

# Our Living Lord

## Chapter 15 of “Absolutely Free!”

by Zane C. Hodges

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### Introduction

The earliest Christian churches were like tiny islands surrounded by a sea of pagan religion. Yet these believers made a spectacular claim: Jesus of Nazareth, who had died on a Roman cross, was alive—and He was Lord of all!

Obviously, in a world where there were “many gods and many lords” (1Co 8:5), this was a bold confession to make. But this truth brought courage and power to those who had found eternal life through faith. Very simply it meant that the Jesus they trusted for God’s free gift possessed “all authority... in heaven and on earth” (Mt 28:18).

And that in turn meant that they could come to Him for anything they needed.

Indeed, the members of the earliest churches were described as people who “called on the name of the Lord.” The Greek word for “called on” could indicate a call for help and assistance and, in a legal setting, it could mean “to appeal” (Ac 25:11-12, 21, 25, etc.). Thus, in addressing the Corinthian church in his first epistle to them, Paul writes:

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, *with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord*, both theirs and ours (1Co 1:2; italics added).

The members of the Corinthian church were people who were “washed,” “sanctified,” and “justified in the name of the Lord Jesus” (1Co 6:11), and they shared this privileged status with believers all over the Roman world who gathered as they did for worship and to invoke the aid and assistance of the risen Christ. In every place where Christians met, they called on the name of the Lord.

In fact, this very designation is used to describe the Christian disciples in Acts. In Ananias’s prayer to the Lord, he notes that the Saul he is being sent to see “has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name” (Ac 9:14), and those who heard Saul preaching Christ in Jerusalem “were amazed, and said, ‘Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem?’” (9:21).

In his last epistle to Timothy, the apostle urges him to “flee... youthful lusts” and to “pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2Ti 2:22). And using a similar expression, the apostle Peter writes, “And if you call on the Father... conduct yourselves throughout the time of your sojourning here in fear” (1Pe 1:17).

One can scarcely overestimate the immense significance that “calling on the name of the Lord” had for the earliest Christians. All the more so since the term “Lord” was used of the Roman emperor and because those who had the special privilege of Roman citizenship could “call on” him for legal justice and redress. It was precisely this privilege which Paul himself resorted to in the face of the judicial unfairness of the Roman procurator, Festus. The exchange between them is highly charged:

But Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, “Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?”

Then Paul said, “I stand at Caesar’s judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know... *I appeal to Caesar*” (Ac 25:9-11; italics added).

But the word “appeal” which Paul uses here is the very one that is employed in the New Testament phrase “call on the name of the Lord.”

Not all Christians held Roman citizenship as Paul did. That privilege was a limited one in Paul's day. But all Christians did hold citizenship in heaven, and it was their right to "appeal" to a higher court than Caesar's. Indeed, they could even "call on" the name of Caesar's Lord since they worshiped Him who is "Lord of all."

And as they relied on His Name, they were living by faith in God's Son.

### **Saving the Saved**

Naturally, there was a great deal to "call on" the Lord about. Every problem of life, every emergency or danger, every need, every concern, could be brought to Him. And He was Lord. He could save, deliver, defend, provide. It was to this distinctively Christian privilege of calling on the Lord that Paul was referring in Romans 10, when he wrote:

For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For "whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Ro 10:11-13; italics added).

"There is no need," Paul says, "for anyone who has believed in Christ to be put to shame. It doesn't matter whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, because Jesus is Lord of all and lavishly generous to all who call on Him for aid. In fact, in the words of Scripture itself (Joel 2:32), deliverance is available to all who call upon the Lord for it!"

Many readers of Romans 10 have thought that the text talks about how a person could be saved from hell. But this completely ignores the fact that in the New Testament "calling on the name of the Lord" is a Christian activity. It also ignores the precise statements of the Pauline text.

Significantly, immediately after the words we have quoted, Paul writes:

How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? (Ro 10:14-15a)

It is clear that we have here a series of steps which, to Paul's mind, are distinct and successive. Rearranging them into their proper temporal sequence, we get this:

- (1) Preaching can occur only if first the preacher is sent to do it.
- (2) Hearing can occur only if first the message is preached.
- (3) Believing can occur only if first the message is heard.
- (4) Calling on the name of the Lord can occur only if first a person has believed.

