



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

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AT BEIT CHESSED

Miracles are nothing new around here. You may say that my time with the Teacher has made me immune to the wonder of miracles. I am still impressed—very impressed—by the wonders the Teacher has done. He amazes me in every town we visit, and a few out of the way places as well. All I'm saying is that miracles have been happening in our country for a while. Yes, maybe more often since the Teacher has been here, but even so there have been some miracles apart from him.

Everybody knows about the pool of Beit Chessed, which the Greeks corrupt to Bethesda. The pool is named the house of mercy because God frequently shows his mercy on a sick person there. Legend has it that an angel visits the pool sometimes. They say that when an angel stirs the water, the first person into the pool is healed. Now, I don't know if it is an angel that stirs the water, an earthquake, or some other phenomenon. All I know is that there are a lot of people walking around now that were very sick, and to me that qualifies as a miracle or two.

Since the time the healings started at this pool near the Sheep Gate, there had been some construction. Because a lot of infirm people came to the pool, some people had taken it upon themselves to construct five porticoes around the pool. Maybe it was the largest five sided building in the world. It was the only one of which I was aware. All five porticoes were constantly filled with the sick, lame, and (according to some wags) the lazy. Everyone was hoping to be the first into the water when it was disturbed. Of course, by the nature of the miracle, the strongest usually got there first. That is why some people doubt the miracles actually occurred.

One shabbos the pool of Beit Chessed truly was a house of mercy. This is a miracle to which I can personally attest, because I was there, and no angel was involved. The water was not even disturbed, although some people were.

We were at Beit Chessed with the Teacher. No surprise. It was not unusual to find him around sick people. Usually they came to him. This time he had gone to them. Here he was in a large building filled with sick people. From what I have seen, he could have just waved his hand and healed them all. Instead, he was walking among them, apparently looking for one man. I don't know if he knew this man. Probably not. He chose one man that we found out had been infirm for thirty eight

years. Then the Teacher asked a strange question.

"Do you want to get well?"

Why would somebody even be here if they did not want to get well? That was the whole point of the place.

The man didn't answer the question, but said instead, "When the pool is disturbed I don't have anybody to help me into it." This might have been an excuse, but the Teacher took it as affirmation that he wanted to be healed. So he healed him.

"Take up your mat and walk," he said. And the man did so.

No sooner was the man outside the building, but someone stopped him and asked him why he was carrying his mat. After all, it was shabbos. He simply replied that the man who had healed him told him to carry his mat.

Now comes the really strange part. Some people might have said, "Oh, you were sick. Well, put down your mat and tell me how you were healed." Not this person. Instead of asking who did the healing he asked, "Who told you to carry your mat?" He missed the point altogether. This man had been healed! Who cares what he was told? Praise God for what was done!

The healed man did not know who the Teacher was. Until later, that is. The Teacher came to him in the Temple and told him who he was and that he was to go, and not sin. Well, he went. He went straight to those who chided him for carrying his mat, and identified the Teacher as his healer.

Maybe he was hoping they would acknowledge the miracle. Instead, they plotted the Teacher's death. It didn't matter that he had healed, but it mattered to them that he had done so on shabbos. Now tell me, who needed the healing more? The lame man, or these blind men?

(Based on John 5:1-16)

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WORKS SALVATION

Those groups that, following the scriptures, insist that baptism (either immersion or some other form that is not properly called baptism) are often accused of advocating “works salvation.” Many who oppose immersion as a requirement for, or the point at which one receives, salvation do so because they interpret being saved by grace as exclusive of any action on man’s part. It might, therefore, be instructive to see what the Bible says about salvation by grace or works. It might also be of value to see whether the people who advocate “grace salvation” in opposition to “works salvation” really follow what they claim to believe.

What is grace?

