

#143 “How Were People Saved in Old Testament Times?”

by Brent Barnett

www.relevantbibleteaching.com

Today, salvation is by no other name except through Christ (Acts 4:12). But Hebrews 1:1-2 tells us that it is only in these last (i.e. New Testament) days that God has spoken finally and definitively through His Son. It says, "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world." Of course, Christ was involved in the writing of the Old Testament Scriptures, but in the New Testament, His person and work is now fully revealed, particularly in the matter of salvation. For example, the Old Testament prophets knew of a Messiah, but they didn't know the name Jesus. They might have been able to piece together that a Messiah would bear the sins of Israel, but certainly they didn't have the understanding we are privileged to have today with the completion of the Scripture.

Hebrews 1:1-2 makes it clear that God spoke in diverse ways before Christ. Note that God spoke *long ago* to the *fathers* and to the *prophets* in *many portions* and in *many ways*. So Job, for example, who is believed to have lived on the earth way back during the accounts in Genesis, had some understanding of God, knew how to worship him and obey Him, and even had the chance to hear God's audible voice and communicate and dialogue with Him (Job 1:8, 38-42). Job didn't have the Bible, let alone the Old Testament or even the first book of Genesis. But still God had revealed Himself to Him such that Job had a responsibility before God to believe and obey. Another example is Abraham, the father of Israel. God spoke directly to him and gave him specific commands, promises, and directions (Genesis 12:1-3). Abraham knew things about God's promises for the future that Job probably didn't know. So God spoke in diverse portions, giving different but complementary revelation of Himself and His ways to these men of God. He also spoke in diverse ways, revealing Himself to the children of Israel through fire, thunder, trumpet sounds (Exodus 13:21, 19:16) and later through the prophets.

Now we learn from the New Testament, namely Romans 4:3, that "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." Hebrews 11:1-2 echoes the importance of faith when it says, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. *For by it the men of old gained approval*" (emphasis added). So Abraham was justified before God because he believed the revelation of God that he had received from God. He was responsible for what he knew, not what he didn't know. God gave him the opportunity and understanding to respond to what he knew and heard, and Abraham was responsible for believing God's Word and acting in faith upon it. Abraham was not saved because he knew about Jesus, but he was accountable for what he did know. He wasn't saved because he lived a perfect life or even because he perfectly believed the revelation of God to him. He did not believe perfectly, even wavering and concocting his own plan to fulfill God's promise (Genesis 16:1-4). But he was justified because of his faith. In the same way today, we believe in salvation through Jesus, understanding His atoning work on the cross. We

don't always believe perfectly, but we who have turned from sin unto life in Jesus are justified. The fruit of this faith for us, as it was for Abraham and Job, is a changed heart (Genesis 12:4, 22:9) which fears God (Job 1:8).

So salvation before the revelation of Jesus Christ required that individuals would respond to the revelation that they had been given. Some had more and some less, and this revelation was progressive and complementary, never contradictory. Yet the message from God to men is what it has always been, to obey the laws of God. This goes beyond following all of the elements of the Mosaic Law which could never save anyway (Romans 3:20, 28). This is about faith that corresponds with repentance leading to a change of heart evidenced by obedience to the law of God. Such a person could be said to have the work of the Law (repentance by faith) written on his heart (Romans 2:15). Romans 8:11-16 is an extremely important passage in understanding salvation. It says, "For there is no partiality with God. For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified." So we see that all men sin, some with the Mosaic Law, that is, the Jews, and some without the Law, namely, the Gentiles, all non-Jews. But it is not those who have heard about the Mosaic Law who will be saved, but, rather, it is those who actually do the Law who will be saved. The meaning of "do the Law" is extremely important. Continuing on to gain understanding of this important phrase, we read, "For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus." So as we consider the question of how those who lived before the time of Christ could have been saved, we have a clear answer. Even those without the Law can still "do the things of the Law," meaning the moral intent of the Law. In so doing, they have evidence of the work of the Law written on their hearts. Those who listen to their conscience such that they are purified by faith before God are the ones who will have honorable secrets of heart. In eternity, God will judge the secrets of these men of old through Jesus Who the men of old might not have even known about.

Salvation was by faith then as it is now; the only difference is that the substance of that faith now has a fuller revelation of the New Testament Scriptures and Jesus Christ than the fathers and prophets of old had. Therefore, today, we must preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, for it is this Christ Who will be worshipped by the saints of our time and the saints of old.