

ARE UNBAPTIZED BELIEVERS LOST?

A STUDENT OF THE WORD¹

© 2002, Grace Centered Magazine. All Rights Reserved. No reproduction by any means without written permission from Grace Centered Magazine.

Introduction

AN ABIBLICAL QUESTION

“Can salvation be found anywhere other than the bottom of a baptistery?”

An intensely serious brother asked me that question. When I replied that salvation couldn't be found anywhere other than in Jesus, he reacted strongly to my answer. He said that he knows many who believe they wholly are given to Jesus in trusting faith and yielded hearts, but that they couldn't possibly be because they haven't yet been to the bottom of a baptistery. He was quite sure that these deluded people who believe in Jesus and think they live in surrender to Him will, to their surprise, someday wake in hell for the lack of being baptized.

He worked from the premise that if a person *really* is yielded to Jesus, he has obeyed *every* command. Therefore, he believed that those who haven't been immersed for the remission of sins haven't really yielded themselves to Jesus, even if they believe that they have. He sees an unimmersed believer as a person whose faith is flawed and whose end is destruction.

Though I didn't agree with him, the truth is that for many years before I had seen things just as he did. I, too, had believed that it was only when one's faith led her to the point of being baptized for the remission of sins that she was saved. I no longer do.

What changed my view?

The simplest answer is that I finally realized that any question having to do with the fate of an unbaptized believer is an abiblical question. In other words, the bible never contemplates such a question. If we seek an answer to a question about whether or not God commands obedience, the bible speaks directly to that.² If we ask whether God commands baptism, there is plain scripture that shows He does.³ Even if we question the fate of a person who doesn't have faith while claiming that he does, we find a direct answer.⁴ However, when it comes to looking for a verse that speaks about the fate of a person that believes in Jesus but hasn't been baptized, there is no scripture that addresses the subject. The New Testament never considers the situation. It's not in the bible. It's abiblical.

Of course, there was a time when I was quite convinced that though the bible doesn't answer that situation directly, it does make the answer clear in other ways. If I had written then, I would have employed various scriptures and interpretations of scriptures to argue that God grants salvation only when one's faith reaches the point of leading him to complete properly administered and understood baptism.

I would have been wrong.

Heretically wrong.

Without realizing it, in those days I had taken the salvation God by grace offers through faith and twisted it into the gift He offers through faithful obedience. Why is that so wrong? Because it violates the very principle of salvation by grace through faith.

Chapter One

THE FOUNDATIONAL TRUTH

As Paul penned the letter we call Romans, the Holy Spirit led him to discuss whether God grants us salvation through our faith, or whether He grants salvation in response to our faithful obedience to His commands.

The truth he teaches on this subject stands as a foundational truth of Christianity.

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.⁵

“Apart from Law”

To understand this passage, we must be clear about what Paul means when he uses the word law. In this passage the New International Version puts the word law in lower case and then, just after that, where it is called “the Law,” the translators employ the upper case. Why? Because in this passage “the Law” refers to the Law of Moses, whereas the lowercase “law” refers to the idea or general principle of what law is. That’s important. In this passage Paul isn’t discussing the Law of Moses, except for a brief illustration. Instead, he discusses the principle of law. In general, law contains rules and regulations that govern people within a community. When one obeys the commands of the law he is rewarded (the rights of citizenship in that community), and when he violates the commands of the law he is punished (the penalty designated for transgression). Therefore, to be righteous (without guilt or sin⁶), one must obey the law under which he lives.

We understand the principle of law because we live under laws enacted and enforced by our own nation, state, county, and local governments. A person who obeys our laws is upright, just, innocent, and righteous. One who violates a law is unjust, guilty, and unrighteous.

However, in reference to the law of God, Paul stands that simple and easy to understand human concept on its head. He writes: “*But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known.*” What does that phrase, apart from law, mean?

To clarify, Paul penned:

For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.⁷

Paul said succinctly (and somewhat shockingly) that our justification—our righteousness, if you prefer—is not based on our obedience to God’s law. Instead, he writes, our justification comes by faith. For years, I didn’t see the power in those words. Not only did I miss the message, I taught people exactly the opposite of what Paul stated. Incredibly, though it violated the very truth that

Paul here dramatically teaches, I did just as I had been taught by my bible professors and explained to those I taught that we *are saved* by obeying God's law. How could I teach that in the face of Paul's statement that a man is justified by faith apart from the law? I, as did the well-intentioned teachers who taught me, unintentionally manipulated this section of scripture until I convinced myself that it meant the very opposite of what God wrote it to mean.

The following segment explains.

“Before” the Law of Moses

I used to argue that though Paul said we aren't justified by obeying the law, we really are. In my argument, I explained that Paul was saying that no one could ever have found justification by obeying the Law of Moses, but that we *could* find it by obeying the laws found in the New Testament. Of course, to reach such a conclusion, I made the word law in these verses apply only to the Law of Moses and not to the laws of the New Testament. To do that I unconsciously blinded myself to the fact that in these verses Paul talks about laws *before, during, and after* the Law of Moses.⁸ Paul deals with the concept of law in general, not just the law during one part of biblical history.

Within the context of his statement about our not being justified by obeying law, Paul illustrates with a story from the life of Abraham. He writes, *“What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter?”*⁹ This should have been my first major clue that I was wrong to think that Paul said that we couldn't be justified by the Law of Moses but that we could be justified by obeying the law of God to us in our era. Why? Because Abraham *does not* in any way illustrate God's truth about the Law of Moses. He lived centuries before God gave that law. Abraham can't be illustrating any point or truth specifically about the Law of Moses because he never had any accountability to the Law of Moses. Abraham *does* illustrate God's truth about law in general. And what is that truth? Abraham was not justified by obeying the law under which he lived; he was justified through faith.

I hate to admit that just a few years ago I would have countered the preceding paragraph by saying something like, “See, Abraham was justified without the Law of Moses and so are we.” I still would have tried to make everything in these verses apply to justification by that law, so that I could claim that it doesn't apply to justification by the law of the New Testament. Of course, if I had said something like that, I would have been foolish. The verse doesn't say that *we* discover a truth by Abraham's not being justified by law; it says that Abraham discovered it. Abraham couldn't even contemplate the Law of Moses. What he discovered had nothing to do with that law. Rather, he discovered that God justified him apart from the very commands (law) that God had given him. God gave Abraham commands, yet declared him just and righteous before he could obey those commands, as we shall see in just a moment. He justified Abraham by faith, apart from law.

It boils down to this, either God declares us righteous because we obey His law or He declares us righteous through faith “apart from law.”

It is one or the other.

All or None

This foundational truth Paul teaches —justification apart from law—must be applicable to any and every law of God, old or new, or it holds no truth at all. It boils down to this, either God declares us righteous because we obey His law or He declares us righteous through faith “apart from law.” It is one or the other. I finally had to be honest with the text and admit that thinking that we cannot be declared righteous by our obeying the Law of Moses, but that we could be declared righteous by obeying the New Testament law, misses the intent of everything Paul says.

We are righteous either through law or apart from law.

Paul states that it is apart from law.

When I finally admitted to myself that this text teaches that truth, it threw me into a whirling torrent of confusion. It stood as a complete contradiction to the gospel that I had preached for so many years. Had I been wrong to teach people to obey?

Is Law Irrelevant?

