

THE GOSPEL LESSON 8

REVIEWING “LORDSHIP SALVATION” PART 1

REVIEWING THE GOSPEL OF YOUR SALVATION

For the past seven lessons we have carefully examined the gospel anchored in Ephesians 1:13, the message of truth about who Jesus is, what He has done, what He promises, the nature of believing in Him, and how salvation comes to us by grace through faith as a gift.

We have seen that eternal life is a present possession the moment a person is persuaded that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who died for our sins and rose again, and that His promise of eternal life to the one who believes is true. Nothing is added to that simple message of grace.

“LORDSHIP SALVATION” - INTRODUCTION

Today we begin to examine a significant theological controversy within evangelicalism regarding the precise nature of saving faith itself. While there is widespread agreement that justification is by grace through faith alone in Christ alone, and that eternal life is a free gift that cannot be earned, there is substantial disagreement about what constitutes genuine saving faith and what necessarily flows from it.

One of the most prominent and influential voices in this discussion is Dr. John MacArthur, who has served as pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, since 1969 and is widely known through his Grace to You radio and media ministry. MacArthur is recognized for his unwavering commitment to verse-by-verse expository preaching through entire books of the Bible. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, he devoted more than seven years (226 sermons) to preaching through the Gospel of Matthew. This sustained, careful study of Jesus’ own evangelistic ministry and calls to discipleship profoundly shaped his understanding of the gospel message.

In 1988, MacArthur published his book *The Gospel According to Jesus*. In it, he argued that much of contemporary evangelical evangelism had reduced the gospel to a minimal “decision” or intellectual assent that did not necessarily include repentance or a willingness to submit to Christ as Lord. He contended that this approach, (which he called “easy believism”) did not adequately reflect the full message Jesus and the apostles proclaimed. The book sparked widespread debate across evangelicalism and brought the term “Lordship Salvation” into common theological usage.

The label “Lordship Salvation” was largely coined and popularized by critics of this view (particularly from within Free Grace circles) as a way to characterize the emphasis on repentance, submission to Christ’s lordship, and the necessity of a transformed life as integral to saving faith. MacArthur himself has not primarily used the term as a self-designation but has consistently defended the substance of what the label describes. He maintains that true saving faith is never mere intellectual agreement or a one-time decision; it involves a heart change that embraces Christ as both Savior and Lord.

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These ideas did not originate with MacArthur or his 1988 book. The modern controversy brought renewed attention to themes that have deep roots in church history. Similar emphases on repentance as a change of heart and behavior, surrender to Christ’s lordship, and the necessity of perseverance can be found in the writings of Arthur W. Pink (1886–1952), who stressed that saving faith involves a genuine turning from sin and submission to God.

“Repentance is sorrowing for sin. Repentance is a heart-repudiation of sin. Repentance is a heart determination to forsake sin. ... It is written ‘except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish’ (Luke 13:3). Repentance is just as essential as faith, yea, the latter cannot be without the former... The order is clearly enough laid down by Christ: ‘Repent ye, and believe the gospel’ (Mark 1:15).” *Studies on Saving Faith*, A.W. Pink 1932

“Saving faith consists of the complete surrender of my whole being and life to the claims of God upon me: ‘But first gave their own selves to the Lord’ (2 Cor. 8:5). It is the unreserved acceptance of Christ as my absolute Lord, bowing to His will and receiving His yoke... And to receive ‘Christ Jesus the Lord’ (Col. 2:6) necessarily involves the renouncing of our own sinful lordship, the throwing down of the weapons of our warfare against Him, and the submitting to His yoke and rule.” *Studies on Saving Faith*, A.W. Pink 1932.

Similar themes were debated publicly well before MacArthur’s book. In September 1959, *Eternity* magazine published a significant exchange titled “Must Christ Be Lord to Be Savior?” between New Testament scholar Everett F. Harrison and John R. W. Stott.

Harrison’s Position (No) Everett F. Harrison argued that while Christ *is* Lord, requiring a sinner to consciously submit to His lordship as a condition of salvation turns the gospel into a works-based message. He maintained that this would undermine the believer’s security and confuse salvation with the ongoing responsibilities of discipleship. Harrison warned against making submission to Christ’s lordship essential for receiving eternal life.

