

SIN AND SALVATION

*God's Work for
and in Us*

GEORGE R. KNIGHT



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Dedicated to

Roger and Peggy Dudley

who have exemplified caring love in my life.

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A Word to the Reader

There is no more important topic than God's plan of salvation for a lost world. *Sin and Salvation* is the second volume in my series on God's redemptive plan. The first, *The Cross of Christ*, specifically focused on God's work *for* us and the meaning of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The present book continues the treatment of God's work *for* people but extends it into the realm of His work *in* them in such areas as sanctification and perfection. The two volumes together survey the broad scope and the overall theme of the redemptive plan.

Beyond that, *Sin and Salvation* seeks to show the interrelatedness of the components of salvation. The book's undergirding thesis is that different concepts of sin lead to varying approaches to "achieving" righteousness. It argues that the greatest mistake of the dominant Pharisaic view at Christ's time was its definition of sin. A false definition led the Pharisees to unfruitful (and even destructive) views of righteousness and perfection. The problem and confusion, unfortunately, never died with the first century Pharisees. It is alive and well today.

Seventh-day Adventists have also wrestled with the ongoing struggle to understand how people get saved. Some have emphasized human effort, sanctification, and some sort of sinless perfection; others have argued that salvation is basically legal (forensic) justification, and that human sanctification is vicariously achieved through Christ's perfect life; yet others, downplaying human effort, have implied that "Jesus does it all"—our part is to sit back and enjoy the ride once we have accepted Jesus.

Like many of my books, this one has evolved from my personal experience. During the past 45 years, I have at various times taught two of the above approaches and flirted with the third, only to discover that all are less than adequate. Thus, the present attempt at understanding a complex subject.

Ever since my conversion from agnosticism in 1961, I have wrestled with what it means to be saved—with what God can do *for* us and *in* us. This book, therefore, is in one sense a result of my personal experience. But even beyond that, it is the fruit of countless encounters with people in the midst of living the Christian life, scholarly studies, and biographical reminiscences

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on the topic. There is nothing more important in my life than how to be right with God and how to be prepared to enjoy His kingdom of love in both the present age and the age to come.

As a result, *Sin and Salvation* is more than a book on abstract theology. Theology at its best not only informs the mind, but also guides daily life. A theology that cannot stand up to the crises and challenges of daily living is less than adequate. It is my hope that the suggestions made in this study will not only enlighten the minds of my readers, but also provide them with insight into the intensity and dynamics of the daily struggle faced by people living in a world of sin.

Besides *The Cross of Christ*, the present book is closely related to the subject matter of several of my other books. First and foremost is *I Used to Be Perfect: A Study of Sin and Salvation* (1994, 2001), which both summarizes and extends the thesis set forth in *Sin and Salvation*. I have also treated many of its themes in *Exploring Galatians and Ephesians* (2005), *Walking With Paul Through the Book of Romans* (2002), and, from a historical perspective, in my three books related to the discussions of righteousness by faith at the 1888 General Conference session—*From 1888 to Apostasy: The Case of A. T. Jones* (1987), *Angry Saints: Tensions and Possibilities in the Adventist Struggle Over Righteousness by Faith* (1989), and *A User-friendly Guide to the 1888 Message* (1998).

In many ways, *Sin and Salvation* has been the most difficult of my books to write. Despite the temptation to skirt the difficult topics involved in its scope, I have sought to face each of them responsibly. No book, of course, can do justice to the depth and complexity of the plan of salvation. While it is our privilege to begin such study in our earthly existence, an understanding of the richness of God's work will continue to develop throughout eternity.

One thing especially surprised me during my study for this book, and that was the amount of agreement between Christians of various backgrounds and denominations on the essential elements of what God does *for* and *in* people in His great salvific work. Even Adventists of apparently opposite postures generally found common ground when *pushed* to be specific by the "hard questions" of theory and life. Most of the warfare in the Christian community is not so much over the central concerns but with where to draw lines and how to define stages and words.

While I have found that problem discouraging, it is also hopeful in the sense that there is a great deal more shared understanding on the subject among Christians than I first perceived. As my study progressed, I more and more fully saw the wisdom of the words of Anglican bishop J. C. Ryle, who

wrote: “The last day will show who is right and who is wrong” in our understanding of holiness. “In the meantime, I am quite certain that to exhibit bitterness and coldness towards those who cannot conscientiously work with us is to prove ourselves very ignorant of real holiness.”*

I should add a word about style. In this book I have attempted the difficult marriage between a popular style and scholarly precision. The result is something of a compromise, which I hope will edify the reader while also being responsible to the deeper concerns of the subject.

