” and to neglect working out the entire greatness of your salvation in fear and trembling before the Lord.

For reflection

1. What would be the opposite of *neglecting* our great salvation?
2. How can we know when we’re beginning to give over our time, attention, activities, and strength to spiritual forces of wickedness (Eph. 5.15-17)?
3. All our days and time are spent under the watchful of Jesus, Who declares of it all, “Mine!” How confident are you that this is true of every area and moment of your life?

Next steps – Preparation: Download our tool, The Time of Your Life ([click here](#)) and take a serious look at how the time of your days is spent. Work through this exercise, then spend a season of prayer, sharing with the Lord what you have learned.

3 Greater than at Present

For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels. But one testified in a certain place, saying:
“What is man that You are mindful of him,
Or the son of man that You take care of him?
You have made him a little lower than the angels;
You have crowned him with glory and honor,
And set him over the works of Your hands.
You have put all things in subjection under his feet.”

For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. Hebrews 2.5-9

The world to come

The writer of Hebrews was concerned that his readers were beginning to *neglect* their great salvation. They were not pressing on to grow in their understanding of the faith. They had allowed the fear of man to compromise their witness, and they were reverting to former ways of seeking the Lord – ways which, though embracing them placated hostile neighbors, were of no benefit to followers of Jesus Christ.

These readers had become content with the state of their salvation, which they must have regarded as great, at least, great enough. They were *looking back* to where they had been and not attending actively to becoming mature servants and disciple-makers. They believed themselves to be saved, and the writer of Hebrews believed as much as well (Heb. 6.9), though he was concerned that the evidence of true faith (Heb. 11.1) was in rather short supply and diminishing.

The first readers of the book of Hebrews were missing the *greatness* of the Lord’s salvation, and the writer was urgent to turn them from neglecting the gift and calling of the Lord to seeking Him earnestly, lest the Lord Himself step in to discipline and correct them (Heb. 12.3-11), which they would not wish to endure.

The writer’s main point is not so much to *chide* his readers as to *encourage* them to see the greatness of their salvation by looking to and considering Jesus, so that they would press on, whatever the cost, in laying firmer hold on that great blessing.

In our text he says that the *great salvation* he was writing about can also be thought of as *the world to come*. Put another way, our salvation is as big as the world around us, the world that Jesus has redeemed, and that He is reconciling to God. God so loved the *world* that He gave Jesus for its salvation (Jn. 3.16). The *world that is to come* is the world of God’s Kingdom, in which an economy of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit is flowing and overflowing, like a river of living water (Jn. 7.37-39), to refresh, revive, and renew *the entire world*.

That great salvation goes forward within the part of the world assigned to each believer, where God has sent them in the Name of Jesus to rule and transform all things for His glory.

Appointed to rule

This is no new mandate. From the beginning of creation, God intended His people to exercise the kind of rule over the entire world that would see the goodness of God increasing throughout (Gen. 1.26-31; 2.15). The entry of sin through the disobedience of Adam and Eve complicated, but did not set aside, that mandate. David pondered the meaning of this appointment in Psalm 8, which the writer of Hebrews quotes in our text to remind his readers that their salvation is as great as the entire world.

God has appointed His people to exercise dominion over and judge the world as a nation of priests and kings (1 Cor. 6.1-3.; 1 Pet. 2.9; cf. Ps. 110). That work of ruling the world begins the moment we enter “the

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regeneration” that comes by the Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ (Matt. 19.28; Jn. 3.3-16). All believers are charged with the task of seeking the Kingdom of God for a world to come of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. As they do, their lives and efforts reify the rule of King Jesus toward the world which is to come.

This is what it means to be saved. Our great salvation is as large as the world, all its creatures and things, cultures and peoples, interests, activities, diversions, and concerns. What Jesus has accomplished on the cross in cancelling the power of the devil and removing our sins, and what He *is* accomplishing at the right hand of God in making all things new, comes to expression in and through the lives of those who know the great salvation of the Lord.

And nowhere else.

Look to Jesus

We can agree with the writer of Hebrews, that we do not presently see that world-to-come-great-salvation to the extent God promises and intends. Indeed, if anything, it seems the tares are taking over the Lord’s field, choking out the wheat and threatening to ruin the world rather than to renew it.

