



# Minutes With Messiah

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## *ALWAYS THE POOR*

You go into a car dealership to look at new cars. The salesperson says, "Have I got a deal for you." The deal is that you pick any car you want. You go through all the financing paperwork and drive away. The deal is that if, by the time you finish paying for the car in five years, the "oil change" reminder light never comes on, the dealer will refund the purchase price of the car with whatever interest you had paid. Sounds like a great deal, right. You agree to the deal and drive off. You check the manual and it says you should get your oil changed every six months. So just before six months comes up, you take it in for an oil change, and get the sensor reset. Six months later you do the same thing. This goes on ever (almost) six month for four years, but then you get called away on an unexpected business trip. On your way home the reminder comes on. Your hopes of a free car go behind you on the highway. You won't get any money refunded.

The Jewish people were offered a similar deal. If anybody made a loan of any sort, be it land or goods or money, the debt would be forgiven every seventh year. If the loan was made one year before the sabbath year, you made out. If the loan was just after the sabbath year the borrower made out. Of course, repayment must be made if possible, but if by the sabbath year the loan is not repaid it is forgiven. There was to be one exception. The loan is forgiven, "Save when there shall be no poor among you; for the LORD shall greatly bless thee." (Deut 15:4) If they trusted in God and when the year of release arrived there could be found not a single poor person in the land, then they could demand repayment of the debts.

Just a little later, though, Moses warns them not to withhold from giving on the theory that it is so close to the year of release that they might lose on the deal. He adds, "For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land." (Deut 15:11) There was less chance of not having to release the debt than there was of getting the free car in the first example. "The poor shall never cease out of the land." It is a given. God gives a condition under which the release need not happen, but then says the condition will never be met.

By the time Jesus walked on this earth, some of the Jewish lawyers had figured out ways to get around

this. The example Jesus gave went this way. "Oh, you have a poor widowed mother you are supposed to support. But you say that whatever should have gone to her you have dedicated to God, so she can't have it." (Mk 7:9-13 paraphrased) Never mind that you kept an equal amount for yourself and spent it on the latest sports camel. Somehow a specific portion of your income, say the second ten percent, was what you figured should have gone to your parents.

One day Jesus was reclining at the table and his friend Mary (Lazarus' sister) came and anointed his feet with some very expensive perfume. Some of the apostles, most notably Judas Iscariot, suggested that the perfume would have been better sold and the profits donated to the poor. Judas led in the discussion, planning to pilfer the profits from the money bags which he held. Jesus replied, "For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good: but me ye have not always." (Mk 14:7)

Don't pretend to care for the poor, but only when you want to save some expensive gift. Don't say that what you would have given to the poor you decided to put into the church treasury.

Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. (Matt 25:44-45)

The poor you have always. But that simply means that you always have the opportunity to give to God by giving to the poor. The condition that would free you from your obligation will never come to pass.

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# SALVATION

In *My Fair Lady*, Eliza sings “Words, words, words. I’m so sick of words.” She wants Freddy to show he loves her, not just say it. Unfortunately, we are human, and humans communicate by words. Or sometimes we miscommunicate by words, when we use a word in a way different than another person understands it. Sometimes that is the case with biblical words, such as the words saved or salvation.

## Saved from What?

When we want to talk to someone about salvation, we often run into a couple of problems. Either the person does not think they need to be saved, or they think of salvation differently than what the Bible teaches.

A lot of people are under the impression that they don’t need salvation. They are good people. They are law abiding, generous, caring people. They are at least as good

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as some Christians that they know, so why do they need salvation?

To others sin is an outdated concept. Humanism teaches that the only wrong (not using the word sin) is to hurt someone else. Some laws may be broken because they are really “victimless crimes.” There are no absolutes, and sin implies an absolute authority.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 Jn 1:8-10)

Others don’t see that the Bible teaches specifically what one is saved from. I once carried on a lengthy e-mail conversation with an individual who said that one can be saved before baptism. Therefore immersion is not necessary, except perhaps as a sign that one has been saved. I pointed out such passages as Acts 2:38 (“Repent and be baptized every one of you for remission of sin.”) or

Acts 22:16 (“Arise and be baptized and wash away your sin.”) His response was that we are saved by grace. (Eph 2:5, 8) If you are saved by grace, he said, then it is not by baptism. Baptism is a work, therefore you are saved before baptism. I asked him, if baptism is what takes away sin, according to scripture, then if you are saved before baptism, what are you saved from? His response was that you are saved from not being saved. He could not define it any further. You are not saved from sin, but instead from being unsaved.

So what is it that the Bible says salvation is? From what is one saved? Gabriel pretty well defined it when he announced to Joseph that his betrothed wife would have a son. “And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.” (Matt 1:21) Jesus was not to save people from the Roman occupation, or some vague sense of being lost. He was to save people from their sins.

Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins. (Jas 5:19-20)

James talks about a salvation from death. This is the salvation of a soul, not the body. So what does it mean to save a soul from death? Paul told the Romans that “the wages of sin is death.” (Rom 6:23) In fact, he spent three chapters (5-7) establishing that sin was the real problem mankind faced, and that salvation was the act of freeing one from sin. So when James talks about saving a soul from death, it is the same as saving a soul from sin.

The Bible does not treat sin as some vague concept. It is real, and it will separate us from God.

But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear. (Isa 59:2)

Even among Christians, salvation from sin is not always a popular concept. It implies that we have done something wrong. More importantly, it implies that there is nothing that we can do on our own to right that wrong. Therefore many Christians will refer to themselves as believers, or Christ-followers. Rarely do you hear anyone call themselves a saved person.

