



THE GOOD NEWS FOR LAODICEA

Study Guide Five

Christ Is Closer to You Than You Think

When Peter foolishly tried to walk on the water and began to sink in the waves, he cried out, "Lord, save me" (Matthew 14:30). It's terrible to realize you are about to drown, but it's very comforting then to know that someone is very close to you, to save you.

We are all Peter sinking in the waves of sin. We know only too well how strong is the undertow that sucks us into the maelstrom, and how dark are those depths. We just do not have the strength to save ourselves. There are passions and lusts that lurk beneath the surface in our hearts. We don't want to say or do things that we later regret, but before we know it we are embroiled again, and more guilt poisons our happiness. Resentments, hatreds, lusts that we seem powerless to control roll over us like ocean waves. Habits like appetite, drugs, tobacco, alcohol, illicit loves, mock us as unconquerable.

A 1985 survey of 1,006 girls concludes: "Religion-conscious girls are 86 percent more likely to say it's important to be a virgin at marriage than non-religion-conscious girls. However, *religion-conscious girls are only 14 percent more likely to be virgins than the non-religion-conscious girls.*" (Leslie Jane Nonkin, *I Wish My Parents Understood*, NY: Penguin; emphasis supplied). Each year more than a million American teenage girls become pregnant; if present trends continue, 40 percent of today's 14-year-olds at least twice before age 20 (*Time*, December 9, 1985). U. S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop says that 70 per cent of American adolescents are sexually active—that is, practicing fornication. "If you tell that 70 per cent to just say no, they laugh. And if they try to say no, they find it very difficult."

There are multitudes in this dark world who suffer in despair, as Paul did. He touched everyone's raw nerve when he complained of himself, "I do not understand what I do; for I don't do what I would like to do, but instead I do what I hate....Even though the desire to do good is in me, I am not able to do it. I don't do the good I want to do; instead, I do the evil that I do not want to do....Evil is the only choice I have....Sin...is at work in my body. What an unhappy man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is taking me to death?" (Romans 7:18-24, TEV).

Here is universal humanity crying out for help. And help is much closer than we have thought. Paul answers his question himself. He tells of a Saviour who has come *very near*. The scandal of nearly two thousand years of apostate Christianity has removed that Saviour far away from us. The 1888 message is unique in that it rediscovered His closeness, and therefore rediscovered also how powerfully He can deliver from the tentacles of deep, deep sin. It's a message that the world is literally dying to hear.

The Saviour Who Came All the Way to Where We Are

1. After Paul described his despair, how did he find joyful hope?
Romans 7:25, first part.

2. How deep and thorough is Christ's deliverance from our compulsive habits of sin? Romans 8:1, 2.

Note: "No condemnation" means release from the inner sense of reproach. A fear of divine judgment has hung over us all our lives. Our feelings of psychic wrong and maladjustment are deep and far-reaching. But "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" which "hath made [us] free from the law of sin and death" is even deeper and more far-reaching. A new principle delivers from tentacles of fear, guilt, and moral disorder that have enslaved our souls, even from our infancy. No psychiatrist can accomplish such a profound catharsis of the human soul as can this "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus." Wrongs and anxieties that even our parents could not relieve find inner healing. "When my father and my mother forsake me [where they leave off], then the Lord will take me up" (Psalm 27:10). "He who takes God for the portion of his inheritance, has a power working in him for righteousness, as much stronger than the power of inherited tendencies to evil, as our heavenly Father is greater than our earthly parents" (Waggoner, *The Everlasting Covenant*, p. 66).

3. What glorious reality is disclosed in Paul's presentation of Christ?
Verses 3, 4.

Note: Paul's intent is to present Christ as perfectly equipped to solve the problem of sin which has taken deep root within our fallen nature. A great battle is being fought between Christ and Satan over this issue of whether or not that deep alienation can be resolved in "sinful flesh." Satan arrogantly claims that he has invented something that proves God is wrong: sin has taken root too deep in our fallen nature to be overcome. And most Christians agree!

