

GOD of the WORD

On Salvation

Dearest Friend,

I am writing to you because of your desire to be in Heaven one day. Perhaps you may feel you “hope to measure up.” Did you know that the Bible offers us confidence that we can *know, without any doubt*, whether or not we are going to Heaven? Some people erroneously think that it is foolish for us to believe we can have such confidence. But the reason we can have this certainty is that our confidence in salvation has *nothing* to do with us and *everything* to do with the finished work of Jesus.

What makes Christianity different from every other religion that has ever been is that it is not a religion of salvation by works. This may confuse you a bit, since we talk so much in our Bible study about obedience. But let me explain. Every religion devised by man (and sadly many “Christian” viewpoints which have erred in their understanding or strayed from keeping the Bible as their sole source of authority) teaches that *we* need to find a way to reach God. Each suggests different means and different individuals who promise to point the way if only we will follow their teaching. In contrast, true Biblical Christianity is absolutely unique. Only the Bible teaches that nothing *we* do will ever enable us to reach God! He is too holy and we are too sinful. The gap is too wide, even for Billy Graham or Mother Theresa or any saint to bridge. This is why John 3:16 says, “*God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.*” In Romans 1:17, the apostle Paul quotes from the Old Testament book of Habakkuk when he says, “*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 is Paul’s point in quoting from the Old Testament? He is testifying to the fact that, although God’s people in the Old Testament lived under an obligation to the Law, the Law was never intended to save them, but only to give them a guideline for how to live well. And God knew, when He gave the Law, that man’s failure to keep it perfectly would only magnify their awareness of that unfathomable gap between themselves and His holy character. (In Romans 3:20, Paul says, “*No one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.*”) No matter how hard they tried, no matter how hard *we* try, people can never be good enough.

Now, let me say something about obedience and good works. We cannot minimize the importance of good works in Scripture. First, the Bible insists that God’s people cannot live blessed lives if they are not obedient to God’s commands (Luke 11:28). Second, it also says that obedience and good works will be the basis of rewards in Heaven for those who are already believers (2 Corinthians 5:10, Colossians 3:24, Revelation 22:12). And finally and most importantly, it says that good works are *an essential evidence* of salvation – in other words, if you have no good works you probably never have been “saved,” because anyone who is “in Christ” (going to Heaven) will naturally want to do what is pleasing to God. (That is the point of the entire book of James. And 1 John 2:3 says, “*We know that we have come to know Him if we obey His commands.*”) Those who live in the western world live in a society that has been “Christianized” to some degree. Because of this, many people have an idea or model for living “good lives,” and for the most part, they do. But so many of them are not going to be in Heaven, because they don’t realize that faith in Christ’s death on our behalf is the *only* thing that can save them. This thinking is not exclusively Western. People all around the globe share this wrong idea about good deeds (or some effort on their part) earning them eternal life.

The deadly confusion over faith and obedience comes when we start to believe that God will measure us by our works to determine whether or not we get into Heaven. Entrance into God’s Heaven has *one, and only one*, requirement – salvation from the penalty of our own personal sin by faith in Jesus – faith that His death on the cross was sufficient to justify us before God. Jesus’ death on the cross is greatly discredited if we don’t understand that He stood in our place when He died. He died so that we wouldn’t have to. He died to pay the debt we owe for our sin. **If we believe we have to add on to what Jesus did on the cross by also being good enough to get into Heaven, then in essence, we are saying Jesus’ death was insufficient to save us.** Paul addresses this in his letter to the Ephesians when he says, “*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.*” (Ephesians 2:8, 9) And in Romans 3:28, “*For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the Law.*” (I also recommend to you the entire book of Galatians, which is a letter Paul wrote specifically to clarify this confusion between salvation by works, or “law”, and salvation entirely by faith.) In truth, we contribute *nothing* to our salvation.

The reason Christians ought to be full of joy is that we understand how tremendous God’s grace is in saving us! If we believe we must do enough good to get into Heaven, then we are saying that, at least in part, we are saving ourselves. On the contrary, these verses say our salvation is pure grace on God’s part. He didn’t have to provide a way for us, but He did. And His provision is entirely sufficient, a gift just waiting to be received by us. What an amazing thing! What a joy! All the pressure is off of us because it was all taken by Jesus. No more worrying about whether or not we’re good enough. We’re not! And we never will be. But when we receive Christ as Savior by faith, a legal transaction is made in Heaven that the Bible calls “justification” (Romans 4:25; 1 Peter 3:8). One easy definition of “justification” is “just-as-if-I’d never sinned”, because when we receive Christ, God no longer sees us as condemned sinners clothed in the filthy rags of our sin and our own effort. Instead, He transfers to us Christ’s righteousness and legally declares us “clothed in Christ” and fit for Heaven. Obviously, God is still aware of our sin. However, He chooses to forgive us completely for Jesus’ sake.

One ought not to assume, then, that being a Christian is an easy thing – a forgettable, “quickie” prayer or mere intellectual assent to Christ’s person and work. For when we trust Christ to save us, it is a commitment of our lives into His service – a commitment that will forever change our lives, which includes suffering for the sake of Christ’s reputation and hardship in helping promote His purposes for the world. “Saving” faith involves shifting our loyalty from self-interests to God’s interests. We will fail in doing so fully because we still have a sinful nature in us (until death.) But the decision to choose to trust Christ for salvation means also choosing His ways. Again, let me be clear, we will never, in this life, be able to perfectly trust, be perfectly loyal, or do anything else perfectly (although over time a true believer should improve), and therefore *our ability to obey and to be completely loyal* can never be counted on to save us.

I want *YOU* to be **ABSOLUTELY SURE** that you have decided to put your faith in Jesus alone for your salvation. Because His “work” on the cross is sufficient and complete, we can have complete confidence that **He did for us what we could never do for ourselves.** In Jesus’ own words, as He died, “IT IS FINISHED!” Salvation has been accomplished. Now it is a free gift for anyone who merely receives it. John 1:12 says, “*Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God.*”

If you have never had this assurance before, may today be the day of your salvation and your greatest joy! Jesus alone is the answer.

With Christ’s love for you,

D.A. Hammond