

THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

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Lessons from Fall

Zach Crane

To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

Many of us have had the blessing of witnessing a beautiful transformation over the past several weeks. As summer melts into fall, God's creation has responded. Hot, humid days have succumbed to cool, crisp nights. Lush, green foliage has given way to brilliant, burning red, yellow, and gold shades. Sprawling, leafy canopies that once soaked in abundant sunlight and moisture – providing vital nutrients to its host and welcoming shade to its visitors – are now colorful carpets spread below bare branches.

Watching these changes take place each autumn is something I await with eager anticipation. They usher in a sense of relief and fulfillment. They provide an escape from the oppressive heat of long summer days and harbor expectations of bountiful harvests, tables furnished with the Lord's blessings and provision. They produce scenes and experiences that leave me in awe of our mighty and loving Father. And yet, I believe there is even more beauty to these shifting seasons than what meets the eye. There is more to observe and appreciate about these transformations beyond the stunning scenery or quaint cornucopia centerpieces. There is more to be gleaned from our Creator's masterful design than what we gather from our fields and gardens. There is wisdom and instruction, comfort, and consolation. There is purpose in the process.

As days become shorter and sunlight scarcer, trees and other vegetation respond by reducing their chlorophyll production. For city folk like myself, chlorophyll is a key ingredient in photosynthesis – the process of converting sunlight into energy. It's also the pigment that gives leaves their rich green color. As chlorophyll levels wane, so does the leaf's bright green, giving way to fall's beautiful, blazing colors. On the surface, it may seem as if this transformation from a full, lush tree to one that is naked and bare is simply the result of irresistible and overwhelming attrition, an organism overpowered and beat down by its surroundings – unable to hold on any longer. But there is more to the story. There is a deeper, more purposeful reason for this change. A reason far

more important than impressing gawkers like myself. The tree actively adapts and prepares for what is inevitably coming – the changing seasons – a lean and harsh winter. As such, there is a shedding of the ancillary in preference of the primary. Amenities that were once necessary and useful – that served a purpose and were beautiful in their time – must now be put off, at least for a time. The energy required to maintain that once splendid and glorious canopy of green is now needed elsewhere. As the foliage falls and branches become bare, the tree begins focusing its energy on growth that may be less obvious – but certainly no less significant. It's during this time of apparent decline that a tree's root system experiences one of its more rapid growth spurts, a process aided by the insulating layer of freshly fallen leaves. While the visible begins to recede – the invisible is growing and expanding.

There seems to be a lesson or two implanted in our Lord's amazing design. When I'm tempted to cling desperately and futilely to what is destined and designed to fade and fall away – when I'm inclined to lament the sight of bare branches once robed in splendor and vibrance – maybe it's time to reflect on my favorite season. Maybe what I'm observing and experiencing isn't an indication of weakness or frailty. Maybe it's not something to dread or mourn. Maybe it's not a grim resignation to barrenness or futility. It could just be time to focus on something more important and pressing than soaking up the sun. It may be time to concentrate our energy on sending roots down deeper: to expand our understanding of and appreciation for God's word, to strengthen our relationship with the Lord and His people, to solidify our grip on the firm foundation. Doing so may just be what helps us survive dark and difficult days ahead. It may provide the resiliency needed to weather the harsh and bitter environments that inevitably come upon us all. It may even position and prepare us to yield more fruit in our next growing season.

As surely and swiftly as summer has faded to fall – so will life's seasons come and go. That's what God's creation and word tells us. God willing, there will be days of birth and rejuvenation – days of newness and rapid growth. There will be long days in the sun – days of toil, production, and strength. There will be days of relief and bounty – days to sit down and enjoy the fruits of our labors and God's rich blessings. And there will be days of darkness – quiet days of emptiness and loneliness. But God's creation and word also teach us there is

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purpose and beauty in it all. Like Paul (**Philippians 4:12-13**), we can learn to be content in all seasons and circumstances and find our strength is something far deeper than the superficial – our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Because Christ was willing to temporarily shed the glory rightfully due Him, to be debased, to lay down His very life for us, and because He rose again – we have hope. I hope that no matter what season we're in – no matter what we're experiencing in this life – there is a day coming we shall be raised to die no more. When the mortal puts on immortality and death is swallowed up in victory, we would do well to take a lesson from fall – to shed, and put off, whatever is necessary to lay hold of that hope – and help others do the same.

