

KNOW FEAR

By Steve Schmutzer

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Sometimes I read things in the Bible that – at the very least - concern me deeply. So, let me be up-front about some background.

I believe I'm a born-again Christian and therefore a secure child of God. I don't say that *because* I'm able to point to a specific time where I prayed a prescriptive prayer. While I can indeed do that, my salvation isn't contingent on the fact that I strung some key phrases together in the right order, or because I asked Jesus to "come into my heart and forgive my sins."

Much more importantly instead, I am fully and consciously convinced that Jesus is the Christ, the only Son of God. I believe with all my heart that He miraculously came to earth in the form of a man (Philippians 2:5-7), lived a sinless life, and paid the full price for all of my sins when He was sacrificed on the cross as the substitutionary Lamb of God (John 1:29). I believe that He rose from the dead and He's coming back to supernaturally receive me to Himself, and to deliver me from His wrath which is forthcoming on an unrepentant world (1 Thess. 1:10).

Furthermore, I believe God chose to redeem me before the foundations of the world (Eph. 1:4), and I believe no element of this salvation blueprint was ever "Plan B." God didn't miscalculate my situation at any point, nor did He underestimate the condition or reactions of anybody else in the whole process. What came together in the beautiful choreography of the Gospel contains no regrets or insufficiencies on God's part. All the details were designed to play out exactly as they did.

Now I don't fully understand every nuance about all this, but I also believe that God, by His grace, gave me the faith to believe every single part of it. And so I chose to believe in Him because He first chose me in His great love (1 John 4:19). I believe there is nothing I can contribute to any part of this salvation transaction that would have improved my odds. Simply stated, Jesus did it *all*.

Now, there are a lot of "believes" in those prior paragraphs, and as I read them over once more I'm glad to see them there. I believe what I am saying.

It was the same for one of the thieves that died beside Jesus Christ (Luke 23:42-43). He *believed* that Jesus was who Jesus said He was even as they both hung on crosses – suffering and dying together! The thief exercised his faith and he confessed that to Jesus. In a most remarkable and unfathomable moment, the thief looked beyond the way things appeared to what he knew them to be instead. And Jesus granted him salvation for his faith that was expressed in that *belief*.

It was also true for the jailer who'd never had any prisoners quite like Paul and Silas (Acts 16:30-31). They acted different. They *were* different! They made the sort of choices the jailer had never seen anyone else make, and so he sought them out when his own coping skills failed. Paul and Silas told him to "*Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved...*" So he did – and he was!

These examples are some which prove that salvation is not guaranteed by reading aloud the prayer in the back of a tract or memorizing the Four Spiritual Laws. Much as it may grate some that I say it,

salvation is not assured by responding to an altar call any more than it's evidenced by the mindless babbling, gibbering, stuttering, and frothing that too many in the modern church define as "speaking in tongues."

What the Bible proves in so many passages is salvation comes by way of an active confession that Jesus Christ is who He said He was (John 14:6), by a complete trust that He is God's *only* provision for our depraved condition (Rom. 5:8), and by an absolute belief that His death and resurrection paid the full penalty for our sin that we could not pay (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

This brings me full circle to my opening comments. So why do I read things in the Bible that cause me to feel a healthy fear? It's because according to Matthew 7:21-27, *many* well-intentioned, highly-regarded, and devoutly-religious people will discover too late that they never believed in Jesus Christ the way they most needed to, and this should give you and I both pause.

Nobody wants to end up being one of these folks! This passage essentially says they'll argue with Jesus as they face their certain fate. They will claim they'd already checked all the necessary boxes, but their problem will be they'd defined their faith on their terms and not on God's. They believed more in their position, their language, their achievements, their education, their rituals, their reputation, their social circles, their denomination, and a host of other things more than they believed in Jesus Christ.

As the truly terrifying account of Matt. 7:21-27 outlines, there are far too many "Christians" who rest in these kinds of false assurances. They're no different than the Pharisees of Jesus' time who appeared righteous to most people, but were exposed as "whitewashed tombs" (Matt. 23:27).

Here's a firm reality check. It's dangerous to assess one's spiritual condition by the values of a church that has "*left her first love*" (Rev. 2:4). It is downright fatal to be seduced by any contrivances of "Christian culture" which the Scriptures condemn as "*....wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, naked, and....lukewarm*" (Rev. 3:15-17). Our Matthew passage is an admonition for each of us to get our act together while we still can, and I contend it's healthy to feel a certain anxiety when one is warned of great personal risk.

The bottom line is there should be nothing more precious to any of us than a genuine saving faith, and according to the first few verses of James, that's a faith that's been rigorously tested and proved. As one old missionary once told me, "A Christian is like a teabag. He's no good till he's been through hot water."

What does that process look like? Well, a real faith is one that remains unbroken after the ravages of protracted pain. A true faith is one that holds up under a gauntlet of diverse temptations and overcomes wrong choices with wisdom. An authentic faith walks the higher road set forth in the Word of God and shuns the lower bar of secularism. A faith of eternal value understands life's trials from the perspective of a "victor" and not a "victim." All of this ultimately boils down to the fact that true faith endures in choosing a right view of God over everything else, and that begins and ends with "*....believing in the Lord Jesus Christ*" the same way the thief and the jailer did.

Paul exhorts us to "*....work out our salvation with fear and trembling*" (Phil. 2:12). Granted, the emphasis is to develop our faith in humility and obedience, but a subsequent point is also made that we should stay engaged in "pressing on" towards Christlikeness (Phil. 3:13-14). The "trembling" of the penitent believer conveys the attitude they should have in pursuing this goal—a healthy fear of offending God through disobedience, and a consuming and unwavering reverence for His power, majesty, and holiness.

We can myopically sing until the cows come home that “Jesus is my friend,” but I’d recommend we keep that in proper balance with the fact that Jesus is also our judge (James 5:9; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10, et al). That’s a necessary truth that sobers the bigger picture. Tensions in our doctrines help to keep us most faithful.

In conclusion, a true faith holds immeasurable eternal value. Matthew 7:21-27 reminds us of this fact. Any discomforts we encounter in this life to acquire genuine faith and to know it’s the real deal are – in the grand scheme of things – what’s best for us.

As Jim Elliott said, “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”

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