

STUDIES ON SAVING FAITH Part II 4. Its Communication

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Transcript

STUDIES ON SAVING FAITH

Part II

4. Its Communication

From the human viewpoint, things are now in a bad state in the world. But from the spiritual viewpoint things are in a far worse state in the religious realm. Sad is it to see the anti-Christian cults flourishing on every side; but far more grievous is it, for those who are taught of God, to discover that much of the so-called "Gospel" which is now being preached in many "fundamentalist churches" and "gospel halls" is but a satanic delusion. The Devil knows that his captives are quite secure while the grace of God and the finished work of Christ are "faithfully" proclaimed to them, so long as the only way in which sinners receive the saving virtues of the Atonement is unfaithfully concealed. While God's peremptory and unchanging demand for repentance is left out, while Christ's own terms of discipleship (i.e. how to become a Christian: Acts 11:26) in Luke 14:26, 27, 33, are withheld, and while saving faith is frittered down to a mere act of the will, blind laymen will continue to be led by blind preachers, only for both to fall into the ditch. Things are far, far worse even in the "orthodox" sections of Christendom than the majority of God's own children are aware. Things are rotten even at the very foundation, for with very rare exceptions God's way of salvation is no longer being taught. Tens of thousands are "ever learning" points in prophecy, the meaning of the types, the significance of the numerals, how to divide the "dispensations," who are, nevertheless, "never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 3:7) of salvation itself—unable because unwilling to pay the price (Prov. 23:23), which is a full surrender to God Himself. As far as the writer understands the present situation, it seems to him that what is needed today is to press upon the serious attention of professing Christians such questions as: When is it that God applies to a sinner the virtues of Christ's finished work? What is it that I am called upon to do in order to appropriate myself to the efficacy of Christ's atonement? What is it that gives me an actual entrance into the good of His redemption? The questions formulated above are only three different ways of framing the same inquiry. Now the popular answer which is being returned to them is, "Nothing more is required from any sinner than that he simply believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." In the preceding articles of this series we have sought to show that such a reply is misleading, inadequate, faulty, and that because it ignores all the other scriptures which set forth what God requires from the sinner: it leaves out of account God's demand for repentance (with all that that involves and includes), and Christ's clearly defined terms of discipleship in Luke 14. To restrict ourselves

to any one scripture term of a subject, or set of passages using that term, results in an erroneous conception of it. They who limit their ideas of regeneration to the one figure of the new birth lapse into serious error upon it. So they who limit their thoughts on how to be saved to the one word "believe" are easily misled. Diligent care needs to be taken to collect all that Scripture teaches on any subject if we are to have a properly balanced and accurate view thereof. To be more specific. In Romans 10:13, we read, "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." Now does this mean that all who have, with their lips, cried unto the Lord, who have in the name of Christ besought God to have mercy on them, have been saved by Him? They who reply in the affirmative are only deceived by the mere sound of words, as the deluded Romanist is when he contends for Christ's bodily presence in the bread, because He said "this is My body." And how are we to show the papist is misled? Why, by comparing Scripture with Scripture. So here. The writer well remembers being on a ship in a terrible storm off the coast of Newfoundland. All the hatches were battened down, and for three days no passenger was allowed on the decks. Reports from the stewards were disquieting. Strong men paled. As the winds increased and the ship rolled worse and worse, scores of men and women were heard calling upon the name of the Lord. Did He save them? A day or two later, when the weather changed, those same men and women were drinking, cursing, card-playing! Perhaps someone asks, "But does not Romans 10:13 say what it means?" Certainly it does, but no verse of Scripture yields its meaning to lazy people. Christ Himself tells us that there are many who call Him "Lord" to whom He will say "Depart from Me" (Matt. 7:22, 23). Then what is to be done with Romans 10:13? Why, diligently compare it with all other passages which make known what the sinner must do ere God will save him. If nothing more than the fear of death or horror of hell prompts the sinner to call upon the Lord, he might just as well call upon the trees. The Almighty is not at the beck and call of any rebel who, when he is terrified, sues for mercy. "He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination" (Prov. 28:9)! "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (Prov. 28: 13). The only "calling upon His name" which the Lord heeds is that which issues from a broken, penitent, sin-hating heart, which thirsts after holiness. The same principle applies to Acts 16:31, and all similar texts: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." To a casual reader, that seems a very simple matter, yet a closer pondering of those words should discover that more is involved than at first sight appears. Note that the apostles did not merely tell the Philippian jailer to "rest on the finished work of Christ," or "trust in His atoning sacrifice." Instead, it was a Person that was set before him. Again, it was not simply "Believe on the Saviour," but "the Lord Jesus Christ." John 1:12 shows plainly that to "believe" is to "receive," and to be saved a sinner must receive One who is not only Saviour but "Lord," yea, who must be received as "Lord" before He becomes the Saviour of that person. And to receive "Christ Jesus the Lord" (Col. 2:6) necessarily involves the renouncing of our own sinful lordship, the throwing down of the weapons of our warfare against Him, and the submitting to His yoke and rule. And before any human rebel is brought to do that, a miracle of Divine grace has to be wrought within him. And this brings us more immediately to the present aspect of our theme. Saving faith is not a native product of the human heart, but a spiritual grace communicated from on high. "It is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). It is "of the operation of God" (Col. 2:12). It is by "the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:5). A most remarkable passage on this subject is found in Ephesians 1:16-20. There we find the apostle Paul praying that the saints should have the eyes of their understanding enlightened, that they might know "what is the exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of His mighty power, which He wrought in Christ when He raised Him from the dead." Not the strong power of God, or the greatness of it, but the "exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward." Note too the standard of comparison: we "believe according to the working of His mighty power, which He wrought in Christ when He raised Him from the dead." God put