If I had had the chance to visit directly with Paul, I would have objected to what he wrote in Romans chapters three and four by saying, “In other places in Romans you teach us to obey. Are you saying that being justified apart from law means that we don’t have to obey? Are you saying that there is no import to law? That it doesn’t matter? That it’s irrelevant?”

Reading Romans again, I discovered that if I had asked that question of Paul, he would have pointed out to me that God does expect us to obey. Whatever the era (Old or New Testament), God takes serious note as to whether or not we obey His commands.

However, demanding our obedience is quite different than granting us righteousness through our obedience.

Shocker of a statement, isn’t it?

If our righteousness isn’t based on our doing what God commands, then on just what is it based?

“Through Faith in Jesus Christ”

It appears Paul anticipated such a question. He writes, *“This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”* He had just written in the preceding verse that this righteousness comes apart from law, and now he tells us where it does come from. God gives it to all who believe and He does it through their faith in Jesus Christ. He writes about that throughout Romans.

Romans 1:17 gives the theme of the book; righteousness is by faith “from first to last.”

For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

Romans 5:1, 2 says that we gain access into grace by faith and that we are justified through faith.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

Romans 9:30-32 states that righteousness is through faith.

The Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works.

God grants righteousness to those who have faith in Jesus. He uses the criteria of faith to credit believers as righteous *before* they can obey so that they can never claim that they earned their righteousness by their obedience.

Before they obey???

Yes, *before*.

Discovering this changed my understanding of God's phenomenal love.

Salvation is Through Faith

Having laid the foundation in chapter three that God grants us righteousness through faith apart from law, Paul goes on in chapter four to illustrate his point.

What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." ¹⁰

Earlier in my life I would have accepted that scripture only if I could have added, "But God doesn't mean that God justified Abraham *just* because He believed. He means He justified Abraham because He had *obedient* faith. God justified him when his faith led him to obey." Back then I would have said that while our works don't save us (we all know that bible teaches we aren't saved by works!) our obedience does save us (because in our era we *are* saved by obeying the New Testament law!). I could say that without feeling contradictory because I thought works and obedience were different things. I classified works as anything we would do to try to earn salvation, and classified obedience as our simply obeying the commands of God. That way I could harmonize my views with the scriptures that so plainly teach that we cannot be saved by works. However, in this section of Romans Paul uses the word works to refer to obedience to God's law. He uses the words work and obedience interchangeably, and when I finally saw that, it decimated my mental separation of the two concepts.

Paul illustrates work with the story of Abraham's obedience to God's command to be circumcised. We find the story in Genesis.

Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep:

Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”¹¹

God gave Abraham the command, demanded obedience, and listed the punishment that would come if Abraham refused to comply. Yet when Paul uses this as his illustration of the truth he teaches in Romans chapters three and four, he says that God’s dealing with Abraham in this situation stands as proof that God grants us righteousness because of the faith in our hearts rather than our obedience to His commands (“justified by faith apart from law”). Paul states that although this was a “must” command, God did the humanly unthinkable and granted Abraham righteousness *before* he obeyed. He even says that if God had granted Abraham righteousness when he obeyed, then Abraham would have *earned* the righteousness rather than receiving it as a gift from God. Follow Paul’s explanation:

He considers what would have happened if Abraham had found his justification by works.

If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about.¹²

Then he tells us *why* Abraham would have had something to boast about.

Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.¹³

Then he tells us why God *wasn’t obligated* to Abraham. God didn’t reward him for an act that led to a corresponding blessing. Instead, He blessed him because of his faith.

However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.¹⁴

Now pay close attention: God says He did *not* credit Abraham with righteousness in response to his work. What is the work that Abraham did, but that God did *not* use as a criterion for declaring him righteous?

Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before!¹⁵

Abraham’s *work* was his *obedience* to the command to be circumcised. When God says that Abraham wasn’t justified by his work, He makes it clear that He means that Abraham wasn’t justified by obeying God’s circumcision command.

Paul shows clearly that work and obedience to the command of God are the same thing, not two different things as I had been taught and was teaching others.

Why is that important to note? Because Paul states that God justified Abraham based on the faith that led him to obey, not on the obedience (the “work”) itself. Rather than declaring him righteous *because* he was circumcised, God declared Abraham righteous *before* he was circumcised. Why? Because God justified him through the faith in his heart.

God makes it clear that anything we *do*, even obeying His command, is *our* work. He also makes it clear that He does *not* grant us righteousness based on *our* work. Instead of looking to us to *earn* our righteousness, He *credits* our faith as if we were righteous.

Don’t think this a semantical argument. It isn’t. It’s the core of the issue at hand.

Law/Faith or Grace/Works

At the risk of belaboring the point, allow me to dig into this just a little more.

In Romans chapters three and four, God uses Paul to let us know that salvation is not by a system of law and works but rather by a system of grace and faith.

The difference?

Law/Works. If one obeys the law, his own actions make him just. If he violates the law, his actions make him unjust. No quantity of obeyed laws compensates for any law not obeyed. (Ex: Telling the truth for a lifetime doesn’t negate the punishment due for one act of lying.) The person stands just or falls per *each* of his own actions.

Grace/Faith. Under God’s system of grace and faith, one’s justification doesn’t result from his obedience or lack of obedience to the governing laws, but rather from the graciousness of the God that enacted the laws. By the grace given him through faith, the believer stands righteous, even when he transgresses.

Am I being too technical?

Okay, let’s see if we can make it simpler by using an illustration to consider why the system of law/works would mean that God would owe us our salvation but a system of grace/faith wouldn’t.

Under Grace/Faith X Doesn’t Bring About Y

If God saved us because of our obedience, we could rightly claim that since we did our part by obeying, He owed it to us to do His part by saving us.

We can see this through this imaginary scenario. God commands, “Do ten pushups to be made righteous.” Let’s make a formula of that. We’ll identify doing the ten pushups as X and identify God’s granting righteousness as Y. The formulated phrasing of God’s command is now, “Do X to get Y.” or “When you do X I’ll give you Y.” By the logic of this formula, when the person

Rather than declaring him righteous because he was circumcised, God declared Abraham righteous before he was circumcised. Why? Because God justified him through the faith in his heart rather than his obedience to the command.

does her ten pushups in response to His command, He would respond by granting her righteousness. He would do that because He is *obligated* to. She does X (ten pushups) and He keeps His word by responding with Y (forgiveness). If He didn't grant her forgiveness, He would violate His word. To be faithful and honest, He *has* to do it; He is obligated.

Have you already seen the problem? Paul said that God *wasn't* obligated to grant Abraham righteousness. That means the above formula is missing something.

The illustration of the foundational truth. Why was God *not* obligated to Abraham? Because He did Y before Abraham could do X. He did *not wait* for Abraham to be circumcised to credit him with righteousness. Read it again, "*Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before?*" God saw the faith in Abraham that would lead him to obey the circumcision command and credited him with righteousness *before* Abraham obeyed the command.

Let me say it again, even stronger: Although God gave Abraham a command that he *had* to obey, God credited righteousness to Abraham *before* Abraham obeyed the command! That's the way God operates; He sees the faith that will prompt the act and graciously gives the blessing *before* the act ever takes place. That is why His giving the blessing is a gift instead of an obligation. He doesn't have to give Y because we haven't yet done X. Therefore, He gives Y as a gift, not as part of a contractual obligation.

This separates Christianity from all other major religions in the world. We serve a God who saves us for what is in our hearts rather than what is in our hands. He commands us to obey, but even before our faith prompts the obedient act, our God credits us as righteous through the faith He acknowledges in our hearts.

Why Should We Obey?

