

Salvation: God's Love Forever

Bethany Bible Church, Adult Sunday School Class, May 19, 2013

'Faith'--The Essential Requirement

THE 'WHY'
OF
SALVATION

THE 'WHAT'
OF
SALVATION

THE 'HOW'
OF
SALVATION

THE 'WHO'
OF
SALVATION

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THE 'WHEN'
OF
SALVATION

THE 'WHERE'
OF
SALVATION

THE 'WONDER'
OF
SALVATION

In our last time together, we discussed two realities that it's necessary to hold to in order to have a truly balanced biblical understanding of salvation: (1) 'divine sovereignty'--i.e., God's unmerited election of someone for salvation; and (2) 'human responsibility'--i.e., that person's responsibility to, in time, hear the gospel and freely choose Jesus Christ. We affirmed that to deny one of these realities in favor of the other is to deny the clear teaching of the Bible. The Bible teaches both without any sense of contradiction--sometimes mentioning them both in the same section of verses! And so, we're on solid biblical ground when we hold to both doctrines faithfully.

But we also said that it's good to keep them distinct in our thinking and consider them separately. In this lesson, we'll begin by considering the doctrine of human responsibility--that in order to be saved someone must hear the gospel and consciously and willingly place their faith in Jesus Christ. It's very practical to begin there; because our message to people is not, "Work hard to discover whether or not you are one of God's elect"; but rather simply, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved . . ." (Acts 16:31). After all, if someone truly believes on Jesus and is saved by faith in Him, then that fact alone proves they were the elect of God all along--chosen by Him from before time. As the Bible says, no one comes to Jesus except those who are given to come; and no one who comes to Jesus will ever be cast out (John 6:37).

A good place to go to in order to think about the call to believe on Jesus would be one of the most beloved and well-known verses in the Bible. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." This verse gives us the essential elements necessary to understand saving faith.

Notice that there is . . .

I. THE INITIATIVE OF GOD TO SAVE SINNERS.

A. We're told, "For God so loved the world . . ." It's essential that genuine faith be placed in the plan that is given by God; because faith in a proposal of salvation that does not originate from God Himself would misplace faith--being placed in a plan that did not have any actual authority to save. Think back to the story of Cain and Abel. In Genesis 3:21, after Adam and Eve sinned, we're told that God rejected the covering they made for themselves of fig leaves; and that "for Adam and his wife the LORD God made tunics of skin, and clothed them." The 'skin' of an animal represented the declaration of God that a substitute would be given as an atoning sacrifice (see Genesis 3:15). Later, Cain sought to bring God "an offering of the fruit of the ground" (4:3). God did not "respect" Cain's offering, because He didn't ask that sinful man bring the work of his own hands as an atonement for sin. Cain's act did not represent faith in the promise of God--and may, in fact, have been rebellion against God's promise. Instead, God "respected" the offering that Abel brought to God "of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat" (v. 4); because it represented faith in the atoning sacrifice of a 'substitute' This reminds us that it is God who must set the terms of salvation--not man. "Faith" in anything else will not save.

B. We're told the motive of this initiative--"God so loved" that He took action. We know from the Scriptures that God's work of salvation is based

on His sovereign choice and results in His own eternal glory. But the Bible makes it clear that the motive that is declared to us in Scripture--and that is to be declared to sinners--is God's own love for us. As it says in Ephesians 2:4-5; "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) . . ." When we share the gospel with unbelieving people, we're sharing the message of God's love for them.

- C. And note finally to whom it is that this initiative of God is directed. It takes "the world" into its scope. By "the world", we understand not the inhabitable planet earth, but the whole of humanity that inhabits it. We understand it to include not only all people living across the surface of the earth presently, but all people who have ever lived, who now live, and will live in time. It is directed to *all* the fallen race of Adam and Eve--starting even with themselves. God, in love, "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4); and He is "the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe" (1 Timothy 4:10). Therefore, we can say that Jesus is "the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world" (1 John 2:2). This means that we don't have to feel we must limit the gospel to the 'elect'--as if we could even determine in advance who they were! Instead, we should declare the gracious initiative of salvation from God to *all* people living in this world without restriction or limitation--and know that it involves a sincere, *boni fide* offer of salvation to them from God Himself.

II. THE PROVISION GOD MADE FOR THE WORLD.

- A. As John 3:16 puts it, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son . . ." Divine love took action. As someone has abbreviated it, "God so loved . . . that He gave." And it was a gift of great sacrifice to Himself--His own dear Son. The phrase "only begotten Son" is mentioned with regard to Jesus five times in Scripture (1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9)--all in John's writings. It is not meant to convey the idea that the Son of God had a beginning in time (because He was eternally pre-existent). Instead, it refers to the uniqueness and depth of the Father's love for His own Son from eternity past. When He gave His Son for us, He gave that which is most dear to His own heart.
- B. This is meant to communicate to us how much a loving God was willing to give in order to save fallen humanity. He was not dispassionate about our need; but was moved--to the deepest degree conceivable--to willingly sacrifice for us; and to the greatest possible level of giving. This is typified for us in God's call to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac; "your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love" (Genesis 22:2). It's declared clearly in the apostle John's declaration; "In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him" (1 John 4:9).

III. THE ONLY ACTION GOD REQUIRES OF THE SINNER.

- A. As John 3:16 tells us, the only condition that is placed on those who would benefit from this provision is "whoever believes in Him". It's important to point out that is to be 'believed in' is not merely the fact of Jesus' existence, but the full content of who it is that He is declared to be (Colossians 1:15-20), how it was that He was testified to have lived (1 John 1:1-5), what it was He came to do for us (Philippians 2:5-11), and how His coming fulfilled the initiative of the Father for our salvation (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)--in other words, His full work as "the Lamb of God

who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

- B. And we should never minimize that wonderful word “whoever”. There is absolutely no limitation placed on who it is that may come to Jesus with humble faith and be saved. “Whoever” sincerely believes on Jesus--even the worst of all sinners--will be saved. As Paul put it; “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life” (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

IV. THE PROMISE GOD MAKES TO THE BELIEVER.

- A. The promise is this: “that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” To “not perish” speaks of the reversal of the condemnation of God concerning the first sin of eating the forbidden fruit at the beginning of the Bible--that “on the day you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 3:17). And to “have everlasting life” fulfills the promise of God concerning the redeemed that is spoken at the end of the Bible--that “they shall reign forever and ever” (Revelation 22:5).
- B. The combining of these two phrases together emphasizes the completeness of salvation. This full salvation is promised to the one who “believes”--whoever they may be. No one must first “earn” a right to this promise. It’s given freely to ‘believers’. We can be as liberal with this promise as Jesus Himself was to the dying thief on the cross--who prayed no more than, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom; and who was told in response, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:42-43).

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In our next time together, we’ll consider the sovereignty of God in choosing--from before time--who it is that will be saved by the blood of His Son. This is a great mystery, because this choice is presented as being apart from any merit or ‘foreseen faith’ on the part of the one He saves. But even if we were to grasp that much of the mystery, it’s an exceedingly greater mystery still; because it is declared to us in perfect harmony with the freedom and responsibility of every redeemed person to place a conscious faith in Jesus Christ.

Let’s be sure that we humbly believe in *both* divine sovereignty and human responsibility--trusting that these two realities meet perfectly in the unfathomable wisdom of God our Savior.

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from The Holy Bible, New King James Version; copyright 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc.