

## Each One Was Judged According to His Works

So far we have tried to explain in some depth the idea that Jesus died as a sacrifice for sin. We have seen that both the Bible and the Qur'an speak of the mercy and the forgiveness of Allah. Both recognize and approve the idea of sacrifices offered to redeem people condemned to death. We have demonstrated the impossibility of erasing one's own sins by accumulating good works, and we have seen that even Muhammad could not be confident of going to Heaven on the basis of his own personal righteousness. He said in the Qur'an, "I know not what shall be done with me or with you" (Surah 26:9 – *Al-Ahqat*). Without the grace of Allah, no one will be saved; the means by which Allah can offer forgiveness to men without compromising His righteousness and minimizing His commandments is the voluntary sacrifice of the one who committed no sin. Thus it is that Jesus himself said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

We also introduced, however, the following idea: God will judge each person according to his or her own actions. The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 5:10, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." The Qur'an says in Surah 35:18 – *Fatir*, "No burden-bearer shall bear another's burden, and if some over-laden soul should call out for someone else to carry his load, not the least portion of it will be borne for him, even though he were a near relative." We have said a lot about the necessity of an intervention by the Most Merciful, without which no one will be saved. But the Qur'an and the Bible evidently also teach the personal responsibility of each individual. So in what sense is each person judged according to the good or the evil which he has done, and how does the grace of God figure? What does God seek in us in order to be able to grant us His grace?

### WHAT DOES GOD SEEK IN US?

If God looks for perfection in us, the absence of sin, He will not find it. (Besides, we would no longer be speaking of grace, but rather of something that was deserved.) In order for us to be pleasing in His eyes strictly by our works, we would have to obey ALL His commandments, EVERY day of our lives, "for whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in

one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law" (James 2:10,11). The Bible tells us quite frankly, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us... If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us" (1 John 1:8,10).

So then, if God knows that He will never find perfection in us, what is it that He seeks? If He must grant His grace and forgiveness to a man in order for that man not to be condemned, what does He require of the man before giving this forgiveness? After all, a just God would not decide on the eternal destiny of His creatures in an arbitrary or capricious manner or according to a passing mood.

### FAITH

That which God seeks in man can be summarized by the word "faith." The Jews asked Jesus one day, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent" (John 6:28,29). The patriarch and prophet Abraham was a rather righteous man, but he was not perfect. Like all men, he committed sin. He pleased God, however, because of his faith. The Bible says several times, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness" (Romans 4:3). Another way of expressing the idea that faith was accounted to him for righteousness would be to say that "Abraham believed God. And that faith made him right with God" (International Children's Bible).

Many Bible passages teach that we are saved by faith. According to Romans 1:16 the Injeel "is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes." Ephesians 2:8 says very simply, "By grace you have been saved through faith." Obviously, faith is necessary for salvation, and without faith no one will be saved. But no passage says that we are saved by faith alone. In fact, other verses show that having faith in one's heart cannot, by itself, save the sinner.

James 2:20,24 says, "But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?... You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone." (We should point out that the word "works" is not used here to speak of works which would deserve or earn a salary, but simply of actions

by which faith must be expressed.) We have a concrete example of faith without works in John 12:42,43, which says, “Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in [Jesus], but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.” Were the Jews spoken of in these verses saved? Certainly not (see Matthew 10:32,33)! They were not saved, because they had the wrong kind of faith. They had an intellectual conviction—they recognized a truth—but they did not demonstrate it by what they did. So there is a kind of faith that does not save.

The question to be answered then is: What kind of faith saves, and what does this faith include?

### THE KIND OF FAITH THAT SAVES

The eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews is called the “faith chapter” of the Bible, because it emphasizes so strongly the importance of faith and cites the examples of so many people who, “by faith,” were pleasing to God. At the end of the preceding chapter the author had exhorted his readers to be “of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul” (Hebrews 10:39), and in chapter 11 he shows them how this faith is manifested and how it is rewarded. He mentions many individuals as examples, and we see that the faith of all these people led them to act:

Hebrews 11:4: “By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice...”

Hebrews 11:7: “By faith Noah... prepared an ark for the salvation of his household.”

Hebrews 11:8: “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance.”

Hebrews 11:27,28: “By faith [Moses] left Egypt... By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the firstborn would not touch them.”

In every case God rewarded people for an obedient faith. When faith had led to obedience, these people obtained the reward “by faith.” A faith that is not translated into obedience is useless when it comes to salvation. As Paul says in Galatians 5:6, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.”

### WHEN DOES FAITH SAVE?

At what point can we say that a faith is effective for saving a sinner? Is it possible to know when someone moves from a dead faith to one that is alive and will enable that person to be saved by the blood of Jesus?

We have already seen that one must confess his faith in Jesus. It is also necessary to repent, that is, to make the sincere decision to turn away from sin. Jesus said in Luke 24:47 “that repentance and remission of sins should be preached” in His name. Obviously these two things are linked in such a way that one does not receive God’s forgiveness without repenting. Jesus said explicitly in Luke 13:5, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” So the apostles, in their preaching, did not fail to proclaim that “the times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:30,31).

It is, however, neither at the moment of confession of faith nor at the time of repentance that the sinner obtains God’s forgiveness or grace. It is when faith is expressed in baptism. Do not think about the ceremony that some people do with a few drops of water to newborn babies. This rite certainly does not express the faith of the person who receives it. Baptism, according to the Bible, is when a person who has listened to the Injeel, has believed it, and has repented of sin, allows himself to be immersed in water, according to the commandment of Jesus and in the image of his death and resurrection. This is how the person demonstrates his faith, love, trust and submission toward God.

According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus himself associated faith and baptism as conditions of salvation when he entrusted to his disciples the mission of evangelizing the world. He said, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). To be condemned, one can simply disbelieve. To be saved, on the other hand, one must, according to Jesus, not only believe but also be baptized. If we understand this, we will not be surprised to find that throughout the New Testament those who had truly believed in the Gospel immediately accepted baptism. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter preached the Good News of Jesus. To those who had indicated their faith by asking what they should do, Peter said,

“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38).

To say that baptism is necessary for salvation is not to deny salvation by faith. In the Bible, baptism is never placed in opposition to true faith in Jesus Christ. Baptism is not in contrast to faith; it signifies faith. It is an act that is motivated by faith, that expresses faith, and that makes faith able to save us.

Baptism is also a commitment. After being baptized, we must continue to demonstrate our faith by doing our best to serve God, obey His laws, repent sincerely and turn away from our sin whenever we have failed to resist temptation, not putting our trust in our own righteousness but the blood of Christ which purifies us. We do not try to earn the grace that has been given to us, but we make every effort not to “fall from grace” (Galatians 5:4) or “be deprived of the grace of God” by allowing ourselves to be dragged back into a life of sin and immorality (Hebrews 12:15, NAB). We must abide in Christ, who gives us life (John 15:4-6). And in the end, we do not present ourselves proudly before God with all of our own good works. Rather, we come in the righteousness of Christ, the one to whom we have clung with perseverance, the only one in whom we have placed our trust. So the judgment will depend on God’s mercy, made possible by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, and on our personal choice to believe, to put our trust in Christ for salvation, and to obey the Gospel.

But this choice must be made while there is time. The Qur’an is right in saying that on that day “if some over-laden soul should call out for someone else to carry his load, not the least portion of it will be borne for him.” If it is only on the last day that one calls for help, it will be too late. Christ is truly willing to bear your sins, but you must call on him now, well before you reach the seat of judgment.