

You Can't

God's amazing grace in an age of darkness

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You Can't

by Andrew Paul Cannon

O to grace how great a debtor

Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.

*P*rone to wander, Lord, I feel it,

Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.

Robert Robinson, 1758

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Chapter One

The Serpent's False Gospel

Do you remember that story? The one in the front of the Bible about Adam and Eve? You know, the couple who disobeyed God, ate from a tree, and had to be removed from paradise? Yeah, this is where our story begins. The story of Adam and Eve is not a story primarily about this couple and their sin. No, the main character is not the first man and woman. The main character is God.

After all, it was God who created the universe. It was God who caused the tree to bear fruit. It was God who formed the people and gave them the ability to choose. It was God who gave the command and gave the possibility for people to sin. It was God who punished. It was God who restored. It is God who offered even these two rebels a chance to be renewed to life. If God gave us a book and a story where He is the main character, I have to wonder why we read it as though its primary focus is on us? While we make the mistake of reading the Bible like it was somehow meant to guide us to

success or happiness, God intends it for one purpose: that He might reveal Himself to us through the reporting of what He has done, what He has said, and the instruction that He has given.

The contrast is stark. It is the reason many of our churches, youth ministries, evangelism efforts, family times, worship services, prayer lives, personal quiet times, Sunday School classes, Small Groups, and so on all seem so shallow in our modern context. It is the difference between life and death. It is the deviation of darkness from light. It's like looking at one of those sculptures that is only clear from one angle. From a natural perspective, the sculpture looks like the artist made random chisels and called it art. As we tilt our heads or as we shift just slightly to the right, we see the image that the artist wants us to see. When we look at Scripture selfishly, as the world does, we see a "how-to" manual for this life. The instruction and the revelation of God, though, is something quite different and infinitely more awe inspiring. This is something that the first man and woman, yes remember them, would learn in Genesis, chapter 3.

Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the Lord God had made. He

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said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You can't eat from any tree in the garden'?"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit from the trees in the garden. But about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God said, 'You must not eat it or touch it, or you will die.'"

"No! You will not die," the serpent said to the woman. "In fact, God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Then the woman saw that the tree was good for food and delightful to look at, and that it was desirable for obtaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves (Genesis 3:1-7).

Remember, God is the main character in His story. God created the serpent. God created the people. God gave the people a choice. The serpent, which has at this point deviated from the order of creation,¹ has introduced a false gospel. You can obtain knowledge like God's knowledge by taking these certain steps. The serpent has now proclaimed a message of self-help. He has introduced a do-it-yourself plan by which

¹ Whether this verse is interpreted as a literal serpent or a symbol to mean Satan, the creature (whether physical or spiritual) has somehow acted against the Creator and the Creator has allowed it.

Adam and Eve could pursue the very knowledge of God. The serpent, acting in contradiction with God's created order, has delivered a short "how-to" sermon that is sure to achieve righteousness or the knowledge of God for Adam and Eve.

Sound familiar? It should. The serpent's false gospel is proclaimed from a multitude of pulpits today. You've heard it. I know you have. This is how you pursue Christ. This is how you live as a Christian. This is how you can know God more. This is how you live a satisfying life.

Granted, not every time a statement like these is used is it being used contrary to the Gospel of Christ. When these are the focus of the local church, though, Christ is not preeminent according to our perspective. He is not the focal point. Just like Adam and Eve, we are so guilty of pursuing righteousness and knowledge on our own. As a result, the "how-to" gospel has permeated humanity from the serpent's deception through our modern day. Adam and Eve assumed that they were the main characters. We sometimes see Adam and Eve as the main characters. We also assume that we are somehow, even though we are merely creatures, also the main characters of God's story.

Adam and Eve, realizing their shame, then took it upon themselves to cover that shame. The "how-to" gospel took

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root. It quickly became pervasive. It was, in an instant, the dominant view upon the earth. The distressing and troubling fact is that this is the gospel that has taken root and grown to maturity in most of the congregations and religious peoples today.

Islam states that people must first submit. Hinduism claims that we somehow ought to work our way through the castes and if our karma is good enough, we will escape the process of reincarnation. Mormonism states that salvation is by works. The Jehovah's Witness is taught that if the law is kept, he or she gets to become a god like Jesus did. The materialist believes that a good life is achieved on this earth by virtue of hard work. The Catholic is justified by repentance and penance. Let's not forget us evangelicals, those who belong to the great heritage of the protestant reformers. From far too many of our pulpits, we hear the same type of "how-to" gospel that is not distinguishable from the messages of other worldviews. From many of our congregations the message of the serpent is heard. We see it in our movies and we hear it on popular Christian radio.

"Go to church and your life will be better!"

"You just need to have enough faith."

"You need to obey the commands of Christ."

“You don’t have a good marriage because you have not modeled it after Christ.”

“This is how you can be a good parent.”

“This is how you can know God better.”

“This is how you grow your church.”

“This is how you reach the next generation.”

“This is how...”

This is the serpent’s gospel. Wait! I thought God was the main character. Perhaps it might be a good idea to see what God’s response is when the serpent’s gospel permeates and becomes pervasive among people that God desires to come to Him.

The Lord God made clothing out of skins for Adam and his wife, and He clothed them.

The Lord God said, “Since man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil, he must not reach out, take from the tree of life, eat, and live forever.” So the Lord God sent him away from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove man out and stationed the cherubim and the flaming, whirling sword east of the garden of Eden to guard the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:21-24).

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God created. God gave choice. God restored. The “how-to” of humanity led away from God. God, in His own glory and in His own majesty, took on the role of restorer. Really, who better to restore God’s creation than the original artist, God Himself? He replaced the garments that Adam and Eve made to cover their own shame with a garment sewed by His own hand. He separated humanity from the tree of life, signifying that there is no “how-to” regarding eternity and regarding a relationship with Himself. Instead, people would have to serve the “how-to” gospel that they believed. He would have to work the ground and wait for God’s redemption from the “how-to” methodology that the serpent shared with him. God restored and there was nothing Adam and Eve could do to earn that restoration.

Thus, we receive the doctrine of God’s grace. There is nothing we can do. Want to know how you can achieve heaven? Want to know how you can legitimately grow your church? Want to know how you can live a happy life, or your best life now? The Gospel of Christ makes this declaration: You Can’t.

Sadly, this means that most people who have called themselves Christians have believed and followed, instead, the gospel of the serpent. It means many preachers today

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