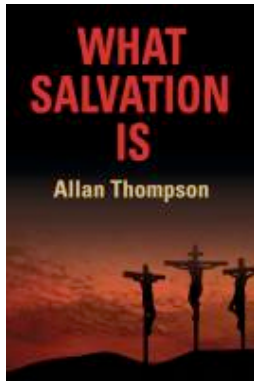


# WHAT SALVATION IS

Allan Thompson





*WHAT SALVATION IS* opens with Allan Thompson's story and powerful saving encounter with Jesus. Since then, Allan has spent much time learning more about God's supernatural salvation. Allan shares here about God's redemption by writing of God's saving work in the Apostle Paul, and in other Christians through the centuries. Allan also writes of God's salvation in many current Christians. God is alive, and His grace is real, necessary, and available for all.

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WHAT  
SALVATION  
IS

Allan Thompson

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Also by Allan Thompson, *'Tis Grace*

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To the memory of Terry Winkler,  
Physician, pastor, friend, saved child of God.  
In heaven, walking, jumping, and praising God for eternity.





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# PART ONE

## MY STORY

*It felt like a large hole opened in my chest and all my worries, fears, and frustrations went whooshing out like stale air from a balloon. Peace washed in through my back, filling the void where the pain had been. It was a peace that was so intense and pure that I was actually frightened. . . . I suddenly had a “knowing” in my heart—a supernatural assurance that everything was going to be all right, for now and forever.*

That personal encounter with God happened to me on Monday, September 23rd, 1991, but I didn't know what it was. I had never experienced anything remotely like it.

By that date, I had become a hopeless alcoholic. Bad life and business decisions had cost my wife, myself, and my mother almost our entire life savings. I had lost two businesses and our home. Without the faithful love and support of my family, I would have lost them, too. The complete story of God's transforming love in my life is told in my book, *'Tis Grace*.

I was raised in a church-going family, but my parents never talked about having an experience with God and never shared any information of that sort with my brother and me. I basically

had book knowledge of Jesus but was not aware that there was anything more. I had been baptized as an infant and had gone through confirmation class as a teen and that was enough to be a Christian according to my church's practices.

In 1961, at age eighteen I left for the University of Oklahoma from my hometown of Lawton and majored in journalism because I had been active on the high school newspaper and yearbook staffs, and because that was the easiest major I could pick. I was more interested in the social life at college, which included heavy drinking. Upon graduation, I took a position with my international college fraternity. For two years, from its New York City headquarters, I traveled to college campuses and visited fraternity chapters, counseling the undergraduate officers on administrative procedures. There were countless opportunities to drink, and I never turned one down.

In January 1968, I left my fraternity travels and joined a major advertising agency in New York. I wanted to be "the world's greatest advertising copywriter" but wound up as a media buyer placing advertising for Bristol-Myers products in national magazines and on various radio stations around the country. We media buyers controlled a tremendous amount of money, and the various media representatives continuously wined and dined us to get our business. More drinking.

I quickly perceived that the salaries were much higher on the sales side of the industry and obtained a position with a radio sales organization. The money rolled in, and my wife Betty (whom I met in college) and I enjoyed the great life money brings. In the broadcast and advertising business at that time, "three-martini lunches" were almost the norm, and I had developed quite a taste for martinis.

I advanced in broadcast sales, and so did my ego. I was promoted to manager of my sales firm's Philadelphia office where Betty and I enjoyed membership in an exclusive country club on the city's storied Main Line. More drinking. More ego enlargement. But, at the same time, I was driven by demons. Despite the fact that I was doing well, I feared that I would be fired. Media sales was a high pressure business which was a key reason for the big salaries. My large ego was constantly being badly bruised every time I lost an important sale.

Due to a decision to move into the lower pressure local radio station management side, I took a job as general sales manager of WTAE/WXKX radio in Pittsburgh. I did exceptionally well, and sales increased dramatically. Our two lovely daughters, Kelly and Kimberly, were born while we were in Pittsburgh. Everything I touched turned to gold, and I could do no wrong (in my opinion). Then I was fired because of my heavy drinking and irresponsible behavior. I had brought what I feared most onto myself, and I had become so self-centered that the firing came as a complete surprise.

The broadcast business being as transient as it is, enabled me to quickly secure a general sales manager's position with KWK/WDVE in St. Louis for a higher salary. Within six months, I became vice president and general manager. Fewer than two years later, our parent company, Doubleday Broadcasting, divested of their radio properties, and I was out of work again.