Overall, I have sought to write in clear, broad strokes that set forth the gospel themes in bold relief and as part of a unified package. I should also note that chapters 8 and 9 address more specifically Adventist concerns than the rest of the book. I gave extra space to them because they have been central features in Adventist discussion and eschatology.

The present book first appeared in 1992 under the title of *The Pharisee’s Guide to Perfect Holiness: A Study of Sin and Salvation*. Outside of editorial changes, the content has remained mostly the same. The two exceptions are that I have expanded and enriched the sections on “the issue of universal justification” and the Greek philosophic definition of perfection as sinlessness.

My debts in writing this book have been many. Special thanks goes to Raoul Dederen, Atilio Dupertuis, and Robert Olson for reading the entire manuscript of the initial publication, and to Robert Johnston for reading the first chapter. Their critiques and suggestions aimed at making the manuscript more accurate. The book is better because of their input and might have been even stronger had I followed all of their counsel. Joyce Werner is also to be thanked for entering my handwritten manuscript into the computer.

Special appreciation for the present version of the book goes to Mika Devoux for providing a cleaned up computerized version of the scanned copy; to my wife, Bonnie, for entering the seemingly endless rounds of corrections into the computer; and to Gerald Wheeler and Jeannette Johnson, for guiding the book through the publication process.

I trust that *Sin and Salvation: God’s Work for and in Us* will be a blessing to its readers as they seek to live their lives “in Christ.”

George R. Knight
Rogue River, Oregon

*J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (Welwyn, Eng.: Evangelical Press, 1979), pp. xiv, xv.

Pharisees Are Good People

I still get upset when I read the Bible.¹ Take, for example, the New Testament portrayal of the Pharisees. In spite of the impression left by the biblical picture of them, the Pharisees were the best of people. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* is undoubtedly right when it claims that no complete “estimate of the character of the Pharisees can be obtained from the New Testament writings, which take a polemical attitude toward them.”²

In a similar vein, we find a great deal of truth in the accusation by *Encyclopaedia Judaica* that it is “mistakenly held that New Testament references to them as ‘hypocrites’ or ‘offspring of vipers’ (Matt. 3:7; Luke 18:9 ff., etc.) are applicable to the entire group.” The leaders of the Pharisees were themselves well aware of the insincere among their numbers and frequently describe them as “sore spots” and “plagues of the Pharisaic party.”³

Most Christians need to revise their picture of the Pharisees. They were not merely good people—they were the best of people. Not only were they morally upright, but they were desperately earnest in their search for God and in their protection of His holy name, law, and Word.

Certainly the church and the world would be infinitely better if more of us daily came to God with the central Pharisaic question: “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25; cf. Matt. 19:16). Here was a people totally dedicated to serving God from the time they arose in the morning to when they retired at night.

Not only were the Pharisees intellectually dedicated to doing right, but they realized the highest level of morality in their daily lives. Jesus never contradicted the Pharisee in Luke 18 who thanked God in prayer that he was “not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers” (verse 11). Nor did Christ take issue with the young man who claimed to have “observed” the Ten Commandments from his youth (see Matt. 19:18–20). It stretches the imagination even to attempt to conceive of a people more

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intent on obedience and ethical living than the Pharisees. A brief look at some of their praiseworthy characteristics should help us put them in perspective.

First and foremost, they loved and protected the Bible as the Word of God. They were intent on preserving the relevant meaning of Scripture. That goal, however, ran into trouble when it encountered divergences of opinion on the exact meaning of a biblical passage. As a result, they developed the theory that along with the written text there was, and always had been from Moses' time, an unwritten tradition that supplemented the written text and pointed to its true meaning.⁴ Thus the oral tradition of the Pharisees was really a product of their reverence for the holy Word of God.

A second high point for the Pharisees was their love of and dedication to God's law. R. Travers Herford sums up that aspect of Pharisaism concisely when he states that "the primary concern of the Pharisees was to make the Torah [law] the supreme guide of life, in thought, word and deed, by study of its contents, obedience to its precepts, and, as the root of all, conscious service of God Who had given the Torah."⁵

The Pharisees were deeply committed to not breaking the law of God. Consequently, they devised a system to avoid violating it. With their oral traditions they built a "fence for the Law" to "protect it by surrounding it with cautionary rules to halt a man like a danger signal before he gets within breaking distance of the divine statute itself."⁶

Thus, for example, they developed 1,521 oral rules for the Sabbath alone.⁷ By the time of Christ, the Pharisees had countless of these fences or rules that affected every aspect of their daily lives. The Jews of Christ's day could tell you how large a rock people could carry on the Sabbath day, how far they could take it, and how many cubits they could throw it. Their oral tradition covered every aspect of life, and an individual had to be zealously sincere about religion to live the pharisaic life.