And to the extent this is true, it is only because we as believers have not put down roots into the *great salvation* of the Lord. We have become satisfied and complacent with the current state of our faith. We are not looking to Jesus, Whom to see is to know power, beauty, goodness, compassion, love, strength, and renewing and transforming grace sufficient to bring the benefits of salvation to everyone and everything in the world.

We do not at present see our great salvation and the world to come unfolding as God intends. But our salvation is greater than at present, and we see Jesus. Or we should be looking to Jesus, immersing ourselves in Jesus, resting in Jesus, and walking on the waves of this tumultuous world with our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus, His command to “Follow Me” resonating continuously in our ears.

Unless we see Jesus as He is, we will never know how great is the salvation He has gained, and we will be of little use in seeking and realizing the promised world which is to come.

For reflection

1. In what sense or senses does our great salvation encompass the whole world?
2. How could you tell when someone was beginning to *neglect* his salvation? What can believers do to help one another keep from doing this?
3. Have you identified your Personal Mission Field? If not, watch this brief video ([click here](#)), download the worksheet, and get started.

Next steps – Preparation: Review your Personal Mission Field. What should you be doing to seek and advance your great salvation in that sphere of influence? Talk with a Christian friend about this question.

4 Greater than Elementary Things

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection... Hebrews 5.12-6.1

Why elementary school?

Why do we send children to elementary school? Is it because we want them to spend the rest of their lives there? Or do we have some higher aspirations?

Of course we do. We want those kids to get the basics of information and skills, so they can progress through the rest of the educational system, and end up being productive citizens and contributors to society and culture.

What would we think of parents who were content to let their children languish in elementary school year after year? The very thought of it seems absurd. At least, where the education of our children is concerned.

But for many Christians, hanging around in elementary school has become the normal Christian life. The writer of Hebrews laid into his readers precisely because, having embraced the elementary things of Christian faith and life, they weren't willing to go any further. For as long as they had been believers, they should have been feasting on solid food; but they were still sipping milk. They should have been actively involved in teaching others about the great salvation of the Lord; however, they were keeping a low profile as witnesses and disciple-makers, and were in need of being taught even the basics of the faith all over again.

To put it briefly, out of fear of how their neighbors might react to a more serious commitment to Christ on their part, the believers to whom the book of Hebrews was addressed had settled into elementary school, with no desire to graduate or grow, and they were neglecting their great salvation.

They needed to move on.

Our proper place

Every Christian is called to the task of making disciples. We are to love and encourage our fellow believers, sharing our own experiences of Christ freely and seeking to edify every other believer into greater heights of Christlikeness. That is, we "ought to be teachers," as Jesus explained (Matt. 28.18-20).

Further, we must prepare ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ and His Word so that we can teach those who are not yet in Christ, but who see something in us for which they would like a reasonable explanation (1 Pet. 3.15). We are to be disciple-makers and witnesses, and we will not fulfill this calling as long as we continue in the elementary school of faith.

The basic doctrines of Christian faith – repentance, faith, baptism, the coming resurrection and judgment, and so forth – are meant only to provide a foundation for our faith. They are not the sum and substance of the faith, but merely the "elementary principles" of Christ and His great salvation.

Grasping these remarkable and amazing truths should spur us on to greater growth and to an insatiable hunger for the truth that sets us free and fits us for following Jesus in every area of life (Jn. 8.32; 2 Tim. 3.15-17). Initial repentance and faith in Jesus is a way of life for mature believers, not a milestone which, having

passed, they can check off their spiritual to-do list. Baptism introduces us into the community of Christ, as members of His Body, in which we are to exercise all manner of spiritual gifts to build up one another and our congregation in Jesus Christ and His Kingdom. Baptism should be seen as launching us into a life of learning, growing, and ministering, and not just one more item on a basic list of “done that.” The laying on the hands indicates the receiving of the gift of the Holy Spirit and a calling to a specific sphere and ministry – your part of the world that Jesus is reconciling to God – where we are to seek the Kingdom of Jesus and do all things for the glory of God. And the coming resurrection and judgment should be for us a powerful impetus to grow in the Lord, becoming more like Jesus in life, work, witness, and worship.

This is our proper place in the life of faith, not hanging around the kindergarten, waiting for mommy or daddy to come and take us home in joy.

