

GOD of the WORD: On Salvation

Dear Friend,

I am writing to you because of your desire to be in heaven one day and the confusion of so many about the nature of Christian faith. It is tragic when people live with no hope, but it is equally tragic for people to live with false hope. The truth is that many who claim to be Christians are either uninformed or misinformed about the nature of Biblical faith.

“Christians” talk very little about sin these days, which contributes greatly to the problem. This is especially disconcerting, since the Bible says so much about it. In fact, without personal conviction of guilt for one’s sin, the Christian message is meaningless. The gospel (“good news”) of the Bible is only good news to those who know that they need saving.

The preaching of Jesus and Paul start in much the same way that the Bible starts, with facts concerning sin in the world and the universal guilt of human beings. Each of us is guilty because we have inherited a sin nature from our first father, Adam, and also because we have each personally sinned against God. One only has to consider the Ten Commandments to see how short we all fall of His holy standard. Is there one of us who has not stolen something (have you never once stolen someone’s reputation with a careless, slanderous word)? Is there one of us who has not secretly loved (worshipped) anyone or anything in the way that only the Creator deserves? Is there anyone who has never dishonored his or her parents, even privately? Who has never once lied, even stretched the truth just a little? The apostle Paul stated it clearly: “There is no one righteous, not even one... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:10, 23). Furthermore, the penalty for sin is permanent, spiritual death (separation from God throughout eternity [Romans 6:23]). According to the Bible, sin is our main problem. Yet too often, the focus of the Christian message as we hear today, has little (if anything) to do with sin.

A second point of confusion about Christianity revolves around the solution to our “sin problem.” Many people who realize their sin nature hope to please God and earn their way to heaven on their own merit. The trouble is that the Bible does not teach salvation by works. In fact, it indicates that nothing we do will ever enable us to reach God (Romans 3:9-18). He is too holy and we are too sinful. The gap is too wide for any person to bridge by his or her own good works, even Billy Graham or Mother Theresa. In Romans 1:17, the apostle Paul quotes from the Old Testament book of Habakkuk: “*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.’*” What was Paul’s point? He quoted from the Old Testament because in those times, God’s people lived under an obligation to the Law. Nevertheless, Paul points out that even in that day, those whom God deemed “righteous” were those who lived by faith. In other words, the Law was never intended to save anyone, because none could keep it perfectly. God knew of our inability long before He gave the Law. According to Paul, the Law serves to magnify our awareness of the unfathomable gap between God and us: “*No one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin*” (Romans 3:20). The purpose of the Law is to show us just how far we fall short God’s standard.

With these things in mind, the gospel makes sense. The good news is that God bridged the gap for us, providing a righteousness apart from the law through Jesus Christ and our faith in Him (Romans 3:21-22). Jesus not only died to pay the death penalty we owe to God for our sin, He also lived the perfect life that none of us could have lived. If we put our faith in Christ, God is graciously willing to accept Jesus’ death in substitute for our own and credit us with Jesus’ righteousness. Thus, “the righteous will live *by faith* (Romans 1:17) and “a man is justified *by faith* apart from observing the law” (Romans 3:28). We contribute *nothing* to our salvation. Jesus has done everything, and our only hope is faith in Him.

Why then does the Bible say so much about obedience and good works? First, the Bible insists that God's people cannot live blessed lives if they are not obedient to God's commands (Luke 11:28). It also says that obedience and good works will be the basis of each believer's heavenly rewards (2 Corinthians 5:10, Colossians 3:24, Revelation 22:12). Most importantly, it says that good works are an essential *evidence* of salvation. Those who are "in Christ" (and going to Heaven) will naturally want to please God (James 1-5, 1 John 2:3). Conversely, anyone who isn't eager to obey God probably isn't saved.

Tragically, many people who think they will go to heaven, even those who call themselves "Christians," will not, for two reasons. Too often, people believe their good works will balance out the debt they owe God. Many also take "faith in Christ" too lightly, as though it is merely an easy, comfortable road to happiness, rather than as a challenging but rewarding road to holiness. But doesn't the Bible say that God has a wonderful plan for our lives? Yes, it does. It says that God's wonderful plan is to make us more like Christ (Romans 8:28-29). The Christian life is a rich life (John 10:10), but it is not a pain free life (John 16:33). We should not assume that being a Christian is an easy thing, requiring only a quick prayer or intellectual assent to Christ's person and work. Trusting Christ to save us involves a commitment of our lives into His service, a commitment to suffering for the sake of His reputation and to hardship in promoting His purposes. True, saving faith involves shifting our loyalty from self-interests to God's interests. The Christian's joy is not the result of a trouble-free life. Christian joy comes from the assurance that after death, we are guaranteed an eternal, heavenly home!

If you have never had this assurance before or never understood the nature of true, saving faith, today can be the day of your salvation. Will you "declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead" with this understanding of the implications? If so, "you will be saved" (Romans 10:9)!

With Christ's love for you,
D. Hammond