Some people define grace as “unmerited favor.” While that seems to be a good definition it has the problem of defining a word by that word. A dictionary would not define a red rose as a rose that is red. Rather it would define it as a flower of a specific genus that is of a color whose hue resembles that of blood or of the ruby or is that of the long-wave extreme of the visible spectrum. In the case of grace, to define it as unmerited favor is to define it by itself, since the word that is sometimes translated grace is also translated favor. So what does the Bible mean by grace?

One of the first things to understand is that grace is the act of God’s looking favorably on a person. It is that

Salvation is a free gift from God, but invariably they tell people that they must pray to receive the gift.

which brings joy or peace, and in a spiritual sense that is because of God’s favorable view of a person. If one is viewed without sin, then one can have joy and peace; if viewed as sinful, those attributes are unattainable.

The next thing to understand is that grace is not necessarily free. The Law is full of references to those who would buy grace.

Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy gates, which the LORD thy God giveth thee, throughout thy tribes: and they shall judge the people with just judgment. Thou shalt not wrest judgment;

thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous. (Deut 16:18-19)

Even today we know of instances where grace is bestowed by men, based solely on what the recipient can pay. In some places it is called baksheesh or a gratuity. In other circumstances it is called a bribe. Far be it from God to show partiality, but he never says that grace itself is free.

Someone might now point out a passage that links grace and a free gift. What does Romans 5:15-17 say? Does it say grace is a free gift?

But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many. And not as it was by one that sinned, so is the gift: for the judgment was by one to condemnation, but the free gift is of many offences unto justification. For if by one man’s offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ.)

No, this passage does not say that grace is a free gift. The free gift comes as a result of grace. But the free gift is not grace. The free gift is righteousness. Now that might be splitting hairs, in a sense. After all, it is the salvation that is really at issue in the discussion. Is the salvation free? Definitely. Does it come from grace? Most certainly. Does that mean that man has no part in obtaining the free gift? Not necessarily.

Free trip to heaven. Inquire inside.

This was a sign posted outside a church building. It happens to be one where those who assemble there do not believe that immersion is essential to salvation. The implication is that the trip to heaven is free of any action on man’s part. And yet, when one looks at what one would be told when he “inquires within” that is not in fact the practice.

Countless web sites, tracts, flyers, and preachers teach that one can be saved before immersion because immersion is a work and one is saved without works. They say that salvation is a free gift from God and that man has no part in it. And yet, invariably, they end by telling the person who is “inquiring within” that all they need to do to receive this salvation or this grace is to pray a certain prayer. Sometimes they even give the specific words to pray. Sometimes it is called “the Sinner’s

Prayer.” A few say that any prayer will do, as long as the person “asks Jesus to come into their heart.”

How does this differ from immersion, other than in the action itself? Is this not saying that one still has to perform an act in order to receive grace or salvation? In fact, it is more positively a work that is being required than immersion, because immersion is something that is done to the recipient rather than by the recipient. Prayer is an action by the one seeking salvation.

It would be unusual to see a tract or pamphlet that tells a person that there is truly nothing that they need do to receive salvation (which may or may not be equated to forgiveness of sins). Such a pamphlet would have to read something like this:

You are a sinner, but that is OK. You don't have to worry about it because God has a totally free gift called salvation. You do not have to do anything to receive it. You do not have to be baptized. You don't even have to pray. If God is going to give you this gift he will give it to you, regardless of what you do or don't do. By the way, though, maybe you should worry, because since you don't have to do anything to receive this gift, you may never know until you die whether you have it or not. In fact, if you pray for it, you can't have it because then you will have worked for it. So go on with your life however you want to live it, and hope that God gives you this gift.

It is not unusual to see a sign like the “free trip to heaven” sign. They ask you to “inquire inside” or open the envelope. A travel agency that offers a free gift of a trip to the Bahamas always has a catch. The trip may be free, but they still put conditions on who receives it. You may have to put your name on a list (and get mail from them for the rest of your natural life). You may have to listen to some talk about the joys of time shares. It is a free trip, but not available to just everyone.