Stott’s Position (Yes) John R. W. Stott contended that it is unbiblical to separate Christ’s lordship from His saviorhood. He argued that genuine saving faith includes repentance and a willingness to submit to Christ as Lord, and that one cannot truly receive Christ as Savior while rejecting His right to rule. Stott emphasized that the gospel calls for a comprehensive response to the person of Christ.

Significance This 1959 exchange is historically important because:

- It brought the core issues of the Lordship debate into wider evangelical discussion.
- It introduced language and categories that would shape later conversations in the 1980s and 1990s.
- It highlighted the central tension: whether submission to Christ’s lordship is *essential* to saving faith.

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MacArthur and those who hold this view, state that justification is by grace through faith alone, that eternal life is a free gift, and that no one can earn or merit salvation. However, they argue that true saving faith necessarily includes repentance, submission to Christ's lordship, and a transformed life that perseveres. In their understanding, these elements are not additions to faith but are inherent in what it means to truly believe the gospel and trust in the person of Christ.

Here are the nine distinctives of Lordship Salvation as presented by Grace Community Church, drawn directly from their doctrinal statement. I will read them in MacArthur's own framework so there is no misrepresentation:

1. The gospel calls sinners to faith joined in oneness with repentance. Repentance is a turning from sin — a change of heart that effects a change of behavior.

Key Scriptures: Acts 2:38, 17:30, 20:21; 2 Peter 3:9; Acts 3:19; Luke 24:47; Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25; Luke 3:8; Acts 26:18-20.

Supporting Quotes/Arguments: Proponents argue that repentance is not optional or a later step but is joined with faith in the gospel call itself. It is a God-given change of heart (not mere human effort) that produces visible behavioral change.

- John MacArthur: “The gospel according to Jesus calls sinners to give up their independence, deny themselves, submit to an alien will, and abandon all rights in order to be owned and controlled by the Lord.” He emphasizes that true repentance involves a “radical, 180-degree turning from sin.”
- A.W. Pink: “Repentance is sorrowing for sin. Repentance is a heart-repudiation of sin. Repentance is a heart determination to forsake sin... The order is clearly enough laid down by Christ: ‘Repent ye, and believe the gospel’ (Mark 1:15).”

2. Salvation is all God's work. Even faith is a gift from God, and real faith endures forever rather than being defective or short-lived.

Key Scriptures: Titus 3:5; Ephesians 2:1-5, 8; Philippians 1:6; Hebrews 11 (and context of perseverance).

Salvation, including the faith that receives it, is entirely monergistic (God's work). Genuine saving faith cannot ultimately fail or be temporary.

- MacArthur (on faith as gift and enduring): Saving faith, repentance, commitment, and obedience “are all divine works, wrought by the Holy Spirit in the heart of everyone who is saved.” Real faith “endures forever.”

3. The object of faith is Christ Himself, not merely a creed or a promise. True faith therefore involves personal commitment to Christ — all true believers follow Jesus.

Key Scriptures: John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 5:15; John 10:27-28.

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Faith is not abstract intellectual assent to facts or a promise but personal trust in and commitment to the person of Christ as Lord and Savior, resulting in following Him.

- MacArthur: “The object of saving faith is not a creed; it is Christ Himself... The signature of saving faith is surrender to the lordship of Jesus Christ. The definitive test of whether a person belongs to Christ is a willingness to bow to His divine authority.”
- “No one can receive Christ as his Saviour while he rejects Him as Lord.”

4. Real faith inevitably produces a changed life. Salvation includes transformation of the inner person, and the unbroken pattern of sin will not continue in the one who is born again.

Key Scriptures: 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20; Romans 6:6; 1 John 3:9-10; John 10:27; 1 John 3:14; 1 John 2:3; John 15:14; Matthew 12:50; John 8:31; John 17:6; Ephesians 2:10; Colossians 1:21-23; Hebrews 3:14.

New birth produces a new nature and ongoing transformation; an unbroken pattern of sin is incompatible with genuine regeneration.

- MacArthur: True salvation “produces a heart that voluntarily responds to the ever-awakening reality of Christ’s lordship.” Faith “inevitably produces a changed life.”
- Pink: “It is not the absence of sin but the grieving over it which distinguishes the child of God from empty professors.”

5. God’s gift of eternal life includes all that pertains to life and godliness in this life, not just a ticket to heaven or future glorification.