Note how close He has come to us: to win the war, God sent "His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh." Christ slew the dragon in his last lair, defeated sin, proved that it is unnecessary, and created in mankind a new abhorrence of it that will lead to its final eradication. The word "likeness" in the Greek means *identical, the same as*. Christ was fully God; now He became fully man. He built a bridge that spanned the gulf of alienation that sin has made, a bridge with foundations that reach all the way to the deepest root within the nature of the most helplessly lost sinner on earth.

The Reason Why Christ Can Save Every Sinner on Earth

4. Read Hebrews 2:9-18 and see how Christ's closeness to us qualifies Him to penetrate to the most inner recesses of our psychic, sinful alienation.

(a) He has tasted our second death, the ultimate horror of our deepest despairs. (b) He was made perfect through His sufferings. (c) He is "one" with us. (d) He calls us "brethren," that is, He is closer to us than family members are to one another. (e) He laid aside the advantages of His divinity so that He had to "trust" in God. (f) He "took part" of the "flesh and blood" of the *descendants of fallen Adam*. (g) Further, He did not take the nature of sinless beings, but that of the *genetic descendants of Abraham*. (h) Without any exception, He was "made like unto" us. (i) Thus He has become a "merciful and faithful High Priest," our divine-human physician and psychiatrist of our souls. (j) However we are tempted, He is able to "succor" us. (To "succor" means to lift us up when we are fallen.)

5. Was Christ tempted as the sinless *Adam* was tempted? Or was He tempted as we, the sinful *descendants* of Adam, are tempted? Hebrews 4:14-16.

Note: This is tremendous good news! No matter how deep or how strong your temptation may be, Christ was tempted that same way, "yet without sin." And that's not all! There is a powerful "therefore" that follows: "Let us therefore come boldly...and find grace to help in time of need." His "likeness of sinful flesh" gave Him perfect entrance to condemn that very sin—judge it, pronounce sentence on it, kill it. Be "bold" in Him; you deserve to receive the victory. Don't hang back timidly as though you have no rights.

Some tell us that Christ could not have been tempted as we are, for

there was no TV in His day, no ice cream parlors, no vodka, no sport cars, etc. But that superficial judgment denies what the Bible says. Every temptation to sin that we can experience is directed at our primal love of self; and He knows every avenue of that sin's appeal. Knowing how strong the temptation is, He sympathizes with us, but that is not all. Mere sympathy and pity would not help us. His full-time job is *saving* us from *yielding* to those temptations. We "come boldly," not timidly, in a prayer of faith to obtain that help.

Note the clear insistence that although Christ came close to us, taking our sinful nature, He was "yet without sin." Not even by a willful thought would He yield to the tempter. "The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me," He said (John 14:30). He always remained "that holy thing" (Luke 1:35). The struggle against sinful temptation was so fierce and so dangerous that He sweat drops of blood in His agony (Hebrews 5:7; 12:3, 4). The struggle to yield your will to be "crucified with Him" may be painful, but living the life of resultant resurrection "with Him" becomes easier than wearing yourself out in continuing to fight *against* the Holy Spirit.

6. Here is a magnificent promise especially for us living in this time of last-days danger: Revelation 3:21. What is implied in this promise?

Note: The Lord saved this one until the very end of time, when sin and temptation would be stronger and more alluring than ever before in world history. When we humans are still weaker and more susceptible to falling, here comes this assurance. Yes, we must overcome! But not on our own; "*even as I also overcame*" is the way.

This means that in these last days the reality of Christ's taking our fallen, sinful flesh becomes a more precious truth than ever before. His overcoming is not only an example to us (an example is useless if you don't know how to follow it). *It enables us to overcome.* Our Example becomes our training-Exemplar. Christ identifies with you and you identify with Him. Your temptation becomes His temptation; your success is His victory, and your failure becomes His concern. You are joined in a yoke with Him, and He does the pulling of the heavy weight. Your job is to stay with Him—don't leave the yoke (Matthew 11:28-30).

Christ knew that in these last days Satan would lead multitudes of human beings into drug addiction, alcoholism, crime, lust, child abuse, homosexuality, pornography, fornication, adultery, and many other temptations that seem irresistible. The lost sheep has strayed

further from the fold than ever before, but the Good Shepherd goes further than ever before "until He find it." This means that as a divine Psychiatrist He probes ever more deeply into the why of our last-day weaknesses, and provides full healing.