forth His "Mighty power" when He resurrected Christ. There was a mighty power seeking to hinder, even Satan and all his hosts. There was a mighty difficulty to be overcome, even the vanquishing of the grace. There was a mighty result to be achieved, even the bringing to life of One who was dead. None but God Himself was equal to a miracle so stupendous. Strictly analogous is that miracle of grace which issues in saving faith. The Devil employs all his arts and power to retain his captive. The sinner is dead in trespasses and sins, and can no more quicken himself than he can create a world. His heart is bound fast with the grave-clothes of worldly and fleshly lusts, and only Omnipotence can raise it into communion with God. Well may every true servant of the Lord emulate the apostle Paul and pray earnestly that God will enlighten His people concerning this wonder of wonders, so that instead of attributing their faith to an exercise of their own will they may freely ascribe all the honour and glory unto Him to whom alone it justly belongs. If only the professing Christians of this untoward generation could begin to obtain some adequate conception of the real condition of every man by nature, they might be less inclined to cavil against the teaching that nothing short of a miracle of grace can ever qualify any sinner to believe unto the saving of his soul. If they could only see that the heart's attitude towards God of the most refined and moral is not a whit different from that of the most vulgar and vicious; that he who is most kind and benevolent toward his fellow creatures has no more real desire after Christ than has the most selfish and brutal; then it would be evident that Divine power must operate to change the heart. Divine power was needed to create, but much greater power is required to regenerate a soul: creation is only the bringing of something out of nothing, but regeneration is the transforming not only of an unlovely object, but of one that resists with all its might the gracious designs of the heavenly Potter. It is not simply that the Holy Spirit approaches a heart in which there is no love for God, but He finds it filled with enmity against Him, and incapable of being subject to His law (Romans 8:7). True, the individual himself maybe quite unconscious of this terrible fact, yea, ready indignantly to deny it. But that is easily accounted for. If he has heard little or nothing but the love, the grace, the mercy, the goodness of God, it would indeed be surprising if he hated Him. But once the God of Scripture is made known to him in the power of the Spirit, once he is made to realize that God is the Governor of this world, demanding unqualified submission to all His laws; that He is inflexibly just, and "will by no means clear the guilty"; that He is sovereign, and loves whom He pleases and hates whom He wills; that so far from being an easy-going, indulgent Creator, who winks at the follies of His creatures, He is ineffably holy, so that His righteous wrath burns against all the workers of iniquity—then will people be conscious of indwelling enmity surging up against Him. And nothing but the almighty power of the Spirit can overcome that enmity and bring any rebel truly to love the God of Holy Writ. Rightly did Thomas Goodwin the Puritan say, "A wolf will sooner marry a lamb, or a lamb a wolf, than ever a carnal heart be subject to the law of God, which was the ancient husband of it (Romans 7:6). It is the turning of one contrary into another. To turn water into wine, there is some kind of symbolizing, yet that is a miracle. But to turn a wolf into a lamb, to turn fire into water, is a yet greater miracle. Between nothing and something there is an infinite distance, but between sin and grace there is a greater distance than can be between nothing and the highest angel in heaven. . . To destroy the power of sin in a man's soul is as great a work as to take away the guilt of sin. It is easier to say to a blind man, 'See,' and to a lame man, 'Walk,' than to say to a man that lies under the power of sin, 'Live, be holy,' for there is that that will not be subject." In 2 Corinthians 10:4, the apostle describes the character of that work in which the true servants of Christ are engaged. It is a conflict with the forces of Satan. The weapons of their warfare are "not carnal"—as well might modern soldiers go forth equipped with only wooden swords and paper shields as preachers think to liberate the Devil's captives by means of human leaning, worldly methods, touching anecdotes, attractive singing, and so on. No, "their weapons" are the "word of God" and "all prayer" (Eph. 6:17, 18); and even these are only mighty "through God," that is by His direct and special blessing of them to particular souls.