I coerced a very reluctant Betty to move to Springfield, Missouri, where we invested a large sum of money to buy a 7 percent ownership of KGBX-AM radio. I was named president and general manager at a salary larger than what I had been earning in St. Louis. Betty and I (along with my mother) soon invested more to become 33 percent owners. Because it was

only AM radio (in an increasingly FM-oriented world) and because of my drinking, we were forced in 1988, along with our other investors, to auction the station for a great loss. Then I organized another group of investors to purchase a regional golf magazine. It failed, and I was out of work again.

I became suicidal.

I stayed at home as much as possible, or in a bar drinking by myself with what money I had conned from Mother or Betty. I spent hours planning my suicide, but didn't have the gumption to go through with it. I was drinking up to a fifth of scotch a day, and the alcohol was affecting me physically. I could take one drink and be totally drunk, or drink a whole fifth and feel nothing at all. I desperately wanted to go back and start my life all over again. I gave up all hope. I had lost everything but my family, and I decided they would be far better off without me.

On Wednesday morning, September 18th, 1991, I was home alone. The girls were in school, and Betty was working full time as a teacher. I was lying curled up on the kitchen floor with no reason to move because I had no place to go, nothing to do, and no money. As I lay there, a voice came into my head and said, "Go see Bob Parr." It was not so much a voice as a vocal "impression" and was like nothing I had ever heard before. Bob Parr had been my dad's best friend and drinking buddy until 1964 when Bob got sober and joined Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.).

I was puzzled by the voice. It triggered in me a vague sensation that I needed to do something, but I didn't move. I simply no longer had the energy. Then, within minutes of the voice, the phone rang. It was Mother. She pleaded for me to come visit her at her home in Enid, Oklahoma, and talk. I said I would come under one condition: that Bob Parr would come

also. I just blurted that out, not even knowing why. Mother said she would check with Bob and call me back, which she did almost immediately.

Bob had agreed to be at Mother's on Monday, September 23rd. We met in the family room after I had poured myself a generous scotch on the rocks. Bob's opening sentence was, "The booze is the problem." I was skeptical and slightly irritated by his insinuation, but said nothing. Bob then proceeded to tell me his story.

He talked about his drinking and how it had steadily gotten more out of control. Then he told of the event that led him to A.A. He had driven his daughter and some of her friends the sixty miles from Lawton to Wichita Falls, Texas, for a high school football game. He had been drinking before they left and he went to a bar and drank more after he dropped them off for the game, thus getting himself totally drunk before he drove them back to Lawton. When they arrived safely home, he was so shaken by what he had done, and so relieved that nothing serious had happened, that he vowed to give up drinking then and there. And he did.

As Bob told me about driving his daughter and her friends, I realized that I had also been driving Kelly and Kimberly and their friends to various events after I had been drinking way too much. I was doing the same thing Bob had done. At the precise moment of that realization, it felt like a large hole opened in my chest and all my worries, fears, and frustrations went whooshing out like stale air from a balloon. Peace washed in through my back, filling the void where the pain had been. It was a peace that was so intense and pure that I was actually frightened. It was almost too much for me to handle. I became aware of a passage from somewhere in the Bible about "the

peace that passeth all understanding.” This must be it! I suddenly had a “knowing” in my heart—a supernatural assurance that everything was going to be all right, for now and forever.

Bob was handing me (the Big Book of) *Alcoholics Anonymous*. As he handed it to me, he said, “When you read this, you will have a spiritual experience.” Not really grasping what had just happened to me, I said, “I think I just did!” Through the grace of God, I had my last drink on Thursday, September 26th, 1991. My desire for booze was completely removed.

But, that is only part of the story. I was soon overcome by a passion to know more about what had happened to me. I became very involved in A.A. and read about the founders, Bill W (Wilson) and Dr. Bob (Smith). Bill W. had also been fascinated with the spiritual life, and one of the books he read was *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James, the noted philosopher and psychologist. I read it and also began to read the Bible, the book that had the strongest influence on the founders of A.A. I frequented used book stores and chose books, seemingly at random, from their psychology and religion sections.

In mid-December 1991, I began volunteering in the A.A. Central Office. The office is staffed with recovering alcoholics to aid the “still suffering” alcoholics who come or call for help. The office was in an old downtown building, and I worked the late afternoon and evening shift several days a week. The building was usually empty, but one evening a young woman smoking a cigarette stuck her head in the office door and asked, “Have you been saved?” I replied that I thought I had been at least once. She said, “You can only be saved once,” and left. I never saw the young woman again. Through all my reading, I was so ignorant



that I didn't even know if I had been saved or what salvation really involved.

