

Do You Need A *Personal* Savior?

What does it really mean to be saved? Christians talk a lot about being saved, but saved from what—and why? Is salvation just a religious word, or does it have real meaning for modern man?

To the first Israelites who came there, Egypt looked mighty good. They were Palestinians, and farming is tough in Palestine, even in good times. Where they came from the land was rocky and water was scarce.

But in Egypt, the soil was good. There was no water problem. The ever-present, ever-flowing Nile saw to that. There were no rocks, just the alluvial soil of the Nile delta, renewed annually when the river overflowed its banks. There was no danger of wearing out the soil, because every year the Nile brought new soil from the south and spread it over the delta. All Jacob and his sons had to do was plant crops, put their cattle on the grass, and wait for harvest. In the beginning, Egypt held promise of an abundant life.

We might wonder how long it was before someone suggested going back to Palestine. After all, it was their home. More important, it was the land God had promised to their father Abraham.

No doubt, the first night it was mentioned, there was lengthy discussion with many impassioned speeches and much soul searching. The problem was that leaving required a decision, and there are few things men resist more than making a decision. This decision required leaving good land, and undertaking an arduous journey over forbidding terrain. And when they arrived, they would have to fight for the right to be there.

I suspect they tabled the subject with a promise to discuss it again another evening. That evening never came.

So it was that generations passed. Only seventy people came into Egypt with Jacob, but they quickly increased in number until they outnumbered even the Egyptians. There came a day when Pharaoh said of the Israelites, "Behold the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we."

And therein lies a puzzle. How did the Egyptians successfully enslave a people more numerous and

stronger than themselves?

Actually, there were several things at work, not the least of which were Israelite naïveté and Egyptian cunning. Pharaoh was a military man and understood well the principle of bringing superior force to bear. He would never have attempted to subjugate all Israel at once. More likely, he found one segment of one tribe (perhaps a family out of favor and physically isolated), came in a quick raid, took a few hundred captives, and left the rest alone.

The Israelites were in an uproar. Impassioned speeches were the order of the day. Some called for immediate retaliation. Others called for immediate departure. Fierce protests were lodged with Pharaoh's representatives, but Pharaoh held his peace.

For the Israelites, the problem was that any action they took called for a decision. They talked about it. They even agonized over it. But a decision involved risk. At worst, it involved going to war against skilled warriors. No matter that the Egyptians were fewer in number, they would still inflict severe casualties.

They could, of course, return to Palestine, but now that involved leaving home, not going home. None of them even remembered Palestine. Every living Israelite had been born in Egypt. It also involved a hard journey across a hard land with an uncertain future once they made it. They would surely have to fight for their old land.

And, of course, there was the soil of Egypt, and the water, and the grass. There were the melons, the leeks, the garlics. It was a hard decision to make, so they put it off and did nothing. And in doing nothing, they grew weaker. And Pharaoh grew stronger.

In time, things returned to normal—for everyone except the slaves. Most of the Israelites forgot about the incident. But Pharaoh didn't forget. He simply waited until the time was right and did it again. And again. Every time he did it, and every time the Israelites did nothing, they became weaker while Pharaoh became stronger.

Who knows, it may have taken a generation or two, but there came a point where the Israelites were no longer able to resist. They had compromised so long, avoided so many decisions; they were now taken captive at Pharaoh's will. He became their master in spirit as well as in body.

In the end, they were all slaves. For them, life was hard labor with no reward. There was no future, no hope. There was only work, fear, and violence. Slowly, they lost all self-respect and dignity. They became so weak, morally and physically, that they could stand by and watch the destruction of all their male children. In theory, they could fight back. They could even leave Egypt. But in reality they could not. They were too weak.

Egypt and Sin

The analogy between Egypt and sin is compelling. Sin, like Egypt, can be very attractive in the beginning. It looks good, feels good, and fills the belly. It is often an easier, more pleasant alternative than doing right. It involves less sacrifice, less hardship, at least at the start. Best of all, you don't have to make any hard decisions.

But every time you fail to resist, you become weaker. In the end, it will make you a slave. You will have no more chance of leaving sin than Israel had of leaving Egypt.

In the early chapters of the book of Proverbs, Solomon uses the "strange woman" as a personification of sin. ("Personification" is a figure of speech in which a thing, quality, or idea is represented as a person.) It is not merely the adulteress that is under discussion. She is chosen because she makes an apt illustration of all sin: "For the lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb," Solomon warned, "and her mouth is smoother than oil, but her end is bitter as wormwood" (Proverbs 5:3). Sin can be sweet and easy to start, but Solomon had reason to know that it doesn't end that way.

