



Minutes With Messiah

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He Found a Sheep

Why did God wait to speak to Moses at the burning bush? What made that the appropriate time, rather than when he was a younger man? Moses was considered the son of the Pharaoh, trained in leadership. It seems that would have made him the ideal man to free his people. He killed an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating an Israelite. (Ex 2:11-12) That should have shown God that he was willing to stand up for the oppressed. Why not then? (Well, maybe because his people still thought of Moses as the son of Pharaoh, not as one of them (Ex 2:14).) A short time later, Moses stood up to a gang of bullies who were trying to keep the daughters of Reuel Jethro from watering their sheep. Now here is a man who has shown his leadership, his concern for his fellow man, and his strength. Why does God wait another forty years to call him to lead his people out of bondage?

The rabbis have pondered this question for centuries. One story that has been passed down says that during the time Moses served as a shepherd, one of his sheep wandered away. He chased the sheep, brought it back to the flock, and then carried it home. This, they say, is when God knew Moses was the man to lead Israel. What does saving a sheep have to do with being a leader? Why now and not earlier?

Perhaps we should look at what God said about another shepherd. In 1 Samuel 16, God is preparing to anoint a new king in Saul's place. Samuel goes to the house of Jesse to choose the new king. He saw that the oldest, Eliab, was a likely candidate, tall and strong and good looking. But in verse 7 God rebuked Samuel with these words: "Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart." He eventually chose the youngest son, David the shepherd.

While we think that Moses' upbringing, royal position, moral and physical strength should have made him a suitable leader, God looks at more than that. God wants a man who not only cares for his brother, but

even for a stupid sheep. All the good and noble characteristics are insufficient in God's eyes if one is not also careful in his stewardship of God's creation. Moses was a suitable leader because he was accountable, both to his employer and to God, for one sheep gone astray. If God was going to give him responsibility, he wanted to know that he could also handle accountability.

Moses, the first prophet of God, spoke of another who was to come. "The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me." (Deut 18:15) This prophet, the Messiah, was to be like Moses.

Jesus the Messiah told a story to show that the least person in the kingdom of heaven was like a little child. He compared God, and himself, to a shepherd who, having a hundred sheep, leaves the ninety-nine in safety to bring back the one that had wandered away, and rejoiced in doing it. (Matt 18:12-13) Jesus probably knew the story about Moses, and even that the rabbis of his time were saying that was what made God choose Moses as a leader. So when he took this story and applied it to himself, he was saying in essence that he was the "Moses to come."

In Luke 15:4-7 Jesus applied the story to himself again, but also by extension to anyone who brings a sinner back to God. Guess what. That means you and me. Do you want God to look at you like he looked at Moses? Are you a fit leader in God's eyes? Jesus says you are, if you will leave the safety of your comfort zone, and go get the sheep that was lost.

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Baptism: Some Questions

Last month I wrote an article, "In Defense of Baptism." Some people had questions as a result of that article, and a co-worker of mine suggested I write a follow-up article to answer some of those questions.

Any time one writes an article showing that baptism is the point at which one's sins are forgiven, one can expect disagreement and questions from many in various churches. Last month's article was no exception. I will look at some of the common questions, and try to answer them from scripture wherever possible.

What about the person who dies before his church has their next baptisms? I know this question was honestly asked. There are others, though, who ask it to disprove the need for baptism: "What about the guy who dies on his way to be baptized; is God going to condemn him to hell?"

There are a number of churches which wait to baptize once a month or once a quarter. In most cases this is because they consider baptism to be optional or because they consider it necessary, but not the point at which one receives forgiveness of sins. In all the congregations of which I have been a member, never once has a person been asked to

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wait to be baptized. Any congregation that considers a person lost until he is immersed will usually insist on doing it as soon as possible. We know that Paul didn't tell his jailer in Philippi to wait for the next Sunday assembly to be baptized. "And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway." (Acts 16:33) The Ethiopian wasn't told to wait until he got home, and then try to find someone to baptize him. "And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and

the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him." (Acts 8:36-38) But that doesn't answer the question.

What if someone decides to be baptized, but dies before he gets into the water? Is that person lost forever? And if not, then is baptism really necessary? The only way I can answer these questions is to repeat that God says that baptism is the point at which sins are "washed away" (Acts 22:16), and forgiven (Acts 2:38). If God is willing to violate his law in certain cases, it is his law to do with as he wishes. I strongly suspect, although there is no scripture to support this, that God would make sure that someone who wanted to be baptized would survive until he could be. It would probably be easier for God to arrange that survival than it would be for him to violate his own laws.

I was baptized after I professed Christ. What about the time in between? Based on the scriptures mentioned in the previous paragraph, I would say you are one of the lucky ones (although luck probably had nothing to do with it). There are many who "profess Christ" and think that is enough to save them, and so never were baptized. They may be wishing they had. Faith and confession are necessary, but insufficient. Jesus said, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." (Matt 7:21) He even says that there will be many who professed him that he will deny ever knowing.