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The Sinner's Prayer

Wade Stanley

It's not an overstatement to claim that most folks in American evangelical churches have been invited to "ask Jesus into their heart" to be saved. Many sincere, well-meaning believers in Jesus, convicted by their sin and seeking the grace of God, have offered the sinner's prayer in response. But, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the sinner's prayer is a very late development in the history of Christendom -- no one was saying the sinner's prayer before the 1950s. If it is indeed a late development, this leads to an important question: is the sinner's prayer in the Bible?

We can trace the history of the sinner's prayer back to a few influential American preachers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the mid-eighteenth century, Eleazar Wheelock developed a technique he called the "Mourner's Seat." He reserved the front bench of the church for sinners who became the subject of his attention throughout his sermon as "salvation...(loomed) over their heads." In the nineteenth century, Charles Finney promoted the use of an "Anxious Seat," a pew on the front row of a church meetinghouse where penitent sinners would sit during the sermon as they awaited baptism. Finney's method was criticized for its manipulative nature, so Dwight Moody developed the "Inquiry Room." Penitent sinners would meet with counselors privately to study about salvation, after which they would pray together.

In the early 20th century, a preacher from Chicago, Billy Sunday, developed his spin on these techniques. First, he

popularized what has become called "crusades" — preaching to large crowds in a tent or other venue. At the close of a fire-and-brimstone, "come-to-Jesus message," Billy Sunday would extend salvation to sinners and offer a prayer. Sometimes he would invite the penitent to walk to the front of the assembly. Later on, Billy Sunday began shaking the penitent's hands, claiming that shaking his hand signaled their intent to follow Christ (the idea of extending the "right hand of fellowship"). Billy Sunday also developed an influential tract entitled "Four Things God Wants You to Know."

Billy Sunday connects us to Billy Graham, the famous crusader of the 20th century, who was converted by a Billy Sunday type crusade in 1935. As he began implementing the crusades pattern popularized by Billy Sunday, Billy Graham also adapted Sunday's tract "Four Things God Wants You to Know" — Graham's formula was called "Four Steps to Peace with God." After the "Four Steps" was a prayer:

Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be.

This is the origin story of what we now call the sinner's prayer, a history lesson that illustrates -- and what will become more apparent in a moment -- that the sinner's prayer is a tradition developed and popularized in the last one hundred years in the American evangelical community.

However, the sinner's prayer is also a tradition without Biblical precedent. **Revelation 3:20** is a passage quoted by many to invite sinners to "ask Jesus into their hearts": "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come into him and dine with him, and he with Me.*" Billy Graham's website tells me, "You cross the bridge into God's family when you receive Christ by personal invitation." It goes on to tell me to, "RECEIVE, through prayer, Jesus Christ into your heart and life." The instructions quote **Revelation 3:20** to justify praying the sinner's prayer.

But here is the problem with **Revelation 3:20**: Jesus is talking to Christians, not to sinners in need of salvation. The church at Laodicea had grown lukewarm -- materialism and affluence had made them apathetic. Jesus "*knocking at the door*" is an invitation to these lukewarm Christians to repent. They have already received salvation, but their sins have placed their souls in danger. So using **Revelation 3:20** as an invitation to sinners to receive salvation through prayer takes the passage out of context.

In addition, the sinner's prayer is found in no conversions in

the book of Acts. When Peter was asked, “*What shall we do to be saved,*” in **Acts 2:37**, prayer is noticeably absent from the apostle’s command in **verse 38**: repent, be baptized, be filled with the Spirit. As Philip preached Jesus to the Ethiopian eunuch in **Acts 8:35**, they happened upon some water; the eunuch expressed his desire to be baptized, so Philip baptized him, and the convert “*went on his way rejoicing.*” Paul baptized both the household of Lydia and the household of his jailer in Philippi when they believed. And when Paul discovered the Ephesians had never heard of the Holy Spirit, he urged them to be re-baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. In all of these conversion examples from the book of Acts, prayer, let alone the sinner’s prayer, is never mentioned. The pattern laid out for us in Scripture is to believe, repent, be baptized, and receive the Spirit.

Even the conversion of Paul -- whose teachings on faith and grace are liberally quoted by practitioners of the sinner’s prayer -- even he had a remarkably different conversion experience. Paul had his “come to Jesus” moment on the road to Damascus; blinded by the light, he was led by the hand to Damascus, where he spent three days fasting and praying. Then, a disciple living in Damascus, Ananias, received a message from Jesus by a vision:

Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight (Acts 9:11-12).