When I finally accepted this crucial, foundational, truth of Christianity, it caused me to question why Abraham went on to be circumcised if he had already been credited as righteous before he was circumcised. Paul answers that question too.

And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.¹⁶

His act of obedience became the seal of his righteousness. A seal is the imprint or sign on a book or document that authenticates it. What does that mean to us in our relationship with God? Perhaps the best way to understand this is to realize that there are two perspectives to our justification.

The first is God's. God tells us throughout the bible that acceptable obedience comes from the heart.¹⁷ He sees the validity of our faith by looking into our hearts.¹⁸ He doesn't have to wait for us to act to see if our faith is genuine. He who knows the heart knows when faith comes to life in one's heart. He justifies us through the faith He sees within us, even before we act.

The second perspective is the one we humans have. We don't always know what is truly in our hearts because all of us have the ability to delude ourselves (see later discussion of James 2).

Therefore, we do better to have an outward sign that we can see and take comfort in. Something that authenticates to *us* that our faith is real and that we *are* yielding. It becomes our signet or seal to prove to us that through our faith God indeed has done what He promised to do. The comfort of our own obedience gives us peace, especially when we don't trust our own hearts.

Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.¹⁹

God justified Abraham because of what was in Abraham's heart. However, Abraham needed to be circumcised to authenticate to himself, and to all of us who would come after him, that his faith was true and his righteousness was granted.

Faith is for God to see and justify us through; obedience is for us to see and take security from.

**Faith is for God to
see and justify us
through; obedience
is for us to see and
take security from.**

Chapter Two

DOES THIS APPLY TO BAPTISM?

The same foundational truth we studied in Romans chapters three and four applies to every command of God, even those that I used to teach that were essential commands we had to obey to gain salvation. I had unwittingly ignored the verses where Paul applies the truth that righteousness is “apart from law” and “through faith” specifically to the forgiveness of sin. Just as Paul finishes illustrating with Abraham in the first five verses of Romans 4, he begins illustrating with David in verse six. He writes that David says the same thing that he, himself, had been teaching about this matter.

David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.”²⁰

I ask myself now how I could have missed this passage that proclaims boldly that God grants *righteousness* apart from any *work*. As you recall from what we saw earlier in Paul’s reference to Abraham, “apart from works” means that it is apart from any *act of obedience*. In reference to God crediting righteousness (forgiveness, justification) apart from works, David wrote about a person being forgiven and never having his sins counted against him. Like Paul, he makes it clear that no act of obedience—no work—stands between a person and his salvation. No wonder he refers to this repeatedly as blessedness.

Salvation is ours when we promptly obey and ours when we sluggishly obey. It’s ours when we understand and do the will of God and it’s ours when we in human frailty misunderstand and miss the will of God. It isn’t to the perfect that God grants righteousness; it is those who have faith in their hearts.

Moreover, this isn’t just an Old Testament concept. Paul started with Abraham who lived *before* the Mosaic law. He then moved to David who lived *during* the Mosaic law. Then to drive his point home he moves to us, the people who live *after* the Mosaic law and are under New Testament law.²¹

The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.²²

This foundational truth applies just as much to us today as it did to Abraham, David, or to those in Rome in the first century. It has always been the way of God and will always be. Salvation comes by God’s grace and is *credited* to those who have faith *before* they can obey the commands of God. That’s the very reason that Paul says it is credited rather than earned. The medium through

which God grants righteousness and salvation is our own faith. That's the pipeline to Him. The door in. The lifeline. It is what He sends His blessings *through*.

Did God Say that Salvation Comes at Baptism?

Let's think again about the question that started this study, the one about salvation being granted only when one is baptized. It's easy to understand someone thinking that way. That same scenario might have happened among the Jewish people after the circumcision command was given. Circumcised Jews would have questioned the relationship an uncircumcised Jew had with God. They might have quoted from what we know as Genesis 17 and told the uncircumcised brother that he needed to be circumcised to become a brother in the covenant. Moreover, they would have been right to insist on his circumcision, just as we are right to direct people who have faith in Jesus to be baptized. A command is a command.

However, the question we consider in this study isn't whether or not God commands baptism, but whether He grants His grace to a believer who hasn't yet been baptized. Remember, the question itself is abiblical. The scripture never considers the fate of a believer who hasn't yet been immersed. We never find a statement in scripture saying something like "believers who haven't yet been baptized are lost." (For comments on Mark 16:15, 16, see endnote.²³) Since the New Testament practice was to baptize people upon their decision to follow Jesus, no New Testament writer spoke directly to the subject of postponed baptisms.

Can we apply the principle we've been studying in Romans chapters three and four to unbaptized believers?

Baptism is Important

Many passages address the importance of baptism. I use the following regularly when I lead people to Christ:

*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*²⁴

*And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.*²⁵

*He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."*²⁶

I not only quote those passages, I believe them.

Yet, the passages cited above no more say that salvation occurs at baptism than other verses say that salvation occurs at the point of repentance or confession. Look at some of the things that Peter and Paul wrote.

“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out.”²⁷

That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.²⁸

In the first verse quoted above, just one chapter after preaching that one should be baptized “for the remission of sins” we find Peter preaching that one should repent so that his “sins may be wiped out.” So did the removal of the listeners’ sins occur when they repented or when they were baptized? Quite simply, neither stands as the magic point separating lost from saved.

Same with Paul’s statement. In Romans 6, he paints a beautiful picture of how at one’s baptism he is buried and resurrected with Christ, but just a few chapters later he says that if we confess we will be saved. Which is it? Does salvation occur at confession or baptism?

Neither.

My earlier penchant for wanting to make some sort of timeline from all this missed the point of God’s saving grace. Neither Peter, Paul, James, John, nor anyone else in the New Testament outlines a process of salvation where one act of obedience follows another, culminating in the final crucial, delineating one that takes a person from being lost to being saved. Oh, it’s a great temptation to make timelines and formulas of commands that do just that. I know firsthand; I used to teach the following:

Faith + Repentance + Confession + Baptism =
Salvation

In my formula everything had to happen in fixed order. For example, a public verbal confession of Jesus’ deity had to come *before* baptism, not *after*, or I would have the person do both the confession *and* the baptism over! Admittedly, to get that formula I had to connect various passages like a kidnapper pasting clippings from newspapers and magazines to construct his message. Also, I ignored altogether passages like the one cited above from Romans 10 where Paul put confession *before* faith! (How dare he do that and confuse people about my salvation plan! Didn’t he know that confession couldn’t come before faith? What was he thinking?)

The New Testament does not outline a process of salvation where one act of obedience follows another, culminating in the final, crucial, delineating one that takes a person from being lost to being saved.

God Desires Faith, Not Formulas

The truth is that God didn’t make a formula for salvation. Nor did He devise a timeline with acts of obedience built upon other prerequisite acts of obedience. That’s why the apostles and

evangelists didn't worry about making any kind of order or plan of salvation clear in every statement they made to every audience. They didn't think themselves inconsistent when on one occasion they told folks to repent to be saved, but on another they concentrated instead on confession, and on yet another they spoke of baptism in the context of salvation. They expected their hearers to do all those things commanded by God and never intended anyone to think that any act of obedience was the basis of her salvation. From beginning to end, they taught that salvation came by the grace of God through faith. They understood that every act of obedience, no matter how important to the changing of our lives, was not to be done so that God would save us, but to be done because the God who saved us wants it done. Moreover, in the very act of obeying we attain in our own hearts the seal that assures us of our relationship with God.