Time passed. I picked up a few dollars here and there by writing some freelance articles but was so unnerved by my prior job experiences that I found it difficult to seek or consider a "real" job. I continued to yearn to learn more about spirituality. Since that time with Bob, I knew there was something very different about me, but I was unsure exactly what. I knew though that I was being guided on an unknown path—a good path.

As I kept finding books, they became more focused on Christianity. Each book was, not coincidentally, just the book I needed at just the right time to answer the questions forming in my mind—questions about not only what was happening to me, but also about conversion, salvation, heaven and hell, and God's grace among many, many other theological topics. Each book built upon the ones I had read before. There was definitely an organized learning process at work, and I was willingly and excitedly swept along.

Then, as I drove home one evening after A.A. volunteering, I was frustrated because I seemed to be getting nowhere fast. I said out loud, "Okay God, what next? Give me some sort of sign." Immediately, I had the strong impression that I should turn on KADI-FM radio, the local Christian contemporary music station. I could not stand what Christian contemporary music I had heard from time to time, but I turned the radio on and found the station. To me, the music was poorly arranged and performed and too message-driven. Further, I thought "born again" Christians were overwrought zealots. However, in begrudging obedience to the inner voice, I listened to the station for a couple of days, and to my surprise, found that I was

beginning to actually like the music. Jesus Christ was still primarily a curse word to me though because I as yet had no concept of who He really was.

On January 22nd, 1992, I was reciting my morning prayer as I sat in my chair in our computer room at home. This was a special prayer that I had written (adapted from A.A.) asking God for humility and the ability to hear His voice and follow His will. I had not humbled myself enough to kneel when I prayed, however.

I had read in one of the Christian books that the closer a person comes to God's light, the more wretched he feels about himself. Also, recently I had become more aware about the way I saw light when my eyes were closed. If I turned my head toward a light, it got brighter. If I had been looking at a bright light with my eyes open, when I closed my eyes, I could still see a yellow glare for a while. This was not any sort of obsession; I had just become more aware.

I had also become curious about comparing myself to God's light and had prayed that perhaps I could see just a little bit of His light. Even though I didn't kneel when I prayed, I did close my eyes. Suddenly as I prayed on that January 22nd, a "rising moon" of light came from the lower part of each closed eye. The moons rose simultaneously to about the center of where my field of vision would be if my eyes were open. They were not blinding lights—they were much like the light I would see if I had turned toward an open window with my eyes closed, but they were much more defined. Actually, I thought I may have unconsciously turned my head toward the open window while praying, so without opening my eyes, I deliberately turned toward the darker part of the room. The two moons remained

exactly as they were. I knew then that God was showing me all I could handle of His light.

At once, I was overcome with shame. I felt unclean. I dropped to my knees, and then a force gently, but firmly, pushed my body to a prostrate position on the floor. I began to moan and cry uncontrollably. I babbled, "Oh God, oh God, oh God." I was being compared to something holy beyond human comprehension. I felt this awesome sense of the purity of God, the totally unflawed purity. I knew that if I were exposed to the fullness of His light, I would have been instantly incinerated.

I saw myself as pond scum. I wept and wept at my lowly uncleanness. And then it was over, and I felt the same sort of peace I had felt when Bob Parr had shared his story with me. Yet, this peace was even deeper—it seemed as pure as God's light without the fire to incinerate me. I was overcome with immense joy—God's joy! Oh, the ecstasy! I was filled with gratitude in the humbling knowledge that God had stooped to reveal even a little bit of Himself to me.

Immediately after my experience with God's light, I began to have a strong sensation that I should take a trip to Branson, thirty miles south of Springfield. The impression became more intense, so I set out the next day. I started later than I wanted and was about to postpone my trip. KADI was playing on the car radio, but I wasn't paying much attention when suddenly the lyrics leaped out at me, "Light the candle, everything's all right." I knew then that I was supposed to go.

When I got near Branson, I once again said out loud, "God, you got me here; you're driving." God's presence in the car was very strong. Just to the east of Silver Dollar City, Branson's large craft and amusement park, lies a small graveyard. I had driven by it many times, but now I felt I should stop. I knew I was

looking for something, but didn't know what. I wandered all around the cemetery and found nothing. I walked slowly back to the car, then on an ancient obelisk tombstone, the words, "In my Father's house are many mansions" seemed to glow from the sun's reflection. I got back into my car and wrote them down. I knew that they were from somewhere in the Bible and that they were what I was looking for, but I had no idea where they were, or what God meant.

I spent some time in downtown Branson then drove back to the cemetery where I again stopped and went to the gravestone. It was still daylight, but the sun was lower in the sky, and I had to peer closely to read the worn letters. I had to trace the letters of the buried man's name with my fingers in order to make them out. His name was Erastusc Vining.