## How is one saved?

Going back to that e-mail discussion, the other person quoted scripture to show that we are saved through grace. Peter says baptism saves us. (1 Pet 3:21) Paul tells the Romans that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. (Rom 1:16) Later he says that “with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” (Rom 10:10) Is there a

contradiction here? How is one saved? How are sins forgiven?

Jesus and the Pharisees had a dispute over this very question. Some men brought a friend who was sick of the palsy to Jesus for healing. When they couldn't reach Jesus because of the crowd, they took out part of the roof and let the sick man down in front of him.

And when he saw their faith, he said unto him, Man, thy sins are forgiven thee. And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, Who is this which speaketh blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone? But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answering said unto them, What reason ye in your hearts? Whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Rise up and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power upon earth to forgive sins, (he said unto the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy couch, and go into thine house. (Lk 5:20-24)

Only God can forgive sins. The one whom God sent, who is God himself, has that power. If hard pressed, though, the Pharisees would have to admit that "the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh." (Heb 9:13) If God plus the Levitical sacrifices cleansed one, then why could one sent directly by God not do the same?

The angel had told Joseph that Jesus would save people from their sins. In this miracle, Jesus told the man his sins were forgiven. Peter said, "There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) Paul says it went beyond Jesus telling people while he was on earth that they were forgiven. "In whom [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins." (Eph 1:7; Col 1:14) "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin." (1 Jn 1:7)

The blood of Jesus shed on the stake on Calvary is what gives forgiveness of sins. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

So what about those other scriptures that say something else saves us? We are saved (have our sins forgiven) through grace. It was the grace of God that sent his son to die, to offer a sinless blood sacrifice, that forgiveness of sins would be possible. By faith, more properly translated trust, we are saved because of that grace.

And what about baptism? Did not Peter say unequivocally that "baptism saves us"? Yes he did. But to take that phrase alone is to take it out of context. In 1 Peter 3, he mentions that Noah was saved by water. Then he says, "The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us by the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Baptism is a figure, a symbol. It only has saving power in its symbolism. You can immerse a cat and all you will get is scratched, not a forgiven cat.

Paul explains this in great detail to the Romans. Most specifically he explains it in chapter 6.

How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into 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. (Rom 6:2-6)

But if baptism is nothing but a symbol then why is it necessary. To say "nothing but a symbol" is to minimize

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its importance. It is a symbol, but not "nothing but." Jesus died, was buried, and arose from the dead that we might have forgiveness of sins. In baptism we reenact what he did. It is that reenactment that brings us forgiveness. If we refuse to reenact the events surrounding the end of Jesus' life, we are refusing the purpose of those events. It is evidence of our faith.

For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. (Gal 3:26-27)

In like manner, Paul says that "with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." (Rom 10:10) This is not confession like one might make to a priest concerning one's sins. This is a profession of trust. Paul is saying that a statement that one believes that Jesus died to take away sin is the verbal equivalent of immersion. Not only do we show our faith, but we profess it, thereby receiving forgiveness of sins.

Hebrews 5:9 says Jesus became the author of salvation to all who obey him. The blood of Jesus, faith, grace, baptism, confession, obedience. Which is it that saves? It is the blood of Jesus. But it is also all of these other things as well. The death of Jesus does us no good if we do not have faith. Faith is demonstrated in immersion and confession. Obedience encompasses all of these things. Salvation, the forgiveness of sins, is tied up in all of these.

# *ALL FLASH, NO SUBSTANCE*

All flash and no substance. That seems to be descriptive of so many things today. In the entertainment industry that was a description of most magic shows. Even earlier it could be said to describe “snake oil” salesmen. It describes a lot of movies today, characterized by special effects but little in the way of anything that makes you think.

People like flash. Every two years a different city is tasked with creating an Olympic opening ceremony that will outdo at least the previous one, if not go down as one of the best ever. Every year the expectations for the Super Bowl halftime show are that it will be better (that is flashier) than all previous shows. One Albuquerque air conditioning company was given the unique task of designing a system for a church building that was powerful enough to vent the smoke from indoor pyrotechnics.

It is not a modern phenomenon. Jesus even dealt with the desire for flash over substance. Once he became known as a miracle worker, that is what people came to see.

And when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceedingly glad: for he was desirous to see him of a long season, because he had heard many things of him; and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by him. (Lk 23:8)

On three separate occasions the leaders of the Jews asked Jesus to “Show us a sign.” (Matt 12:38; Jn 2:18; Jn 6:30) At least two of those occasions came shortly after Jesus had performed a miracle. The leaders did not even consider healings to be sufficiently flashy to prove his authority. It is not very clear what kind of a sign would have been sufficient, but Jesus said the only sign they would get would be “the sign of Jonah.” Being raised from the dead on the third day seems like it would be enough flash, but apparently even that would not do.

The problem with flash is that people get inured to it. They want something more, or something else. After Jesus had healed many people and fed the five thousand men with only five loaves and two fish, the people forgot the miracles.

Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled. (Jn 6:26)

There is nothing inherently wrong with flash. While it could be argued that Jesus did not perform the miracles for their flash, nevertheless they were showy. John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask if he was the Messiah they were seeking.

Then Jesus answering said unto them, Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached. (Lk 7:22)

Jesus did not say that the miracles were unimportant. They served a purpose. But he pointed out that it was not all flash and no substance. They were to tell John about the miracles, but they were also to tell him that the gospel was being preached to the poor. The proof of his Messiahship was both the miracles and the teaching.

Just because a church uses pyrotechnics does not mean they should be dismissed out of hand. Nor should we dismiss them automatically because of a fantastic show band or a charismatic preacher. If that preacher rarely quotes scripture, and never says exactly where the reference is to be found, then he should be dismissed as all flash and no substance. If, on the other hand, the gospel is preached even in the context of flashy, possibly unscriptural, circumstances, the important thing is that the gospel is preached.

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