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**April 2009 E-Teaching**  
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## **Salvation B.C. and A.D.**

It goes without saying that from Adam until the present time, people have been sinning. In fact, I think it is quite safe to say that all people who have ever lived have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Knowing this, we thank God that Jesus died for our sins, making our salvation possible.

But here is an interesting question: Was it possible for people to be saved prior to Jesus' death?

The answer is *yes*.

We have plenty of examples of God forgiving people, both Jews and Gentiles, before Jesus' death, in the Old Testament and in the Gospels. And if people are forgiven, they are saved. They don't have to fear suffering God's wrath. Jesus, for example, once told a repentant woman that her sins had been forgiven, and He then told her that her faith had saved her (Luke 7:48-50). She was forgiven; thus she was saved. And obviously, she was saved before Jesus died. If she died in a forgiven state, then God did not revoke His forgiveness when she stood before His throne of judgment. She inherited eternal life.

So let us expand our thinking (if it needs expanded in this regard) to realize that it is not only since the time of Christ that salvation, that is, being forgiven and saved from God's wrath, has been available to humanity.

But to whom has God offered salvation before Jesus died? Jews only? If so, then

salvation was not available to anyone for the first 2,200 years of human history, because there were no Jews before then, and it wasn't available to *any* Gentiles for the first 4,000 years of human history. Millions of people then had no opportunity of being saved.

The truth is, however, that God offered salvation to Gentiles long before there were any descendants of Israel, and you may be surprised that a man named Abraham is a prime example of a Gentile who received God's salvation. Abraham was not a Jew; neither was he a descendant of Israel. Rather he was Israel's (Jacob's) grandfather. Yet according to Genesis 15:16, God declared Abraham to be righteous because of his faith. Paul mentioned this fact about Abraham in his letters to the Romans and Galatians as he argued that salvation is offered now to both Jews and Gentiles by faith (see Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6). If Abraham---who appears early in Genesis and who lived hundreds of years before the giving of the Law of Moses---was declared righteous by God, this proves that Gentiles could be forgiven and declared righteous by God long before Jesus was born.

On a side note, remember that Abraham's faith was not a dead faith that was void of works. The apostle James points out that Abraham's example proves that "a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (Jas. 2:24). True believers obey.

## **A Gentile City Saved**

But perhaps Abraham was a special case, singled out by God for salvation among ancient Gentiles?

No, there are plenty of other examples in the Old Testament of God working to draw Gentiles to Himself. Consider, for example, the people of Nineveh, to whom God sent Jonah. Clearly, God was holding them accountable for their sin, even though He never gave them a written law as he did the Jews. He had given them, however, His law written in their consciences, which He expected them to obey.

Their sin was so grievous in His eyes that He intended to destroy their large city within forty days (Jonah 3:4). But when Jonah arrived, preaching repentance, we are told, "Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them" (Jonah 3:5). The king of Nineveh issued a decree that everyone should "call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands" (Jonah 3:8).

The result was that God did not judge them as He had intended (to Jonah's chagrin), which indicates that He forgave them when they repented. If any of those Ninevites died soon after, having just repented and been forgiven, would God have treated them as forgiven people after death? Of course! They would have died as saved people, saved from His wrath in life and in the afterlife. Of this there is no doubt, because Jesus clearly affirmed the salvation of that particular generation of Ninevites. He said:

[The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah \(Matt. 12:41\).](#)

After God gathers the Ninevites to condemn the people of Jesus' generation for not

repenting, will He then cast those repentant Ninevites into hell since they lived prior to the time of Christ, or weren't descendants of Israel, or didn't keep the rituals of the Mosaic Law? No, those Ninevites were *saved*, and you'll meet them in heaven if you make it there yourself!

Just like Abraham, the repentant Ninevites were saved by faith. They "believed in God" (Jonah 3:4), and because they believed, they repented. Of course, any of those who repented at the preaching of Jonah may have later returned to their sinful ways, putting themselves back under the anger of God. But the fact is, God called a large group of non-Jewish people to repentance before the time of Christ, they repented, God forgave them, and according to Jesus, in the afterlife those people are still righteous before God.

### **Salvation by Faith in Christ, B.C.**

If both Abraham and the Ninevites of Jonah's time were saved by "believing in the Lord," then can we even go so far as to say that they were saved by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ since He is obviously the Lord in whom they believed, even though they didn't know Him by His name, Jesus? I think so. And since Jesus is one with the Father (John 10:30), I really think so!

And I'll go one step further if you will allow me. Whether they realized it or not, not only was the forgiveness that God granted Abraham and the Ninevites due to their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, but their forgiveness was based on His future death, as He would ultimately pay the penalty for their sins.

We know that the New Testament teaches that the only way God could righteously forgive our sins was through the sufferings and death of the spotless Son of God. If God could have simply forgiven our sins without need of a substitutionary sacrifice while maintaining His righteousness, then there would have been no need for Christ to have died. Sin, however, must be punished if God is to be righteous. Therefore, if God could not forgive *our* sins apart from Christ's sufferings and death, why should we think that people before Christ could have their sins forgiven apart from Christ's sacrifice? If Christ didn't need to die for *their* sin in order for them to be forgiven, why would He have to die for *our* sins in order for us to be forgiven? And it didn't make any difference if Christ died thousands of years after they lived any more than it did that Christ died thousands of years before we were born. His sufferings and death, predestined from the foundation of the world, could be credited to anyone at any time in history for the forgiveness of their sins.