When I got home, thanks to a supernatural "coincidence," I found that John 14:2 was the passage. I later learned that John 14, 15, and 16 are the most in-depth descriptive chapters in the Bible about the work of the third Person of the Trinity, God the Holy Spirit. As I read through John 14, I read of Jesus' promise that He would send the Holy Spirit to live in and with His followers. I began to understand what had been happening to me. The Holy Spirit had made Himself known to me the day I sat with Bob Parr. I had the Holy Spirit living in me! I was born again! I was saved!

I finished John 14 and noticed the first line of John 15 where Jesus says, "I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener." Vining-Vine! I knew God wanted me to read John 15 as well. I came to John 15:16 where Jesus says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last." I began to weep when the realization swept over me that Jesus had reached down and chosen me. I had nothing

to do with His choice. I wept and wept with gratitude. Jesus Christ was no longer a curse word—He was my Savior and my Lord, and my friend.

God began to cleanse me. I prayed that I would no longer curse, and almost overnight I quit. I stopped writing bad checks. I no longer gambled. I won't even buy a lottery ticket. I quit smoking. This has all happened through the transforming grace of God. Then, through a miraculous series of events, I began to receive Social Security disability because of being diagnosed as bipolar. Again, all God.

In the meantime, I had joined a small Presbyterian church (the denomination of my youth). I was confused because I was seemingly the only one there who had anything near my experience of salvation.

I myself had been zealous for God so much that some fellow alcoholics called me "preacher." Was I no longer able to control my emotions? Was I so "manic" that I had lost complete touch with reality? Or was I truly experiencing God? Yes, I was experiencing God! Through prayer and scripture reading I knew that was true.

I had become aware of a new church in Springfield: James River Assembly. It had begun in 1992 in a storefront with a small number of families and had quickly grown to more than five hundred members in a large new facility. I was curious and felt like I needed to go visit one of their services to see why they had grown so rapidly. I went on May 15th, 1994. I arrived shortly before the service was to start, and everyone was already standing and singing. There was a spirit of true praise and worship in the sanctuary, and I was overwhelmed by it.

Then the pastor bounded to the platform to deliver the sermon. I got out my pad and pen to take notes as he spoke,

something I had never felt compelled to do at my own church. His message was full of Christ, and comfort, and teaching about the Bible. It was quite obvious to me why the church had grown so much: it was the work of the Holy Spirit through believers who lovingly looked to God for guidance. Jesus was the focus. People wanted to come to church to seek Him. In my church, the name of Jesus was hardly mentioned.

Afterwards, I wrote in my journal, "I finally found where they are, these joyful people of God." Praise, joy, and love for Jesus with passion, intensity, and enthusiasm were the infectious marks of those believers.

I later spoke in a meeting of the elders of my church and listed God's expectations for a Christian church. I made the list from their denomination's very own doctrinal statements and the Bible. Church members were to invite new people, lovingly guide them to a saving relationship with Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit, train them, and send them out as disciples to bring others into the Body of Christ.

I was told that was not the way things were done in "our" church. Further, we did not use such terms as "born again" or "saved." They were "red flag" words that were too divisive.

I continued to struggle with doubt in my own heart and mind because of the unbelief I encountered. Was being born again—regenerated, as many denominational doctrines say—really necessary to get to heaven? For that matter, was there really such a thing as being born again at all? If salvation was real and necessary, why did so many people ridicule or ignore it? Why wouldn't people absolutely yearn to be saved and filled with God Himself? Why was there a resistance when a discussion of Jesus reached a certain stage? Why was I the only

person I knew, except those at James River, who cared about salvation?

I knew from my studies and my own experience that a saved person becomes aware of being plucked from the jaws of death and given life in God for eternity. The resulting emotions are awe, joy, and gratitude. A saved person loves God with all his or her heart, mind, body, soul, and strength. There is a complete change of character—a new life. James River was full of saved people and the focus was on their personal relationships with Jesus: they loved Him. My church was not full of saved people, and the focus was on loving each other and the world. There they did not even discuss Jesus, and I had to surmise that they neither knew Him nor loved Him. After all, don't we talk about who or what we love?

My heart broke and still breaks for those in any denomination who regularly attend church, think they are okay with God, and don't even understand that God is personal and alive. The Bible's Greatest Commandment is, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). This commandment is ignored by those who don't attend church, but how can it not be heeded by any true Christian congregation?