When Ananias found Paul -- who had been praying for three days -- here is what he said to him: “*And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord!*” (**Acts 22:16**). Paul had been praying for three days, but Ananias told him to stop waiting. Paul had been praying for three days, but he still had sins to wash away. Paul had been praying for three days, but he had not yet “*called on the name of the Lord.*” If prayer is how one “receives Jesus into one’s heart,” why did Ananias say all these things to Paul? And remember: **Acts 22:16** is Paul’s account of his conversion in his own words. So Paul’s conversion experience is remarkably different from the practice modeled by Billy Graham and others who have adopted the sinner’s prayer. Based on what I can see, the practice of “asking Jesus into your heart” appears to be a very recent manmade tradition without Biblical or historical precedent.

My final objection to the sinner’s prayer is it teaches receiving salvation by a work while claiming it avoids teaching salvation by works. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus confronts three “works” used by the Pharisees and scribes to demonstrate their righteousness: charitable giving,

praying, and fasting. It is clear from the teachings of Jesus here and elsewhere that he considered prayer a work. If prayer is a “work,” and one tells others to receive Jesus by the sinner’s prayer, isn’t the sinner’s prayer, by definition, a “work?”

Many people who teach and practice the sinner’s prayer are very concerned about receiving salvation by works and so they adopt a critical view of the role of works in salvation, specifically baptism. However, the troubling part about the sinner’s prayer is the internal inconsistency. In an earnest attempt to avoid preaching salvation by works, the work of prayer has been adopted by man to be the mechanism to receive salvation. How can one claim we are not saved by works while preaching “we must ask Jesus into our hearts” through prayer? If works do not save me, why am I told to pray the sinner’s prayer? Thus, the sinner’s prayer promises salvation based on two assumptions our neighbors believe are mutually exclusive: “we ask Jesus into our hearts because works do not save us.”

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Glory to God!

The **South Fairfax** congregation in **Bakersfield, CA** was delighted when **Donn** and **Donna Sigrist** placed membership on May 9. **Dean Babb** was baptized October 24 and gladly welcomed into the church family at **South Fairfax Church of Christ**.

The **Old Scotland Church of Christ**, rural Jameson, MO, were elated to see **Ethan Prindle**, **Drew Prindle** and **Olivia Prindle** baptized on October 10.

The church that meets on **Prince Road, Alton, IL** rejoiced when **Blake Harvey** was baptized on November 3. The congregation rejoiced again the next day when **Issac** and **Calvin Range** were buried with Christ.

Blessed Are the Dead

Glen Dale Owens, 86, went to be with our Lord on October 15, 2021. Glen was born in Lyons, Indiana to **Clyde Owens** and **Wanda Waggoner Owens** on December 17, 1934. Glen met **Julia Gordon** at a vacation bible school at the Church of Christ and they were married on June 14, 1953. Glen and Julia both have dedicated their lives to their church and their family with Glen having served as an elder of the **Chapel Glen Church of**



Please check your expiration date!

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Christ, Indianapolis, IN. At last count, there were six children, fourteen grandchildren, and seventeen great-grandchildren.

Lee Wright, an evangelist living and working in Oregon, sends us this report of two recent deaths among the churches with which he works:

Ralph Young passed away in **Myrtle Creek, OR** in late October at the age of 86 from cancer. He was instrumental in the establishment of the congregation now existing in **Tri-Cities, OR**. That congregation started in his back yard in an old cabin with a wood stove that had a hole in it. Without Ralph and his wife, who left this earth a few years back, there would be no congregation in Tri-Cities today.

We also recently lost **Ted Gay** from the **Harrisburg** congregation from a heart attack. Ted was an elder and was instrumental in training his son, **Tab**, to become an elder as well. He is also responsible for the training of two more men, **Terrill Gay** and **Cameron Hollis** to become Deacons. The Harrisburg congregation probably would not exist if Ted had not been there.

Special Meetings

The churches in **Martinstown, MO**, **Memphis, MO**, and **Unionville, MO** are pleased to announce their plans for a **Fall Campout, September 30-October 2, 2022**. The campout will take place at the **Putnam County Fairgrounds** in **Unionville, MO**. The three congregations will be working together to host the meeting. More details about the meeting will be announced in future issues.

If your congregation is planning a special meeting for 2022, please send the details to your editor, **Wade Stanley**, to announce in future issues .

2021 Meetings

December 28-30...Youth Rally, Gregory Blvd., Raytown, MO
December 28-30.....College Study, Lone Jack, MO

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The Gospel Message

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