7. How successful will He be in rescuing those who are sinking in these last-days waves of temptation? Jude 24; Revelation 12:17; 14:5, 12; 19:7, 8.

Note: The secret of their overcoming is not a special works program of trying harder than ever before; it is the recovery of a purer *faith* than any former generation of God's people have attained. The 1888 message is prophetically declared to be the "beginning" of the recovery of that faith. The essence of that faith is a previously unrealized intimacy of sympathy with Christ, a heart-appreciation of Him, a "surveying" of His cross with all the melting of hard-as-rock hearts that follows. Nothing else but that contrite concern for the honor of Christ can "keep you from falling." Selfish concern, fear of hell, hope of reward in heaven, will fail.

8. Our addiction to sin stems from a deep sense of alienation from God and from one another, and a profound loneliness. How has Christ abolished that lonely alienation? Ephesians 2:12-17.

Note: Even many people within the church go on day after day "having no hope, and without God in the world." But this alienation from God which causes our deep loneliness was endured by the tempted Jesus, as He hung on the cross in His last hours. No one has ever felt so bereft of hope and joy as He when He cried out, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

It was in that final hour of total darkness of soul that Jesus drank our bitter cup to its dregs. That was when He tasted real "death for every man." Do you feel as though the heavens were brass above you, the earth as iron beneath, that no one cares, that Heaven seems to have slammed the door against you, that nothing lies before you but darkness? *That is precisely how Jesus felt.*, so that you might not have to feel that way. You can thank Him for enduring that cross for you. Appreciate His closeness to you.

9. Where can we find the most intimate portrayals of Christ's humiliation and excruciating personal pain? Psalm 22:1-24; 69:7-21; Isaiah 53:4-6.

In that dark hour He built that glorious bridge over the chasm of

alienation that sin has caused. His magnificent achievement is called "the atonement," the making at-one of those who were separated—you and God.

That alienation is the fundamental reason why so many youth seek illicit physical intimacies. Their souls are hungry and empty for the reality that the cross of Christ alone can fill. Frightening them with warnings of pregnancy, VD, AIDS, or hell, does nothing to help them resist that temptation. Hope of reward is equally ineffective, hence the large percentage of "religion-conscious" girls who yield. With AIDS becoming rampant, the world is at last realizing that sin is suicide. Abounding sin needs much more abounding grace—a revelation of the closeness of the Saviour, an awareness that passes through the mind and penetrates to the inner heart. Only those who have received the atonement can be successful in ministering that grace to youth. The glorious message of Christ's righteousness is at last coming into its own to meet the need.

10. Since Jesus has come so close to us, how close can we come to Him?
Galatians 2:20.

Note: Many are asking, How can I get close to Jesus? The first step is to believe how close He has come to you. Then the next step follows naturally: the honest heart that appreciates the cross of Christ *identifies with Him there*. What Paul said (according to the original language) is that his *ego* is "crucified with Christ." That is, his selfish pride, his selfish will that has been contrary to the truth of God, his selfish ambition, his glorying in his own achievements or abilities—this is his *ego* :

"When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride."

This does not mean that the one who believes in Christ grovels ever after in the dust. His sense of self-respect is never shattered. To be "crucified with Christ" means also to be resurrected with Him; "nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." Now one finds his truest self-respect: "He pulled me out of a dangerous pit, out of the deadly quicksand. He set me safely on a rock and made me secure" (Psalm 40:1, 2, TEV).

11. How did the 1888 message recognize this beautiful truth of the closeness of Jesus to us?

There is joyous good news in this message that so many deny today: "It has been Satan's work always to get men to think that God is as far away as possible....The great trouble with heathenism was to think that God was so far away....Then the papacy came in...and again puts God and Christ so far away that nobody can come near to them...the false idea that He is so holy that it would be entirely unbecoming in Him to come near to us, and be possessed of such a nature as we have,—sinful, depraved, fallen human nature. Therefore Mary must be born immaculate—and...Christ must...take His human nature in absolute sinlessness from her....

"But if He comes no nearer to us than in a sinless nature, that is a long way off; because I need...someone to help me who knows something about sinful nature; for that is the nature that I have; and such the Lord did take. He became one of us" (Jones, *General Conference Bulletin*, 1895, p. 311).