Key Scriptures: 2 Peter 1:3; Romans 8:32.

Eternal life is not merely forensic or future-oriented; it brings present resources for godly living as part of the gift.

- MacArthur and GCC framing: The gift encompasses “all that pertains to life and godliness,” contrasting with views that limit guarantees to judicial aspects only, requiring a later “dedication” for practical sanctification.

6. Faith involves unconditional surrender to Christ as Lord. Jesus does not bestow eternal life on those whose hearts remain set against Him.

Key Scriptures: Romans 6:17-18; 10:9-10; James 4:6.

Surrender to Christ’s lordship is not an optional add-on but central to the gospel invitation and the nature of saving faith.

- MacArthur: “Surrender to Christ’s lordship is the only acceptable response to the gospel, and any message that does not call sinners to submit to Jesus as Lord is not really the gospel... The gospel according to Jesus calls sinners to give up their independence, deny themselves, submit to an alien will, and abandon all rights...”

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- “Submission to the will of God, to Christ’s lordship... is an essential, not an optional, part of saving faith.”

7. Those who truly believe will love Christ and therefore long to obey Him.

Key Scriptures: 1 Peter 1:8-9; Romans 8:28-30; 1 Corinthians 16:22; John 14:15, 23.

Genuine faith produces love for Christ that manifests in a desire to obey, not mere reluctant compliance.

- MacArthur: True believers are marked by a heart that loves Christ and responds to His lordship; “those who will not receive [Christ] as Lord are willfully rejecting Him.”

8. Behavior is an important test of faith. Obedience is evidence that one’s faith is real.

Key Scriptures: 1 John 2:3 (“By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments”); 1 John 2:4.

While salvation is by faith alone, obedience serves as a necessary evidence or test of the reality of that faith.

- MacArthur: “Obedience is the inevitable manifestation of true faith... Real faith is as concerned with doing the will of God as it is with affirming the facts of true doctrine.” Behavior that shows unwillingness to obey calls the reality of faith into question.
- Pink alignment: Genuine faith is evidenced by turning from sin and submission.

9. Genuine believers persevere in the faith. Those who completely turn away from the Lord show that they were never truly born again.

Key Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 1:8; 1 John 2:19 (“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us”).

True saving faith perseveres; final apostasy demonstrates that the person was never genuinely regenerate.

- MacArthur: Genuine believers “may stumble and fall, but they will persevere in the faith.” Complete turning away reveals they “were never truly born again.”
- Broader Lordship emphasis (including Pink’s writings on perseverance of the saints): Perseverance is the continued exercise of holy affections and principles; it is not optional but flows from the new nature.

HERMENEUTICAL DIFFERENCES

The real difference between what we hold to and what we teach and those who propose these views is not about who honors Scripture more. Both sides claim to use a literal, grammatical-historical approach. The difference lies in how we synthesize the Scriptures.

First, Those who hold to Lordship Salvation read passages in 1 John chapter two and three, and in James 2, as tests that show whether someone is a true believer. They treat

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them as descriptions of what genuine saving faith will necessarily produce in a person's life.

However, the method properly applied to these sections actually tells us that what they see as descriptions of a genuine believer are identifications of a believer. God is telling us who we are in Christ (we are saints, holy ones, righteous ones, those who do righteousness). Because of our position in Him we are called to have our behavior match. What we see is that many of their test passages are not descriptions of what a true believer will do, but declarations of who we are in Christ or a call to have our behavior match our identity. Behavior can never earn identity, hold identity, or prove identity.

Secondly, what they see in some Bible passages as absolute result of a person who is saved will be demonstrated as never saying that. There is not one passage in Scripture that states that faith ever results in behavior automatically. When they try to spin verses into production (e.g. James 2:14-26) we can easily examine these verses and demonstrate that these verses are a call to do good and shun evil as believers.

Thirdly, the main book for their error, the Book of Matthew, will be shown that it is not written so that one may believe in Jesus and have eternal life, but rather for a different purpose, to show the Jew that Jesus is the promised Messiah who will usher in the Kingdom of Heaven to Earth. They claim to hold to a hermeneutic that honors the historical setting and message but negate the history of Matthew (and other books) to their peril.

METHODOLOGY

Over the next few weeks, we will examine each point of distinction and provide a biblical response to their claims. Come with your observations and your questions.