

THE THIRD STEP

In the last couple months we've talked about the first and second steps in the salvation process in order to be justified in God's sight, and how these steps relate to the third angel's message of **Revelation 14:9-12**; and these first two steps are repentance and confession. But what do we do once we've been made right with God through these first two steps? Is that all that's required in order for us to be assured a place in heaven? There are many that would say yes, that's all that's required to be saved, and I would agree, if one died right after these first two steps, like the thief on the cross, but the Bible does not teach that once we're saved we're eternally secure. Life goes on, and we must learn to walk and keep on walking in newness of life; to walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. If you want a good study this afternoon, read **Romans chapters 6 and 8**; it's very clear that God has made a way for us to live a life of joyful obedience. Because the wages of sin is eternal death, and God wants us to live eternally, there has to be a way for us to stop sinning.

Years ago I heard someone say, "I believe in once saved always saved as long as you keep saved", and I believe that to be a true statement, and this is why there has to be a third step. After repentance and confession there has to be a way to remain justified by faith, otherwise the rest of our lives would be spent sinning and repenting, sinning and repenting, sinning and repenting; and unfortunately that's the way most professed Christians will live their entire lives till the day they die, but if they die that way they will have a shocking surprise when they find themselves outside the walls of the Holy City looking in just before fire comes down from God out of heaven and devours them. Sorry to be so graphic, but it's true. What a shock it will be for millions of people that thought they were ready to meet Jesus.

Remember the group Jesus mentioned in **Matthew 7** that will say, "*Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will (Jesus) profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.*" What a shock for those who thought they were doing God's service, only to find out they were really serving the devil. What a realization of absolute horror they will experience, but that doesn't have to be your experience; that's the good news. God has made every provision for us to inherit immortality when He returns, but we've got to follow the blueprint contained between the two covers of the book.

Well, let's talk for a minute about what one does to become justified by faith to begin with. The change that takes place in our lives when we first become children of God is spoken of in the Bible as a birth, and as a born again experience. It's also compared to the germination of good seed that a farmer sows in his field. In **1 Peter 2:2** it says we are like "*newborn babes*",

and **Ephesians 4:13** says we are to “*grow up*” until we look just like Christ in all His perfection, and **Isaiah 61:3** says the followers of Christ shall “*be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that God might be glorified.*” You see, that's what it's all about; we as Christians making God look good; making Him attractive so that others will desire to surrender all to Jesus.

All these different illustrations in the Bible are given to help us better understand the mysterious truths of spiritual life. It's only through the life that God imparts that all things live, whether plant or animal; and in the same way, it's only through life from God that spiritual life begins and continues. Unless a man is “*born from above,*” Jesus told Nicodemus, he cannot become a partaker of the life that Christ came to give, and it's the same with growth.

Just as you cannot become born by yourself, neither can you grow spiritually apart from God. When Jesus said, “*without me you can do nothing*”, that's exactly what He meant! That goes for both beginning and continuing the spiritual life. **Hebrews 12:2** says that Jesus is both the author and finisher of our faith, so don't ever think that you can somehow go it on your own. God doesn't get us started in our spiritual walk and then kick us out of the nest and say, “ok, now you're on your own.” There will never be a time when we don't need Christ. We have to receive the life of Christ every day, and throughout the day, or we'll surely yield to temptation, and as soon as we do, we die spiritually, just like Adam and Eve when they ate of the forbidden fruit.

Remember what God told them in **Genesis 2:17**? “*But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it: for in the day that you eat thereof you shall surely die.*” They didn't die physically that day, did they? No, they died spiritually! Yes they started to age and would one day die physically, but they died spiritually that very day. That's why an animal had to be killed in order to cover their nakedness. That animal represented Jesus that would one day come and sacrifice His own life that we might have a chance to be born again and receive the gift of eternal life. But what if we choose to sin after being born again? This is the important question we must be able to answer correctly if we would one day receive immortality.

I was talking to a Baptist one day about this subject and his theory was that once you've been born again you can't be unborn, therefore everyone that accepts Christ is saved and can't be lost. After thinking about that for a few seconds my reply to that was to say that it's true, once you've been born again you can't be unborn, but you can die can't you? And if you die wouldn't you have to be reborn in order to live again?