"How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed?" Paul asks. How can one invoke the aid and assistance of a Lord in whom he does not believe? Obviously, faith in Christ must precede our effort to obtain His aid and deliverance in daily life.

So the salvation Paul has in mind here is broader in scope than simply salvation from eternal damnation. Instead it embraces the whole range of spiritual and personal deliverances which a risen Lord is able to bestow on those who call upon Him for it.

But this is not to be done in a corner. In fact, the other New Testament references to "calling on the name of the Lord" imply that this activity is associated with the public life and witness of the churches. When Paul came to Damascus with authority to bind all who called on the Lord's name (Ac 9:14), he was not looking for closet Christians! He was looking for those who were publicly identified with that Name.

That is why, immediately before the words we have been talking about in Romans 10, Paul made this declaration:

But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way... But what does it say? "The word is near you, even in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved (Ro 10:6a, 8-9).

As is well known, this famous statement has been used by many to present "confession" as a coordinate condition with faith for obtaining eternal life. But this error should never be made.

To begin with, if that were the intent of Paul's declaration, it would stand absolutely alone on the pages of the New Testament. Not even Paul himself introduces this idea elsewhere in his thirteen letters.

Worse yet, the gospel of John, which explicitly claims to be written to bring people to eternal life (Jn 20:30-31), never even once lays down “confession” as a condition for that life.

Some have tried to deflect the impact of these observations by claiming that the Pauline statement really only teaches that confession is an inevitable result of salvation. But this explanation is not tenable. This is clear from the following verse: “For with the heart one believes to [Greek, “for”] righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made to [Greek, “for”] salvation” (Ro 10:10).

Not only does this verse *not* say that confession is the result of salvation, it states instead that “salvation” results from confession,<sup>1</sup> while “righteousness” results from faith!

And here lies the real meaning of the text. By “righteousness” Paul obviously refers to “the righteousness of faith” (v. 6) or, in other words, to the truth of justification by faith (v. 3-4). And, for Paul, confession has nothing at all to do with that righteousness. The faith that occurs in the heart is the one and only condition for the imputed righteousness of God.

Paul’s position on justification by faith alone is in no way modified or altered by Romans 10:9-10. “Confession” was not a part of justification precisely because confession is not a condition for the righteousness of God. Faith alone is the condition for that, just as faith alone is the condition for eternal life.

But confession with the mouth is a condition for the kind of salvation Paul has in mind here. For, as we have already seen from the verses that follow (v. 11-13), Paul is really thinking about the kind of salvation which is available to the believer in Christ if that believer is among those who regularly appeal to the name of the risen Lord.

It follows from this that the confession Paul calls for here is not merely telling my neighbor or close friend about my conversion. It is much more than that. It is my public identification as a member of that circle of people who “call on the name of the Lord.” Indeed, to call on Him like this in public prayer is nothing less than a confession with my mouth that “Jesus is Lord.” My whole experience of Christian victory and deliverance depends on my willingness to do this. The faith that is in my heart needs to be expressed through my lips!

Here, then, we meet the “saving of the saved.” Drawing upon that wonderful flexibility which always marked the Greek words for “salvation,” Paul stretches our horizons in a challenging fashion. He preached salvation in its most sweeping sense. Those who had been justified by faith were uniquely positioned to experience God’s “deliverance” in their lives. They could dare to number themselves openly among those who called on the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord.

Of course, Paul knew only too well that this did not mean the removal of all problems. What it really meant was victory in and over those problems, as one lived the Christian life by faith in God’s Son.

And even when Paul faced impending martyrdom, this confidence did not desert him. And though, at his first hearing, no human help was available to him (2Ti 4:16), still he could say triumphantly: “But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me... And I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion” (v. 17).

Yet death was coming, as he knew so well (2Ti 4:6-8), but even that death would be a glorious victory. For by his martyrdom for Christ Paul would be rescued forever from the evil against which he had struggled so long:

And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for [or, save me into] His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen! (2Ti 4:18; italics added).