No wonder we have but little concept of how great our salvation is. We have not dared to invest ourselves in those higher grades of education, training, skills, and wisdom which prepare us for citizenship in the Kingdom of our God and King.

On to perfection

The writer of Hebrews urged his readers to move on from these elementary principles. And not just a little: “let us go on to perfection.”

Perfection is only found in Jesus Christ, which is why, in the book of Hebrews, so much emphasis is placed on seeing and considering Jesus. We are to learn Jesus (Eph. 4.17-24), put on Jesus (Rom. 13.14), be transformed into Jesus (2 Cor. 3.12-18), think with the mind of Jesus (1 Cor. 2.16), and to consider Him, both as our faithful High Priest and Ruler of His house (Heb. 3.1-3), and as the Example of heroic, self-denying, joyful obedience to God (Heb. 12.1, 2). We do this so that we can *run the full course of our lives*, every course in every grade and all the knowledge and skills with which that solid food will fit us for our race, and to realize that we must never be satisfied, never think we have arrived, never believe we have exhausted the richness and power of the life of faith. And we must never, never, ever be content merely to lounge around the Christian kindergarten with other complacent believers, telling one another that this is as good as it gets, right?

You will never know how great our salvation is until you determine to learn Jesus, grow in Jesus, be more like Jesus, and *live for Jesus* every day in every aspect of your life, even if it costs you to do so.

How great is your salvation?

For reflection

1. If you were to compare your walk with Jesus to progressing through the educational system (kindergarten to graduate school), where would you place yourself? Why?
2. How would you describe your grasp of the “solid food” on which mature, disciple-making witnesses of Christ feed as their regular fare?
3. How can Christians encourage and assist each other to “go on to perfection”?

Next steps – Preparation: Share your answers to the three questions above with a fellow believer. Discuss how you can help one another move beyond elementary things to the solid food of maturity in Christ.

5 Greater than Mountaintops

For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? Hebrews 3.16-18

So close, but so far away

Here is my candidate for one of the top ten saddest verses in the entire Bible:

It is eleven days' journey from Horeb by way of Mount Seir to Kadesh Barnea. Now it came to pass in the fortieth year... (Deut. 1.2, 3).

Mt. Horeb, in the Sinai desert, is where Moses met with God to receive His Law. There the people of God saw the glory of the Lord upon the mountain, in fierce lightning and terrifying thunder. They marveled at the glory that shone on Moses' face. It was at Mt. Horeb that the people gladly joined together to provide everything and more than was needed to construct the tabernacle and its furnishings. Yes, there was that episode of the golden calf – a bit too much spiritual exuberance, mingled with pragmatic religion. But even that misstep was followed by more of the mercy and grace of the Lord.

All in all, life at Mt. Horeb was exciting for the people of Israel. They had just been delivered by God through the miracle at the Red Sea, and at Mt. Horeb they saw how great God was and got a taste of the blessings that awaited them in His Law and in the promised land. They might have been content just to remain there, had not God commanded them to go on to the greater perfection of life in the promised land (Deut. 1.5-8).

It is eleven days' journey from Mt. Horeb to the border of the land of promise. And that journey took the people of Israel forty years to accomplish.

They actually did make it to Kadesh Barnea in eleven days, and there they received a foretaste of the fruit and bounty of the land of promise – just as Moses had said, a land flowing with milk and honey, a land of *rest*.

But they refused to go forward, refused to enter more fully into the great salvation of the Lord, and were cast back into the wilderness where, for forty years, they grumbled, complained, plotted ways back to Egypt, threatened to overthrow their God-appointed leaders, and subsisted on the same daily fare as they had known from the beginning of their salvation. For an entire generation, the great salvation God had promised them went neglected and refused, as the people complacently wandered around in the wilderness, waiting for that disobedient generation to die.

The allure of the mountaintop

The allure of the mountaintop is undeniable. Noise, singing and dancing, excitement and music, the glory of God all around us! Even the disciples would have preferred to remain indefinitely on the mount of Transfiguration, so great was their joy in the presence of Christ and His glory.

