

“BY GRACE YE HAVE BEEN SAVED, THROUGH FAITH”

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 9, 1955 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC.

A few mornings ago I found myself sitting across a dining-car table from a corporal in the United States Army, a man about my own age. As we ate, we became acquainted. I asked where he was stationed and he said near San Francisco, California. I asked how long he had been in the service and he said since 1941, and indicated that he was making the Army his career. He was married, but had no children. We found a good many things of interest to talk about, and after a while I asked him concerning his religion. He smiled and said, “I guess I have none.” He also mentioned that his wife, as he expressed it, “had no faith.” Neither had ever professed any faith in God, in the Bible, or in anything pertaining to religion.

The Tragedy of Being Lost

He was a likable man. He was the kind of a man that I felt that I would like to know better. He was quiet and unassuming, yet courteous and friendly. As I sat across from him I thought of how tragic it is that a man with all his good qualities is destined to be eternally lost. Yet the Bible leaves no other possible conclusion.

In recent months I have found myself thinking more and more often concerning those with whom I have been associated. As it now stands, this man is lost. It may be in a business transaction, as I buy something across a counter, there crosses my mind the thought, “This man isn’t a Christian; this man is lost.” Or it may be while I am seated in a football stadium watching a game that I realize that a great many of the people around me are relatively irreligious and therefore lost.

What Must I Do?

What would you say that my friend across the table the other morning needed to do in order to be saved? This is the most important question that any man can face, because it has to do not only with his life but with the eternity beyond. No question deserves more careful attention than the question, “What must I do to be saved?”

There are a great many people who would say that he does not need to do anything. After all he is a respectable citizen, a very decent, moral kind of man. There are a great many people who say that this is enough. In so saying they completely disregard the teaching in the tenth chapter of Acts. Cornelius was a man who would suffer by comparison with no one. He was a devout believer in God, who prayed often and gave generously, yet he was lost. He was lost until he became a Christian. It is not enough just to be a good man.

There are a great many others who would answer our question by saying that our friend would have to wait until God, in some special way, called him.

I still remember the paragraph in which T. B. Larimore wrote concerning the agonies of his own boyhood. He had been taught that there is nothing that a man can do in order to come to God until he is miraculously called. He attended a college, which in his day taught that man can do nothing until he hears a still, small voice, or receives some other such sign. Young Larimore attended meetings of various kinds and agonized in prayer hoping that God would call him, but God did not. At least there was no special miraculous, supernatural call. He spent several years in deep despondency.

Augustine and Calvin

That doctrine goes a long way back. The man who gave it its first really distinctive statement was Augustine in the fifth century. He said, in effect, “There is nothing man can do until God starts the process by his grace.” Augustine believed that before a man could be saved God must do something specifically for that man. God must elect him to be saved. Augustine was one of the first to believe in predestination, that God before the foundation of the world determined those who were among the elect and those who were not among the elect. He believed that the number was so fixed that it could not be changed.

Later, John Calvin believed this same doctrine and taught it. Those religious millions who have followed in the theology of Calvin have believed it. They have believed that God predestined certain men to be saved and others to be lost. Man can do nothing about it. The scriptures have quite a different emphasis, for they indicate that man must play a crucial and determining part in his own salvation. Later in the life of T. B. Larimore he read the scriptures, and finally, like the breaking of the sun through the clouds, there came the realization that on Pentecost Peter preached Christ, and when he finished he invited everyone who would to come and repent and be baptized. Those who would, did. There was no miraculous tuning of their hearts. They just heard the preaching of the gospel and accepted it. The idea that man can do nothing is not of the Bible. The idea of the Bible is that men go out to preach, the gospel is heard, and everybody who wants to can accept it. “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth on him might not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16). The apostle Paul wrote, “Whosoever shall call on the name

of the Lord shall be saved.” (Rom. 10:13). The idea that man must wait until he has been miraculously called is not taught in the scriptures.

The Answer From the Scriptures

If I were answering the question, “What does our friend need to do to be saved?” I would say that he needs to believe in Christ as the Son of God, (Heb. 11:6), that he needs to believe in Christ so deeply that it causes him to repent of his sins, (Acts 17:30), that he needs to stand up before men and confess his faith in Jesus as his Savior, (Rom. 10:9-10), and then, as a kind of culminating act, he needs to be buried with his Lord by baptism for the forgiveness of his sins. (John 3:5; Acts 2:38). When he has done these things God adds him to the family of the saved, and he lives as a Christian for the rest of his life. That is what every man desperately needs to do.

If it were only that man on the train last week, I would not be discussing this subject, but there are millions of others who need to do that same thing. If you have never become a Christian you are lost. You are not lost just for a day or a month. You are lost forever until you do something about it, and that something has got to be done while you live.

Saved by Grace

I want to read you an interesting and instructive passage of scripture: “By grace have ye have saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should boast.” (Eph. 2:8-9). What does it mean? Sometimes this passage is interpreted as saying that man does not need to do anything. But look at it carefully. In the passage there are several key words. Two stand out. The first is grace. What does grace mean? The clearest definition that I know is “unmerited favor.” Grace is the underserved or unmerited favor of God. It is a free gift that has not been earned.

If grace is the primary or only factor in salvation, everybody on earth will be saved, or else God is a respecter of persons. Now we know that neither of those things is true because the inspired word says, “Enter ye in by the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many are they that enter in thereby.” (Matt. 7:13). Many will be eternally lost. Is God a respecter of persons, saving some by his grace and letting others be lost? The apostle Peter said, “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him.” (Acts 10:34-35). We must conclude from these scriptures that men are saved by God’s grace, but not merely by grace, not by grace alone.