Such in fact is always the experience of those who “call on the name of the Lord” in faith. Tragedy is turned into triumph, disaster into deliverance, by the powerful lordship of Jesus Christ.

Yes, no matter what the circumstances may be, the Lord Jesus Christ can save the saved!

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<sup>1</sup> Thus the Bauer-Gingrich-Danker lexicon (for bibliographic data, see chap. 2, n. 4) translates the phrase in Romans 10:10 this way: “confess to salvation = so as to receive salvation” (p. 229; italics in the original).

## Confident Living

But Christ can do more than that. He can live so dynamically within His disciples that they can enjoy an experiential realization of His presence. They can know that He is actually at work in them. This is more, of course, than knowing that we are saved, although our assurance of eternal life is fundamental to all vital Christian experience. What we are talking about is the result of fellowship with Christ, and it is nothing less than the manifestation in our lives of His indwelling presence and power.

It is thrilling, of course, to have a Lord to call on who is “far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named” (Eph 1:21). But it is also thrilling to have this same Lord manifesting Himself in our lives—and to be able to recognize that fact.

Such indeed was the confident persuasion of the apostle Paul as he served the risen Christ. And this confidence comes through powerfully as he closes his second letter to the Corinthian church. In the final chapter of that epistle, he writes this:

I have told you before, and foretell as if I were present the second time... that if I come again I will not spare—since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me, who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you. For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you (2Co 13:2-4).

What boldness there is in these words! Yet, at the same time, what humility and dependence.

Paul had critics and enemies in the city of Corinth. The believers there listened to these people more than they should have (2 Co 10:7-12; 11:12-15). Even some of his own converts apparently wondered whether Paul could furnish “proof of Christ speaking” in him. But Paul had no doubt that he could do that because of the power of the Lord he served.

True, the Savior had suffered crucifixion in the “weakness” of His self-giving death for men. But He had also risen from the dead, and now He lived by the very “power of God.” And though Paul knew that he, too, was weak, yet in fellowship with his Lord he could be strong toward these Corinthian believers: “...we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you” (13:4; italics added).

Yet Paul is not so arrogant as to suppose that such spiritual confidence was his alone. The Corinthians themselves could likewise enjoy a confidence like this:

Examine yourselves, whether you are in the faith. Prove yourselves. Do you not know [or, recognize] yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you, unless you are disqualified? (2Co 13:5).

Regrettably, however, these forceful words have been sadly misconstrued. They have been read by some interpreters as though they were a challenge to the Corinthians to find out whether they were really saved or not!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See MacArthur, pp. 23, 190, 197. On page 190, MacArthur states in a footnote: “As a pastor, I take issue with Hodges’ assertion that Paul was unconcerned about the destiny of members of the flocks he pastored.” The word “unconcerned” has a pejorative ring to it. And, of course, I too am a pastor. My statement is found in *The Gospel Under Siege* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1981), p. 95, where I affirm that Paul was not “constantly concerned about the eternal destiny of his readers.”

MacArthur’s response to me is inadequate for two reasons. (1) He is reading the modern church situation back into the New Testament. It has been estimated on the basis of the number of names mentioned in the greetings found in Romans 16:3-15, that the church at Rome itself was not likely to be much larger than about fifty people. And this must have been one of the larger congregations. If Paul did not know each member of his churches personally, the elders of each church did. It was quite easy for New Testament church leaders to find out whether or not an individual understood and believed the gospel in congregations as small as New Testament churches usually were.

But this leads us to (2). MacArthur’s own doctrine of faith and assurance does not even permit the believer himself to know for sure whether he has truly believed. So how could a pastor find out if a person does, without watching that person’s behavior over a long period of time? And even then, the pastor could not be sure just as the believer himself could not be sure, since perseverance to the end is required!

But Paul did not preach the sort of gospel that creates this kind of uncertainty and doubt. Paul knew that the Philippian jailer and his family were saved the very night they believed and, accordingly, he baptized them that same night (Ac 16:33)! If there is any significant number of people in our congregations today who are actually unsaved, the fault is ours for not preaching the gospel clearly and for not making sure that each individual understands and believes it.