But for many believers, the essence of Christian life consists of perceived mountaintop experiences, especially their Sunday morning service of worship. If it's lively and upbeat, if the people are all happy and singing, if the testimonies are sincere, and if the pastor preaches a comforting message, then this is what it's all about to be a Christian. If my church fails to deliver such mountaintop experiences, I might complain to an elder or the people in my small group, or I might go looking for another mountaintop experience somewhere else.

But the mountaintop is not the place where we find the *rest* promised in our great salvation. The people of

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Israel might have wished it were so, and we might wish it, too. But the *rest* God promises – that freedom from fear, want, uncertainty, doubt, loneliness, and self-loathing – is merely *glimpsed* during our services of worship. It is *realized*, and we *grow* in it by *laboring to obtain the promises of God and to live for His glory within His appointed place and calling for our lives*.

But there are plenty of false advance men telling us it ain't so: The world is too hard, the people too mean and indifferent to spiritual matters, we can never make a difference out there, and after all, we have all our own stuff and issues to deal with. Only a handful of Joshuas and Calebs keep trying to get us to recall the promises of God, see the evidence of greater salvation to come, and commit to a life of obedience, service, and witness so that the *rest* of our great salvation can be increasingly ours.

A matter of obedience

You may be quite content with the various mountaintops that constitute your view of what it means to be a Christian. But if all you do as a Christian is get to the mountaintop, if you never strive for the promises of God and the greater-than-mountaintops salvation that Jesus has secured for you, then you will never know the fullness of God's blessed and holy *rest*.

And you will be disobeying the God Who saved you – not for the mountaintop, but for the daily life of following Jesus in service and witness in your part of His world.

The Christian life is a race, and running races is hard work. And it's not just a race, it's a *marathon*. And more than that, the Christian life is a *marathon steeplechase*, filled with challenges and obstacles and unwelcome surprises, and requiring strenuous exertions of faith and obedience in all your relationships, roles, and responsibilities.

But it is also a life fraught with precious and very great promises, promises of blessing and rest, promises of becoming more like Jesus and advancing His rule on earth as it is in heaven.

Our great salvation beckons, calling us not to abandon our mountaintops but to see them for what God intends them to be – rallying-places designed to sharpen our focus on Him and to prepare us for daily obedience, faithful witness, and living for the glory of Jesus Christ.

Let us go on to perfection in Him. Let us refuse to neglect our great salvation. Let us use our mountaintop experiences as ways to see further into the promised land of rest; and let us prepare for each next leg in our race of obedience to Jesus.

For reflection

1. Mountaintop experiences aren't bad. They just aren't everything. Explain.
2. Why does going on to our great salvation mean that we have to do so much work?
3. Neglecting our great salvation is rebellion (v. 16), sin (v. 17), and disobedience (v. 18). How can we keep from falling into such neglect?

Next steps – Preparation: What are your mountaintop experiences as a Christian? How can you use these as encouragement in your race to gain more of God's greater salvation? Talk with a Christian friend about these questions.

6 Greater than Assurance Only

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Hebrews 11.1 (my translation)

Our glory and shame

For the better part of the last generation, among evangelical Christians in America, at least, a particular formula for declaring the Gospel has been *de rigueur*.

The primary elements of this understanding of the Gospel are readily identifiable in the various presentations of the Gospel, used in churches and various parachurch ministries, as well as in much of the popular music composed for worship during the past 50 years, and in much preaching.

This is a Gospel offering forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. By acknowledging our need – that we are sinners who cannot extricate ourselves from this miserable and baleful condition, as much as we might wish – and by receiving Jesus as Savior, we pass from death to life, from guilt to forgiveness, from bondage to freedom, and from hell to heaven.

Gospel presentations employing this formula typically include a word of assurance, sometimes based on 1 John 5.13, that if we sincerely believe in Jesus, we may *know* that we have eternal life. Praise songs celebrate that forgiveness in memorable melodies and lively lyrics, reminding believers, in an endless stream of new compositions, of what Jesus has done and how they may feel because of this.

Untold millions of people have been exposed to this Good News in a wide variety of means. Millions of those – full disclosure, myself included – have believed in Jesus, have been born again from darkness to light and from death in sin to life in Jesus, and continue to this day rejoicing in the assurance that, even now, Jesus is preparing a place for them in heaven, and that He will soon and very soon come to gather them unto Himself.

