

The Best Friend I Ever Had

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In the Civil War a band of guerrillas called "Quantrell's Band" was ordered to be shot on sight. They were caught after burning down a town in Iowa. They were blindfolded and tied and lined up in front of a long ditch that was dug as a burial trench.

Just as the firing squad was ready to present arms, a young man dashed through the bushes and cried, "Stop!" He told the commander of the firing squad that he was as guilty as any of the others, but he had escaped and had come of his own free will, and pointed to one man in the line and asked to take his place.

"I'm single," he said, "while he has a wife and babies." The young fellow was blindfolded and bound as the other was set free. When the guns rang out, he lay dead.

Time went on, and one day a man came upon another in a graveyard in Missouri, weeping and shaping the grave into form. The first asked who was buried there.

The other said, "The best friend I ever had." Then he told how he had not gone far away, but had come back and got the body of his friend to bury it properly. He had brought a withered bouquet all the way from his home to put on the grave. He was poor then, and could not afford anything costly, but he had placed a slab of wood on the pliable earth with these words on it: "He died for me."

In a small way, this illustrates what Jesus did for us. He took our place at Calvary so we could live. Innocent, He was willing to substitute His life for the penalty of our sins (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Mankind in general is lost (Romans 3:9, 23; 1 John 5:19). All men, therefore, have the same need—a Savior. How can man be saved?

- Man cannot save himself (Jeremiah 10:23).
- Silver and gold cannot save (1 Peter 1:18–19).
- Animal sacrifices cannot (Hebrews 10:4).
- Angels cannot (Galatians 1:8; Hebrews 1:5–7).

How, then, can man be saved? The Bible is a book about salvation. The word *save* (various tenses) is found 338 times in the Scriptures. One does not read far into the New Testament before he finds God's solution to man's dilemma. Matthew's first chapter included, "And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

So when Mary first held that beautiful infant, she did not wrestle with what He would be called. His Father (not His stepfather) had decided to call Him Jesus. He sent a messenger to the perplexed Joseph to name the child Jesus (Matthew 1:18–21). The apostles later affirmed, "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

THE QUESTION

The question, "What must I do to be saved?" is found three times after the cross of Christ:

- The jailor in Philippi brought Paul and Silas out of the prison, and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30).
- The Jews on Pentecost "were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37).
- Saul of Tarsus asked, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6).

THE ANSWERS

Interestingly, each was told something different to do.

- The jailor was told, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (Acts 16:31).
- Those on Pentecost heard, "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).
- The Lord told Saul, "Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do" (Acts 9:6). When the preacher arrived, he said, "And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). (The conversion of Saul is recorded three times in Acts: in chapter 9, where it happened historically; in Acts 22, when Paul made his defense in Jerusalem after being arrested and nearly killed; and in Acts 26, when Paul recounted it before King Agrippa.)

THE DISCUSSION

The Bible uses the phrase *obey the gospel* (cf. Romans 10:16; 2 Thessalonians 1:8), which implies that the gospel contains commands. As we see in these examples, they include,

- Hear (Mark 16:15);
- Believe (Mark 16:15–16);
- Repent (Acts 17:30; Romans 2:4; Acts 2:38);
- Confess Christ (Romans 10:9–10);
- Be baptized (Mark 16:15–16).

Does God require less or more of some than others? No, God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34–35). God's commands begin where man's obedience stops.

Suppose you were on a trip to Nashville, Tennessee, from Birmingham, Alabama, and you stopped to ask directions. You were told, "Take I-59 to Chattanooga, and then get on I-24 North." So you start on the journey and get as far as Rising Fawn, Georgia. You stop for gas and ask, "How do I get to Nashville from here?" Would the cashier say, "You need to go to Birmingham and take I-59, go to Chattanooga, and get on I-24 North"? No, the directions would start from where you were then, not from where you began.

In the case of the jailer, he was a pagan who had never heard of Jesus. He needed to start at the beginning, which is learning about Christ. He was not told only to believe in Jesus, but "they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house" (Acts 16:32). What did they tell him? Judging from the context, the discussion included repentance and baptism. We know this because "he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes [giving evidence of repentance]; and was baptized, he and all his, straight-way." Note that they did not even wait until the morning for the baptism.

In the case of those on Pentecost, they were already convinced that Jesus was the Son of God, which is why they asked the question. So they needed to start at the point of repentance and move to baptism, and that is exactly what Peter told them to do.

Saul of Tarsus had been a believer since seeing the Lord on the Damascus road. He was sorry for his sins (penitent), as shown by the fact that he had been fasting and praying for three days. So he needed to start at that point to complete his obedience. Thus, he was told to "arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins." Note that he still had his sins, even as a penitent believer. If he had been saved on the road to Damascus, he didn't know it; Ananias didn't know it; and the Lord didn't know it!

THE CONCLUSION

Someone may say, "Well, I don't believe baptism is important." Jesus' last statement to man on earth (according to Mark) before returning to heaven included the command to be baptized in order to be saved (Mark 16:16). N. B. Hardeman once said,

Just why the world rebels at baptism, I do not know. Just why man should interpose his opinion and partially accept God's way, I never have understood. Why the prejudices against my duplicating the burial and the resurrection of my Savior, I cannot understand. All men, every character in your splendid city, will tell you that God commanded people to be baptized. It is not the authority of Hardeman. It is not of my brethren. It is not an ordinance of your city. It is not a law enacted

on Capitol Hill. Neither is it a proclamation from the President of Washington. But it comes from the King of kings, the Lord of lords—Him who speaks as man never spake. It is from Him that has authority and to whom all power in heaven and earth has been granted. If we refuse it here, then a thousand worlds would be gladly given for one opportunity like this tonight. While truth instructs and mercy lingers, while angels look out from their heavenly regions and anxiously wait for those that may come to acknowledge the Christ, it is our pleasure once again to extend to you the invitation and pray for your response.

Jesus . . . what a name! It is now the world's most recognizable appellation, but at that time it was just a common Jewish word for "savior." It is the New Testament form of the Old Testament name Joshua. Joshua saved God's people by bringing them into Canaan; Jesus saved God's people by opening heaven. The New Testament uses the word *Jesus* 983 times. You don't have to know Hebrew or Greek to see that He is the principal character of the world's best-selling Book. The word *Savior* is found thirty-seven times in the Bible and twenty-four times in the New Testament. For instance, it is found in every chapter of the book of 2 Peter (1:1, 11; 2:20; 3:2, 18).

And He's the best friend you ever had.

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