The specter of eternal damnation is chilling. The thought of it is so dreadful that I continually ask myself, "Do I really believe people go to hell?" The Bible certainly teaches that, but I want there to be an escape clause somehow. The reality is that Jesus is the only escape clause, and those who reject or ignore His call through the Holy Spirit doom themselves to eternity apart from God. But, how can a God who claims to be Love Himself let this happen?

Love gave us free will. That free will allows us to reject Love. If we were forced to accept Love, it would not be love at all. Heaven is filled with those who have freely accepted Love Himself, and hell is filled with those who have rejected Love.

There is a strong resistance to Jesus because we are selfish beings. To accept Jesus as Savior and Lord requires giving up our control to God. The god of this world (Satan) has deluded us into thinking that we really have control over our lives and that we must cling to that (assumed) control at all costs. In reality, apart from God, we are under slavery to sin no matter how righteous we appear to be. The truth is that when we repent of our selfish, sinful ways and give our lives to God, we receive freedom. "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" is what Jesus says in John 8:32. The truth makes us free to be who God created us to be and that is the purpose of life.

Since that day when I found the believers at James River, I have found thousands more who love Jesus. I have been privileged to see many more saved in jails, prisons, on the streets, and in churches. However, my heart still breaks for those who reject or ignore Him and do not believe.

Salvation is real and necessary to get to heaven. Being born again (regenerated) is *mandatory* to salvation. Jesus says in John 3:3, "I tell you the truth, *no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.*" The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8:9, "*If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ [the Holy Spirit who is sent to live in the new believer at the moment of conversion], he does not belong to Christ.*" The Apostle John wrote in 1 John 5:12, "*He who has the Son [through the indwelling Spirit] has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.*" Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:13, "*We [believers] were all baptized by one Spirit*



## WHAT SALVATION IS

*into one body.*” The Holy Spirit within believers not only testifies to the unity of the Body of Christ, but the Spirit within each individual believer is also God’s guarantee of His gift of salvation now, and for eternity. Again, Paul wrote to believers in Ephesians 1:13-14, “You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation. *Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory*” (all italics are mine).

The *only*—repeat, *only*—way to get to heaven is through belief in Jesus Christ marked by rebirth through the Holy Spirit. That is what this book is all about. The stories within are real stories of persons who have been saved through the centuries, and today, through faith in Jesus. I start with what is regarded as the prototypical salvation story: that of the Apostle Paul.



# PART TWO

## SAUL/PAUL

*“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”*

*“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.*

*“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”*

Around the time of Jesus’ birth, the Apostle Saul (his Aramaic name) was born in Tarsus (in what is now Turkey) on the southeast coast of Asia Minor in the Roman province of Cilicia. The actual date of his birth can only be estimated as no written records exist. In fact, no records exist at all of Saul’s life prior to his first mention in the Bible in Acts 7:58. Historians and theologians have pieced together his story from what evidence they have.

Jewish boys born in Roman provinces were usually given an Aramaic name and a Roman name. Many biblical scholars believe that Paul was Saul’s given Roman name.

Saul’s family probably owned a successful tent-making enterprise. Families like Saul’s, though Jewish, had the full rights of Roman citizenship because they were wealthy, respected residents who had lived for at least four generations in a Roman province. It is likely that Saul had several brothers

and sisters, although the Bible only makes reference to a married sister and her son (Acts 23:16) living in Jerusalem shortly before AD 60.

A city of some 75,000 residents, Tarsus was a crossroads for international trade. It was a major seaport and university center with emphasis on Stoic philosophy. Greek, Latin, and Aramaic were the primary languages. As Saul grew, he would have been influenced by both Jewish and Greek cultures. Tarku, a graven image, was the chief god of many in Tarsus, and a raucous pagan festival was held in the idol's honor every year. The approximately seven-thousand Jews of Tarsus lived in a separate city within the city to isolate themselves from much of the paganism.

Saul was highly intelligent and well-educated, as evidenced later by his writing skills and broad knowledge. He spoke classical Greek as well as Koine (common dialect) Greek and Aramaic, the common language of the Jews. His father was a Pharisee (a religious leader), so Saul was definitely raised with knowledge of the Jewish law. His studies would have begun at age five, and by age ten, he would have been well-versed in the Oral Law. By thirteen, Jewish boys were considered men. At that age, Saul would have started to wear the phylacteries (leather boxes containing verses from Hebrew scripture) on his forehead and left arm. According to the precise laws, the straps on his left arm would have been wound exactly seven times around.

Probably shortly after he reached the age of thirteen, Saul set out from Tarsus to Jerusalem on a merchant ship. He likely wore the clothes of a wealthy young Jew: a linen tunic with a woolen cloak and leather sandals. He almost certainly traveled with an older male companion his father had picked.