He also knew how confusing sin can be: "Lest you should ponder the path of life, her ways are movable, that thou canst not know them." Sin doesn't want you to think and does what it can to keep you from making a decision. People rarely decide to sin. Nor do they decide not to sin. They just don't decide at all. They never get around to thinking about it. Sin, like Pharaoh, usually wins by default.

"Remove thy way far from her," Solomon continued, "and come not nigh the door of the house: Lest thou give thine honour unto others, and thy years unto the cruel. Lest strangers be filled with thy wealth; and thy labours be in the house of a stranger." In other words, lest you become a slave.

This is not because of what others will do to you because you have sinned. It is because of what sin itself will do to you. Sin, like a drug, is addicting.

Moses

Moses was only a shepherd when God spoke to him from the burning bush. He was to become one of the greatest liberators in history. "I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt," the Lord told him, "And I have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians ... Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, *that thou movest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt*" (Exodus 3:7-10).

The liberation of Israel was not a result of their works. It was not a result of their goodness. It was a result of the goodness of God. God did not blame them for their plight though well He might have. Nor were there recriminations. God said to Moses, "I have heard. I have seen. I will send you to save them." *It is the earliest biblical example of salvation by grace.*

Most serious students of the Bible realize that Moses was a type of Christ. As Moses was sent to be a savior, so was Christ. But it seems that not so many students of the Bible realize what it really means to be a savior. Moses' salvation was immediate and real. Israel was saved from real physical danger, and they were saved *now*.

Yet there seems to be some confusion as to what Jesus saves us from, and when. Some students equate salvation with the forgiveness of sin. Repentance and baptism are the moment of salvation. Seen this way, salvation is a past act. Others equate ultimate salvation with the resurrection, citing Romans 5:9: "Much more then, being now justified by His blood, we *shall be saved* [future tense] from wrath through Him."

There are three things we need to understand about salvation. First, salvation is a process. In the Bible, it is spoken of in terms of the past, the present, and the future. We have been saved, we are saved, and we shall be saved.

Second, salvation is an act of God, not an act of man: "For by grace are ye saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Third, there is a difference between being *forgiven* of our sins and being *saved from* our sins. We are saved, not only from the consequences of sin, but from *sin itself!* Israel needed more than freedom

from slavery. They needed to be out of Egypt and away from Pharaoh, *or they would soon be back in slavery again.*

The Slavemaster

Paul was one of those New Testament writers who created a personification of sin. To Paul, sin exists in the world; it has a body; it rules, dominates, and controls. Being justified, forgiven of our sins, does not mean that sin goes away. The devil is still in the world. Sin still feels good and tastes better. Sin is still an easier path than righteousness. Unless we are truly liberated, sin can take us captive again.

The only liberation from sin is Jesus Christ.

In the fifth and sixth chapters of Romans, Paul sets forth in some detail a theology of sin and salvation. "For when we were yet without strength," he tells us, "in due time, Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). Plainly, Christ's death was to accomplish something we had not the strength to do. We had not been strong enough to overcome sin. We were still classified as "ungodly" when Christ died for us.

"For scarcely for a righteous man will one die," Paul continues, "Yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, *while we were yet sinners*, Christ died for us." It was not a matter of our overcoming sin to qualify for His sacrifice. We are characterized as weak, helpless sinners for whom Christ died.

But Paul doesn't stop there: "Much more then, being now justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if, *when we were enemies*, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life" (Romans 5:9–10). Not only were we weak and helpless, *we were enemies.*

There was only one result for people like us. We had to die. The law demanded it and the prophets confirmed it: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezekiel 18:20). Sin, Paul tells us, actually used the law to destroy us: "And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me" (Romans 7:10–11). The law actually made out a death warrant called "the handwriting of ordinances that was against us" (Colossians 2:14). This is a special term in the Greek language specifying a handwritten document spelling out an indebtedness—in this case, the wages of sin.

So we are presented with the picture of sin using

the righteous law of God, making it our enemy, enslaving us, and ultimately destroying us with it.

In the days when slavery was practiced in America there were many slaves who tried to escape. A few made it, but most were run down with dogs and returned to their masters. But there might have been a way. Suppose you were the slave and we decided to *fake your death.* Suppose we killed a pig, splattered some of its blood around, and then nailed it in a coffin. We could explain to the slave master how you had been killed, and then we could bury the pig with much lamentation and weeping. You could even hide nearby and watch your own funeral.