Remember, faith is for God to see and act upon; obedience is for us to see and take security from.

New Testament Stories Prove This True

There is no doubt that God commands baptism of those seeking Him. He made it a significant point in our spiritual journey. But does that mean that if one with faith has not yet been to the bottom of a baptistery that he has no part of God? No chance of salvation even if he places his trust in Jesus? Is that what God says?

We know that the answer to that question is no. We learned it through the foundational principles in Romans 3 and 4. We also know it because there are stories in the book of Acts about people in God's grace through faith though they *had not yet been baptized!*

The Story of Cornelius

In Acts 10, we read of a man named Cornelius.

He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.²⁹

Because of this family's faith, God sent an angel to tell Cornelius,

"Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."³⁰

Cornelius did as commanded and sent for Peter. As he speaks to them,³¹ Peter included these points about Cornelius and his family (in each point, the emphasis is mine).

*"I now realize . . . **God . . . accepts** men from every nation who fear him and do what is right"*

*"**you know the message** God sent to the people of Israel, telling **the good news** of peace through Jesus Christ"*

*“you know what has happened in Judea . . . how God anointed
Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and Power”*

Peter said that Cornelius and his family already knew that Jesus was God’s anointed. Yet later he said that God chose him so that “the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.”³² Because each of those verses seems to give a different viewpoint, I’m not sure whether Cornelius was already a believer in Jesus when Peter arrived or if he became so as Peter preached.³³ Either way, Peter later made it clear that Cornelius’ faith in Jesus led to his salvation *before* he was baptized.

“Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”³⁴

Do you see Peter’s points?

God, who knew Cornelius’ heart, showed that He accepted him by giving the Holy Spirit to him. Note that Peter used the phrase “showed that he accepted” rather than “showed that he *would* accept.” God made it clear that when Cornelius received the Holy Spirit he was *already* accepted by God.

Why did God accept Cornelius and his family?

Peter says, “God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them . . . for he purified their hearts by faith.” Why did He purify their hearts by faith before they did the first act of obedience to His commands? Peter writes, “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” Peter says that God saved the household of Cornelius by His grace through their faith. Peter says that God showed they were saved (purified) by giving them the Holy Spirit.

Another reason we know that God saved Cornelius and his family before their baptism is because in the New Testament we find God giving His Spirit only to those who are His, those who are saved. Look what Paul wrote about one’s receiving the Holy Spirit.

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.³⁵

Paul says that the Holy Spirit is a seal with which God marks believers. He says that the Holy Spirit is our guarantee or assurance that we’ve been saved. Don’t think that Cornelius’ family had not yet been saved when God poured His Spirit out on them. In the New Testament era, the Spirit

is the seal of salvation. No situation exists in the New Testament where God gives His Holy Spirit to an alien sinner (unbeliever) in the same way He gave it to the apostles “at the beginning”³⁶ on the Day of Pentecost. God showed the Jews who had become Christians that He had given the seal of salvation to a Gentile family so that the Jewish Christians would know absolutely that God accepted them.

Peter didn’t baptize them so that they would be saved. It was only after the divine sign of God’s acceptance, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that the thoroughly Jewish Peter would baptize them!

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.”

Cornelius and his family stand as proof of what we’ve already learned in our study. God grants us righteousness through our faith before any action on our part. He does not wait for the act of obedience one does, but instead blesses through the faith one has. The acts of obedience are for our sake, not His, since He knows whether our faith is alive before we can do a thing, just as He did with Cornelius’ family who received the Spirit before they could show any acts of repentance, confession, baptism, or anything else.

When I was younger, I argued that this story was a special situation that wouldn’t apply to us because God bent the rules for the conversion of the first Gentiles to Christianity. As I grew in the Lord, I came to realize that such logic fails miserably.

First, because even in a special situation God did not—would not—give His Spirit to a lost person in the same way as He did to the apostles “at the beginning” on Pentecost. Cornelius was saved when he believed, just as Paul spoke of in Romans 4 in reference to Abraham and to all of us who are Abraham’s descendants through faith.

Second, because this isn’t the only story in Acts where God saves people before baptism.

The Story of the Disciples in Ephesus

It starts simply enough:

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”³⁷

Disciples

Thirty times in the book of Acts Luke refers to disciples. In every case, he uses the word to refer to those who are the saved, the people of God. He even lets us know that disciples and Christians are the same thing.

*The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*³⁸

Based on his consistent usage of the word throughout this letter to Theophilus, we know that when Luke refers to these people in Ephesus as disciples, he means that they are the people of God. They are Christians. That's the way he uses the word disciples in every instance in this book. Theophilus would have had no reason to think that suddenly Luke had changed the meaning of this word he had used repeatedly throughout the letter with singular purpose.

Luke didn't change the meaning and neither should we. Yet, I used to do just that. When I used to say that in this instance Luke used the word disciples to refer to those who really weren't the people of God, the only justification I had for doing so was because in this instance the word didn't agree with my preconceived doctrines. I was so very wrong to have done that. The internal consistency of Luke's letter has to be respected by any authentic student, and in this letter Luke uses the word disciples to refer exclusively to the people of God.

Not only do we have the usage of the word by Luke but the example of Paul himself in this story. Paul accepts these men as disciples and accepts them as fellow believers in Jesus. He demonstrates that fact when he asks if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed.³⁹

*They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied. Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all.*⁴⁰

How could there have been men in Ephesus who believed in Jesus but who had received the wrong baptism? Luke answered that question in the preceding chapter of Acts.

*A Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.*⁴¹

The eloquent Apollos had preached in Ephesus and, according to Luke, he "taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John." That's important. Apollos taught these men accurately about Jesus, but in ignorance he misinformed them about baptism. When Paul discovered that these disciples had obeyed an outdated baptism command, he never questioned the sincerity or reality of their faith. Why would he? They had been taught accurately about Jesus! Their faith was a true faith. Their teacher got that part right. Therefore, Paul didn't waste time teaching them about faith and salvation. Instead, he taught them more accurately about baptism. John's

baptism was a baptism for the Jews that prepared the way for the coming Christ. God commanded John's baptism from those already in covenant with God under the old law. John's baptism was an act of penitence from Jewish people straightening their lives out in anticipation of the soon to arrive Messiah.

Whether these Ephesian disciples were Gentile or Jew, they had no reason to obey a baptism command that had previously existed to make the Jewish people ready for Jesus. Jesus had come. Since the purpose of that baptism no longer existed, that baptism no longer held viability. God replaced it with a new baptism done in the name of Jesus. (In other words, by the authority of Jesus or in response to the command of Jesus.)

The Ephesian disciples complied and submitted themselves to baptism in Jesus' name. When Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit physically manifested His presence with these men by causing them to speak in tongues.

Does No Spirit Mean No Salvation?

In the previous story of Cornelius, I wrote that Cornelius' family's receiving the Spirit proves that they were saved. Does it follow that when these disciples in Ephesus didn't yet have the Spirit that they weren't yet saved?

No. It means that God withheld His Spirit until they learned "more perfectly." In the New Testament His withholding the Spirit doesn't necessarily mean one is lost, though His giving the Spirit does mean that one is saved. God gives His Spirit to His people as His seal of their salvation. No unsaved person may have Him. However, there are examples of God withholding the Spirit from His people—people who are saved—for a specific purpose. He did it in Acts 8 when the first Samaritans were converted.

