

HOW WERE PEOPLE SAVED BEFORE JESUS CAME?

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I. INTRODUCTION

How were people saved before Jesus came? Some suggest that people were saved by sincerely responding to what God had revealed to them at that time. They assert that this revelation did not include the need to believe in Christ. This idea has led some to suggest that if God saved people back then who did not believe in Christ, then He does the same today. This suggestion should make us uncomfortable and force us to find biblical answers to the following two questions: “*How* were people saved before Jesus came?” and “How did people *know* how to be saved before Jesus came?”

II. HOW WERE PEOPLE SAVED BEFORE JESUS CAME?

To answer the first question, let’s allow the Bible to eliminate some suggested answers and then let’s look for the Bible’s answer, one step at a time.

A. *NOT* SAVED BY SACRIFICES, LAW KEEPING, OR GOOD WORKS

Some suggest that before Jesus came people were saved by offering animal sacrifices. However, the Bible states, “It is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (Heb 10:4). Others argue that before Jesus came people were saved by keeping the OT law. But the Bible says, “By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight...” (Rom 3:20). Some say that before Jesus came, people were saved by doing good works. However, the Bible makes clear that “...all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags...” (Isa 64:6). Therefore, before Jesus came, people were not saved by offering animal sacrifices, by keeping the law, or by doing good works.

B. SAVED ON THE BASIS OF CHRIST'S DEATH

Having eliminated these answers, let's now consider the Bible's claim that people have always been saved on the basis of Christ's death for their sins. This includes those people who lived before He died. The Bible speaks of Jesus as "...the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev 13:8). In the mind of God, Christ's death was as good as done, even before the world was created. Some 800 years before Jesus died, Isaiah wrote of His death in the past tense, "...the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isa 53:6). Paul says, "Whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were *previously* committed" (Rom 3:25, emphasis added). God could pass over the sins of men committed before Jesus came because, in His mind, Jesus had already paid for those sins. Therefore, before Jesus came, people were saved on the basis of His death for their sins.

C. SAVED BY FAITH ALONE

Now let's consider what people had to do to be saved before Jesus came. Paul says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness...But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness" (Rom 4:3, 5). Using Abraham as an example, Paul demonstrates that, before Jesus came, people were saved by faith alone, not by their works.

D. SAVED BY FAITH ALONE IN CHRIST ALONE

But that leads to an obvious question: "Faith alone in what?" "Abraham believed God," but what did God tell him to believe? Some suggest that God didn't tell Abraham to believe in Christ. But Jesus said, "...Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). Two thousand years before Jesus came, Abraham looked ahead in time and believed in the coming Christ for eternal life. Therefore, he was saved by faith alone in Christ alone.

Job made a similar statement, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth. And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:25-26). Two thousand years before Jesus came, Job knew that his Redeemer was coming to this earth to pay the price for his sins. Job had a certain assurance that because of his Redeemer, he would live with God after his death.

We also know that Moses: "...esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward" (Heb 11:26). Living 1,500 years before Jesus came, he not only believed in Christ, he also understood God's truth concerning discipleship and rewards. Moses even wrote about Christ. As Jesus said to the Jews, "For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me" (John 5:46).

Abraham, Job, and Moses illustrate that before Jesus came, people were saved by believing in the Christ who was yet to come. Today, we are saved by believing in the same Christ who has come. They looked forward. We look back. But people have always been saved in the same way, by faith alone in Christ alone.

III. HOW DID PEOPLE KNOW HOW TO BE SAVED BEFORE JESUS CAME?

To adequately answer this question, we need to ask it in relation to three distinct time periods. First, "How did people know how to be saved before the OT was written?" Second, "How did people know how to be saved while the OT was being written?" And third, "How did people know how to be saved after the OT was completed?" Let's consider these questions one at a time.

A. HOW DID PEOPLE KNOW HOW TO BE SAVED BEFORE THE OT WAS WRITTEN?

Consider the dates of our three examples: Abraham and Job lived about 2000 B.C. and Moses lived about 1500 B.C. Now consider the dates in which the OT was written. Job was probably written about 2000 B.C. The rest of the OT began with the writings of Moses in about 1450 B.C. and ended with Malachi in about 450 B.C. Abraham, Job, and Moses did not have the OT when they believed in the coming Christ. And before them, for thousands of years, all the way back to Adam, people did not have the OT. So how did they know how to be saved? There can be only one answer. Before the OT was written, God gave verbal revelation that eternal salvation is received through faith alone in Christ alone.

