

that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

This is not a description of a person before conversion to Christ, because there was no battle going on at all in his soul, then. It's a description of the truly converted Christian, with the spiritual battle against the flesh continually going on within him until he dies.

Our proper understanding of this, leads us to realise that we're not getting better at all, but rather we're coming to see our sins more and more. Our very need of Christ then becomes clearer as we grow in the faith.

I'm just as much a terrible sinner in need of Christ the second before I die as I was the second after I was conceived, even though, in between, I've been born-again and had a new heart put within me. If I was getting better, it would mean that the more mature in the faith I become, the less I would be in need of Christ, which can't possible be.

Christ said of Himself:

John 17:19
And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth.

Christ here says that that He sanctifies Himself, who was altogether perfect and could not possibly get better. Rather, what is meant is that He was setting Himself more and more apart from the world, as He got ready to go to the cross.

To us, sanctification is not our becoming better either. It is our becoming more set apart from the ways of the world, in order to live a Christ-like life. And this is directly proportional to our knowledge of the Scriptures.

While we are in this world, we are given new hearts to understand the Scriptures, in order for us to mortify the old nature, and nurture the fruit of the Spirit. This is how the Christian should spend his life. As we do this, we become more set apart from the world's ways of doing things, and more conformed to Christ's way of living. But all the time, we're still the vile sinners that we always were by nature.

Upon having a new heart put within us, our slavery to sin is immediately broken, so anyone with an addiction has hope! It can be broken, if we come to Christ! However, sin itself will still be there. We have our slavery to sin broken, but we still need victory over individual temptations as they present themselves to us. The drunkard can have his habit broken if he comes to Christ, but it would still be a good idea for him to avoid the pub.

Christ tells His disciples that they need to pray daily:

Luke 11:4
Forgive us our sins.... and lead us not into temptation.

Job came to the mature spiritual conclusion:

Job 40:4, 42:6
I am vile.... I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

Our sanctification gives us victory over sin, as we need it. It doesn't make us better people, because then, resisting temptation would become easier.

In the Christian life, we grow in two things. We:

2 Peter 3:18
....grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The more Scripture we know, as we mature in the faith, the more weapons we have in our armoury, as we fight the world, the flesh and the devil. Overcoming sin does not become easier, but we have more weapons at our disposal in the constant battle that we have against our spiritual enemies – a war that will not end, nor become easier, until we rest and go to be with Christ, which is far better.

One day, in heaven, there'll be no more need for the Bible. Sin will have gone from our lives completely. There will be no more need of setting ourselves apart; we will be apart from our enemies for ever, as they all get thrown into hell-fire and we don't. But while we are here on this earth now, we need the Word of God, for our sanctification:

Romans 12:2
And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

I'm Saved. But I'm Not Getting Any Better

What is the minimum amount of doctrine we need to know in order to be saved to eternal life?

Do we need to believe the Trinity, perhaps? To join the World Council of Churches, we do. Unitarians are excluded. Every other theological position under the sun is accepted, but to not believe in the Trinity isn't.

Do we need to believe a creed, perhaps? Many churches think so. In fact one of the orthodox creeds, the Athanasian Creed, states precisely that:

*"1 Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith; 2 Which faith **except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.** 3 And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity.... [then follows a lengthy definition of the Trinity]....*

*28 He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity. 29 Furthermore **it is necessary to everlasting salvation** that he also believe rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. 30 For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man.... [then follows a lengthy definition of the orthodox view on the being of Christ]....*

*44 This is the catholic faith, **which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.**"*

But the thief on the cross never believed any of this. The passing of a creed in some ecumenical council somewhere, does not define the truth. Christ always was God, whether anybody believed it or dogmatised it in a creed or not.

Assertion of a creed does not determine who is saved to eternal life and who isn't.

Do we need to believe the gospel, then? Surely we do. Surely Paul's answer to the Philippian jailor is our minimum requirement:

Acts 16:31
Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.

But how much of this do we need to know to be saved?

Do we need to know:

- that Christ died on the cross as a substitutionary atonement to take away sin?
- that Christ died for me personally?
- that I must repent and exercise faith in Christ to be saved?