But weren't the Israelites saved through the means of animal sacrifices? Actually, no. Scripture tells us that "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Heb. 10:4). Those animal sacrifices so prevalent in the Old Testament prior to and during the Mosaic Law all served as continual reminders of the need for substitutionary sacrifice for forgiveness of sins, and all served to foreshadow the *only* sacrifice that God could accept as a true and full payment. If animal sacrifices could provide forgiveness of sins, then again, we would have to ask why Jesus died. We could just have continued sacrificing animals.

Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, not just the people who lived after He died. The Bible does not say, "God so loved the people who lived from the time of Jesus onward that He gave His only Son." No, "God so loved *the world*" (John 3:16).

## **Back to Genesis**

Let us return once more to the time of Abraham to a story of another Gentile whom God drew to Himself in early human history. In Genesis 20, we read about a king named Abimelech who took Abraham's wife, Sarah, into his harem. Abraham had deceived Abimelech about his wife, saying that she was his sister (a half-truth, since she was a half-sister), fearing that upon seeing his beautiful wife (who was ninety years old!), the land's inhabitants would kill him and take her.

God closed the wombs of all of Abimelech's household (Gen. 20:18) and then appeared to Gentile Abimelech in a dream saying, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is married" (Gen. 20:3). This was hundreds of years before God commanded Israel, "You shall not commit adultery," but God had already written that commandment on every Gentile's heart and was expecting all to obey it. Abimelech was no exception.

Abimelech reminded God that Abraham had deceived him about Sarah, and he then restored her to her husband, knowing that death was the alternative (Gen. 20:7). We don't know if Abimelech knew the Lord before his dream, but he certainly believed in the Lord during and after his dream, and his actions saved his life. He was saved from death by his faith, a faith that went into action. Is it possible that this man who had such an experience, when he eventually died and stood before God, was judged as righteous? Certainly it is. Why would God deal with someone as He did Abimelech if there was no hope of his inheriting eternal life? Is it even remotely possible that God said to Abimelech at his judgment, "So glad that you feared Me and returned Abraham's wife after that dream. Unfortunately, however, you lived before the time of Christ, and neither were you a Jew, and thus salvation was never offered to you, so you'll have to go to hell"?

If we took the time, we could look at many other specific attempts by God to awaken ancient Gentiles to repentance. Remember His awesome power displayed before the kingdom of Egypt and many surrounding nations during the time of Israel's exodus? Is it possible that some Egyptians believed in the Lord and repented, perhaps even evidenced by their giving their silver and gold to the Israelite slaves whom they had exploited for years (see Ex. 12:33-36)? Or what about the God-given dreams of Nebuchadnezzar, as well as his and King Darius' world-wide decrees honoring God (Dan. 3:29 - 4:37; 6:25-27)? How about the many words of the Jewish prophets that were directed at Gentile nations, holding them accountable and condemning them for their sins? These examples and others like them testify that God has always been drawing Gentiles. Some have responded rightly.

There is also, of course, the testimony of creation that has, from the dawn of human history, continually revealed to every person, Jew and Gentile, God's "invisible

attributes...eternal power and divine nature...so that they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). Again, God has been drawing every person to Himself from the beginning.

God not only speaks to each person's five senses through His creation, but continually speaks to each person inwardly through his or her conscience, calling each to turn from sin and turn to righteousness. That inward voice is programmed within every person who has ever lived. In giving every person a conscience, was God's intention to motivate them to do what is pleasing in His sight during their lives so He could eventually cast them into hell? Obviously not. Rather, it was to motivate them to repentance, faith, obedience and salvation.

Is it possible that at least some of the millions of Gentiles who lived before Christ, who never once heard a verse from the Old Testament---many having lived before a single word of the Old Testament was penned, and many having lived beyond the range of its knowledge, scattered around the globe---might have rightly responded to creation and conscience, which were both designed by God to draw all people to Himself? And if they believed in God and repented, would God have forgiven them? And might some of them have continued in faith, following the voice of their conscience, and died in a state of righteousness? And if so, would God have accepted them and granted them eternal life on the basis of the fact that Jesus died for their sins, making their forgiveness by a righteous God possible? I think the answer to all of those questions is *yes*. I don't know how anyone could say otherwise.

So what is the real point of this e-teaching? If we understand how God has been saving people from the beginning, we are less apt to misunderstand how He is saving them now. God has always been drawing everyone through creation and conscience, and He still is. It has never been His will that anyone created in His image perish, and it isn't now. He has always offered salvation to everyone through faith, and He still is today. Genuine faith has always resulted in works, and it still does. Repentance, born from faith, has always been required. God has been saving people only through Christ's suffering and death since the beginning, and He still is.

Finally, all of these 6,000-year-old truths help us put the many other minor issues that side-track Christians in their proper, insignificant perspective. Solomon put it well in the final two verses of Ecclesiastes:

The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to *every* person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil (Eccl. 12:13-14).

I intend to pursue this subject a little further next month. I'll appreciate your thoughtful feedback to this e-teaching, as your views and questions may help guide me as I work on the next teaching. (But please don't hold me to a personal reply, as I am swimming in emails already!)