After Saul and his companion crossed the Mediterranean Sea, they would have ridden donkeys to traverse the thirty-five miles inland to Jerusalem. Saul probably went straight to the Temple when he arrived. The huge edifice would have been an awesome sight with its giant stone blocks covered with gold, silver, and polished bronze. The stones were gleaming white where the walls were not covered with precious metals.

Saul was an intense young man, and because of his great mind and education, he became a student of Gamaliel, a distinguished teacher and leader of the Great Sanhedrin, the body which held all religious and legal authority among the Jews in Jerusalem. In his college of about one-thousand students, Saul's day was filled with rituals. To the Pharisees, following God meant to obey the laws given by God to Moses in the first five books of the Bible. Their extensive interpretation and elaboration on the Mosaic Law was known as the Oral Torah (Law). Detailed rules regulated the way Saul put his garments on in the morning and took them off at night. Like all of the Pharisees and their students, he was required to sprinkle his hands before meals in just a certain way with distinctive sets of cups and pots for daily purification. Surely, Saul followed the regulations meticulously and proudly wore the long robes with blue tassels which were an identifying mark of the Pharisees.

In his years of schooling, Saul became fervent in prayer (which to the Pharisees was always dramatic, not passive), worship, and study. He committed much of the Hebrew scriptures to memory, including the many prophetic passages regarding the coming Messiah. Saul, like his contemporaries, would have firmly believed that the scriptures pointed to the Messiah as a great warrior king who would come in glory, destroy Israel's enemies, and establish Israel's eternal kingdom.

The only physical description of Saul, which may or may not be accurate, is given in a second-century extra-biblical writing, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. In it, Saul is described as a short, strong man with a balding head and slightly bowed legs. It is obvious that his hands were toughened and his arms and shoulders strengthened by working in his family's tent-making trade.

Because of his small stature and passion to excel, he was probably not well-liked by many of his classmates. Later as Paul he wrote that he "was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers" (Galatians 1:14). He was arrogant. Years later, a much humbled Paul wrote of the things of the flesh that had led to his arrogance, "If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" (Philippians 3:4-6).

As a young man, Saul had no awareness that there was a living God, but God was soon to reveal Himself in a powerful way. First, Saul had to be fully prepared by the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). Anyone who is saved is at first drawn by the Holy Spirit to Jesus through supernatural revelation. The Holy Spirit begins to open a person's eyes so he or she can understand the true meaning of the Gospel (John 16:8-11). Unless this drawing occurs, salvation does not come. Humans are unable to turn to God on their own. The Bible says that people are dead to the things of the Spirit until He opens their eyes.

Saul was in Jerusalem during the time of Jesus, but it is likely he never saw Him or heard Him speak. Saul was also probably physically in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' crucifixion (approximately AD 30). As described in the Gospels, the hours of total darkness from noon until three and the earth shaking and rocks being split would have been experienced by Saul, or certainly related to him by others if he were not there. The fact that the curtain of the Temple was torn from top to bottom would have been no secret to any of the Pharisees. Yet, they were so blinded by their own prideful devotion to their way of life that they were impervious to even such dramatic events.

After Jesus' crucifixion (probably within two years), Saul guarded the coats of the men who stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Stephen had enraged the members of the Great Sanhedrin by telling them Jesus was the promised Messiah and saying.

You are just like your fathers. You always resist the Holy Spirit! . . . And now you have betrayed and murdered him [Jesus, the prophesied Righteous One] . . . . Yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him [Stephen], dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' . . . *Saul was there, giving approval to his death.*" (Acts 7:57-8:1, italics are mine)

The Greek word for approval means “taking pleasure.” Saul cheered them on while they threw the stones.

But, since Saul was a man of great passion, he must have subconsciously felt a connection with the passion and faith of Stephen. As Saul turned this over in his mind, along with the events surrounding the crucifixion, his absolute allegiance to the Pharisees’ way of thinking and strict following of the Mosaic Law was probably shaken. Still, to him, it was impossible that an itinerant preacher, crucified and buried, could be the long-awaited Messiah.

The Bible says that immediately after the stoning of Stephen, “A great persecution broke out” (Acts 8:1) against the followers of Jesus. Acts 8:3 states, “Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.” He also tried to force them to deny Jesus and sought to have them put to death. He was stopping at nothing to defend the Jewish law. Perhaps Saul had intensified his persecution efforts because a nagging doubt was growing in the back of his mind threatening his deeply-ingrained beliefs. In fact, who he was and all he stood for was being challenged by this doubt.

