



Why We Cannot Save Ourselves

Grace Reigns: God's Gospel for All Peoples Series #20

Romans 3:1-20

David Sunday

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Lord, as we approach Your holy Word, we pray that You would capture our hearts. In Isaiah, you said that You would draw near to those who are humble and contrite in heart, trembling at Your Word. Grant that we would be that kind of people. Grant us that trembling—that joyful reverence—and that earnest hope and desire to be conformed to You. Grant that we might have eyes to see. Open our eyes that we would behold wonderful things out of Your law today. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

I cannot save myself and I want to tell you today how God convinced me of that truth. It is my prayer today that God will persuade and convince every one of us of that truth. Please turn in your Bible to Romans 3.

First, I want to say a word about who I am. My name is David Sunday. I am one of the pastors here at New Covenant. You might look at me and think, "I have nothing in common with you. I'm really not a religious type; you're a religious professional. This is what you do for a living." With a last name like Sunday, I get lots of laughter when people find out I'm a pastor. Every week, I get comments about my name. Literally, every week people ask, "Are you related to Billy Sunday?" Sometimes, people even ask me if I was born with that name or if I got that name when I became a pastor. It is sort of like the Pope, whose name changes when he is elevated to that position.

Yes, I was born with this name. It was not given to me at my ordination. I was born into a very religious family. I had parents, grandparents and great-grandparents who were all very involved in church. I am the only pastor out of all those people, but they were all believers. They took me to church up to three times a week when I was growing up. I cannot remember a time in my life when I was actively not believing in Jesus or not listening to the Bible and believing that it is God's Word.

However, I do know that religion alone is not enough to save me. There came a time when I was around 18 years old when I went through a significant season of doubt and spiritual turmoil. There were two things happening at that time. One was that I was becoming much more aware of my sinfulness, specifically desires and actions that I could not control and from which I could not save myself. The other thing that happened at that time was that I was plagued with doubts. “Is God real? Can I really know Him? How can I know if I am in a right relationship with Him?” This went on for about six months, and I struggled day and night with those questions. Sometimes it was so much of a struggle that I had no rest.

Here is something that I learned about myself at that time and I have been learning it ever since: no matter how hard I try, I cannot make myself right with God. I am a lot worse than I ever realized. I know this is true. My heart is dead toward God in myself, and I am desperately sinful. I need Him to come down and rescue me—to save me from my sins.

There is a story Jesus told about a father of two sons (Luke 15:11-32). One son squandered everything that he had in reckless and riotous living. The father gave him all that he had. The son took it, wasted it and ran from the father. The other son stayed home and slavishly tried to do everything the father told him to do. However, he did not love his brother and he had deep resentment in his heart toward his father, especially when his father was merciful to his younger brother when he finally came to his senses and came home.

One of the things I began to realize about myself during that season of turmoil was that I was a lot like that older brother. I used my own morality and performance—even my own religion—as a means of trying to satisfy God and keep up a good opinion of myself. I realized there is a lot of self-righteousness in my heart. I looked down on other people who were less righteous than I thought I was. What set me free was realizing that God came down into this world, not just to save unreligious, riotous, reckless people, but religious people as well. We desperately need Him to save us.

The good news is that my acceptance with God is not based on or improved by my religious performance. My acceptance with God is based completely on what Jesus Christ, God’s Son, did on the cross to cleanse me—and cleanse all people, religious and unreligious—of my sin, self-righteous pride and hard-heartedness. That’s the good news of the gospel and it is for each one of us. None of us can save ourselves. We all need this gospel.

For me today, religion is not about trying to make myself acceptable to God. Religion is about getting to know Jesus better. Religion is about trusting Him more. Religion is about loving Him and sharing His love with other people who need Him just as desperately as I do. That is what I want to do for you today. I want to share your need for Jesus with you. I want you

to be persuaded—just as I am persuaded—that you cannot save yourself. Romans 3 is designed to do that for us.

