

Receiving Salvation by Faith

When I was 14 my brother came home one day and asked me a very strange question: “Do you realize that we are saved by faith in Christ, and not by our good works?” His statement shocked me. He was denying the faith that we cherished so much. At that time, I did not know that the religious conversation that followed would mark the beginning of a dramatic change in my life.

I couldn't believe that such a tragedy had happened to our family and I was determined to convince him of his error and bring him back to the Catholic Church. I knew that I had to study the Bible for myself in order to disarm my brother and prove that the doctrines of the Catholic Church are found in the Bible. And study I did! I read the Catholic Bible, both in English and Maltese. I also asked questions to my religious instruction teacher, so that I would be better prepared.

The reading of the Bible had an unexpected and unforeseen effect. Initially I used the Bible merely as an argumentative tool. Gradually, however, the words of Scripture began to penetrate the very depths of my soul. Because my brother always seemed to be able to quote Scripture to prove his point I was determined that I would do the same. However, as I read the Bible there was a gradual shift in my concern. I was no longer merely interested in a religious argument, but had a pressing concern about my personal salvation and relationship with the Lord.

The Sermon on the Mount particularly impressed me and I determined to make it the standard of my life. I tried to follow the teaching of the Lord, as I thought that this would gain me much merit. Yet the harder I tried, the more evident it became that I could never reach the high moral and spiritual standard demanded by Christ. His standards were beyond my reach. An overwhelming sense of frustration and defeat forced me to reconsider my religious beliefs about good works. How could I be as perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, as Jesus demands? Yet, if I wanted to reach Heaven this is the standard I would have to attain. I began to see that I was failing miserably to be right with God by my own obedience and goodness.

When I discovered what the apostle Paul had to say about this matter, it was as if he was speaking directly to me:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast ... Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin ... Wherefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Ephesians 2:8, 9; Romans 3:20 and Galatians 3:24).

I must have read these passages a hundred times. Why does the apostle Paul say that we are not saved by works? As a Catholic I believed that I was supposed to do good works in order to merit eternal life and I was trying to be right with God by obeying His law. Instead, the law was revealing my failures and weakness. God was breaking my pride and preparing me to believe in Jesus.

As a Roman Catholic I knew that salvation had to do with the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. We used to repeat this prayer, especially during Lent, “We adore You, O Christ, and we praise You. Because by Your Holy Cross You have redeemed the world.” We were taught that Jesus opened the gate of Heaven that had been closed by Adam's sin, and that now, it was up to us to enter that open door by doing good and participating in the sacraments. With further reading of the Bible, I discovered that the Lord Jesus accomplished something much greater than that. It says: -

“Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed ... For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God” (1 Peter 2:24 and 3:18).

The work of Jesus was much, much greater than opening the door of Heaven for hardworking Catholics. The Bible was saying that Jesus paid the debt of my sin. Instead of me working all my life and doing penance and good works to pay for my sins, Jesus did this for me. He bore my sins on the cross. How different was this to what I had been taught to believe. The punishment for sin is not repeating a few prayers or suffering in the fires of purgatory. The penalty for sin is death; yet *Jesus died in the place of sinners*. The Lord Jesus did not just make salvation possible, by opening the door of Heaven. No, on the cross, Jesus became the sinner's substitute, by dying in their place. Therefore we cannot possibly make satisfaction for our sin or merit eternal life by anything we do; rather we must entrust our salvation in the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is able to save completely; his blood cleanses from all sin.

God brought me to this crossroad. On one hand I could continue to live according to the religion that promised eternal life on the merits of my works. On the other hand, I could abandon that teaching and completely trust in the Lord Jesus Christ alone for my salvation. I was by myself at home one evening; I knelt down and prayed. I acknowledged my sin and guilt. I admitted that I could not pay my debt by doing good, and I asked God to receive me for the sake of Jesus Christ His Son. The joy in my heart was unspeakable.

God illustrated to me the wonderful truth of Jesus' substitutionary death on my fifteenth birthday. I was supposed to be helping my father in the fields. Instead, I was driving the tractor up and down a busy road without my father's permission and without a driving license. I was involved in a traffic accident, causing hundreds of pounds worth of damages to the brand new van involved in the collision. It was entirely my fault. My father was not guilty. Yet my father paid all the damages for me. I did not pay a single cent, though I will always be grateful for my father's goodness.

That's exactly what the Son of God did on my behalf. He died for me, freed me from sin, so that I may live for him who loves me with such amazing love.