And then you could leave with no fear of pursuit, no dogs tracking you down, no men on horseback with guns and whips. They all believe you are dead. You can take on a new identity, a new life. You are free!

Believe it or not, this is what happens when we are baptized: "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized unto Jesus Christ were baptized into His death: Therefore we are buried with Him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection: Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with Him, that *the body of sin might be destroyed*, that henceforth we should not serve sin. *For He that is dead is freed from sin*" (Romans 6:3–7).

When Israel had been "baptized in the Red Sea," when they had crossed and the sea had closed behind them, then and only then were they free of Egypt and Pharaoh. There was no more pursuit. They were *free.* Just so, when the Christian goes through the waters of baptism, he is a new man in Christ. Sin can no longer reign over him. In Paul's words, "For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14).

Without Christ, a man has as much chance of being free of sin as Israel had of being free of Egypt. He has about as much chance as the simpleton in Solomon's proverb: "I looked through my casement, and beheld among the simple ones, I discerned among the youths, a young man void of understanding, passing through the street near her corner; and he went the way to her house, in the twilight, in the evening, in the black and dark night: and, behold, there met him a woman with the attire of an harlot, and subtil of heart" (Proverbs 7:6–10).

Solomon personifies sin with this woman, because he can find no better model. How much

chance does a young fool have of walking away from a woman like this? “So she caught him, and kissed him, and with an impudent face said unto him ... I came forth to meet thee, diligently to seek thy face, and I have found thee ... I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Come, let us take our fill of love until the morning: let us solace ourselves with loves” (verses 13–18).

Of course, he doesn’t *have* to sin. He could just turn and walk away, couldn’t he? Yes, theoretically he could, but that would involve a decision. And does anyone think this young fool is going to be making any decisions at this point?

Solomon concludes, “With her much fair speech she *caused* him to yield, with the flattering of her lips she *forced* him. He goeth after her straightway as an ox goeth to the slaughter, or as a fool to the correction of the stocks; Till a dart strike through his liver; as a bird hasteth to the snare, and knoweth not that it is for his life” (verses 21–23).

Sin does not give up its dominion easily. Just because you have repented, don’t assume that sin no longer feels and tastes good. Sin will always be there tugging and pulling at you. You cannot defeat sin on your own. You cannot escape sin without a Moses, and your Moses is Jesus Christ. And just as Israel had no way out except through the Red Sea, there is only one way out for you: through the waters of baptism.

In the baptismal service, we ask two questions: First, have you repented of your sins, of the transgression of God’s holy and righteous law? Second, do you accept Jesus Christ as your *personal* Savior?

Don’t make the mistake of assuming that you must overcome sin before baptism. No one can ever “qualify” for baptism. How could we hope to become good enough to merit the sacrifice of the Son of God? You don’t have to become “good enough” for baptism. What you have to do is repent.

The Publican

Two men went up to the temple to pray. The one, a Pharisee; the other, a publican. The Pharisee thanked God that he was not like other men and proceeded to outline all his good works. The publican would not even approach the place of prayer, but stood far back, smote upon his breast, and prayed, “God be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke

18:12).

This is repentance. Jesus said of the publican, “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other.” Repentance means you are sorry. Repentance means you know you are a sinner and want to change. Repentance means you ask for baptism and forgiveness, not because you deserve it, but because you don’t. The publican went back to his home justified. Being justified means you are forgiven, but it doesn’t mean the battle is over. Even the great apostle Paul, years after his conversion, wrote of a continuing battle with sin, acknowledging that sin “dwelleth in me.” Can you expect to do better than Paul?

This is where the second baptismal question comes in: Do you accept Jesus Christ as your personal Savior? Being sorry you are in slavery is not enough, you see. You must have a Moses. You must have someone who will not only get you out of Egypt, but will be with you in the wilderness.

That someone is Jesus Christ.

But what does it mean for Him to be your *personal* Savior? Paul put it this way: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless, I live: yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 1:20). Later he would write. “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 7:24).

Salvation is not an impersonal “religious” word. It is a very real, ongoing, personal work of Jesus Christ. And how could anything be more personal than Christ in us?

If you have been baptized, you already know that the battle is not over. But you also know that you have the strength, the help you need to overcome sin. For you, the challenge is to know and respond to Christ in you.

If you have not been baptized, then you must know that the road to salvation passes through the waters of baptism. Have you repented of your sins? Are you ready to accept Jesus Christ as your personal Savior? If you would like to discuss baptism, please write and let us know. We will try to put you in touch with someone who can help you as you prepare to take the next step.

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