We have been going through the book of Romans—specifically the first two chapters—over the last several weeks this summer and the main thing Paul is trying to show us is that everyone needs this gospel. Recall the manifesto of Paul in Romans 1:16-17. He said, *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...”* We all need to believe. When we believe on Jesus Christ—when we put our faith and trust in Him—God gives us a righteousness that comes from Him. It is a righteousness that is through faith in Jesus. Paul is designing to show everyone in the universe that we need this righteousness that comes from God. We do not have it in ourselves. We cannot save ourselves.

So Paul spends a lot of time arguing with religious and moral people, saying, “You, too, need this salvation from God. You, too, need this righteousness. You cannot save yourself.” He actually spends more time with religious, moral people than he does with the freewheeling, sensual pagan people. I wonder why that is. Could it be that religious people are actually harder to reach? Could it be that people who are moral and self-respectable have a harder time seeing their need? They do not really believe they have a desperate need.

Imagine you are on an airplane and are reaching cruising altitude. It is a long flight over the ocean. Suddenly, the flight attendants come out into the cabin and hand out parachutes. They say to everyone, especially the men, “Here, strap these on and you will feel like paratroopers. If you like Band of Brothers, you’re really going to love this. You are going to feel so strong and powerful.” So everyone begins strapping the parachutes on, saying, “This is kind of cool. I feel like I’m part of the Band of Brothers.” However, after about an hour of wearing the parachute on this transatlantic flight, it becomes even more uncomfortable than normal uncomfortable seats on an airplane. It is heavy and you cannot relax your neck and back. Finally, you say, “I need to get rid of this thing. It does not fit. I do not need it.” So you take the parachute off.

However, imagine a different scenario. You reach cruising altitude; all of a sudden, the flight attendants run up and down each aisle, throwing parachutes at the passengers and saying, “The cockpit is on fire! This place is going down. Strap on the parachute! It’s your only means of survival.” Suddenly, that parachute is the difference between life and death.

How does that relate to the gospel? Whether or not you treasure the gospel depends on whether or not you believe that your own righteousness—your own morality—is like a burning plane that is going down. You are going to crash and burn if you put your hope and trust in your

own righteousness. Do you sense your need that makes the difference between whether or not you will treasure this gospel? That is what Paul is doing here.

Look at the end of chapter two where we ended last week. Paul demolishes religiosity at the end of chapter two. In verse 28, he says, *“For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.”*

If you are a good Jew and have been listening to Paul up to this point, you are getting agitated in your heart. At this point, you are feeling pretty trapped by the apostle’s argument. You can hear echoes of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel in these words about the need for the Spirit to transform your heart. You can even hear echoes of Moses in these words. He taught that all our hearts need to be circumcised. We need God’s Spirit to transform us from the inside out so that we can love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Paul is saying to the religious Jew, “If your religion is really about pride in your morality and pedigree, and pride in how hard you are trying to obey the law, then what you are really doing is seeking praise for yourself. You don’t love God from your heart. In fact, deep down inside, you might be getting angry with God. You might feel like your whole identity is being stolen from you, like everything you have built your life upon is now worthless.

In chapter three, Paul imagines this good Jewish man crying out in protest at this point, saying, “Paul, if being a Jew does not save us, if being so faithful to God’s law is not good enough, what is the benefit in being Jewish? If we are no better than anyone else, if we need to be saved from judgment like everyone else in the world, if our religion, rituals and rigorous law-keeping doesn’t make us better than any other sinner, is there any value in being a Jew?”

Paul shows us in the first nine verses of chapter three how to do good evangelism. Part of doing good evangelism is anticipating objections. You are thinking about what is going on in the minds of people who are hearing the message, anticipating those questions and objections. That is what Paul does here beginning in verse one. He asks the questions good Jews are thinking: “What advantage has the Jew? What is the value of circumcision?” Paul says in verse two, *“Much in every way. To begin with...”* Or, “first of all,” but he never finishes his list. He is going to get back to these questions later in Romans 4 and then again in chapters nine and 11.

Paul says the advantage is that *“the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.”* They have been given the Bible. God has told them about His history in dealing with them. God has called them to Himself through the prophets and He has revealed His ways to them.