There is no free gift without conditions in this life. People receive Christmas presents or birthday presents, beautifully wrapped. It is truly a free gift. But to take advantage of it (or even find out what it is) requires an action on the part of the recipient. He or she must open the package. Nobody leaves the wrapped package on a shelf and admires it. Few would even dare to tell the giver that in order for it to be a gift the giver has to open it and hand it to the recipient (who would still have to put out his hand to receive it). No, even a free gift is not free of action on the part of the recipient.

Works Salvation

The principal objection to immersion is that it would lead to salvation by works. As previously seen, even salvation by faith involves action (works?) on the part of the recipient. But is immersion a work?

Works, in the sense usually used, would be legalistic works of law, generally of the Law of Moses. That is how Paul uses the word in his letter to the Galatians. Paul speaks of those who believe they have earned their salvation because of the *mitzvot* they have done. Works, in this sense, would include anything by which a person thinks he has earned salvation. For some people that may include immersion; for others it may include prayer, or faith, or doing or being good.

Doing something in order to receive salvation is not always a work, in that sense. Praying for God's spirit in one's life may not be a work, if one doesn't believe that God owes them his spirit just because they prayed. Immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins may not be a work, in the legalistic sense, if one has it done to him because God commanded it, and one wants to obey the commands of God because he is God. If it is something to

A trip from a travel agency may be free, but you may have to put your name on a list to get mail from them for the rest of your natural life.

check off on a list of things to earn salvation it is a work. If it is, as Peter says in 1 Peter 3:21, the response of a good conscience toward God, then it is not a work.

Another difference between immersion and other works becomes crucial. Immersion is not something one does in order to be saved. It is not even something one does because he has been saved, as some would claim in opposition to the scriptures. It is not even something one does. Immersion is something that is done to a person. A dead body does not bury itself. A person who has died to sin and is about to rise to walk in a new life (Romans 6) does not immerse himself. He submits to immersion. If it is a work, it is a work of another person on the one wishing to be saved. In this way it is no different than God granting forgiveness of sins. If immersion (baptism) is a work, then so is God's gracious forgiveness. If, then, we cannot be saved by immersion because it is a work, then we cannot be forgiven, because that is a work. What someone does to us is not our work. Immersion is not salvation by works, because in it we are being acted upon, not acting.

POP. ME/WE

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

John Donne

Matthew West sings of a little world, Population Me. That is certainly how many of us seem to think. Everything revolves around me. If there is a God, he must be interested solely in me. Everything in my world is meant to serve or enhance me. Gordon Gecko said, "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good." And greed is all about me.

There are a couple of problems with that view of the world. Population Me is a very lonely place. Some people claim to like lonely. Alone is good, sometimes; lonely, rarely. In fact, lonely can become a very scary place. Population Me sometimes becomes a place of "everything is out to get me." Because our world (the real world, with many me's) does not always work the way we want it to, lonely doesn't afford any comfort, or any help. God knew this. "It is not good for that man should be alone." (Gen 2:18) Solomon, for all his wives and concubines, seems to have been for a time a very lonely man. And yet he could write:

Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.

Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken. (Eccl 4:9-12)

We need other people to help us through tough times. Those times will come. In Population Me, those times can be deadly.

John Donne understood that there is no Population Me. We are so intertwined with each other that what affects one man affects all. If I think it is Population Me, I lose sight of what each loss means. Soon there is nothing less to lose. The clod and the promontory. Lose one, lose all.

But there is another problem with Population Me. We just were not made that way. It is not all about me. Greed, for lack of a better word, is unnatural. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." (Eph 2:10) Good works are natural. Looking outside oneself is natural. Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35)

Imagine a world where everything is all about me, for each me. The highest good is my own good. Where my good differs from your good, I must by nature ensure my own preservation. Mr. Justice Holmes was wrong, then, that "The right to swing my fist ends where the other man's nose begins." In Population Me, the right to swing my fist ends when I get my way. Anarchy reigns. Contrary to popular belief, it is not all about me. I am here not to be served but to serve. By so doing, we do not diminish the world, but restore it. In God's own little world, it must be Population We.

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