You see dear friends, spiritually that's what happens when we repent and confess our sins,

and this process has to happen every time we knowingly disobey the law of God. If we sin, we must be born again, or we cannot live again. Never forget it; Jesus is your life, and if He is forced out of it because of willful sin, the only way you can have life again is to invite Him back in.

Many people get all confused when they think of eternal life and immortality, because they're not the same thing, but they think they are. When we accept Christ, eternal life begins, but we can forfeit eternal life through disobedience. The only reason we have eternal life when we accept Christ is because the One who is Life lives within, but we are free at any time to follow another master, and as soon as we do Jesus no longer abides, and when Jesus no longer abides we abide in death, because that's all the other master has to offer. Satan is a defeated foe, and eternal death is his sentence, to be executed at the end of the thousand years spoken of in **Revelation 20:6, 7**, and if we are connected to him at that time, that will be our sentence as well.

Immortality, on the other hand, is something that can never be taken away once it's given, but before we receive it, at the coming of Christ according to **1 Corinthians 15:51-55**, we have to be tried in the furnace of affliction and develop the kind of character that is safe to take to heaven, otherwise we'd spoil it, and God won't allow that to happen.

That's why the decisions we make in this life are so important, because there's not going to be another chance, or a second probation, this life is it! In fact, this life is a second probation for the human race, because Adam and Eve blew the first one. So don't be fooled into thinking there'll be another chance during what many refer to as a 7-year tribulation after a secret rapture. We don't have time this morning to study into this cunningly devised fable, but many are going to be fooled by it, and I hope you're not one of them.

Hebrews 10:26, 27 says, *“If we sin willfully (knowingly) after that we have received the knowledge of the truth (did Adam and Eve sin willfully? Yes; they may not have understood the full consequences of their disobedience, but they knew not to mess with the tree that was in the midst of the garden, didn't they?). If we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remains no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation.”*

“No more sacrifice for sins” means that the sacrifice of Christ no longer covers us when we willfully transgress God's ten commandment law. When that happens, we have to go through the first and second steps of repentance and confession once again in order to be forgiven and cleansed and set back on the road to spiritual growth. In other words, we must be born again; we have to be spiritually resurrected; we must partake once again of the divine nature,

otherwise we will never be victorious.

So don't let anyone ever tell you that you can be saved in sin, or that the blood of Jesus still covers you while you have ongoing sin in your life; that's a lie of the devil! And according to **2 Thessalonians 2:11** it's not just "*a lie*", but when you study it out you'll find that it is "*THE lie*" that Satan is trying to get us to swallow, and for the most part he's been very successful. This is one of the passages in the Old King James Bible that would be better translated "*the lie*" and not just "*a lie*." In other words, the main lie that the devil wants us to believe is that we can have pleasure in unrighteousness, or sin, and still have God's approval. Notice what it says in ***The Great Controversy*, page 582**; I just love this book:

"From the very beginning of the great controversy in heaven it has been Satan's purpose to overthrow the law of God. It was to accomplish this that he entered upon his rebellion against the Creator, and though he was cast out of heaven he has continued the same warfare upon the earth. To deceive men, and thus lead them to transgress God's law, is the object which he has steadfastly pursued. . . . The last great conflict between truth and error is but the final struggle of the long-standing controversy concerning the law of God."

The sole purpose of Satan's deceptions is to cause us to break God's law any way he can do it. Because as professed Christians if he can get us to do that and at the same time fool us into thinking that the sacrifice of Christ still covers us while we are engaging in sin, then he has accomplished his goal.

Now back to the growth process. I just planted some blueberry bushes in my garden, and I know it's God that causes the plants to bud and bloom and bring forth fruit, and I can't wait until they're ripe enough to eat. But I also know that if they don't continue to receive water, and sunlight, and the nutrients of the earth, I'll never see the fruit mature, no matter how good of a start they had; no matter how careful I was to make sure they were planted and fertilized correctly, and it's the same way with us. We need God at every step of our spiritual grow, not just at the beginning. And when you think about it, that takes the pressure off us and puts it on Christ who can handle it. All we have to do is place ourselves within His space and do what He tells us to do, and we will grow; and as we grow we will become more like Him in character, and that's what it will take to give us an abundant entrance into God's everlasting kingdom.