Last week, we saw that knowing the Bible can be dangerous because it is not what we know but what we do with what we know that really matters. We can use what we know in a

hypocritical way and we can rely on external rituals rather than inward transformation.

Therefore, knowing the Bible in itself can be a dangerous thing. However, having the Bible is a great treasure.

As Paul says, “You have the oracles of God.” A good Jew probably would have had Psalm 147:19-20 in his mind. It says this: *“He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and rules to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his rules. Praise the Lord!”* God has given us His revelation. That is a treasure and a privilege.

So Paul imagines that a Jew is going to agree with him on this and rejoice at the privilege of having the Holy Scriptures—the Bible. He is going to say, “Surely, this is a tremendous advantage to have the Word of God.” But then Paul imagines his religious objector going down this path in verses three and four. He imagines the Jew thinking, “In these Scriptures and oracles, God has made promises to the children of Abraham. Surely, God is going to be faithful to us. He is going to be faithful to His promises, even if we failed Him. Right, Paul?

Great is His faithfulness!
Morning by morning, new mercies we see...
He changes not, His compassions they fail not.
As He has been He forever will be.

(Great Is Their Faithfulness by Thomas O. Chisholm)

Right, Paul? Right?”

Paul is saying, “Yes, right. God is always faithful to His Word.” So then the religious Jew thinks, “Because God is faithful and we are the children of Abraham, we Jews are safe. No matter what we do, God will accept us on the day of judgment. Right? God never breaks His promises.” Paul is reading the mind of his questioner in verse three. He says, *“What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means!”*

Paul is saying, “Even if every Jewish person on the planet broke faith with God, even if everyone was a liar and unfaithful to the covenant, God would still be faithful to His promises.” However, Paul adds something that this person who trusted in his religion did not grasp. God is faithful to His Word not only when He is saving us, but also when He is judging us. God’s judgment is also a reflection of His faithfulness to His Word.

So what does Paul do? In the middle of verse four, he brings his Jewish friend back to Psalm 51. What is that psalm? It is the psalm when King David confessed his adultery with Bathsheba. What does David say? He says these words: *“That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.”* David is saying, “God, I praise You for Your judgments. I’m going to stop blaming Bathsheba. I’m going to stop making excuses. I’m going

to stop raging against You in my heart, God. This is what I say to You: Lord, whatever comes out of this sordid failure in my life, You deserve to win. You deserve to prevail. Whatever You say about me, God, is right. Your judgments against me are right. I deserve nothing from You except judgment. I cannot save myself. My only plea is, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’”

Friends, someday every one of us must eventually get to that point. Every one of us must find ourselves where David found himself. If we are ever going to experience God’s salvation, we must fail. We must see ourselves as miserable failures. “I don’t have a leg to stand on before God. I don’t have a single argument to make in my favor.” You must be undone, just as David was and just as Isaiah was in the temple. You must say, “God, You win! I have no argument in my favor. You are the One Who must be proved right here, not me. Your judgment must prevail, not mine.”

Listen to how Ray Ortlund describes how every one of us must come to this realization that we cannot save ourselves. He says:

If God has a purpose of grace for you, there comes a time in your life when you fail inexcusably, shamefully. The only human being Who never failed was Who? Jesus. But there will come a time for you—and maybe it has already come—when you will look at yourself in shock and disbelief that you could be so stupid, and worse than stupid. Something important in your life, you will bungle it so horribly that it lies in broken pieces around your feet, and you can’t put it back together again. You will hurt people you love. And then you will face the most important choice in your life. Here it is. The most important choice is not whether or not to sin. You will sin. We all do. The most important choice comes after the sin. Will you deny it and evade it and not face up to it, but soften it and excuse it and blame others and even blame God? It’s what millions of people do. “I’m going to save myself. I’m going to defend myself. I cannot face my failure.” If God has a purpose of grace for you, He will be so faithful to you He will not let you win. He will not let you sweep it under the carpet. He will not let you hide in the darkness, but will be faithful to shine the light of the gospel into your secrets and invite you to come out of hiding and be forgiven of it all.