But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.⁴²

This is a perfect example of people who were saved but hadn't received the Spirit.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.⁴³

So we see clearly in this story of Samaritan Christians that one can be a Christian without yet having the Spirit, at least in physical manifestations.

Interesting, isn't it?

Samaritan Christians went a while without the Spirit. So did the twelve in Ephesus. These disciples were believers in Jesus. Their not yet having received the Spirit indicated nothing about

their salvation but it did prove that God very much wanted them to submit to Jesus' baptism rather than John's. However, when I used to conclude that these twelve Ephesian disciples were baptized in the name of Jesus so that they would go from being lost to being saved was because I pressed my preconceived notions onto the text. Quite simply, there is nothing in this text that says or implies that these men were not yet Jesus' disciples. In fact, it states just the opposite! Both Luke and Paul called them disciples and believers. And why wouldn't they be? They were taught about Jesus accurately and had placed their faith in Him. Therefore, they *were* disciples even though they hadn't yet been baptized. To argue that they *weren't* disciples until they were baptized is to ignore completely Luke's use of the word disciple in the text. Being a Christian is the same as being a disciple in the book of Acts.

Every time.

As usual, when I finally realized that truth, I had another question. "How could someone go so long without the proper baptism and be a Christian anyway?" It took only moments to realize that the principle of Romans answers that question. God saves us through our faith, as passage after passage states so clearly. He doesn't wait for the obedience produced by faith. God commands and we yield to His commands. However, He doesn't wait for our obedience to grant us righteousness. It is through our faith that He saves us, and it is our obedience that seals in our own hearts the assurance of that salvation.

Chapter Three

THE TRUTH IN JAMES 2

Salvation is by grace through faith and is *not* based on the rapidity, quantity, or quality of our obedience. Consider this plain, simple, verse that needs no interpretation at all.

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*⁴⁴

This same word translated here as work is translated in other passages as doing or deed. God lets us know again that nothing we *do* causes Him to give us salvation. It isn't what we *do* but what we have in our heart—faith—that He seeks to see before granting salvation.

When I used to believe that our obedience is as important as our faith, I referred to James 2 to justify my position. Again, I was wrong. Let's look at that passage in context to see what James says.

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

*You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.*⁴⁵

The first thing to note here is that James discusses in these verses a man who “claims” to have faith but actually doesn’t. That is the key to this whole section of scripture. James isn’t talking about a man who truly has faith, but one who claims to have faith but whose claim is false. His faith exists only in his claim and not in reality. To show those who think they have faith what true faith is, everything James writes is directed toward demonstrating the difference in a claimed faith and a true faith.

As soon as he establishes this subject, he says of a claimed faith, “can such faith save him?” That question is rhetorical. A claimed faith doesn’t lead to salvation—it cannot save because it isn’t really faith at all—but a true faith does. Notice carefully that in this entire section James never doubts that it is faith that saves. That’s what makes his rhetorical question work. If we were saved through something other than faith, his question “can such faith save him” wouldn’t make sense. He isn’t telling us that works save us; he’s telling us that a claimed faith cannot.

Doubt that?

Keep looking into James 2.

Living or Dead?

Preeminently practical throughout his letter, James uses illustrations to make clear the truth he wants to communicate. To do that, he shifts his approach from contrasting *claimed faith to true faith* to another in which he can paint a powerful picture, contrasting *living faith to dead faith*.

To contrast the two, he speaks of the signs of a living faith and the signs of a dead faith. Living faith obeys, thereby demonstrating its being alive by the things that it does. Dead faith doesn’t obey and, in a sense, demonstrates its lack of life by what it *doesn’t* do. That’s why he says, “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” and “show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.” Living faith acts. Dead faith doesn’t.

Think of it this way. If you were terribly injured and EMTs were trying to determine if you were alive, they would search for your vital signs. If you are breathing, your heart pumping, and your brain active, no one can rightfully declare you dead. On the other hand, if every organ in your body has shut down so that no vital sign exists, you can rightfully be declared dead. The only way physicians can know if a body is alive is if it gives signs of life.

It is the same with faith and the work produced by faith. Faith demonstrates itself alive through the vital signs of obedience such as loving and caring for people. Therefore, James says, “I will show you my faith by what I do.” On the other hand, the complete absence of these vital signs—the complete lack of obedience—proves that there is no living faith in a person. Though he may *claim* faith, his faith is dead. Dead faith, of course, is the imagery James uses for no faith at all. A person may believe there is a God (as do the demons) but he certainly hasn’t placed his faith and trust in that God. If he did, the faith would demonstrate its life (existence) by obeying God and serving people. Thus James says “faith without works is dead” and “faith without deeds is useless.”

James paints a picture of a person who doesn't have faith, although she says she does, as having a faith best described by words like *claimed*, *dead*, and *useless*. If we are to be saved, we must have faith that is real, living, and useful.

The Signs of Life Aren't Equal to the Life They Signify

As important as your vital signs are, they aren't you. You are much more than a working lung, beating heart, and functioning brain. Vital signs prove life, that's all. They don't replace the person, nor are they equal to him.

In the same way, the acts of obedience our faith leads us to do show that our faith is alive, but those acts aren't our faith. Obedience isn't the same as faith; instead, it is the product of a living faith. Faith, hope, and love lead us to obey (work) but no work we do ever equals faith or hope or love.

We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.⁴⁶

The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.⁴⁷

Our acts of obedience prove our faith is living. But to whom do they prove that faith is alive? To God so that He in response to our actions will save us? No. As I've already pointed out, our obedience proves to *us* that our faith is alive so that *we* can *know* that we aren't just *claiming* faith but truly have faith. God doesn't have to wait for a single action on my part to know whether the faith in my heart is real.

Unfortunately, sometimes I do.

The Illustration of Abraham

Before James finishes this section on faith and works, he proves that he never contemplated that works could save anyone. He does that by referring to Abraham being credited as righteous by God, but instead of using the circumcision illustration that Paul used in Romans 4, he uses the illustration of Abraham offering Isaac on the altar. In Romans Paul made it extremely clear that Abraham was credited with righteousness *before* he obeyed God's command. Does James contradict what Paul taught there by saying here that Abraham was credited as righteous *after* he obeyed a different command from God?

Certainly not.

The Holy Spirit inspired Paul to pen the treatise we know as Romans. James is inspired by the Holy Spirit to write a book of practical counsel on how to live as a Christian. Since both were inspired by the same Spirit, James does not (cannot!) contradict the theology of Romans. Romans was clear. Extremely clear. God had Paul explain things in detail. James doesn't give us something different or new that Paul forgot to give! Instead, the writing of James shows us the way to apply the truth of Romans.

Don't forget James' premise: If faith is alive, it will prove its life by acting in obedience to God. He then sets out to prove that with the illustration of Abraham and Isaac.

First, he says that Abraham was "considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar." If we stopped there, we might conclude that it was Abraham's action that brought about his righteousness. It seems to say that, doesn't it? However, we keep reading.

Next James writes, "You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did." Made complete? What does that mean? James doesn't use that word any other place in his writing so we look elsewhere to get an idea of what James is telling us. Other times in the New Testament that Koine Greek word is translated as consecrate, finish, fulfil, or make perfect. In verses like John 4:34, 5:36, and 17:4, Jesus used it when He talked about finishing His work here on earth. In this verse James says that Abraham's actions finished or completed his faith. That fits nicely with everything we've already learned about the relationship between faith and works. God sees the faith and blesses us through it. We do the work (act of obedience) and gain a seal in our heart. Our action finishes or completes the process. It proves our faith is alive and that God is blessing us because of that.