This Gospel phenomenon has been one of the great glories of evangelical Christianity over the past generation.

It has also been the occasion of one of our greatest shames.

“Near” Christianity

The great shame is that, content with forgiveness and the assurance of a place in heaven, we have settled into a version of Christian faith which is considerably less than the great salvation we are warned not to neglect. We have preferred not to go on to perfection, and thus it is little wonder that so little *evidence* of Kingdom Christianity exists among those who claim to have faith in Jesus.

When Paul arrived in Ephesus for the first time, he encountered twelve men who professed faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 19.1-7). They had heard the message of John the Baptist to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, and they had learned that Jesus, to Whom John pointed, was that Messiah. And they believed and were saved. Truly and sincerely saved.

These twelve men must have been conspicuous in their belief in Jesus. Perhaps they sold their idols of the city’s patron deity, Diana. Or refused to join in the celebrations at her luxurious temple. Or maybe they just seemed more joyful and at peace in their religion than their frenzied neighbors, who, like all good Greek worshipers, labored to appease their deities, rather than to know them.

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But these men, distinct as they must have been – since Paul seems to have had no trouble finding them – had embraced only the barest kernel of Christian faith – what we might call *near Christianity*. They knew nothing of the Spirit of God and thus, nothing of the Kingdom of Jesus, nor the call to seek that Kingdom and live for Christ’s glory in every area of their lives, nor of the power for bearing holy fruit and persuasive witness to Jesus. They had no incentive for evangelism, perhaps concluding that their neighbors would not be interested in what little they could tell them about following Jesus.

Paul’s response to their status was to immediately begin teaching them “the things of the kingdom of God” (v. 8). And what were those things? We can gather from Paul’s other writings: The vision of Jesus, exalted in glory, advancing His rule on earth as it is in heaven; that same Jesus, enthroned in the soul of each man, working by His Word and Spirit to transform them into His own image; true spiritual growth that entails pressing on in the knowledge of Christ and His Word; spiritual fruit and gifts, flowing from the soul to refresh, renew, and restore all aspects of life; power beyond mere words to make all things new; works of faith and obedience devoted to glorifying God through self-denying love and world-uprighting truth.

In other words, Paul, building on the *assurance* of salvation these sincere but unschooled believers possessed, led them diligently, systematically, and Biblically into the *saved life of Christlike evidence*. Thus Paul brought their faith to a level of reality and maturity which was more than assurance, merely, and which, after only a brief time, resulted in all the province of Asia hearing the Word of our Lord Jesus Christ.

On to perfection

True and saving faith in Jesus Christ entails both *inward assurance* – of forgiveness, eternal life, and a place in heaven with the Lord forever – and *outward evidence* – of seeing and communing with and drawing vision and power from such unseen realities as Jesus Christ enthroned in glory and His Kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven. We have true and saving faith, which is crucial to going on to perfection in our great salvation, when we are both *assured* of grace and *flourishing* in it.

Mere assurance of salvation *may* indicate the genuine article. But it also may not. Which is why the writer of Hebrews urged his readers to go on to perfection, increasing in the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ, growing in their understanding of the deep mysteries of God’s Word (such as the man Melchizedek and the coming Kingdom and City of God), and bringing to fruition good works of many kinds in every area of life as the *evidence* that a great salvation had indeed taken hold in their souls.

In our day, it is a great shame for Christians who know better, to content themselves with some version of *near Christianity* as their claim to faith in Christ. Paul would not allow us to be content with this. Nor would the writer of Hebrews. Nor would Peter or John or James.

Nor would Jesus.

For reflection

1. What evidence of true faith should the people in your Personal Mission Field see in you?
2. Should we be content with some version of *near Christianity*? Why not?
3. What *unseen things* should fill our vision of the life of faith? How can we cultivate that vision?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with some fellow Christians about the role of unseen things in their walk with the Lord. How can you help one another have a clearer vision of these?

7 Greater than Convenience

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12.1, 2

Let's face it

Let's face it: running the marathon steeplechase which the Lord has outlined as the course of our great salvation is just not convenient.