But, “Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way [followers of Jesus], whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:1-2). Saul was a man obsessed.

Then, “As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground [blinded] and heard a voice say to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked. [By then, he



probably knew the answer before he asked the question.] ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. ‘Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do’” (Acts 9:3-6).

This was Saul’s moment of conversion for which the Holy Spirit had prepared the way. He became aware of the living God and his shameful condition in relation to God’s holiness. Those who are saved always experience this moment of spiritual revelation, but the Holy Spirit lovingly makes it different for everyone depending on his or her individual personality and circumstances.

Genuine conversion always brings repentance, which is a turning around from sinful ways to God’s ways. The first recorded preaching of Jesus was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matthew 4:17). Repentance is absolutely necessary to salvation. Regarding repentance, around AD 55, Saul as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 7:10, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation.” He wrote in 1 Timothy 1:15, “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.” Saul was regarded as one of the holiest of men by the Jews, yet he was a sinner in God’s eyes. Knowing God’s holiness well, he later wrote to the Romans, “*All* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23, italics are mine).

No amount of “being good” will ever reconcile any person with God. True repentance is the only way reconciliation can come. Repentance immediately precedes saving faith, a free bestowal from God. Thirty years after he was converted, Paul wrote, “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith”

(Ephesians 2:8). He continued, “And this [faith] not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”

When conversion happens, a person is born again. Jesus says in John 3:3, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” Salvation is a profound spiritual experience freely given by God. The Holy Spirit comes to live within the new believer. Saul, as Paul, summed this up late in his ministry when he wrote to his disciple Titus, “He [God] saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5b-7). Believers are regenerated. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Directly following his experience on the Damascus road, Saul was led into that city and did not eat or drink for three days. Then God sent a man named Ananias who “[Placed] his hands on Saul, [and] he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength” (Acts 9:17b-19a).

Like Saul, a new believer should be baptized. This is the vital first step of obedience to the Lord, and is a public testimony of saving faith.

After Saul was baptized, he spent a few days with the disciples in Damascus, and “At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. . . . Saul grew more and

more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 9:20, 22). Saul preached with so much effect that the Jews conspired to kill him. Hearing of this, one night other believers lowered him in a basket through an opening in the one-hundred-foot high wall around the city to make his escape back to Jerusalem.

Saul was initially distrusted by the people of the Way there because they thought he might be trying to trick them. But Barnabas, a respected believer, befriended him and took him to the apostles. Barnabas explained what had happened to Saul and how he had become a bold preacher in Jesus' name. Saul then stayed in Jerusalem and freely proclaimed the truth about Jesus. He was so effective that once again, the Jews, many of whom were probably former classmates and teachers, conspired to kill him. The disciples then rushed Saul off to the port city of Caesarea to catch a ship back to Tarsus.

It is not known how he was received in Tarsus, but he likely was accepted back by his family and continued in the tent-making trade for the five to seven years he was there. As time passed, the church in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had a period of peace. According to Acts 9:31, "It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers."

Many followers who had scattered during the persecution following the stoning of Stephen went to Antioch (its ruins are near Antakya in modern Turkey) and spoke to Greeks about Jesus. A large number believed and turned to Him. Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to observe what was happening, and when he arrived he encouraged them all to remain true to God. Barnabas then went to Tarsus to find Saul. He brought him back to Antioch, and for a year they stayed and taught about Jesus

with great effect. Antioch is where the members of the Way were first called Christians.

The Holy Spirit then asked the church to set apart Saul and Barnabas, “For the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2b). This is another aspect of salvation. Jesus says to His disciples in John 15:16, “You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.” In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote, “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*” (Ephesians 2:10, italics are mine). All those who have been saved are saved for specific works in the kingdom of God on earth.

Saul and Barnabas set out and traveled across Cypress to Paphos on the other end of the island. There they met Elymas, a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet, who was an attendant of the Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus. Elymas tried to keep them away from the proconsul and “Saul, who was also called Paul” (Acts 13:9) invoked the power of the Holy Spirit, and Elymas was blinded. The miracle caused the proconsul to believe, and he became Saul’s first recorded convert. This passage is also the first time Saul is called Paul in the Bible.

Paul chose to change his own name as opposed to the Apostle Peter whose name was changed by Jesus. No one knows for certain why Paul made the change. Perhaps it was to honor his first convert, Sergius Paulus. Paul may have started going by that name because he was starting to realize how small and insignificant he was to do the job for which God had called him. In the Greek, Paul means “small.” But most likely, he started using the name because he was called to the Gentiles (non-Jews) where his Roman name would be more widely accepted.

