

OUR FIRST RESPONSIBILITY

Our Own Salvation!

“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Romans 3:21–22a).

At the age of seventeen I became a believer. It was the first time I had clearly understood the gospel. The spiritual light came on and I finally understood why Christ had died. Up to that point my theology was very fuzzy (actually, incorrect). Over a couple of weeks, in the spring of 1954, I realized that for me to be truly saved, to have my sins forgiven, to be justified before God, to be set right before an almighty and holy God, I must put my personal faith in Jesus Christ as my sin-bearer, the only One who *could take away* the awful guilt of my many sins.

At the age of nine I had joined a church, been immersed and had begun attending Sunday School and church services somewhat regularly. I would try to pray each night before going to sleep. I tried to live a moral, upright life. I was somewhat obedient to my parents and regularly prayed that they would not go to hell (they seldom attended church, especially my father). No individual ever asked me if I was saved, but should they have, I would have answered “yes.” Yet, I often feared the torment of hell. I knew that I sinned and was constantly fearful that God would cast me into an everlasting fire. In those days farmers in our area would burn off their fields in the fall of the year. Just seeing those large fires would cause me severe mental and emotional anguish. I could picture myself in the middle of one of them calling on the rocks and hills to fall on me (at that time, more often than today, preachers gave “hell-fire and brimstone” sermons).

My reaction was to try to be more moral, to attend church services more frequently, to work harder on my Sunday School assignments, often lying awake at night fearing the imminent return of

Christ and my subsequent judgment. I cannot count the number of times I prayed that God would not cast me and my family into the endless torment of hell.

As I look back, I was trying to do what most people do: save myself by such things as baptism, church membership, prayer and morality.

But in the spring of 1954, God began a work of grace in my heart. A gentleman came to our home in an attempt to reach my brother who had joined a church cult. My brother would not meet with him (although my brother was saved almost ten years later). Instead, in God's gracious providence, the man approached me about teaching me the Scriptures. He asked if I could gather up some of my high school buddies for a class in our home. I was able to do so and in a short time, we began studying Romans. We had requested Revelation, but he was wise enough to steer us in the direction of a portion of the Scriptures that stressed the basics of the faith—Paul's letter to the Romans.

Within two weeks we came to Romans 1:16–17, “the just shall live by faith.” God suddenly removed the scales from my eyes. I realized that my perspective on salvation had been totally wrong. It was not by morality, works, sincerity, church attendance or any other human merit or achievement. It was by grace, through faith in Christ as my substitute. The shock to my system turned out to be the salvation of my soul. It was as if I had believed all my life that the earth was flat and suddenly realized that it was a big round ball.

The burden was lifted and God's peace filled my soul. I knew that a righteous God had now adopted me into His family and that I would never have to face His wrath. Instead I learned that God had poured out His wrath upon His only Son in my place and that I was now saved eternally. My worldview was changed drastically. Later I realized what had taken place, that I had been born again by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit.

Obedience to God, church attendance and the study of the Scriptures now came to mean a way of life, not a way to obtain life. I understood my depravity and Satan's pull on me and why it was impossible to live a perfect life. I began to learn that the Holy Spirit was there to help me in my weaknesses and, though I was still a sinner, I had the finished work of Christ to atone for my sins. In addition, I was shown that the Spirit of God would help me in my feeble

efforts to live the Christian life, to pray and to study God's Word. And I learned that my Lord was in heaven interceding for me.

What a tremendous relief! I learned that though I would spend the remainder of my days on this earth in a struggle with the world, my flesh and the Devil, yet I had now read the end of the book and knew that through Christ all of us who trust in Him would be "more than conquerors."

What about you? I assume that since you have picked up this book that you are probably a member of a local congregation. Perhaps you are a serious church member who wants to know what ministry you should engage in and what your responsibilities are. But of first importance, are you really a child of God? Have your sins been forgiven through the blood of Christ? Is He your Savior? Or, are you trying to save yourself by your own merits? Church membership? Baptism? Sincerity? Responsible lifestyle?

If so, just as I tried to earn my way into heaven, you are spiritually lost and are still accountable to God for your sins. Your first responsibility, therefore, in your journey to a ministry or church responsibility, must start at priority one—your own personal salvation. The Scriptures tell us to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, to call on Him to save us and to trust in His work on the cross on our behalf (Acts 16:31; Romans 10:9–13). And John 6:37–40 makes it abundantly clear that whoever comes to Christ will never be driven away; that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life and will be raised up at the coming of the Lord.

Paul, in Romans 12:1–3, instructs us that we are to be living sacrifices (servants of the Lord and of His church), but in order for us to be living sacrifices we must first be among the living—those who have been made alive (born again from above) through faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. It is only at that point that we are on the road to acceptable service.

Application

For Individuals:

1. Read Romans 3:9–31 and 10:1–13. Summarize in one sentence what these verses are saying as to how to be saved.

2. What are you trusting in to get you to heaven?
3. List some evidences in your life which demonstrate that you have been born again by the Spirit of God.

For Groups:

1. What are some of the many ways by which people are trying to get to heaven?
2. Locate at least ten passages of Scripture in which the gospel method of salvation is clearly presented.
3. What are some of the better ways you have discovered to evangelize the lost?
4. Discuss some of the obstacles you have met in evangelizing and some of the ways you have overcome these obstacles.

Meditation

Prayerfully think through the meaning and implications of Romans 5:6–11.