It’s a beautiful thing. Let me be very clear, friends. The more respectable, religious and good on the outside you are and people think you are, the harder it will be for you to come to that point, buried in the dust. “God, be merciful to me!” It is very hard for religious people who have a high view of their morality to surrender to God’s judgment on our utter sinfulness and cast

ourselves on His mercy. It is terribly hard for good church people to admit, “I am a failure. I am a wreck. I am a mess.” Your pride will not give up without a fight.

That is what we see in Romans 3. Paul knew he was getting ahold of his religious friend. He could see him squirming in his seat. He could see him agitated. However, his defense was that they were being broken down but not gone yet. He still protested and held on to his own self-sufficiency for dear life.

It is at this point that this religious man began to sound ridiculous. Look at verse five: *“But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us?”* Paul was imagining that there were people thinking, “Okay, my sin makes God’s righteousness shine all the brighter. If that is the case, how is it fair for God to judge us?” It is as if he argued that our sins somehow do God a favor. Somehow our sinning is going to add to God’s glory, so God has no right to judge us. Our sins are just making Him look better.

Paul was appalled at such a thought. He said, “I am speaking in a human way here. This is a fleshly, man-centered way of thinking.” He rebukes that thought in verse six: *“By no means! For then how could God judge the world?”* If that perverse sort of reasoning were true, then God could not judge anyone. The religious person is still thinking, “God, I want You to judge those people in Romans 1—those wicked, immoral, idolatrous pagans out there in the world. Yes, judge them!” Paul is saying, “If the way you are thinking right now is true, God could not judge anyone. Instead, He would have to thank us and reward us for being such good sinners.” Thoughts like this don’t even deserve a response. But the human heart does not easily humble itself.

Therefore, this religious guy, who was on a self-salvation project, took one last desperate stab at trying to preserve the dignity of being able to save and justify himself. Listen to what he says in verse seven: *“But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come?”* Paul answers, “Some people slanderously accuse me of teaching this when I teach my gospel, because I am telling people salvation is by grace alone—there is nothing you can do to earn it or deserve it. You must trust completely in Christ.” So some people say, “Well, if that’s true, why not sin that grace may abound?” Paul deals with that in more detail in chapter six.

Look at the end of verse eight. All Paul says right now is people who twist God’s grace into an excuse for sinning deserve whatever condemnation comes their way. The text says, *“Their condemnation is just.”* If we ever say in our minds, “Well, Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world. So I’m going to sin. He died for me. He covers that.” Paul says, “Your condemnation is just if you use God’s grace as an excuse for sinning.”

Paul has anticipated every rejection a religious, moral person can make; he is closing every escape hatch that we can find for self-salvation. In verse nine, he moves toward his closing argument. *“What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin...”* This is our legal status—all of us. Everyone has a passport at birth and there are only two stamps on that passport: under sin or under grace.

We are all born under sin. We are slaves to sin. This is the first time in Romans that Paul has pictured sin like a slavemaster. It has us under its grip, tyranny and control. We are citizens of the dominion of sin. Sin is our prince, our king, our ruler. All of us—Jews and Greeks, religious and unreligious, moral and immoral—are under sin. You may live a better life than I do. I may live a better life than you do. However, it does not change the basic fact that we are all under the tyranny of sin.

Take three swimmers. Each of them is trying to get from Virginia to France. The first swimmer cannot swim at all. So the minute he reaches a point where his feet cannot touch the bottom of the ocean, he starts drowning. Within five minutes he is gone. Dead.

The second swimmer, like me, went to “Mommy and Me” classes when he was four or five years old. His parents threw him in the pool and said, “Swim.” He can get around a little bit. He’s an amateur swimmer. He might make it half an hour. He is out there and can still see the shores of Virginia. But he runs out of breath and runs out of strength, and, before you know it, he is down at the bottom of the ocean. Dead.

The last swimmer is Michael Phelps, an Olympic athlete. You have hopes for him. He takes off and does 10 miles with no problem. Twenty miles. Still making it. Thirty miles. At 40 miles, he is starting to get very tired. At 50 miles, he is really sluggish. At 60 miles, he is starting to sink. Before he hits 70, he is down. He is dead.