Saved by Faith

That is exactly what our text says, “By grace have ye been saved, through faith.” What does the writer mean by faith? Many people define faith as a mental acceptance of certain facts. That is historical faith. We have historical faith about many things. You believe, for example, that certain cities exist and that certain people have lived, though you have not seen the cities or known the people. That kind of faith, however, is not sufficient to save a man. The devils believe and tremble, but they are not going to be saved. Faith is something beyond the mental acceptance of the existence of God and of Christ. It is that, but it is more. Recently in the ladies’ Bible class on Thursday mornings we have been studying the book of Romans. The theme of that book is faith, and when you study the book you discover that faith meant to the apostle Paul a mental acceptance of the existence of God and Christ plus a commitment of one’s life. When a man has faith, he believes and he invests himself in Christ. The clearest way I know to convey Paul’s meaning is to read a phrase from the opening sentence of Romans and another from the closing sentence. In the opening sentence we find the expression “unto obedience of faith.” (Rom. 1:5). Paul emphasizes faith throughout the sixteen chapters which make up the book. It is obedient faith--faith which includes within itself obedience to God’s will. When you come to the end of the book he uses the same expression, “unto obedience of faith.” (Rom. 16:26). We are save by grace plus faith. Grace is God’s part and faith is our part, and that faith includes within itself the obedience which God asks of us.

In addition, I want to mention what another inspired writer has written. James, the Lord’s brother, wrote, “Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead in itself.” It is not faith. It is dead if it does not have some kind of obedience in it. Later in the same paragraph James wrote, “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, even so faith apart from works is dead.” (James 2:17-26).

Two Sides--Two Parts

Think of it, if you will, as a coin. On one side, God’s side, there is grace; on the other side, our side, obedient faith. What did God need to do to save men? God needed first to love men enough to want them saved. Then he needed to send his only begotten Son into the world to pay the price for man’s redemption. Christ had to live, and die on the cross. Now all of that is God’s part, grace. God also had to make known this message to men. He did it through his inspired word, the Bible. He also did it through the prophets, the apostles, and the evangelists. “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?” (Rom. 10:13-14). God’s part--grace--meant the loving of men, the giving of Christ to die for men, and the making known of the way of salvation to men.

Look at man's part--obedient faith. That means faith that leads a man to repent of his sins and to confess that he believes in Christ as God's son. It also leads him to be buried with his Lord in baptism for the forgiveness of his sins. It leads him to live a new life--a Christian life.

Some people look at God's part--grace--and feel that it is all that is necessary. But grace alone will not save. Others of us may look too exclusively at man's part until we feel that man earns salvation by his obedience. This is a mistake for salvation is God's free gift. We do not earn salvation. It is given. But our part is fundamental, too, for God commands us to do something.

It Is Like ----

Each of us breathes God's fresh air every moment that he lives. It is God's free gift, but we must breathe it. We do not earn it by breathing it, but our breathing it is essential to life.

Just suppose that someone called last night to say, "We want you to come to dinner Tuesday evening." You replied, "We will be happy to come." They will prepare the dinner, they will provide the home, but you have to go. Your going does not earn the dinner, but you have to go to get it. It is a free gift, but you have to go.

A few days ago somebody gave you a gift, but you had to receive it. You do not earn it by receiving it, but you had to receive it in order to get it. Your tearing open of the package did not earn it, it was a free gift. Nevertheless you had to do something. These are just a few ways of pointing out the correct relationship between God's side, grace, the big side, the unmerited gift, and man's side, the obedience of faith. All we really do is fulfill the requirements of accepting God's gift.

Proof Positive

How can you know that what I am saying is right? Because when the inspired writer Luke penned the book of Acts that is the way he said it over and over again. Here it is in Acts two. Peter preached a sermon about Christ. "Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their hearts, and said unto Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brethren, what shall we do? And Peter said unto them, Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit ... And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, Save yourselves from this crooked generation. They then that received his word were baptized: and there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls." (Acts 2:37-38; 40-41).

Here is example number two. God loved a man from Ethiopia enough that he caused a preacher to come and sit beside him in his chariot. "And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this scripture, preached unto him Jesus. And as they went on their way, they came to a certain water: and the eunuch saith, Behold, here is water; what doeth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thy heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still; and they both went down into the waters, both Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, for he went on his way rejoicing." (Acts 8:35-39).

Chapter nine of Acts tells about Saul of Tarsus. Christ said unto him, "Rise and enter into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. And he was three days without sight and did neither eat nor drink." (Acts 9:6,9). Then, Ananias, the preacher, came and said, "Why tarriest thou? arise and be baptized, and wash away thy sins." (Acts 22:16).

Here is one last example. It is the story of the Philippian jailor. In it there came the moment when the jailor said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" The apostle Paul replied, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house. And they spake the word of the Lord unto him, with all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes, and was baptized, he and all his, immediately." (Acts 16:31-33).

A Soldier on A Train -- and You

That man sitting across from me at breakfast a few mornings ago needed to believe in God and in Christ as the divine Son of God. He then needed to believe it so deeply that it would change the direction of his life. He needed to make his faith known before men, and in that ancient fashion he needed to be buried with his Lord, through baptism, in order to be saved.

We are not thinking primarily about a soldier on a train, we are thinking about you. The only purpose of our speaking today is the hope that someone who hears these words will make the decision to do his part in obedience to God so that God may call him one of his children. This ancient gospel will save men's souls, but it will only save the souls of those who let it. Why not give yourself to Christ and let him save you?