One reason the "church of Christ" is known for preaching baptism, sometimes almost to the exclusion of everything else, is that so many people are brought to faith, repentance, and confession, but never hear that they are still lost. The Devil has continued the lie he started in the garden: Obey only this far and you will not die. It was a lie then, and it is still a lie now.

If I sin, does that mean I have to be baptized again? If baptism is what takes away sin, then shouldn't I be baptized after every sin? This is where we may have done a disservice in our preaching on baptism. We sometimes leave the impression that it is the act of baptism that saves. Peter says clearly and explicitly that baptism saves us (1 Pet 3:21), but points out that it is not the act itself, but the blood of Christ which is the effective element. I have heard many preachers say that it is at baptism that we "come in contact with the blood of Christ." This is not scriptural phrasing, but it is a scriptural concept.

In Romans 6 Paul says we are baptized into Jesus' death. It is that death which brings about forgiveness of sins. Without the sacrificial blood there could be no forgiveness (Heb 9:22). Baptism, confession, repentance, faith—all would be useless if it were not for the blood of Christ. Therefore, I often wonder why some insist on the "work" of faith, the "work" of repentance, even the "work" of confession, but balk at immersion because it sounds like salvation by works.

If it is the blood of Christ, and our response to it in immersion, that brings salvation, do we need to be baptized every time we sin? The writer of Hebrews answers this. There was a time when blood had to be offered time after time, in order for forgiveness. That is because the sacrifices were of limited effectiveness. However, once is now enough:

For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us: Nor yet that he should offer himself often, as the high priest entereth into the holy place every year with blood of others; For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of

many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation. (Heb 9:24-28)

What about the one who reads his Bible, decides to be baptized, but can't find a Christian preacher to do it? Isn't God amazing? He has provided a way for man to be saved. He tells him to believe, repent, and be baptized, but then puts a man off in the middle of nowhere with a Bible and a bunch of heathens, and doesn't

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provide a preacher to baptize him. How cruel can your God be?

The amazing thing is that God never said "repent, and have a Christian preacher baptize you." Look at what he requires. Faith. Do I need a preacher around to believe? All I need is the word of God. Repentance. Can I let a preacher repent for me and that will suffice? I know of nobody who believes that. Baptism. Is it the one doing the dunking that makes the difference? I think not. If the faith and the repentance that lead to salvation don't need a Christian preacher, why would baptism? Nowhere does the Bible say you have to be baptized by a Christian preacher. It doesn't even say you have to be baptized by a Christian. It doesn't even say you have to be baptized by a one who understands the significance of the immersion. If I know why I am being baptized it wouldn't matter if it was done by Saddam Hussein or the Dalai Lama. Nobody needs to say a formula over me. It is my understanding that makes it valid, not the one doing the baptizing.

There will always be those who question baptism. Some will be honest, others less so. We should never be afraid of questions. Instead we should "be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you." (1 Pet 3:15)

Hand Writing

Some people write in notebooks; others on their PalmPilots®. Still others write in the dirt (John 8:8). God once wrote on a wall (Dan 5:5), although we often discourage that in our children. When I have something important to write down—a phone number, a reminder—I tend to write it on my hand. When I used to shave, that didn't always help, because the alcohol in after-shave would remove the ink. But I still would try to write important notes on my hand.

I find I'm not the only one to do this. There's a guy in a commercial for a long distance phone service who does it, too. I've known kids try to get away with writing the answers to a test on their hands. But it seems we aren't the only ones. Isaiah 49:16 says that God writes on his hand.

What could be so important that God would see the need to write on his hand? It couldn't be the answers to test questions—God knows all the answers. It isn't 1-800-COLLECT® because God already has free long distance; it's called prayer. In Isaiah, God says that which is important enough to write on his hand is a name. He says that even though a woman could forget her child, he could never forget Zion, the holy city, Jerusalem. This is what God finds so important.

Yet the Revelation to John indicates that even that Jerusalem is passing. There will be a new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2). While the Zion on this earth

(and I'm not talking about Zion, Illinois) is where God chose to dwell, the New Jerusalem is his eternal abode.

Note how both are described. "You shall don them (your children) all like jewels, deck yourself with them like a bride." (Isa 49:18) Of the New Jerusalem it is said, she is "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." He tells the temporary Zion "All the world shall know that I the Lord am your savior." (Isa 49:26) To the New Jerusalem he says, "They shall be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." (Rev 21:3)

If God thinks this Zion of such value that he writes her name on his hand, how much more will he care about his New Jerusalem! And if he cares so much for his city, how much more will he care for her inhabitants, her children. And we are her children, if we overcome sin and Satan and those that would tear us from our Hope through persecution.

God writes on his hand. He also writes his laws on our hearts (Heb 8:10). But he also writes names in a book (Rev 19:12). Those names are the children of Zion, the real Zion. Is your name written there?

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