In what follows, a description is given of where the might of God is seen, namely in the powerful opposition which it meets with and vanquishes; "to the pulling down of strong holds, casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." Herein lies the power of God when He is pleased thus to put it forth in the saving of a sinner. The heart of that sinner is fortified against Him: it is steeled against His holy demands, His righteous claims. It is determined not to submit to His law, nor to abandon those idols which it prohibits. That haughty rebel has made up his mind that he will not turn away from the delights of this world and the pleasure of sin and give God the supreme place in his affections. But God has determined to overcome his sinful opposition, and transform him into a loving and loyal subject. The figure here used is that of a besieged town—the heart. Its "strongholds"—the reigning power of fleshly and worldly lusts—are "pulled down"; self-will is broken, pride is subdued, and the defiant rebel is made a willing captive to "the obedience of Christ"! "Mighty through God" points to this miracle of grace. There is one other detail pointed by the analogy drawn in Ephesians 1:19, 20, which exemplifies the mighty power of God, namely "and set Him [Christ] at His own right hand in the heavenly places." The members of Christ's mystical body are predestinated to be conformed to the glorious image of their glorified Head: in measure, now; perfectly, in the day to come. The ascension of Christ was contrary to nature, being opposed by the law of gravitation. But the power of God overcame that opposition, and translated His resurrected Son bodily into heaven. In like manner, His grace produces in His people that which is contrary to nature, overcoming the opposition of the flesh, and drawing their hearts unto things above. How we would marvel if we saw a man extend his arms and suddenly leave the earth, soaring upward into the sky. Yet still more wonderful is it when we behold the power of the Spirit causing a sinful creature to rise above temptations, worldliness and sin, and breathe the atmosphere of heaven; when a human soul is made to disdain the things of earth and find its satisfaction in things above. The historical order in connection with the Head in Ephesians 1:19, 20, is also the experimental order with regard to the members of His body. Before setting His Son at His own right hand in the heavenlies, God raised Him from the dead; so before the Holy Spirit fixes the heart of a sinner upon Christ He first quickens him into newness of life. There must be life before there can be sight, believing, or good works performed. One who is physically dead is incapable of doing anything; so he who is spiritually dead is incapable of any spiritual exercises. First the giving of life unto dead Lazarus, then the removing of the grave-clothes which bound him hand and foot. God must regenerate before there can be a "new creature in Christ Jesus." The washing of a child follows its birth. When spiritual life has been communicated to the soul, that individual is now able to see things in their true colours. In God's light he sees light (Psalm 36:9). He is now given to perceive (by the Holy Spirit) what a lifelong rebel he has been against his Creator and Benefactor: that instead of making God's will his rule he has gone his own way; that instead of having before him God's glory he has sought only to please and gratify self. Even though he may have been preserved from all the grosser outward forms of wickedness, he now recognizes that he is a spiritual leper, a vile and polluted creature, utterly unfit to draw near, still less to dwell with, Him who is ineffably holy; and such an apprehension makes him feel that his case is hopeless. There is a vast difference between hearing or reading of what conviction of sin is and being made to feel it in the depths of one's own soul. Multitudes are acquainted with the theory who are total strangers to the experience of it: One may read of the sad effects of war, and may agree that they are indeed dreadful; but when the enemy is at one's own door, plundering his goods, firing his home, slaying his dear ones, he is far more sensible of the miseries of war than ever he was (or could be) previously. So an unbeliever may hear of what a dreadful state the sinner is in before God, and how terrible will be the sufferings of hell; but when the Spirit brings home to his own heart its actual condition, and makes him feel the heat of God's wrath in his own conscience, he is ready to sink with dismay and despair. Reader, do

you know anything of such an experience? Only thus is any soul prepared truly to appreciate Christ. They that are whole need not a physician. The one who has been savingly convicted is made to realize that none but the Lord Jesus can heal one so desperately diseased by sin; that He alone can impart that spiritual health (holiness) which will enable him to run in the way of God's commandments; that nothing but His precious blood can atone for the sins of the past and naught but His all-sufficient grace can meet the pressing needs of the present and future. Thus there must be discerning faith before there is coming faith. The Father "draws" to the Son (John 6:44) by imparting to the mind a deep realization of our desperate need of Christ, by giving to the heart a real sense of the inestimable worth of Him, and by causing the will to receive Him on His own terms.

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