Beyond strict Sabbath observance, the Pharisees were energetic and sacrificial tithers, even going so far as to separate every tenth leaf of their mint plants and other garden herbs as being the Lord's (see Matt. 23:23). And, of course, they would never eat or even touch any food or item regarded as unclean.

People can say what they like about the Pharisees, but one thing all must admit is that they led lives totally dedicated to serving God and obeying His law. Jesus commended them for such a life (see Matt. 23:23). And Paul, looking back to his Pharisaic years, could say that "as to righteousness under the law" he was "blameless" (Phil. 3:6).

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A third commendable aspect of Pharisaism was its missionary and evangelistic zeal. They would “scour sea and land to make a single convert” (Matt. 23:15, Phillips). The Pharisees not only sought to convert non-Jews to their religious views and practices, but also other Jews. Thus, writes Joachim Jeremias, the Pharisaic group set forth the rules of purity laid down for the everyday life of the priests as the ideal for every Jew. “In this way they meant to build up the holy community of Israel” into the “true Israel” of God (God’s remnant). As a result, while the average Jew did not like the superior airs of the Pharisees, the common people “looked to the Pharisees . . . as models of piety, and as embodiments of the ideal life.”⁸

A fourth positive aspect of the Pharisees is that they were “adventists.” They looked forward with intense desire to the coming of the Messianic kingdom. But they tied it to the faithful keeping of the law. Some of them believed that Messiah (Christ) would come if God’s people kept Torah (the law) perfectly for one day. As a result, they fully dedicated their lives to bringing about that day through perfect holiness.⁹

The Pharisees were an elite corps of highly dedicated men, being about 6,000 strong in the time of Christ. The New Testament refers to the religious scholars among them as the “scribes.” One interpretation of the name *Pharisee* is “the separate ones.” By extension, it would represent “the holy ones, the true community of Israel.”¹⁰

The sect of the Pharisees developed after the Babylonian captivity. God had allowed the Jews to be taken into captivity because (1) they had not been faithful to His law, and (2) they had adopted the ways of their pagan neighbors. After the 70-year captivity, Ezra early became a central figure in steering the Israelites toward God’s commands and away from the compromising culture of their day.

The Pharisees first appear as an organized group in the second century B.C. during the Maccabean crisis. The “separated ones” adopted a lifestyle and a theological outlook that would preserve faithfulness to God so that Israel need not repeat its captivity. Thus, in their search for holiness, they separated themselves from the surrounding cultures and their customs, from the this-worldly and compromising practices of the priestly Sadducees, and from the careless ways of the common people. Because the Pharisees sought to pave the way for the coming of the Christ through godly living, their motivations were praiseworthy in every way.¹¹

Given this positive view of the Pharisees, one of the most shocking and revolutionary teachings of Christ is that “unless your righteousness ex-

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ceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20). How could anyone strive harder or live for God more earnestly than these elite moralists, these storm troopers for the kingdom of God?

The Fly in Pharisaism’s Theological Ointment

The central problem in the dominant tradition of Pharisaic Judaism’s approach to God and salvation was an inadequate view of sin and its effect on human ability. The rabbinic¹² perspective came to view sin generally as a specific act rather than as a condition of the heart and mind. Likewise, the dominant Pharisaic tradition saw neither Adam or his descendants as morally different because of the Genesis fall. In other words, human beings since the Fall have had the same ability to live the righteous life as Adam did before it. Thus G. F. Moore writes, “There is no notion that the original constitution of Adam underwent any change in consequence of the fall, so that he transmitted to his descendants a vitiated nature in which the appetites and passions necessarily prevail over reason and virtue.” Nor was “the will to good . . . enfeebled.”¹³

While it is true that the rabbis taught that people have a *yeṣer ha-raʿ* (an evil impulse), they also assumed that God had created Adam with it in the first place. The impulse to evil can be subdued and brought into service to God and humanly controlled through studying and meditating upon the Torah (law) and by applying the law to daily living. “The mind [and life] thus preoccupied with religion,” Moore writes, “excludes temptations from without and evil devisings within.”¹⁴

E. P. Sanders penned, in summing up the rabbinic position, that “the possibility exists that one might not sin. Despite the tendency to disobey, man is free to obey or disobey.”¹⁵ Thus persons could technically live sinless lives under their own steam.