It's by God's power that the seed develops. In **Mark 4:28** Jesus said, "*first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.*" He also said, "*consider the lilies how they grow.*" The plants and flowers don't grow by their own effort, but by receiving what God has supplied to minister to their life.

In **Matthew 6:27** Jesus said, *“which of you by taking thought (that is, “to be anxious about”) can add one cubit to his stature?”* Now a cubit is the length of the average adult forearm. Not only can we not add about a foot and a half to our height by worry, or anxiety, or effort; we can't even add one inch! And it's the same way with spiritual growth. What water and food and sunshine are to my blueberries, such is Christ to me when I trust in Him to supply my needs.

By the gift of God in giving Jesus to the human race, He has encircled the entire globe with an atmosphere of grace as real as the air we breathe. And if we choose to breathe this life-giving atmosphere, we will live and grow up to the stature of men and women in Christ Jesus.

It's interesting how plants were designed to turn toward the sun in order to perfect their beauty, it's called heliotropism, and if we are going to perfect the beauty of our character, we must turn to the Son of Righteousness, because that's the way God designed it should happen.

Notice with me what Jesus said in **John 15:4, 5**: *“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can you, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches: He that abides in me, and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit: for without me you can do nothing.”*

In other words, we are just as dependent upon Christ, in order to live a holy life as it is for the branch upon the parent stock to grow and produce fruit. Apart from Christ we have no life, period! We have no power in ourselves to resist temptation or to grow in grace and holiness, but if we abide in Him, we'll live and thrive like a tree planted by the side of a river.

However, there's a caution when thinking about these things, because there are some who think they don't have to do anything to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling, but that's normally not the problem within Adventism, at least it didn't used to be. Our problem has been more along the lines of thinking we have to do some part of the work alone. There's no lack of understanding when it comes to trusting in Christ for the forgiveness of sin, but after that many try by their own efforts to live a godly life, and many would say, “I know better than that”, not realizing that when they fail to spend time with God and His word, they really are trying by their own efforts to live a righteous life. But you know what friends, every such effort will fail, it has to, because our growth in grace, our joy, and our usefulness in this life all depend upon being connected to Christ, and you can't stay connected when you go day after day neglecting your study and prayer time. It just won't work!

It's by communion with Jesus, every day, and every hour of the day, that we must abide in

Him; that's how we grow in grace. He has to be with us, not only at the beginning, but at the end of our course as well, and even at every step along the way. In **Psalm 16:8** David said, *"I have set the Lord always before me (always): because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved."* If we are connected to the Lord all the time, the devil cannot defeat us, but if we're not, he will, no question.

When many people hear things like abiding in Christ, they wonder, how am I supposed to do it? What does it mean to abide in Christ? Well, it's really quite simple; you abide in Him the same way you first received Him. **Colossians 2:6** says, *"As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him."* And how did you first receive Him? **Hebrews 10:38** says, *"The just shall live by faith."* If you've never been converted you might well wonder how to abide, but if you've truly been born again, you know how that came about, and you just have to go back and recapture that experience if you've lost it.

Just as you accepted Christ by faith and trusted Him to save you at first; in the very same way you have to maintain a vital connection with Him. That's how we're justified and that's how we're sanctified; that's how we're pardoned and that's how we live in holiness; that's how salvation comes, and that's how it remains.

When you accepted Christ you gave yourself completely to Him, didn't you? You gave yourself to be wholly His, to serve Him and to obey Him; it's very similar to marriage; in fact, that's what the Bible likens it to. It's by loving Him and no one else, and depending wholly upon Him and no one else, that we're to be transformed into His likeness. If you don't depend upon Christ, who are you going to depend on, yourself or some other sinful mortal? That would be a fatal mistake, but many people are making it.

Whenever we look to self or to another person, we turn away from Christ; how can it be any other way? That's what the devil wants, because it'll destroy any union and communion you might have had with Him. Plants don't have a choice but to turn toward the sun, but we do have a choice, and we can turn away from Christ any time we want.

