

GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION

by Bobby Duncan

In Isaiah 53:6, the prophet of God wrote: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." Ecclesiastes 7:20 states: "For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not." Paul said in romans 3:23: "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." In verse 10 of the same chapter he said: "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one." These verses all emphasize the universal problem of sin. Romans 6:23 underscores the consequences of being lost in sin: " For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Man needs salvation from sin.

GOD'S PART AND MAN'S PART

There are two aspects of the gospel plan of salvation: (1) God's gracious provisions which make our salvation possible, and (2) the proper response on the part of man to those provisions. In Ephesians 2:8 the apostle Paul wrote, "For by grace are ye saved through faith...." *Grace* should be understood as a word which sums up and includes every single thing Deity has done to provide for our salvation. In the same way, *faith* should be understood as a word which sums up and includes every single thing a man does in response to God's grace, and to appropriate the provisions of God's grace to himself. In other words, the gospel plan of salvation involves acts on the part of God and on the part of man. Actions performed by God to make man's salvation possible we call acts of grace; actions performed by man to make his salvation a reality are acts of faith.

Some resist the idea that man plays a part in his own salvation, averring that sinners are saved by grace alone. If one means by that that one's actions do not make him deserving of salvation, or that his obedience does not pay for any part of his salvation, than we would agree. But what man does or does not do determines whether he is saved or lost. After Peter had concluded that memorable sermon on Pentecost, he exhorted, "Save yourselves from this untoward generation" (Acts 2:40). Peter was not suggesting that these people could save themselves separate and apart from God's grace; he was urging them to appropriate the grace of God to themselves by obeying God's commands.

It is a fact that man cannot make atonement for any of his sins. Micah 6:7 states, "Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" Oh, no! There is no way man can pay for his own sin and lift himself out of condemnation by his own deeds or his own sacrifices. If it were not for God's grace and the provisions springing therefrom, man would be helplessly and hopelessly lost for eternity, in spite of all the good deeds he might do and all the sacrifices he might make.

But it needs to be understood also that all the provisions swelling up out of the grace of god cannot save one sinner who will not put his trust in the Lord and submit to his will. This is the very idea Peter was expressing when he said "Save yourselves from this untoward generation."

If nothing a man does has anything to do with his salvation, then there would be universal salvation, for Hebrews 2:9 says, "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering

of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man." If we were to conclude that man's salvation is not at all dependent on anything he does, then we would have to conclude also that all men will be saved, because Jesus died for all. Since "God is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34), and since Christ died for all (Hebrews 2:9), it would have to be the case that all will be saved, unless man's own response to the provisions of the gospel determines whether he is lost or saved. This, of course, is the case. Hebrews 5:9 states clearly that Christ is the author of eternal salvation "unto all them that obey him."

EXAMPLE OF CONDITIONAL GIFTS

It should not be thought strange to any Bible student that God would make the offer of salvation from sin conditional. Throughout the Old and New testaments there are many examples of those to whom God offered certain benefits, and yet made those offers conditional. God promised to spare the firstborn of the Israelites, provided they would kill a lamb and sprinkle its blood on the doorposts of their houses (Exodus 12). God offered to heal Naaman of his leprosy, but the offer was conditional. Naaman would have to wash in the Jordan River seven times (II Kings 5). Israel was given the city of Jericho, but in order to get the city they had to meet certain conditions; they had to march around the city once a day for six days, and then seven times on the seventh day (Joshua 6). Jesus would restore sight to the blind man, but he required the blind man to wash in the pool of Siloam (John 9). Why should anyone find it difficult to understand that God's offer of forgiveness of sins is conditioned upon man's obedience to the commands of God?

WHAT THE SINNER MUST DO

We are not here discussing what God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit did in order that lost sinners might be saved. We are rather discussing what the sinner is required to do in order to be forgiven of his sins and become a child of God. It should be noted also we are not here discussing the things involved in living the Christian life. We are rather discussing what the sinner is required to do in order to be forgiven of past sins and become a Christian.

