

# **BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #131:**

## **THINGS THAT WILL NOT REMOVE THE GUILT OF SIN**

**By John Temples**

I have bad news and good news. First, the bad news: you and I, and all other accountable people in the world, are guilty of sin before God (Romans 3:23). Now the good news: God's grace and the sacrifice of Christ have made it possible for you and I to be forgiven of sin by obedience to the gospel. Praise God!

However, the sad truth is that many people have been misled by false doctrine and believe that their sins are forgiven, when actually they are not. Let us examine this situation and learn the truth from God's word. The case of Saul of Tarsus (the apostle Paul) goes a long way toward correcting erroneous beliefs in this area.

The conversion of Paul/Saul is a watershed moment in the history of the early church. Before he became a Christian, Paul was a bitter enemy of the church and a ringleader of the Jewish effort to exterminate it. On one occasion he was on his way to Damascus to arrest Jewish Christians and bring them to Jerusalem for trial. Here are his own words as to what occurred:

"Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' So I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.' And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me. So I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do.' And since I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of those who were with me, I came into Damascus. Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there, came to me; and he stood and said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that same hour I looked up at him. Then he said, 'The God of our fathers has chosen

you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.' (Acts 22:6-16)

Acts 9:9 adds one important detail to this record: In his remorse for the course he had taken, he fasted and prayed for three days before Ananias came to him.

It is obvious that Paul experienced a crisis, a moment when he realized that he had been completely wrong about Jesus. He knew that he was in deep trouble with God! He had committed sin of epic proportions. He had asked Jesus what he should do, and was told to go into Damascus and await instructions. Many people today believe that Saul was saved at the moment he saw Jesus on the Damascus road and believed in Him, but we need to read “the rest of the story.”

Acts 22:16 is a very important verse. Here it is again: “And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” Remember, this was spoken to Paul three days after his encounter with Jesus. Here’s one reason this is important: *It lets us know that at that time he was still an unpardoned sinner.* We know this because he was told by Ananias to be baptized and “wash away his sins.”

This leads us to think about an important question: How can I obtain forgiveness of sins and be made right with God? If you ask religious authorities that question today, you will get many different and confusing answers. So it behooves us to examine the record of Paul’s conversion and look at...

## SOME THINGS THAT WILL NOT REMOVE THE GUILT OF SIN

*First: a miracle did not remove Paul’s sin.* It may have been that Paul, when he realized he was in the presence of the Lord, just closed his eyes and stood there waiting to be “zapped.” He also might have thought, like many today, that salvation is some miraculous, supernatural experience, with lightning flashing, thunder roaring, or fireworks going off. Paul did indeed experience a miracle--he saw Jesus in all His blazing heavenly glory. But this miraculous display was only for confirmation of Jesus’s divinity. It had nothing to do with removing Paul’s sin. We

know this because Acts 22:16 affirms that three days after the miraculous encounter, he was still a sinner. Today, evidence for the deity of Jesus comes not from miracles (which have ceased), but from the inspired testimony of the Bible.

*Second: an actual “talk with Jesus” did not remove his sins.* Many people take comfort in the words of a well-known song: “I once was lost in sin, but Jesus took me in; and then a little light from heaven filled my soul. It bathed my heart in love and wrote my name above, and ‘just a little talk with Jesus’ made me whole.” Some make statements like, “I have talked with Jesus,” or “Jesus talked to me,” or “Me and Jesus, we got a thing going,” etc., and feel saved as a result. They may FEEL forgiven, but they need to remember Paul’s experience. He saw a light from heaven, and he “had a talk with Jesus”; but he did not experience immediate forgiveness. It is worthy of note that Jesus had “power on earth to forgive sins” (Matthew 9:6); yet Jesus said nothing to Paul about his sins being forgiven.

*Third: Faith, by itself, did not remove Paul’s sins.* It’s obvious that Paul became a believer in Christ; as soon as he saw Him, he called Him “Lord” (Acts 22:10). Ananias’s conversation with him shows that he assumed Paul to be a believer. Many modern preachers will tell people that to be saved “all you have to do is believe.” Well, Paul did believe; but three days after becoming a believer he was still in his sins.

*Fourth: sorrow, fasting, and prayer did not remove his sins.* Read Acts 9:9 again: “And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.” Obviously, Paul was bitterly remorseful and sorry for his sins. But bitter sorrow alone did not result in cleansing of the stain of his sin. Judas was sorry for betraying Christ, but that did not cancel the debt of sin he owed to God.