The Jews, however, realistically recognized that strict obedience was rare, so they also taught repentance and forgiveness. But even repentance they defined as a kind of salvation by human works in which a person abandons evil deeds and does good. Thus one’s sins become “white as snow” (Isa. 1:18) through moral reformation. While God’s forgiveness is genuine, the high point in rabbinic teachings on grace as God’s unmerited favor is that God gave Israel the law and a covenant relationship with Himself in which obedience to the law as a response to God’s gracious election is central. “The ‘righteous’ man” in actual practice, therefore, “is not he who obeys the Law flawlessly, but he alone who *strives* to regulate his life by the

Law” and “is repentant when he fails.” George Eldon Ladd points out that the sincerity and primacy of one’s purpose to keep the law and “the strenuous endeavor to accomplish it are the marks of a righteous man.”¹⁶

Thus Jewish teaching, while recognizing the reality of and need for grace, forgiveness, and repentance, put obedience to the law at the center of humanity’s relationship to God. That led in daily practice to legalistic approaches, even though Judaism at its best recognized and taught that the matter of greatest importance was the spirit of the law as exemplified in love for God (see Deut. 6:5; 10:12) and for one’s neighbor (see Lev. 19:18).

During the centuries that Pharisaism developed, the role of the law went through a significant change in Jewish thinking. Ladd indicates that the importance of the law came to overshadow the concept of God’s gracious covenant and became “the condition of membership in God’s people.” Even more important, observance of the law became “the basis of God’s verdict upon the individual. Resurrection will be the reward of those who have been devoted to the Law.” The law became the hope of the faithful and central to justification, salvation, righteousness, and life.¹⁷

That emphasis, not surprisingly, led eventually to a kind of legalistic bookkeeping among the Jews. We can think of their approach in terms of a moral balance scale in which the godly are those whose merits outweigh their transgressions, while the ungodly are those whose transgressions are heavier. The Jewish *Mishnah* puts it nicely when it says, “The world is judged by grace, yet all is according to the excess of works [that be good or evil].”¹⁸

The *Talmud* later presented the same thought: “One who performs mostly good deeds inherits the Garden of Eden, and one who performs mostly transgressions inherits *Gehenna* [hell].” The real problem for the judgment, of course, would be the “intermediates”—those whose merits and faults balance each other. That problem proved to be a point of exciting debate between the Pharisaic schools of Hillel and Shammai in the New Testament period. According to one tradition, God’s grace comes in to tip the balance in favor of righteousness.¹⁹

*The important point to note is that the Pharisaic merit system of righteousness atomized sin. That is, it defined sin primarily as a series of actions, even though Judaism at its clear-thinking best recognized sin as a rebellious state of mind and as an offense against God.*²⁰ Walther Eichrodt notes that the atomization of sin into specific actions was undoubtedly aided by the fact that when the “Old Testament speaks of sin *the chief emphasis* unquestionably

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falls on its current concrete expression.” Beyond that, the Pharisaic concept of law thrust the deeper meaning of sin as rebellion against God into the background. Given their balance-scale approach, the transgression of each individual command of the law was sin.²¹

As we noted earlier, the Pharisees’ approach to law and sin led them to develop an ever-increasing number of rules in an attempt to safeguard themselves against unwittingly breaking the letter of the law. The Jews applied their oral tradition to every possible life situation, resulting in a massive body of written and oral law that they had to observe. “To violate one of them was equivalent to rejecting the whole Law and refusing God’s yoke.”²²

With this information in hand, we should not be surprised to find the rich young ruler asking Jesus “what good deed” he needed *to do* “to have eternal life” (Matt. 19:16). Nor should it puzzle us to find Jesus answering the young man according to his own perspective by giving him an itemized list of commandments (verses 18, 19). Jesus met him on his own ground, but Christ’s final suggestion regarding the road to righteousness and becoming “perfect” shifted the issue from the atomized letter of the law to its spiritual intent in relation to both loving God and one’s neighbor. Calling for an end to selfish and self-centered living, Jesus emphasized total dedication to God. Such a concept was too much for the young man, who beat a hasty retreat from a Teacher who had such high ideals (verses 20-22). It is infinitely easier to keep the letter of the law than its spirit.

One of the greatest tragedies of Pharisaism is that in its sincere attempt to live up to the letter of the individual biblical and oral commandments, it missed the intent of the whole. *The essence of the Pharisaic problem was viewing the nature of sin as being a series of acts rather than being primarily a condition of the heart and a rebellious attitude toward God.*

Unfortunately, a mistaken concept of sin led them into a fatal misunderstanding regarding righteousness. If one defines sin as a series of actions, the next logical step is to see righteousness as a series of behaviors or actions.