If Satan can get you to separate from Christ by worldly pleasures, or the cares of this life, or by dwelling on the faults of others, or even your own faults and imperfections, he has accomplished his goal. These are his devices to lead you away from Jesus as the source of life; don't let him do it.

I remember talking with a man several years ago that didn't believe he could be saved; that he was predestined to be lost; in fact I wrote a small booklet about it called "Fuel For The Fires Of Hell", because that's what he thought he was. This man dwelt upon his own faults and

weaknesses and imperfections to the point that Satan gained complete control over him. He said he wanted to serve Christ, but he indulged anxiety and fear as to whether or not he would be saved for so long that he lost all hope. And if you've ever thought that way, you need to stop it and realize that you are precious in God's sight and that Jesus loved you enough to die for you. Don't let Satan discourage you that way.

The truth is, everyone is predestined to be saved, that's why Christ died on the cross, but we can frustrate His purpose if we choose. If Jesus didn't think you were worth it, He wouldn't have come down here in the first place. The cross of Calvary speaks loud and clear that the way is open for you to inherit eternal life, and when you dwell upon self, of course you get discouraged, because self is full of imperfections and shortcomings. Self is sinful, because your human nature is sinful, and when you look away from Christ to self, what do you have left? All you have left is your sinful self. But if you leave sinful self in God's hands; if you allow yourself to be crucified with Christ, He will bring you off more than conqueror through Him that loves you.

When Christ took human nature, He bound Himself to humanity by a tie of love that can't be broken by any power except our own choice, and Satan will constantly present falsehoods and enticements to us in hopes we will break this tie by choosing to separate ourselves from Christ. But it's absolutely insane to choose another master when Christ is the best Master we could ever have. But you know, the God of heaven is not a God of force, and we are always free to choose to go contrary to His plan for us.

So what we need to do is keep our eyes fixed on Christ, and He'll preserve us. Looking unto Jesus, we're always safe, and nothing can pluck us out of His hand; that's the promise of Jesus Himself in **John 10:28, 29**, but again, we can jump out of His hand any time we choose, but why would we do that? It's only because the world becomes attractive to us when we neglect our time with Christ.

A godly character is not something that comes naturally to any of us, but it happens as we go places and do things with Christ. Think of His disciples when they were with Him as they traveled and ate and slept and prayed and worked together. As a result of being with Him almost constantly they began to reflect His character more and more. Why? Because it's a law of the mind that by beholding we become changed. What you expose yourself to will mold your character one way or the other.

Even the apostle John, the one who most fully reflected the character of the Christ, did not naturally possess a lovely character, did he? He was not only self-assertive and ambitious for self honor, but he had a fierce and violent temper as well. He and his brother were called

“sons of thunder” for a reason. They were the kind of guys that would fly off the handle at the least provocation and stomp on any one that got in their way.

But as John observed the character of Christ day in and day out, he began to see his own deficiencies by comparison, and was humbled by the way Jesus dealt with various situations. All the godly traits of character that Jesus manifested in every crisis, as well as in His daily routine, filled John's soul with admiration and love, and as he yielded to it, it changed him dramatically. Do you want that kind of change? You can have it, but you've got to spend time with Him; it doesn't come any other way.

Day by day John's heart was drawn out toward Christ until he lost sight of self in love for his Master. And this same transformation will happen to us as we yield ourselves to Christ as John did. This character change is the sure result of union with Jesus. When He abides in the heart, the whole nature is transformed, and not only our thoughts, but also our desires will be toward God and heaven. If you don't have a desire to serve God from the heart, then there's something wrong, and your character will never be formed in righteousness.

Listen to these inspired words from ***The Desire of Ages, page 668***, “All true obedience comes from the heart. It was heart work with Christ. And if we consent (**that's our small part**), He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity to His will, that when obeying Him we shall be but carrying out our own impulses. The will (**or the power of choice**), refined and sanctified, will find its highest delight in doing His service. When we know God as it is our privilege to know Him, our life will be a life of continual obedience. Through an appreciation of the character of Christ, through communion with God, sin will become hateful to us.”