Then James underlines the foundational truth, "And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend." Paul already told us *exactly* what that phrase "credited as righteous" means. In Romans 3 and 4, he said pointedly that Abraham did not earn righteousness; it wasn't granted because of what he did. Instead, through Abraham's faith He *credited* Abraham as righteous. His righteousness was not earned; it was credited. God did not bless Abraham because of his action. Now, do we find James using the same phrase in exact opposite meaning to the way Paul used it? Does he say that God granted Abraham righteousness because of what he did when Paul said that he didn't?

No.

In the illustration James employs about Abraham, God couldn't have credited Abraham righteous for what he *did* in obeying Him because Abraham *didn't* obey the command! God stopped Abraham *before* he sacrificed Isaac. Even if one were to reject the truth of Romans and try to say that Abraham was justified because of his works/obedience, that person would have to then admit, "Well, God blessed him for his *effort* to obey the command. God was so pleased with the *effort* that He didn't require the command's completion." So, then, what did God bless? Don't we all have to agree that it was the *intention* in Abraham's heart to sacrifice Isaac as commanded and not the act of sacrifice itself?

That has to be so because the sacrifice never took place!

Could it be any clearer?

In the illustration James employs about Abraham, God couldn't have credited Abraham righteous for what he *did* in obeying Him because Abraham *didn't* obey the command of God.

It was Abraham's intent for which God granted him righteousness. It was what was in his heart. His faith. He never finished his obedience, so it couldn't be the obedience that God was blessing! If Abraham had to finish X to get Y, then God couldn't have given him righteousness (Y) because he never sacrificed Isaac (X). God granted Abraham righteousness through the faith in his heart, not the obedience he completed.

God saves us by faith, not by works. James teaches that and nothing more.

See James' Point

What then does God mean by having James write, "You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone."

Within the entire context of James 2, James answers that for us. Only a living faith is a true faith. A living faith acts; it shows its vital signs. A dead faith does nothing but talk. Our actions of obedience prove our faith alive and in that sense are part of our justification. But does God wait for the obedience to give the justification? No. James says Abraham was *credited* as righteous because of his faith. Paul, quoting the *same* verse, says that God grants the righteousness *before* our act of obedience.

Paul wants us to know that our works won't save us. God saves us because of our faith.

James wants us to know that we better be obeying God, because our very obedience becomes the vital sign to let us know that our faith is real. But he didn't write his practical letter to contradict Paul and to change salvation from a system of *grace/faith* to one of *law/works*.

We are saved by grace through faith.

Chapter Four

IT' S WHAT' S INSIDE THAT COUNTS

Thinking that our actions are as important as, or even more important than, what we have in our hearts misses the essence of God's dealing with us. In His relationship with humankind, He has always looked into our hearts and given what He finds there greater weight than those things we do.

Don't think that I mean by that statement that I believe our actions are irrelevant. The bible speaks of judgment for the things we do.

*You, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.*⁴⁸

*For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.*⁴⁹

*God "will give to each person according to what he has done."*⁵⁰

*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*⁵¹

*"Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End."*⁵²

As I pointed out repeatedly in this study, God expects us to obey and finds great displeasure in our disobedience. My point is not that we can ignore God; it is that God reacts to our motivations even before we can act in either obedience or disobedience. God looks to the heart before, during, and after any act that we do either for Him or against Him. That is one of the most powerful things about Christianity. It is why God saved (and presumably still does) those who haven't obeyed His laws exactly but who are people who are good in heart anyway. Paul wrote in the beginning of the Roman treatise,

All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now

accusing, now even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.⁵³

Paul forcefully stated that it is *not* those who hear, but those who *obey* the law that God declares righteous. Knowing what to do isn't enough. Then he throws a curve by immediately giving an illustration of a group of people who did *not* obey the law in its entirety because they didn't know what it was, yet God justified them anyway. Why? Well, it certainly wasn't because these Gentiles obeyed the law God gave to the Jews. They didn't circumcise their male children on the eighth day or give tithes of all they had to God. Nor did they keep all the feasts or ceremonial laws commanded in the Old Testament. How could anyone keep those laws if they didn't know what they were? No one would just sit down with his friends and family one day and say something like, "Well, I've been thinking. If we are to please the Creator of all we see here, even though we don't really know who He is or what His name is, I think that all us guys need to cut off our foreskins. Who's in?" Surely no one thinks that is what Paul means when he says that these people did "by nature" the things of the law. He referred instead to the motivations of their lives that led them to be good people morally. He said of them, "they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them." In the same context where Paul says in his wording what James would rephrase later about being doers of the word rather than hearers only, he tells us that God justified a group of people who didn't have the law but had good hearts. God didn't save them for what they did in obedience to His law. He saved them because their hearts defended them. That may mean that He saw in their hearts that they would have obeyed His law had they known or understood it. Whether it does or not, He judged them not on the specifics of what they did but on the love He saw in their hearts.

God looks to the heart before He looks to the act. That's what we have been saying throughout this study.

Furthermore, when discussing sin we can see that point instantly! Isn't it interesting that most Christians have no problem understanding that God reacts to inner motivations rather than outer actions when it comes to sin?

WHEN DOES GOD CONSIDER ONE GUILTY?

Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.⁵⁴

John equates hating to murder. The "anyone" considered in this passage hasn't actually committed murder, at least not yet, but John tells him that the hate in his heart makes him guilty of murder already. In the eyes of God, his guilt exists before his actions can make him guilty. Why? Because God knows what is in one's heart and responds to that even before the person can act.

If God sees the hate in one's heart as his already committing murder and deals with him accordingly, then doesn't it also make sense that God sees the faith in one's heart as already obedient and deals with him accordingly? Sure it does. That's why Paul wrote that Abraham was justified *before*

he ever took the knife to circumcise himself. It's why James says he was justified *before* he sliced the life out of Isaac. While our acts are important—especially so that we can know who and what we really are—God has never had to wait to see what we would do to know whether the hate in our hearts, or the faith in our hearts, was real. He knows that a hater is already a murderer, and a believer is already a Christian.

Here's another example.

I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.⁵⁵

Looking isn't a sin, but looking lustfully is. However, the fascinating thing is that the sin Jesus accuses the man of isn't lust, it's adultery! How so? Because God views the lust in "his heart" as his having "already committed adultery." God holds him guilty for the motivation in his heart even before he can act on that motivation. Isn't it fascinating that some of the same folks who claim that God won't bless faith until it acts in baptism hold the contradictory belief that God will condemn lust before it acts? They give God the credit for judging the heart when it comes to sin but believe He is restricted when it comes to judging the heart when it comes to salvation.

If we can see that so clearly when it comes to sin, why can't we see it as clearly when it comes to salvation?

Do we really believe that we can do wrong before we act on what is in our hearts but that we cannot do right? That God will condemn a heart before it can act but that He will not save a heart before it can obey?

WHEN DOES GOD CONSIDER ONE FORGIVEN?

One of the most debated subjects in my church-of-origin concerns the fate of a believer on his way to the baptistery but didn't make it. In many bible classes, we've fabricated an imaginary poor soul who placed his faith in Jesus but was killed by a falling tree or errant driver before he could get to the place where someone could baptize him "into Christ" specifically "for the remission of sins." Most of the people involved in these discussions saw the answer as a clear case of his waiting too late to obey and, therefore, the supplicant for salvation fell short of achieving it. If he had made it just a few more yards, he could have rejoiced in his salvation, but, unfortunately, the mythical careening car short-circuited his quest and condemned him eternally to hell. Others in the discussion felt that view very unfair to the poor soul seeking baptism but, based on their theology of salvation at baptism, they had no choice but to agree reluctantly.