Nobody can become a Christian without first hearing the gospel of Christ. That is the reason Jesus commanded his apostles: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). In the book of Acts, every person who became a Christian first heard the preaching of the gospel of Christ. God did not operate upon their hearts and minds directly, separate and apart from the gospel, because the gospel "is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16). Jesus had taught: "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me" (John 6:44-45). Romans 10:13 states the obvious, that one cannot believe without first hearing.

The sinner must next believe the gospel which has been preached. Paul declared that "with the heart man believeth unto righteousness..." (Romans 10:10). John 1:12 states: "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name." You will

notice this verse does not state that those who believe are the sons of God; it states rather that those who believe have the power to become sons of God. Those who believe, in order to become sons of God, must exercise the power given them by their faith. This is done by obeying the commands which God has set forth as conditions of pardon. Salvation is not by faith only as is stated in certain creeds. The inspired record says, "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only" (James 2:24).

After the sinner believes the gospel of Christ, he must then repent, which means to make up one's mind to do right, and obey the gospel of Christ. Acts 17:30 states: "And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent." J.H. Thayer, in his *Greek-English Lexicon* (P. 405), comments on the Greek word translated "repent" in this passage, saying it is "used sep. of those who, conscious of their sins and with manifest tokens of sorrow, are intent on obtaining God's pardon." This is precisely the idea Paul expressed in Second Corinthians 7:10: "For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death." The person who has repented, then, is one who, having heard and believed the gospel, is conscious of and sorry for his sins, and has determined to do what is necessary to obtain God's pardon. Please observe that the sinner who has repented has not, by the mere repentance, obtained pardon; he is rather "intent on obtaining God's pardon." Repentance has been referred to as "the most difficult command," suggesting that, when one has genuinely repented, he will not be at all reluctant to do whatever the Lord requires.

The Lord requires the penitent believer to confess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. One simply cannot be forgiven of his sins if he is ashamed of Christ. Jesus said, "Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, hem will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32-33). The eunuch of Ethiopia heard the gospel of Christ, believed it, and was intent on being baptized to obtain God's pardon. "And Philip said, If though believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37). Having made this confession, the eunuch was immediately baptized.

Baptism, which is immersion in water (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12), is the point at which the sinner is forgiven of his sins and becomes a child of God. Before Jesus ascended to heaven he commissioned his apostles, saying, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:15-16). In carrying out this commission Peter, on Pentecost, said, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2:38). Please observe that baptism is said to be "for the remission of sins," meaning that one is baptized in order to receive the remission of sins. This perfectly coincides with every passage in the Bible dealing with baptism. For example, First Peter 3:21 says baptism saves us. Acts 22:16 says it washes away sins. Galatians 3:27 tells us that baptism puts one into Christ.

BAPTISM AND SALVATION

The religious world generally does not teach nor practice what the Bible teaches with reference to baptism. As the above verses indicate baptism is a condition upon which the sinner can be forgiven of his sins. Just as the Israelites had to sprinkle the blood of the lamb on their doorposts to avoid the death of the first born, just as Naaman had to wash in Jordan in order to be healed of his leprosy, just as Joshua had to march around Jericho in order for the Lord to give him that city, and just as the blind man had to wash in the pool of Siloam, even so the sinner must be baptized in order to be forgiven of his sins.

Nearly all modern religions have salvation before baptism in their creeds, with baptism's being a non-essential act which does nothing more than symbolize one's forgiveness. That is not what the Bible teaches. It is a significant fact that in every verse in the Bible where both baptism and salvation are mentioned, baptism always is mentioned first. Notice some examples of such verses: "John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the *baptism* of repentance for the *remission of sins*" (Mark 1:4). "He that believeth and is *baptized* shall be *saved*; but he that believeth not shall be damned: (Mark 16:16). "Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be *baptized* every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the *remission of sins*, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost (Acts 2:38). "And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be *baptized*, and *wash away thy sins*, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). Emphasis has been added in these verses to call attention to the order of the words. Look at each verse again and observe that baptism always comes before salvation or pardon. Other verses which should be examined include Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27; and First Peter 3:21.

The gospel plan of salvation is clearly taught in the New Testament. Let us not allow the philosophies of men to confuse our minds and cause us to require anything less or more than God has required.