

Is The Road To Salvation Confusing?

"It's just your interpretation!" "The Bible contradicts itself!" "I know in my heart that I'm saved!" "I'm comfortable with my religion!" "You have your opinion, I have mine!" These are all statements that I, personally, have heard from relatives during the past year as I've tried to confront them with the truth of the Scriptures. There seems to be a prevailing attitude among people that the road to salvation is confusing and that all a person can do is have faith, worship somewhere, live a good life and trust in God's grace. Let's analyze that attitude in detail.

I believe that anyone who calls themselves a Christian will agree that one is saved by God's grace. Romans 3:23 says, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." No one deserves heaven, but God, through His grace and love for us, gives every person an opportunity to achieve salvation. I doubt that any person who believes in Jesus Christ as the Son of God will deny that faith is, also, essential to salvation. Romans 5:1 says, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God thru our Lord Jesus Christ." Ephesians 2:8 ties grace and faith together by stating, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God." Other passages, such as Romans 1:5, Romans 3:24 & 28, Acts 15:9, Luke 7:50, II Thessalonians 2:16, I Peter 1:5 and John 3:16, are all "proof texts" that support the idea of salvation by grace and faith. But is that all it takes?

The Bible teaches that there is more that we must do besides believe and accept God's saving grace. Jesus taught in John 14 that loving Him equates to obedience. The passages before John 3:16 state that we must be born of water (baptism) and the Spirit (repentance) in order to enter the kingdom of God. (John 3:3,5) After John 3:16, in verses 21 and 36, we read that our deeds are manifested and that if we do not obey the Son we will not see life. In II Corinthians 5:10, Paul says that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ to be recompensed for our deeds in the body. James makes it even clearer by stating that "...a man is justified by works and not by faith alone." (James 2:24) But what deeds are they talking about and what constitutes obedience?

The first act of obedience must be baptism. Jesus said, "He who has believed and is baptized shall be saved..." (Mark 16:16) Acts 22:16 reads, "And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on His name." Peter caps this thought process, by writing, "And corresponding to that, baptism NOW SAVES YOU...." (I Peter 3:21) But just because we are saved at that point does not mean that we are saved on the day we die. We Christians must strive for the rest of our lives to control our thoughts and actions, trying to become more like Jesus every day. I John 1:6-10 makes it clear that we must "walk in the light" and admit that we sin, confessing those mistakes we make in order to stay in touch with the cleansing blood of Jesus. In Revelation 2:10, Jesus tells us to "...Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

All of the passages mentioned above can be confusing when taken out of context or by pitting them against one another. When we accept the fact that the Bible does not contradict itself and never sends mixed or inconsistent messages, the confusion begins to go away. As we delve deeper and deeper into God's Word with an open and honest heart, searching only for the truth, the message becomes ever clearer. The fact is that we are saved by grace through faith, which produces works, one of which is baptism, an act of

obedience. But at what point are we saved? Many in the denominational world believe that one is saved at the moment we allow the Holy Spirit into our hearts. This means at the moment of sincere, emotional, heartfelt belief. If that were true, those who heard Peter's sermon and were pierced to the heart (Acts 2:37) would have been saved at that very moment, for they certainly believed with all their hearts. But Peter told them in Acts 2:38 that they must "Repent and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins." They sincerely believed, but did not have their sins forgiven until they acted on that belief. Paul's conversion is another example that proves the "faith only" theory to be incorrect. In Acts 22:7-10, Paul was spoken to directly by the risen Christ and confessed Him as Lord. But until he acted on that faith by going to Damascus, finding Ananias and getting baptized (Acts 22:16), Paul was an unsaved man. So we are saved, initially, at the point of baptism after hearing, believing, confessing and repenting. '

But once our past sins are forgiven, we must change our lives and continuously work to increase our knowledge, which produces new demands of obedience. The essence of Christianity is probably best summed up in the Great Commission, recorded in Matthew 18:18-20. As Christians, we are instructed to go into the world and make disciples, then teach the new converts to observe all of Jesus' commands. Putting ourselves on the receiving end of that commission, we are to learn and obey. We learn by studying our Bibles, attending services and associating with fellow Christians. We obey by performing Christian works and doing what the Bible says we must do, always willing to change our lives and our attitudes as our knowledge of God's truth increases. The path to salvation is not confusing if we accept the Bible as our sole authority. It has become confusing to many who rely on the authority of men and manmade institutions to lead them. Jesus said the way is narrow and few will find the way. (Matthew 7:14) But the map to heaven is in the homes of just about everyone. All we have to do is read it, accept it and obey it. That's not confusing at all!

Richard Bartholomew