Many years ago, protracted “revivals” or evangelistic campaigns were popular. People were prompted by long-winded, eloquent preachers to respond to an emotional “altar call,” agonize publicly over their sins, and pour out their heart to God with tears and cries for pardon. Every now and then, the preacher would check in and ask if they had experienced forgiveness. If the answer was “no” or “I’m not sure,” the preacher would say, “Well, just keep praying until you ‘pray through.’” A Christian Bible scholar named J. W. McGarvey lived in an era when these “altar calls” were prevalent. Here are his comments on the practice:

“The manner in which Ananias proceeded when he reached the house [where Paul was staying] presents a most remarkable contrast with the course of most Protestant preachers of the present day. Leaving out of view the miraculous restoration of Saul’s eyesight, Ananias was simply sent to a man in a certain house, who had been a persecutor, but was now praying....He comes into the house, and finds him prostrate upon the floor, almost exhausted from want of food and drink, which his wretchedness makes him refuse; and he is still praying in great agony. No man of this generation can hesitate as to the course one of our modern preachers would pursue in such a case. He would at once urge him to pray on, and quote to him many passages of Scripture in reference to the answer of prayer. He would tell him to believe in the Lord Jesus, and that the moment he would cast his soul entirely upon him he would be relieved. He would pray with him. Long and fervently would he call upon God to have mercy on the waiting sinner, and send down the Holy Ghost to speak peace to his troubled soul. If these efforts did not bring relief, other brethren and sisters would be called in, and their prayers united with those of the preacher. Pathetic hymns would alternate with zealous prayers and warm exhortations, until both the mourner and his comforters were exhausted, the latter every moment expecting to hear from their wretched victim a shout of joy, as the touch of God would roll away the burden from his soul.” (Commentary on Acts 9:17-19)

This was written over a hundred years ago; but in essence this process is still believed by many to be the way to salvation--you just have to be sufficiently remorseful for your sins and wear God down with prayerful pleading! If it did not work in the case of a pious man like Paul, it will not work for you or me today.

*Fifth: Even repentance--a change in heart leading to a change in behavior--did not procure forgiveness by itself.* Paul had been on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians. He obviously abandoned that purpose. He no longer wished to persecute Christians; in fact, he realized that they were the true servants of God and that he had been wrong to punish them. Again, many people today are convinced that if you will simply change your life and stop sinning, you will be pardoned. Please note that Paul’s purpose and course of behavior had been changed for three days when Ananias appeared, and yet he still had no

forgiveness. (Let me make something clear: In saying that belief or repentance did not procure salvation for Paul, I used two important words: *by itself*. Do you have to have faith in Jesus to be saved? Absolutely. Must you repent of sins and change your life? Certainly. But it's important to realize that these are preliminary steps to obtaining salvation.)

*Sixth: Time did not (and does not) mitigate or remove the guilt of sin.* There is no "statute of limitations" on sin! Paul had been fasting, praying, and grieving over his sins for three days; and no doubt, had Ananias not come to him, he would have continued in that state indefinitely. But time is not your savior. Sins committed long ago are still on "God's books" unless pardon is obtained on God's terms. Time may lessen the effects of sin and may reduce the feelings of guilt over sin; but no amount of time can produce forgiveness for sin.

## CONCLUSION

So when Ananias encounters Paul, he meets a changed man who realizes that he has been wrong about Jesus and is guilty of sin before God.

- He knows that he has been wrong in thinking Jesus to be an imposter.
- He now knows and believes that Jesus is Lord.
- He now wants to submit to Jesus and beg His forgiveness.
- He has experienced a miraculous appearance of the Lord, but forgiveness of sins has not come.
- He has mourned for his sins with fasting and prayers.

When Ananias realizes where Paul is spiritually--he is a penitent believer--he knows immediately what to tell him: "And now, why are you waiting? Arise [note the force of that command--stop fasting and praying] and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16).

Here is the missing link, the final step. To obtain forgiveness of sins, faith is necessary and repentance is essential. Baptism completes the process. It is not, as many think, an optional step, or an afterthought, or something to be done later at a convenient time; rather, it is the final step that puts us into Christ. (Again, note that baptism by itself does not save; it must be preceded by faith and repentance and followed by an obedient life.)

So the record of Paul's conversion is of inestimable value, because in it we see many things people trust in for salvation but which do not avail to remove sins:

- A supposed miraculous "experience"
- Talking with Jesus
- Fasting and praying
- Sorrow over sin that does not lead to repentance
- Faith and repentance by themselves
- A long span of time since the sin was committed

One final note about baptism: Sadly, many modern people will read and agree with this analysis until baptism is put forth as necessary for forgiveness of sin. Why do so many folks object so violently to the proposition of baptism as necessary for salvation? I don't know. I didn't make it a condition of salvation, the Lord did. He said in Mark 16:16, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved." When Paul found that out, he just DID IT--no resistance, no objections, no hesitation, no questioning the instruction he received. The Lord then used him mightily to further His kingdom. Can we learn from this? --John Temples