Oh friend, search your own heart and don't fool yourself into thinking you're all right with God if the words we just read are not a reality in your life. If we are not obeying God from the heart, if it's not a delight to serve Him, it will do nothing for our character, and if our character does not reflect the character of Christ, He can't claim us as His own, and if He can't claim us as His own, we will be left behind to come up in the second resurrection after the thousand years are finished, and believe me, you don't want to have that experience.

1 John 5:3 says, *“For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous”* or burdensome. If obeying God is a burden to you, then your love for Him isn't what it should be; there's something wrong when it's like pulling teeth to get you to do what He wants you to do. And of course it's self that's causing all the problems.

What we've been looking at over the past three months are the ABC's of salvation; the 1, 2, 3 of the gospel, and it's not complicated. We act upon the gift of repentance by confessing, or acknowledging that we have sinned; God forgives us and we learn to live a new life, even the life of Christ by spending time with Him. That's about as simple as it gets. The theological terms for this are justification and sanctification; being pardoned and then learning how to keep living a holy life once we're forgiven and cleansed of all our past sins.

This is what the third angel's message is all about. This is the process we go through to be changed from a sinner to a saint and to grow into the likeness of Christ. Let me illustrate this growth process by telling you a short story.

Grandpa and his sweet little grand-daughter were out in the garden one day, and grandpa was planting corn. The soil had been prepared and a straight furrow was made for the seed, and as grandpa was getting ready with a handful of seed to drop them in the dirt and cover them over, the grand-daughter said, "Grandpa, what are those square little wrinkled up yellow things in your hand"? and Grandpa said, "that's corn." And she said, "oh."

Then about a week and a half later when the grand-daughter was visiting grandpa again, they were out in the garden, and pointing to where grandpa had planted those square little wrinkled up yellow things a few days before, there were these little round green shoots sticking up out of the ground about an inch high, and she said, "Grandpa, what's that"? and Grandpa said, "that's corn", and the little girl, with a puzzled look on her face said, "oh."

It was some time before the grand-daughter came to visit grandpa again and by this time the corn was much taller and had tassels on top and leaves sticking out all over the place and she said, "Grandpa, what's that", and again Grandpa said, "that's corn." "Oh."

Well, several more weeks went by before the grand-daughter was back to see grandpa and his garden, and by this time the corn was about six feet high and there were three or four long things growing off the sides of each stalk with what looked like hair growing out the ends of each one, and she said, "Grandpa, what's that?" and Grandpa said, "that's corn."

You see friends, that corn was perfect at each stage of development, wasn't it? even though it looked very different during each stage as it grew, and that's how we can be perfect in Christ and still have some growing to do. We start out as babes in Christ, but as long as we take in the nutrients from God's word, and the Holy Spirit waters it, and we are constantly turned toward the Son of Righteousness, we will be perfect at each stage as we grow up into Christ; and as we're growing this way, we will have the patience of the saints and be able to truly keep the commandments of God, because we have the same faith that Jesus had. But make

no mistake, when we willfully transgress God's law, the growth process stops and we are in danger of shriveling up unless we make a quick work of repentance and confession.

And keep this in mind, if we are not continually growing in Christ, we're sinning, we're going backwards, and if we are sinning we're in a lost condition. There's no such thing as standing still in our character development; we're either going forward or we're losing ground. The fallen nature is in love with sin, and unfortunately each one of us has one, but as we partake of the divine nature on a continual basis as it says in **2 Peter 1:4**, and follow where it leads, we will have victory over sin and be prepared to take our flight when Jesus comes.

I believe it was Benjamin Franklin who said, "Failing to prepare is preparing to fail", and someone else once said, "If you never start you will never finish." friend, today is the day to get back on track if you've been sidetracked, because every day you delay makes it that much harder to be found without spot or wrinkle or any such thing.

Christ's Object Lessons, page 69 says, "When the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own."

This likeness to Christ involves a preparation in this life, a preparation that requires right choices and decisions all along the way, and if we're not making right choices, we truly are preparing to fail. May this not be your experience, but may each one of us be preparing to succeed by taking hold of Christ with the attitude that we will not let Him go.