

GraceLife Articles - Dr. Charlie Bing

No. 13 - What Must I Do to Be Saved? - Grace in Focus, Mar. 1996

Synopsis:

A simple question in Acts 16 receives a simple answer that we have been arguing about ever since! Here is a clear and simple explanation of the condition for eternal salvation.

Two thousand years ago a very frightened man asked a very simple question: "What must I do to be saved?" The original answer was as short and simple as the question: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." Leave it to us theologians to twist this into a monumental debate that divides Christians. Nevertheless, it remains the crucial question of life, and it must be settled before we tell one more person about Christ.

The Context of the Question

The question we consider rose before the dust settled in the quaking Philippian jail. The jailer who asked it saw his life flash before him in the earthquake itself. Now he faced a second dark reality: The prisoners had escaped and he would be executed by the Roman command for allowing it.

Suicide seemed a better option. But Paul's loud plea saved his life. "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here!" That Paul and Silas had spent the night worshipping and now expressed this concern for his welfare disclosed to the jailer a deeper need. Thus his question. And thus the answer we examine.

There are two ways some make Paul's simple answer as complicated as an IRS tax form. First, they say that believing is doing something. After all, the jailer asked, "What must I *do* to be saved?" Second, they use the object of faith to define the nature of faith. Let's examine this reasoning.

The Nature of Faith

In whatever way we understand *do*, we cannot be consistent with the Bible if we take it to mean more than the passive reception of something that is true. That is the nature of faith or believing.

In John 6, the Jews asked Jesus, "What shall we *do*, that we may work the works of God?" (v 28). In other words, they wanted to know what works God required them to *do* for eternal life. But Jesus' answer startled them: "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent" (v 29). They could not be saved by *doing* works. God's only requirement was belief in His Son.

Furthermore, if we define believe as *surrender, commit, or obey*, we revert back to a salvation by works. It is impossible that faith could in any way be a work of merit or something done to earn God's favor: "Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness" ([Rom 4:4-5](#)).

Paul was simply telling the jailer to accept something as true, to trust in the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Object of Faith

In the second misunderstanding of this verse, some say that it is "the *Lord* Jesus Christ" who is to be believed in. That is, faith is submission to His lordship over our lives. It is making Him Master of our lives.

True, the title *Lord* speaks of Christ's sovereign authority and rulership over everything. But is submission to that authority demanded here as a condition for salvation? It is not, for four reasons.

First, the title *Lord* denotes deity before it denotes rulership. Rulership and authority are only deductions from the fact that the Lord is God. In fact, deity denotes much more than rulership. He is also Creator, Judge, Sustainer, etc. But the apostle Paul is not asking the jailer to recognize all of these offices and submit to each. To this Gentile, *Lord* would first and simply denote deity which would imply the authority and ability to save. And that's what the jailer wanted. Note that v 34 says he believed "in God."

Second, to refer to Jesus as *Lord* is to use a respectful title, but this doesn't mean that submission is explicitly demanded. Note that in v 30 the jailer addressed Paul and Silas with the respectful title, "sirs." Literally he called them "lords" using the plural form of the very same word Paul used of Jesus Christ. This shows the jailer's respect, but not his absolute submission to these men in every area of life. A person can call the Commander-in-chief "the President" or even "my President," but not be submitted to every aspect of his authority (though ideally he should!).

Third, if we demand that the jailer relate to Jesus as Master because of the title *Lord*, then we should also demand he relate to the other terms *Jesus* and *Christ*. Since *Jesus* is Christ's human name and *Christ* speaks of His role as the *anointed* one of God, the Jewish Messiah, then we should insist that the jailer also comprehend and submit to the implications of Jesus' humanity and Jewish messianic theology. But Paul does not demand or expect such theological sophistication from a pagan soldier.

Fourth, it is unreasonable to assume that a pagan Gentile soldier would comprehend all the implications of Jesus' lordship for his life, much less submit to them immediately. As an unbeliever, he was dead in sin. His request was for eternal life, or salvation from the penalty for his sin. He could not respond to the grace of God by submitting his life, for he had not yet experienced that grace.

So, what would the jailer have understood by "the *Lord* Jesus Christ?" Simply this: he wanted to be saved, and this One called "Lord" had the authority and power to save him. There is no reason to jump from the objective title *Lord* to the subjective demand that one submit everything to Him for salvation.

Faith is Simple

Faith is faith regardless of the object. The faith it takes to sit in a chair or swallow medication is in essence the same faith as the faith it takes to be saved. Faith is trusting. Faith is simple.

The object of faith does not determine the nature of faith. If someone writes a check sincerely believing she has adequate funds to cover it when she really doesn't, has she believed any less than if she *did* have adequate funds? Of course not! Likewise, one can believe in Buddha and another believe in Christ. Both believe in the same way, but only one will be saved. What *is* different is the object of their faith.

Faith is simple--so simple millions miss it! Many have missed it in [Acts 16:31](#). What must you do to be saved? The biblical answer is *believe*! Simply believe, only believe in the Lord Jesus Christ for eternal salvation and you will be saved.