Indeed, for many people, it might be quite *inconvenient* to follow Jesus ever more deeply into His great salvation. Such a way of life takes time. It requires discipline. Demands change. It means learning new skills. Reading. Praying. Paying careful attention to how we use our time. Discovering new ways to live for God's glory in even the most everyday details of life. Turning away from habits of thinking and living which are contrary to the mind and example of Christ. Watching for open doors of opportunity to talk about the Lord. Increasing and improving in Christlike living in all areas of life.

And setting aside a good many things we might otherwise enjoy, but which are like junk food shops along the route of our race.

No, it is *not* convenient to press on like this toward the upward calling of God in Christ, not when we consider so many other matters to be of equal importance as our calling to follow Jesus.

For many of us, our experience of Christian faith involves finding a niche that suits us just fine. We want a faith that's good enough to assure us we really believe, to comfort and console us as needed, and to provide wholesome spiritual enjoyment with like-minded friends.

A convenient faith?

We want a faith that is *convenient*, one that fits in with all the other things we think we need to do. Alongside believing in and serving Jesus, we need time for those interests that give us the happiness and contentment we seek.

We want faith on *our* terms and *our* timetable, and we want to enjoy it without having to give up too much of what everybody else has and seems to enjoy. Our Christianity must be convenient; it must fit our chosen lifestyle and schedule.

But a faith that we practice only to the extent that it is *convenient* for us may not be saving faith at all.

The parable of the great supper

In the parable of the great supper (Lk. 14.15-24), Jesus likens the Kingdom of God to a man who prepared a sumptuous repast, and invited many to attend. When everything was ready, he sent his servant to announce that the hour had come.

But those who had been invited began to make excuses for why they would not be attending. One claimed he needed to inspect a piece of property. Another wanted to test a yoke of oxen. Another had just been married and therefore insisted he could not attend.

It just was not convenient for these people to set aside their other interests and concerns to comply with the

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invitation for a great supper and an enjoyable evening with a generous neighbor. They preferred their own diversions and occupations to the hospitality that had been prepared for them.

The result, Jesus explained, was that “none of those men who were invited” would “taste” the sumptuous dinner of their gracious neighbor.

To the extent that we prefer anything over following Jesus and growing in our great salvation, we are like those ungrateful neighbors, excusing ourselves, for one “good reason” or another, for not daily feeding on the Word of God, not practicing prayer without ceasing, not learning more about how our great salvation applies to all our roles and responsibilities, not being more consistent as witnesses for Jesus, not setting our minds on Him in His exalted glory, and not working out our salvation or pressing on or running our race any more diligently and vigorously than we do.

That’s not the kind of Christian life and salvation many who profess to believe in Jesus choose to follow. It’s just not convenient. I don’t like to read. I have other things I like to do. I don’t want to upset my friends or co-workers. Learning new things is hard.

Excuses, excuses, excuses. Jim Kennedy once reminded me that an excuse is “the skin of a reason, stuffed with a lie.” The lie we inhabit when, claiming inconvenience, we don’t press on to lay hold on our great salvation, is that what we have of faith at present is “good enough for me, and so it will have to be good enough for Jesus.”

It isn’t.

Claiming inconvenience for not running or exercising may not be a big deal. But claiming inconvenience when it comes to fixing our eyes on Jesus and running the race He has set for us is nothing other than neglecting our great salvation. And those who neglect that salvation will invariably drift from it, thus perhaps demonstrating that they have no real appetite for the Lord’s great supper after all.

For reflection

1. Why do you think so many Christians seem not to be growing in their walk with and work for the Lord?
2. Our time comes to us as a gift from God. What should we do to make sure we’re making the most of His gift (Eph. 5.15-17)?
3. Is there anything in your life standing in the way of your laying firmer hold on your great salvation?

Next steps – Transformation: Spend an extended time in prayer – an hour or so – waiting silently on the Lord as you review all the ways you use your time each week. Are you claiming inconvenience as an excuse for not growing in any way? Repent, and seek the Lord for a new course of action.

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For reflection or discussion

1. How would someone *neglect* his salvation? What is the danger in this?
2. Why do we say that our salvation is as *great* as the whole world?
3. In what sense should every believer in Jesus be a “teacher”? Would you describe yourself as a teacher? Explain.
4. What do we mean by saying that some people consider a greater pursuit of their salvation to be not convenient? How can we encourage such people to overcome that obstacle?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.