Silliness, isn't it?

If that were a valid biblical question, we could just as well ask it about Abraham and his circumcision. After all, God did tell him it was a "must" command. What if old Abe had accidentally severed his wrist with the knife as he was preparing to remove his foreskin? If Abraham had bled to death before finishing the circumcision, does any true bible student believe that God would have said to him something like, "You came soooooo close. Sorry to have to banish you from my

presence.” No. We know that God wouldn’t respond that way because of the teaching Paul made about Abraham’s justification coming *before* his circumcision. God justified him and declared him righteous before he obeyed. We have no reason to believe that God would have renounced Abraham’s justification if he never got to finish his obedience.

Before someone claims that there was some sort of timeline that Abraham had to meet or his being credited as righteous would have been rescinded, let’s examine a bible story of a person who was given a direct command of God but ignored it for about fifteen years.

Who was that man?

The apostle Peter.

As Jesus readied Himself to rise into the clouds, He gave Peter and the other apostles a simple yet essential command. He said,

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”(Matthew’s record)⁵⁶

“Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”
(Mark’s record)⁵⁷

He couldn’t have made it any clearer than that, could He? He told them to go and make disciples of all nations. That meant just what it says. Peter and the others were to go into the entire world preaching the good news about Jesus to all people and make disciples for Jesus from those of every nation. Not just Jews, but Gentiles as well. A short while later Peter himself preached to those gathered on Pentecost,

*“The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off for all whom the Lord our God will call.”*⁵⁸

The scholars and commentators pretty much agree that Peter’s statement refers to both the Jews (for you and your children) and the Gentiles (for all who are far off). He preached that day exactly what Jesus told him in what we refer to as the Great Commission. The apostles and their converts were to take the gospel to all.

Peter knew that. He heard Jesus command him to do it. Nevertheless, Peter didn’t obey. It took a special intervention from God to get Peter to go the home of Cornelius⁵⁹ and preach the gospel to Gentiles. Just before the envoys showed up to take Peter to Cornelius, he stood on Simon’s roof and argued about what was clean and unclean. Was Peter lost because he neglected to obey a direct command of God? No. We know that Peter remained in harmony with God, continuing to be saved and justified, while at the same time he ignored a direct command of Jesus.

Was Peter given a timeline? Did God say, “Okay, Peter. You’ve got only so many hours/days/weeks to get this done or I’ll declare you are a disobedient and lost person.” No. About fifteen years transpired from the time that Peter heard the command from Jesus until he obeyed it by teaching and baptizing Cornelius.

Isn't that amazing? God continued to give Peter grace through years and years of ignoring His direct command. How could God be so blind? Did He "wink" at sin?⁶⁰ No. He saved Peter because of his heart, stubborn and prejudiced as it was toward Gentiles, rather than his prompt obedience to a direct command. Peter held faith in his heart, a living faith though an imperfect faith, and God declared him righteous because of that faith. Just as God looks in the heart of a hater or luster to decide whether he is guilty, even before he physically commits the sin, God looks into the heart of a believer and declares him righteous, even before he physically obeys the command.

Even if that obedience comes excruciatingly slow.

WHAT ABOUT BELIEVERS WHO DELAY BAPTISM?

When I teach people about Jesus, I baptize them just as quickly as they are willing to yield their lives to Him in trusting faith. They did it that way in the stories in the New Testament and I can think of no reason to do it any differently than they. At the same time, I don't worry about the salvation of those who have faith in Jesus but haven't yet been immersed in obedience to Him. If their faith is true, God has already granted them righteousness through their faith. God made sure we understood that principle as the Holy Spirit penned Romans through Paul.

Just as God gave grace and patience to Peter as he struggled, or misunderstood, or fought his prejudices, or whatever it was that kept him from obeying the Great Commission, He gives grace to us who have faith in Him. There are believers who have not yet been to the bottom of a baptistery who are just as much declared righteous as those who have. They may not have obeyed all the commands yet, but God saves them through the living faith in their hearts.

Don't I think them to be in jeopardy because they haven't yet submitted to the baptism God commands of them? No. They are no more in jeopardy of being lost than was Noah's family when they were threatened by the flood. Actually, examining the correlation of that flood and baptism is a good way to end this study and show why we shouldn't fear the salvation of those not yet baptized but who already believe.

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.⁶¹

For years I've heard people quote from the above scripture as if they really believed that this verse says that baptism saves us. Of course, when pressured they would retreat and admit that it is God who saves us and that nothing we do can make that happen. Then they would go right back and quote the verse again as if baptism did somehow save us. Well, let's look at the situation more closely. Whatever baptism does for us was first symbolized by what the flood did for Noah. Since that is the case, we must ask, "Was Noah lost? Did the flood save him by bringing him into relationship with God?" The answer to both those questions is no. Noah wasn't lost. The flood didn't do anything to change his relationship with God. While Noah and his family needed to be saved *from* the flood and would be saved *by* the flood, they were saved *before* the flood ever happened. They already had a relationship with God and weren't lost, either physically or spiritually.

As His children, they obeyed His command to build the ark. We know that Noah's family wasn't lost while they were building the ark, nor were they lost while they were floating on the waters. They were saved before, during, and after the flood. So what did the flood save them from? Drowning. The flood that would have drowned them became the very vehicle to keep them alive as it floated the ship on which they sat. It didn't take them from being lost to being saved. It kept them safe.

In a more symbolic way, the flood saved them because it stood as the clear delineation of their moving from one type of world to another. They were God's in both worlds, but I'm sure they preferred the new one God brought them to.

Peter says that the flood symbolizes the way that baptism now "saves us." To be true to the illustration, we should in no way think or imply that we are lost before baptism and saved after. That wasn't the case with Noah, so it isn't what the illustration is meant to convey. And if we are true to the illustration we note that it wasn't Noah's actions that saved him; it wasn't what he built that God refers to as saving him. It was what God did, the flood. Noah obeyed, as should we, but nothing in the illustration Peter uses indicates that Noah saved himself by his obedience. God was the one who did all the saving that was done.

In the passage Peter makes it clear that we aren't saved by physical washing (removing dirt from the flesh) but by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, so that no one could foolishly figure that the water somehow makes us clean. God makes us clean. God saves us. Noah's building an ark didn't save him and our being baptized doesn't save us. What God did saved Noah. What God does saves us. Noah obeyed and that obedience gave him his "good conscience" that he would survive the mayhem to come. Same with us. Our obedience doesn't save us, but it does indeed give us the "good conscience" that God will save us from the mayhem to come when judgment is brought to fruition on this planet.

Yes, God commands things of us. If we use the illustration of Noah here as Peter uses it, we see the essential nature of obedience (build the ark if God commands!), and how that as we obey Him He symbolically takes us from one level of living to another—one much purer than what we had before. But be honest with the passage; Noah's relationship with God wasn't established by the flood, just sealed by it. Same with us and our obedience to the command to be baptized. Just as Noah would have been spiritually stupid to disobey the command to build the ark, we would be as

much so to ignore God's command to be baptized. But we are His in the process, whether it takes an hour or one hundred twenty years. He doesn't wait for the obedience to be complete. He looks to our hearts.

Since I understand scripture this way, what do I do with unbaptized believers?