With that mentality, they could develop their balance scale approach to righteousness and God’s final judgment. From that perspective, the rich young ruler could ask what deeds he still needed to perform. Christ’s answer to him (“If you would be perfect”) reflects the fact that the Pharisees of His day were seeking to bring about the kingdom of God by living “perfect” lives. While their intent was praiseworthy, their faulty view of sin led them to a faulty approach to righteousness.

Unfortunately, in spite of the New Testament, the effort to bring

about the kingdom of God through an atomized view of sin and righteousness is still alive and well in the twenty-first century—even in Adventism. In fact, Adventism's most prominent theologian of the 1930s and 1940s took exactly the same position as the Pharisees on sin and righteousness.

In speaking of sanctification as the work of a lifetime, M. L. Andreasen noted that it begins at conversion and continues throughout life. "Every victory," he wrote, "hastens the process. There are few Christians who have not gained the victory over some *sin* that formerly . . . overcame them." Many a man enslaved to the tobacco habit has triumphed over tobacco, and it ceases to be a temptation for him. "*On that point he is sanctified. As he has been victorious over one besetment so he is to become victorious over every sin.* When the work is completed, when he has gained the victory over pride, ambition, love of the world—over all evil—he is *ready for translation*. He has been tried in all *points*. The evil one has come to him and found nothing. Satan has no more temptations for him. *He has overcome them all*. He stands *without fault* before the throne of God. Christ places His seal upon him. . . .

"Thus it shall be with the last generation of men living on the earth. Through them God's final demonstration of what He can do with humanity will be given. . . . [The final generation] will be subjected to every temptation, but they will not yield. They will demonstrate that it is possible to live without sin—the very demonstration for which the world has been looking. . . . It will become evident to all that the gospel really can save to the uttermost."²³

The above quotation is extremely important in Adventist theology. Whole schools of Adventist thought base themselves upon its approach to sin, righteousness, and perfection. While not denying God's ability to save to the uttermost and the need for a "spotless" final generation of earthlings (Rev. 14:5), the present book will argue that Adventist theology has two distinctly different approaches to sin that lead to several (more than two) distinctively different approaches to righteousness and perfection within the denomination.

The present volume also argues, in connection with the above point, that the greatest mistake of the Pharisees of old was in their definition of sin. Chapter 2 will take up the topic of sin. The rest of the book, chapters 4 through 10, will develop an approach to righteousness, perfection, and "translation faith" that grows out of a well-rounded view of the biblical teaching on sin. Meanwhile, we need to spend a bit more time with our friends the Pharisees.

The Problem With Being Good

The parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9-14) is probably the best New Testament illustration of the problem of human goodness. “Two men,” related Jesus, “went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, *I* thank thee that *I* am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. *I* fast twice a week, *I* give tithes of all that *I* get.’ But the tax collector, standing afar off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a [“the” in the Greek text] sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

We should note several things about the Pharisee’s prayer. First, it is a catalog of his own virtues, the negative first, then the positive. Not only is he not like others, but he can list his merits. Five times he uses the personal pronoun *I* in relation to his virtue. Thus William Barclay points out that “the Pharisee was really giving himself a testimonial before God.”²⁴ Such a catalog is obviously based on an atomization of sin. The Pharisee could quantify his righteousness—he could count his merits.

Second, not only could he quantify his righteousness, but he could compare himself with the tax collector and come out feeling good about himself. More important, he used his neighbor’s failures to build his self-image. Luke therefore adds that our Pharisee friend not only trusted in himself, but he “despised others” who were not as good as himself. That problem, unfortunately, has continued to plague Pharisaic personalities down through history.

Third, the parable indicates that the Pharisee, in spite of his goodness, was totally lost spiritually. Not only was his prayer “with” or “to” himself (verse 11), but he had no sense of his lostness. In his confidence and zeal to be good, he concluded that he had succeeded. We could compare him to Rabbi Simeon ben Jochai, who once said: “If there are only two righteous men in the world, I and my son are these two; if there is only one, I am he!”²⁵

In the parable the Pharisee demonstrates that he does not understand either the nature or the depth of sin. Sin, his actions imply, could be rooted out by trying harder and doing more. One outcome was a form of “degenerate sanctification” that drove a wedge between faith in God and daily living. The result was “destructive of true religion.”²⁶

Thus the parable of Luke 18 represents the way in which the pursuit