After Paphos, Paul and Barnabas continued their travels and always spoke in the synagogues first to give the Jews an opportunity to accept the Gospel before they reached out to the Gentiles. Finding little acceptance there, they went to the Gentiles who were much more open. In the cities, poor classes all mingled together in ghetto-like environments. The Gospel promised a new way of life which would put an end to suffering. The Jews were blinded by their traditions, but the Gentiles were hungry for the joy and promise Christianity provided.

Paul and Barnabas went on to the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch where Paul preached about Jesus being raised from the dead. Paul said, "Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:38b-39). They were invited back the following week, and "Almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord" (Acts 13:44). The Jewish leaders were jealous of the great crowds and "expelled" Paul and Barnabas from the city. The Bible says that those who did accept Jesus, Jews and Gentiles, "Were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:52).

All of Paul's travels are found in Acts and in his letters which comprise thirteen of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament. It is not the purpose of this work to retell those events. The focus here remains on Paul's story as the prototype of God's salvation.

Paul and Barnabas did continue to travel together until they had a "sharp" disagreement (Acts 15:36-41) about John Mark, Barnabas' young nephew who deserted them in Pamphylia. Later, the three men reconciled, and John Mark is credited with

writing the Gospel of Mark. Paul was always an outspoken man, also confronting the Apostle Peter who hypocritically stopped eating with the Gentiles after some Jewish brothers showed up to join the Christians in Galatia (Galatians 2:11-14).

God mellowed Paul though. Through God's transforming work, Saul the persecutor became Paul the man overflowing with God's love. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 13, the "love chapter" in the Bible. It includes the moving passage, "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a).

To the Ephesians he wrote, "I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge" (Ephesians 3:17b-19a). He wrote from his jail cell to the Philippians, "God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God" (Philippians 1:8-11). All of Paul's writings are filled with the love of God. .

This filling with love is another distinctive mark of salvation called sanctification. Sanctification is the ongoing work of God in the believer, making the believer more like Jesus. It is supernatural and progressive in this life on earth. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "The fruit of the [Holy] Spirit is love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22). As believers trust and obey God, they more and more display this fruit in their lives. Paul wrote to his disciple Titus that Jesus, "Gave himself for us [believers] to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:14). Paul came to the point that he could proclaim, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). Paul lived fully in the love of God, seeking only to do His will.

Perseverance is the culminating step in salvation. Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27-28). Those who are truly saved will not fall away. Paul wrote to the Philippians, "In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that *he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 1:4-6, italics are mine).

Paradoxically, God begins and completes His work in believers, but believers also must persevere to overcome. Paul instructed the Philippians, "To work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12b-13). The author of Hebrews wrote, "Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised [eternal salvation]" (Hebrews 10:35-36). Jesus reiterated His promise to the believers in Revelation. One example is from His message to the church in Ephesus, "To him

[or her] who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (Revelation 2:7).

Paul persevered through almost unimaginable trials and tribulations. In his words.

[I have] been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (2 Corinthians 11:23b-27)

All of this is only a portion of what Paul endured for the sake of Jesus.

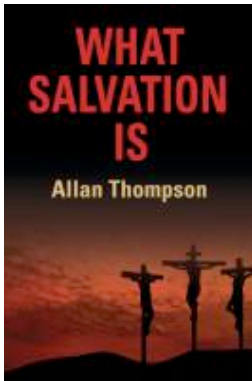
At the end of his life, Paul was imprisoned in Rome during the reign of Nero. He was held in chains under extremely difficult cold and miserable conditions. He was around sixty and probably was only skin and bones by then. Certainly his body was broken and scarred from his many trials, and he was probably in constant pain. Yet, he could write to his beloved disciple Timothy, "The time has come for my departure. I have



fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—*and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing*” (2 Timothy 4:6b-8, italics are mine).

Saul set out to destroy the Church and through God’s grace—as Paul—wound up being instrumental in establishing it.

Tradition says that Paul was beheaded sometime between AD 64 and 67 as a victim of Nero’s murderous persecution of the Christians. The Church of St. Paul of Three Fountains (*Tre Fontane*) was built on the location where Paul was executed. The tomb of Saint Paul is in the Basilica San Paolo, known as St. Paul’s Outside the Walls, in Rome.



*WHAT SALVATION IS* opens with Allan Thompson's story and powerful saving encounter with Jesus. Since then, Allan has spent much time learning more about God's supernatural salvation. Allan shares here about God's redemption by writing of God's saving work in the Apostle Paul, and in other Christians through the centuries. Allan also writes of God's salvation in many current Christians. God is alive, and His grace is real, necessary, and available for all.

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