Here is the key question: which swimmer is more dead than the other? Did any of them even get close to reaching the shore of France? In the grand scheme of things, they are all equally separated from the European coastline. They are not even close. That is where a human being finds himself in the presence of a holy God. You can go to the top of the Himalayan Mountains at the highest peak on earth, but you can no more reach a star than someone down in Death Valley. That is how separated we are from God. That is how much of a grip sin has on us. Do you believe this about yourself today? Do you believe that you cannot save yourself?

Christopher Ash says:

Nothing I can do can stop God being very angry with me, and rightly so. It doesn’t matter how good a life I manage to lead, how well I

know my Bible, how zealous I am about church, how wonderful a Christian family or friends I may have. The right thing for God to do is to be very angry with me. It would be quite wrong of God not to be angry with me.

Do you believe that's true? Christopher Ash says it sounds outrageous, but it is true. Until we grasp this, we will never fully appreciate the wonder of the gospel of Jesus Christ. What is true about every one of us? We are all by nature trapped in slavery to sin. Paul has made his case, and it is as if he says in verse ten, "Do you still doubt this? Let me just bring out a litany of Scriptures—your own Scriptures—to prove this point to you and show you what a heavy weight your sin is and how you cannot save yourself."

He starts quoting from the Bible over and over again, verse after verse, showing the utter pervasive depravity of every human being. He begins in verse then, "*None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.*" None of us stands in a right position before God, and none of our deeds can change that. You cannot fix this through your own efforts. We are guilty and condemned. We do not understand God's truth or God's ways. People have Ph.D.'s in theology and still do not understand and embrace the gospel. We need the Holy Spirit to illuminate our darkened minds. Sin has darkened our understanding because our hearts are hardened.

Tim Keller says, "Our sinful self-centeredness leads us to filter out a lot of reality. It's a form of denial. We are blind to many truths and our thinking does not compute data as it should." We believe what we want to believe and filter out a lot of truth. We have some pretty sophisticated defense mechanisms going on in our thinking that keep us from understanding the ways of God.

Paul says, "None of us really wants to find God. No one seeks for God." I know we seek spiritual blessings. We seek answers to our prayers. We seek spiritual power, peace or experiences, but Paul is saying no one prompted by his or her own initiative—no one acting in his or her own ability—seeks God to know God for Who He is. Christians even know this is true. One of the things I hear from Christian people over and over again is, "I'm not reading my Bible. I'm not praying like I should. I know I should be seeking God, but I'm really not." We don't find God until God finds us. We don't seek God until God seeks and rescues us.

Paul goes on in verse 12, saying, "*All have turned aside,*" echoing the Prophet Isaiah, who said, "*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way*" (Isaiah 53:6). We are not just lost; we are willfully wandering away from God's path. We are demanding our own way—the right to choose our own path and define our own destiny. We cherish that

right of self-determination. Every one of us has turned to his own way. Together we have become worthless. That was the word that was used of a spoiled container of milk. Sour milk. Yuck! It is worthless. Dump it down the drain. We are no longer useful for the purposes for which we were designed.

Paul says in verse 12 that no one does good. Yet, there are so many people around me who do so many good things. Relatively speaking, there are people who are better than others and we benefit from people's good deeds all the time. When they do good for you, you should not say to them, "No one does good. I'm not going to thank you for that." You are just a fellow sinner like they are. If someone does good to you, whether or not they are a believer in Jesus, you better thank them because you did not deserve that. However, relative to God, no one is good but God alone. None of us measures up, not even one. It is universal.

If you doubt that, test your speech. Can you go one week without complaining? Can you go one week only speaking that which is useful for "*building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear*" (Ephesians 4:29)? Can you go one week without becoming impatient? Can you go one week without speaking ill of someone else?

Paul says, "*Their throat is an open grave*" (verse 13). It is like a grave with rotting bodies in it; it is open to let all the stench and decay poison everyone who comes near. That is our throat. How quickly and easily we lie. We use our tongues to deceive. How willingly we tear down others in order to advance ourselves. "*The venom of asps is under their lips*" (verse 13). Woe to the person who gets in the way of our comfort; who prevents our promotion; who makes us feel out of control; or who enjoys a relationship that we feel like we deserve to have. "*Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known*" (verses 14-17).

That is what comes to my mind when Pastor Huff asks us to, "Take a moment to confess our sins." I think of some relational tension in my life and how every time I try to fix it I feel like I am messing it up a little bit more. I say to the Lord, "The way of peace I do not know. Whenever I try to take this into my own hands, it does not get better; it gets worse. My only hope is You, Lord."

What is at the root of all this? It is our relationship to God. Verse 18 says, "*There is no fear of God before their eyes.*" There is no awe; no respect; no trembling joy before His greatness; no tearful amazement at His mercy; no thinking of His glory, love and power; no yielding to His leadership and control. We live as if He doesn't exist. We may not view ourselves as atheists, but in our hearts we say, "There is no God. There is no God to guide me. There is no God to rule me. There is no God to thank. There is no God to worship. There is no God to judge.

There is no God to honor.” That is what God’s law teaches us about each of us. That is the condition of humanity without exception. That is what God’s law does. It levels us in the dust.

Paul says in verse 19, *“Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law...”* In a sense, we are all born into this world under the law of God and under that law we are condemned as sinners. But the law ultimately has a gracious purpose. It is to show us we cannot save ourselves. The evidence that we are coming to the realization that we cannot save ourselves is that we shut up. We stop speaking. We stop defending ourselves. We stop trying to assert our own goodness.

Paul says this is the aim: *“that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin”* (verses 19-20). In other words, no one will save himself and no one will save herself since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

Here is the biggest difference between a religious unbeliever and a true Christian: a true Christian repents not only of his sin, but of his goodness. We have given up on the thought of saving ourselves. We have put that to death once for all.

I want to read some words from a theologian that describes the response to this message so well. He says the way to God is wide open and that is what this communion table represents. The way to God is wide open through the blood of Jesus. God has provided a Savior.

John Gerstner says:

The way to God is wide open. There is nothing standing between the sinner and his God. He has immediate and unimpeded access to the Savior. There is nothing to hinder. No sin can hold [you] back, because God offers justification to the ungodly. Nothing now stands between the sinner and God but the sinner’s ‘good works.’ Nothing can keep him from Christ but his delusion...that he has good works of his own that can satisfy God... All they need is need. All they must have is nothing... But alas, sinners cannot part with their ‘virtues.’ They have none that are not imaginary, but they are real to them. So grace becomes unreal. The real grace of God they spurn in order to hold on to the illusory virtues of their own. Their eyes fixed on a mirage, they will not drink real water. They die of thirst with water all about them.

Here is the water. Here is the grace. It is available to all. Do not fix your eyes on a mirage. Do not think you can save yourself. Say to the Lord, “My only hope is You.”

As we prepare to come to this communion table, if you recognize you are desperately sinful and cannot save yourself, you are welcome here. It is one thing to say, “Yes, I am a sinner.” It’s another thing to confess real sins to God. As we prepare to come to this table, I want to ask

you, fellow Christian, “Are you living with any unconfessed sin before God today?” Think about that for a minute. If you are, take this time to confess to the God of mercy and grace.

Do you owe anyone else an apology for a wrong you have said or done? Would you not desire to make that right? Would you not desire as much as it is possible within you to live at peace with all people (Romans 12:18)? Would you determine in your heart to make that right today?

Are you tolerating anything in your life unworthy of the name of Christ? We must not come to this table callously, without confessing our sinfulness and need; harboring grudges and resentments; tolerating things in our lives that we know are unworthy of the name of Christ; and failing to rise up in the Spirit, saying, “I must put this to death.” To come to the table treating sin lightly is to fall into the very trap of the person who argued with Paul in this passage.

Let’s bow before the Lord and take a moment to deal quietly with Him.

New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ www.newcbc.org

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