But such faults are not to be laid at the feet of Paul or of Pauline-trained church elders! They preached and taught a clear gospel of faith and assurance, and they did so “publicly and from house to house” (Ac 20:20).

This is unthinkable. After twelve chapters in which Paul takes their Christianity for granted, can he only now be asking them to make sure they are born again? The question answers itself.

Let the readers of this book examine 2 Corinthians on their own. They will see clearly how often the apostle affirms in one way or another his conviction that his readers are genuinely Christian. Think, for example, of these words:

...inasmuch as you are manifestly declared to be an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart (2Co 3:3; italics added).

No indeed! Paul is not saying, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are born again, or justified.” He is saying, however, “Take stock and see if you are in the faith.” But that’s a different matter.

Surprisingly, the closest analogy to these words of the apostle is to be found in a statement toward the end of his first letter to this same church. There Paul writes like this: “Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong” (1Co 16:13; italics added).

Elsewhere Paul speaks of those who are “weak in the faith” (Ro 14:1) and of others who need to be “sound in the faith” (Tit 1:13). Even Peter’s words suggest a parallel:

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith (1Pe 5:8-9; italics added).

To be “in the faith,” therefore, is to be operating and acting within the parameters of our Christian convictions and beliefs, precisely as Paul claims to be doing in the immediately preceding verses. It meant living in a dynamic, faith-oriented connection with Jesus Christ, who Himself was living by the power of God (v. 4).

Paul had confidence that he could demonstrate to the Corinthians that he did live like that—that Christ was indeed speaking in him. But he also thinks they can demonstrate the same thing about their own experience of Christ.

“Take a look at yourselves,” he challenges them, “test yourselves. Can you not recognize yourselves as people in whom Jesus Christ is very much alive? You most certainly can—unless, however, you are ‘disqualified.’”

The word “disqualified” is a significant one for Paul. He used it in his first letter to the Corinthian church when he wrote as follows:

But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, *I myself should become disqualified* (1Co 9:27; italics added).

But in that passage the image of the Christian race, or contest, was prominently in Paul’s mind. Here in 2 Corinthians the simple translation “disapproved” is probably to be preferred.

So long as the Corinthians were not living “outside the boundaries of their faith,” so long as their lives were not “disapproved” by God, they could indeed discern in their own experience—as Paul did in his—the reality of the indwelling Christ.

If John the Evangelist had written this text, he might well have spoken of “abiding in Christ” and of “Christ abiding in us.” He might also have spoken of the fruit that will be the manifestation of God’s “approval” on that kind of an experience.

Yet whether John or Paul, or any other New Testament writer, each bears witness to the dynamic reality of a life lived in fellowship with Him who is Lord of all. They fully believe, and teach, that this reality can be richly known and experienced by those who are born again.

The songwriter has captured it well:

Once far from God and dead in sin,  
No light my heart could see;  
But in God’s Word the light I found,  
Now Christ liveth in me.  
Christ liveth in me, Christ liveth in me,  
Oh! What a salvation this, that Christ liveth in me.  
Christ Liveth in Me -Maj. D. W. Whittle

### **Conclusion**

Christ lives in me! What a marvelous conviction to possess! What an excellent experience to live out!

But however rich and deep, however full and fruitful our realization of this privilege may become, it began for all of us in exactly the same way. It began with a simple childlike act of faith. It began with a single, irreversible appropriation of the water of life.

It never started for anyone any other way, and it never will. For the words of our living and all-powerful Lord stand as an authoritative and immutable testimony to God's gracious way of salvation: "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life" (Jn 6:47).

There are no other conditions. There are no hidden clauses or commitments. Whoever wants it, can have it. The Spirit and the bride themselves say so:

"Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev 22:17).

The chorus writer was correct after all. He breathed the spirit of the Bible when he penned these words:

Absolutely free! Yes, it is absolutely free!

For God has given salvation, absolutely free!

Absolutely free! Yes, it is absolutely free!

For God has given His great salvation, absolutely free!

-Author unknown