All of the above are true statements, but do we need to know all of them, or some of them, in order to be saved? How much do we actually need to know?

The answer to that question is actually.... nothing!

But, surely we at least need to know about Christ, his atoning work, and put our trust in Him for our salvation? Well, hang on a minute, let me explain.

To be saved to eternal life, we must be born again:

John 3:3

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

We need the Lord to give us a new heart:

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

Ezekiel 36:26

A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.

The Bible is quite clear in that we are saved by grace alone:

Ephesians 2:8,9

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.

The gospel call is a call to repent and believe in Christ. So, in order to respond to it, we need repentance and faith. But the Bible tells us these are gifts of God:

Ephesians 2:8

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.

Acts 11:18

Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

We cannot whip these attributes up from within ourselves. We need to be born again by the Holy Spirit first, before we can receive and exercise faith and repentance at all.

So, does this mean that we can just sit back in our armchairs and do nothing, thinking that if God wants to save us, He will do so, but if not, that's just the way it is? Of course not. God forbid that we should think that way! People use that idea as an excuse not to bother with the things of God at all.

We can at least realise our inability to respond, be bothered by it, and cry to God to grant us these gifts, even though we don't deserve them. Even if God won't hear us and we end up in hell-fire for ever, that's just what we deserve anyway, so God won't have done anything wrong to ignore our cry. But the Bible tells us that He is a merciful God and that He does save sinners. That is our only hope.

Am I saying then, that it is possible to come to salvation without even knowing about the Lord Jesus Christ? What about people who practice other religions? Can they be saved even though they never come into contact with the Bible, a church or anything else that proclaims the truth? Again, I say, God forbid!

The preaching of the gospel and the responding to it, is the ordinary means of salvation. Ordinarily, God uses means. So, it is always the church's job to proclaim the gospel, and to bring people into contact with, and to a knowledge of, the truths of the Bible.

But God is always free to work without, above and against means if he so wishes. This is the case, for example, for all elect persons who are incapable of being called by the Word, such as elect infants. But we should never presume on this. Ordinarily, the job of the church is to bring people into contact with the truth, tell them about Christ, and leave the rest to the Lord as to whether He saves them or not.

What I am trying to get across is that it is not what we **know** that saves us, neither is it even what we **believe**, but salvation is only of the Lord. Many people go to church for years, and know their Bibles backwards, but they're not saved. Only when the Lord regenerates their heart does the truth of the Scriptures, that they may have known for many years, come alive for them. This is the new birth, and we can do nothing to attain it for ourselves. Neither our faith, nor our understanding, can help get us to heaven, otherwise we could boast that we did something our neighbour didn't do, namely have faith, or understand the Scriptures better. No, no, no. Salvation is of the Lord alone. We learn everything else later.

The Word of God has power to regenerate hearts:

Hebrews 4:12

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

But it's only after we've been born again in the heart that the Scriptures really come into their own. Christ prayed to the Father (with regards his disciples):

John 17:17

Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

This is the reason we need to stay close to the Word of God for as long as we're in this world. We're justified by grace through faith alone, but we're sanctified through the truth, the Scriptures.

It's here that we learn of the doctrine of the Trinity, and all the other doctrines of truth. And not only do we learn of them with our minds, but if we are born-again we will also know them for sure in our hearts, and they will begin to change us from the inside.

It is possible to know correct doctrine, without a new heart, simply through reading the Bible. But just knowing the truth cannot change anybody. We can say we believe in all the orthodox Creeds, all the orthodox doctrines, and mean it, and still go to hell in the end. It's only after we've been born again that the Scriptures come alive to us. They affect our hearts and change our way of life altogether.

But many Christians make a mistake by thinking that sanctification is me "every day in every way getting better and better." They think that as we mature in the faith, and we learn more and more of how we should behave from the Scriptures, then we really become better people as a result. I'm a lot better than I was, say, ten years ago.

But this is just not true. Try as much as I can, even with the Lord's help, I'm still not getting better and better. And neither was the apostle Paul, who said:

Romans 7:14-26

I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform