

# Dan's Dilemma

by J.B. Hixson

I still remember the night Dan called me. It was about 10 p.m. As a pastor it was not uncommon for me to get late night calls. This time, however, the person on the other end of the line was not one of our church members. It was Dan, my best friend, calling from Tulsa. I had known Dan for almost 15 years. We had grown up together through high school and college and though many miles now separated us, we still tried to stay in touch.

I could tell by the quiver in Dan's voice that night that something was seriously wrong. Weeping, he said, "I really blew it this time, J.B." He fought for every word between sobs. "Calm down, Dan. Tell me what's going on." I was afraid of what he was going to say next. Dan was the kind of kid who always lived on the edge. The son of a preacher, he had been the poster child for PK syndrome. He had a great heart—very genuine and sensitive, but somehow it seemed trouble always found him. But this time I could tell his tangled web involved more than a mere sophomoric prank.

Still, his words caught me completely off guard. "Melanie is pregnant," he finally confessed. Melanie was his girlfriend. His words echoed in my mind for what seemed like minutes as I searched for words to say. I genuinely hurt for Dan, but at the same time I was angry that he had allowed himself to go too far. Dan's propensity toward sexual sins was no secret—at least not to me. I knew he had struggled with this issue during high school. But I thought he had fully repented of this behavior years earlier when he had rededicated his life to Christ at a summer youth camp. I did my best to encourage Dan that night on the phone.

Then a few weeks later, Dan called again. This time his tone was joyful and enthusiastic. "Guess what?" he asked, not waiting for me to answer. "I got saved last night!" I didn't know quite how to respond because I knew that Dan had trusted Christ as His Savior at the age of seven. Not wanting to dampen his enthusiasm I asked him to tell me about it. He related that while attending counseling sessions in the wake of his moral failure he had become convinced that he wasn't really saved. "I mean, how could I be? Christians don't do the kinds of things I was doing," he reasoned. "But *this time*, I really mean business with the Lord. This time I'm fully committed." Although Dan's comments didn't ring true with the theological principle that salvation is a free gift of grace obtained solely by faith in Christ alone, I didn't feel this was the time or place to go into it with him. In my mind at the time, I felt the important thing was to affirm Dan's repentance and encourage him in his commitment.

Over the next few months I provided some occasional counseling as he and Melanie decided to get married. It was a wonderful wedding. It seemed that Dan and Melanie were destined to become a wonderful, godly family despite their shaky beginning.

Five years later, I received another call. It was Dan. Again, he was crying. This time, though, it seemed like tears of fear not remorse. "Can you come over right away?" he pleaded. "I really need to talk with you." "Sure," I said. "I'll be there as quickly as I can."

By this time, my wife Wendy and I also lived in Tulsa. Dan was serving as the pastor of a Baptist church and I was involved in a ministry of my own. Dan and Melanie now had two daughters. Our kids enjoyed playing with each other whenever we got together. Dan frequently called me looking for pastoral advice on various issues and I occasionally filled the pulpit at his church when he was out of town.

When I walked into Dan's living room that night, Melanie was sitting on the couch. It was obvious she had been crying—perhaps all day. I knew right then why I had sensed such fear in Dan's voice earlier in the day. He had blown it again and this time he was afraid he may have destroyed his family. "What happened?" I asked, tentatively. Melanie started sobbing. After a moment or two, in a calm, almost casual sounding voice, Dan said, "I've been having an affair."

Over the next few weeks, things went from bad to worse. Dan resigned as pastor of his church. It turned out that Dan's mistress was pregnant. Dan continued to struggle with breaking off the illicit relationship. It seemed as though all hope for salvaging Dan and Melanie's marriage was futile. But by the grace of God, Melanie

determined in her heart not to give up on Dan. Eventually Dan and his family left Tulsa and moved in with some relatives out of state. Dan began attending counseling sessions with a staff counselor at a large church—the same church where years earlier Dan had made his first profession of faith as a child. I wanted to give him time to sort things out and begin the healing process so I resisted the urge to call him for several weeks. Then, one afternoon, he called me.

"Guess what?" he asked. "I got saved two weeks ago and I was baptized last Sunday." "Really? Tell me about it," I asked, acutely aware of the *déjà vu*. "Well, I realized that I had never truly repented of my sins and fully surrendered to the Lordship of Christ. But this time, I really mean it! I am totally committed to the Lord." As Dan recounted his most recent conversion experience, the similarities in detail to his experience five years earlier were so striking that I was surprised that Dan didn't at least acknowledge them.

I couldn't hold back this time. With as much tact and sincerity as I could muster, I said, "Dan, I have to tell you. I'm concerned that every time you mess up you draw the conclusion that you must not really be saved. I don't mean to question whether or not the experience you had two weeks ago was a genuine salvation experience. But I can't help but notice that in your mind salvation seems to be connected to some level of volitional commitment on your part. The reason this concerns me is because as long as your salvation is conditioned upon your commitment, your life will always be plagued with doubt and fear over whether or not you're truly saved. Every time you blow it, you'll wonder, 'Am I really saved?'"

Then in an effort to offer him some explanation for the spiritual conviction he was feeling I added, "Is it possible that what God is doing in your life at this time is calling you to repent and follow Him; *not* receive the free gift of salvation?" Dan replied, "No. I don't think so. This time is for real." His answer belied the fact that he was still being held captive.

Perhaps what frustrates me most about Dan's situation is that when a sinning brother, broken and hurting, went to his home church seeking counsel, the best they could offer him was, "You must not be saved. Try getting saved again and maybe this time it will take." Such counsel stems from a misunderstanding of the gospel that conditions eternal life on some degree of commitment or repentance from sin.

The effects of a commitment-based gospel are devastating. In the first place, it leaves unbelievers confused about just what is actually required to be saved. Is it a gift I receive, or is it something I earn based on my pledge of obedience? In the second place, it leaves those who did actually accept the free gift of eternal life wondering if they must do more in order to prove they're really saved. As illustrated in Dan's story, those who feel they must prove the genuineness of their salvation by living consistently obedient lives end up being held captive by guilt and discouragement. Extreme highs and lows will mark their lives with no real confidence in their salvation.

What about you? Perhaps you are the unwitting victim of a commitment-based gospel teaching. Do you find yourself repeatedly questioning your salvation? Are you basing the assurance of your eternal salvation on the consistency of your good works? If so, let me encourage you to rest in the promise of Jesus who said, "I give [you] eternal life and [you] shall never perish" (John 10:28). Making a commitment to follow Christ and live in obedience to His commands is an essential pursuit for the Christian. But, only those who have already received the free gift of eternal life by faith can successfully accomplish such pursuits.

The final chapter on Dan's story is still being written. Who knows if his latest commitment to unashamedly follow Christ will bear lasting fruit? But one thing is sure. According to Scripture, when Dan placed his faith in Jesus Christ as His Savior at the age of seven, he received the gift of eternal life; and no matter how many times he stumbles, his home in heaven is eternally secure. I only wish Dan himself would find such assurance by resting on the promise of Christ who said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life" (John 6:47).

Although this article was inspired by a true story, the names and places have been changed and some details altered in the interest of privacy. J. B. Hixson is presently the Director of Baccalaureate Programs at the College of Biblical Studies in Houston, TX.