I don't judge them. I don't reject them. I don't doubt their faith or their relationship with God. I don't view them as lost. I don't hold myself at arm's length from them. Instead, I call them brothers. Then I do as Priscilla and Aquila did with Apollos. I teach them the way more perfectly. I do as Paul; I baptize them in the name of Jesus. However, I don't view them the same as I do those who don't know Christ. Like Paul viewed those in Ephesus, I see them as disciples who need further teaching.

Salvation is by grace through faith. Accept that and your relationship with God will change. Deepen. Broaden your spiritual borders. And bring you fellowship of many who will bless you as much or more as you bless them.

Isn't that what Christianity is all about?

Endnotes

¹ All too often the author becomes the target of debate rather than the subject at hand. Rather than allow that to happen with this treatise, I decided to assure the subject is paramount by keeping the author unknown. I am unimportant; the subject is extremely important. Let's focus on that. If you decide to critique or debate, deal with the text rather than a personality.

² Matthew 28:20, Jeremiah 11:4

³ Matthew 28:18-20

⁴ Hebrews 11:6, John 3:16-18

⁵ Romans 3:21, 22

⁶ American Heritage Dictionary

⁷ Romans 3:27, 28

⁸ Paul refers to justification apart from law, illustrating with Abraham (who lived well before the Law of Moses), David (who lived under the Law of Moses), and then the Romans themselves in 4:23, 24 (who lived after the Law of Moses). By illustrating across such a broad spectrum of time and laws, He makes His point a universal one rather than one applying to just one law. Abraham was justified by faith rather than the laws of his era, David justified by faith rather than through the Law of Moses, and the Romans justified by faith rather than through the laws given in the New Testament.

⁹ Romans 4:1

¹⁰ Romans 4:3

¹¹ Genesis 17:9-14

¹² Romans 4:2

¹³ Romans 4:4

¹⁴ Romans 4:5

¹⁵ Romans 4:10

¹⁶ Romans 4:11

¹⁷ We find this in the Old Testament. "The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it . . . But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them." (Deuteronomy 30:14-17). We also find it in the New Testament where Paul makes it clear that acts of service or obedience on our part must be prompted by love or "it profits" us nothing. (1 Corinthians 13)

¹⁸ Some may use a passage like Deuteronomy 8:2 to say that God doesn't know what is in our hearts until we obey. That verse says, "Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands." But surely no reasonable person could think that God was saying HE didn't know what was in their hearts. He did. They needed to learn. The bible makes it clear that God DOES

know what is in an individual's heart. Consider "The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (I Samuel 16:7) And note, "If we had forgotten the name of our God, or spread out our hands to a foreign god, would not God have discovered it, since he knows the secrets of the heart?" (Psalm 44:20-21) And believe "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us." (Acts 15:8)

¹⁹ 1 John 3:18-20

²⁰ Romans 4:6-8

²¹ In my church-of-origin, I was taught that there were three biblical dispensations, the Patriarchal, Mosaical, and Christian dispensations. Interestingly, Paul covers all three of those eras through his illustrations of Abraham, David, and those who have faith in Jesus. He makes it clear that the system of salvation he discusses existed as long as humans have existed.

²² Romans 4:23, 24

²³ Even in Mark 16:15, 16 where Mark had the perfect opportunity to tell us that unbaptized believers are lost, he says only "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." Some argue that he didn't have to write, "he who does not be baptized will be condemned" because we can infer it from the text. However, that inference is wholly human. If you infer it, you do so because you see faith and baptism as being equally important. I used to hear it put this way, "If $1 + 1 = 2$, then the lack of either 1 prevents you from reaching 2 because $1 + 0$ isn't 2. Faith plus baptism equals salvation. If you lack either faith or baptism, you cannot have salvation."

That seemingly simple logic contains two fatal flaws.

The first is that faith and baptism are *not* equal, nor are they equally important. The Bible doesn't equate baptism, repentance, confession, praying, giving, or anything else to faith. All those things are acts we *do* in obedience to God's commands. Faith is the motive, power, reason, and drive leading us to those actions. No act of obedience in the bible is as important as faith and indeed could not be. If faith equals 1, then all the things we ever do to obey could never equal another 1 in that manufactured formula. They don't come close to being equal to faith. God didn't make that formula and His next statement shows that we shouldn't either. He said, "Whoever does not believe will be condemned." There's His point. He saves those with faith and rejects those without faith.

The second is that this fabricated formula is specifically contrary to the truth of Romans 4. If the formula some make from Mark 16 were correct, then we could make a similar formula for Abraham, "If Abraham believes and is circumcised he will be declared righteous. But if he doesn't believe he will *not* be declared righteous." By the logic of those who try to make Mark 16 a formula, we would say that God told Abraham that faith plus circumcision equals righteousness. We would then say that if Abraham weren't circumcised, he would be unrighteous.

See the problem?

Not only was Abraham righteous, Paul said pointedly in Romans 4 that God declared Abraham righteous *before* he was circumcised. The formula devised by human logic to explain Mark 16 falls flat when applied to another essential command of God. Surely, that shows us that the formula is one of human origin and does not apply to the truth of God. God isn't operating by our logic or our brilliant argumentative constructions. Paul says that God grants righteousness and forgiveness of sins because of faith, not obedience. Trying to make Mark 16 say anything differently is to fly in the face of Romans and dispute the very nature of salvation through grace.

The reason that Mark didn't say, "he that believes but isn't baptized will be condemned" is because no such thought entered his mind. Neither the Holy Spirit who inspired him nor he, himself, would have ever written such a thing. Baptism wasn't the subject of his statement. Faith was.

²⁴ Acts 2:38

²⁵ Acts 22:16

²⁶ Mark 16:15-16

²⁷ Acts 3:19

²⁸ Romans 10:9, 10

²⁹ Acts 10:2, 3

³⁰ Acts 10:4, 5

³¹ Acts 10:34-38

³² Acts 15:7

³³ I lean toward the understanding that Cornelius and his household already believed and that Peter was there to witness the fact that God accepted believing Gentiles. I think that his statement about Gentiles hearing from him and believing was a statement about Gentiles in general rather than Cornelius' household specifically.

³⁴ Acts 15:7-11

³⁵ Ephesians 1:13-14

³⁶ Acts 11:15-17

³⁷ Acts 19:1, 2

³⁸ Acts 11:26

³⁹ Note that the "test" of a Christian living in the power of God in the New Testament wasn't whether he was baptized, but whether he had received the Holy Spirit.

⁴⁰ Acts 19:2-7

⁴¹ Acts 18:24-26

⁴² Acts 8:12, 13

⁴³ Acts 8:14-17

⁴⁴ Ephesians 2:8-9

⁴⁵ James 2:14-26

⁴⁶ I Thessalonians 1:3

⁴⁷ James 5:6

⁴⁸ Psalm 62:12

⁴⁹ Matthew 16:27

-
- ⁵⁰ Romans 2:6
 - ⁵¹ 2 Corinthians 5:10
 - ⁵² Revelation 22:12, 13
 - ⁵³ Romans 2:12-16
 - ⁵⁴ 1 John 3:15
 - ⁵⁵ Matthew 5:28
 - ⁵⁶ Matthew 26:18, 19
 - ⁵⁷ Mark 16:15
 - ⁵⁸ Acts 2:39
 - ⁵⁹ Acts 10:1-48
 - ⁶⁰ Acts 17:30 KJV
 - ⁶¹ 1 Peter 3:18-22