In the beginning, God gave this verbal revelation Himself. He said to the serpent in Gen 3:15, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel." While this verse alludes to Christ's future

death for sins, it certainly is not enough information for Adam and Eve to be saved, even if they heard God say it. It says nothing about believing in Christ and nothing about their eternal destiny with God. Therefore, we can safely assume that God gave Adam and Eve more verbal information than what we read in the Scriptures, specifically that they must believe in the coming Messiah for eternal salvation.

God verbally presented the way of salvation Himself, and later, He presented it verbally through His prophets, long before the OT was written. Enoch is a specific example of this truth. As Jude says, “Now Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men also, saying, ‘Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all...’” (Jude 14). If Enoch revealed these advanced truths about the second coming of Christ, we should expect that he also revealed basic truths about the first coming of Christ and the good news of eternal life given to those who believe in Him.

In summary, for over 2,500 years before the OT was written, God verbally revealed the way of salvation Himself, and later verbally revealed the way of salvation through prophets such as Enoch. In turn, the gospel would then have been verbally proclaimed by believers who learned the way of salvation from the prophets.

B. HOW DID PEOPLE KNOW HOW TO BE SAVED WHILE THE OT WAS BEING WRITTEN?

It would have been exceedingly difficult for someone to find the way of salvation in an unfinished OT since it is exceedingly difficult to find the way of salvation in the completed OT. Let’s consider how difficult it is to find the way of salvation in each major section.

First, would people know how to be saved from the historical books? Genesis 3:15 alludes to Christ’s death for sins, but says nothing about faith in Him for eternal life. Genesis 15:6 says that Abraham “believed in the Lord and He accounted it to him for righteousness,” but it doesn’t clearly tell us *what* he believed. It seems that nowhere in the historical books do we find a passage that explains the way of salvation.

What about the wisdom literature? Job seems to detail the way of salvation when he says, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth. And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God” (Job 19:25-26). Job says, “I know” which may be a synonym for “believe.” He believes in a living Redeemer, which is an allusion to Christ and His payment for sins. He says he will see God after his death, which is assurance of eternal life

with God. This passage in Job seems to be the only passage in the wisdom literature where we find the way of salvation.

What about the prophets? Isaiah writes, “My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities” (Isa 53:11), but he does not tell the reader what he must do to be justified. Habakkuk says, “The just shall live by faith” (Hab 2:4), but he does not explain in whom that faith is to be placed. While Jeremiah speaks of “knowing the Lord” and “forgiveness of sins” (Jer 31:34), he doesn’t mention how to experience these things. Ezekiel speaks of spiritual birth as he says, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you...” (Ezek 36:25), but he doesn’t say how to experience this new birth. There seems to be no passage in the prophetic section that by itself explains the way of salvation.

While we can find various pieces of information about the way of salvation from Moses to Malachi, these pieces are hard to find because it was not the purpose of the OT writers to focus on this truth. Their focus was on discipleship. The writers assume that the readers already know the way of salvation through verbal revelation given by the prophets.

Consider what Peter says about the prophets’ testimony concerning Christ, “To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43). Peter refers to the prophets who wrote about Christ. But he must also have in mind that these and other prophets said much about Him verbally that is not recorded in the OT. For example, while Enoch is mentioned in Genesis, we would not know that he prophesied about Christ unless Jude told us. And we would not know that Moses “considered the reproach of Christ” unless the writer of Hebrews told us. We would also not know that Abraham rejoiced to see Jesus’ day unless John told us.

Another example of this is seen in the story of Saul in 1 Samuel 10. Consider these words spoken by Samuel to Saul: “...You will meet a group of prophets...and they will be prophesying. Then the Spirit of the LORD will come upon you, and you will prophesy with them and be turned into another man...God gave him another heart...” (1 Sam 10:5-6, 9). Saul did respond to the words of the prophets. As a result, he “was turned into another man,” and “God gave him another heart.” Clearly these terms could only refer to a new birth. Saul was saved that day! What did the prophets tell him? Samuel doesn’t say. He assumes that the reader would know that the prophets told Saul to believe in Christ for eternal life.

In summary, while the OT was being written, prophets verbally proclaimed the gospel, and believers, in turn, verbally proclaimed what they heard from the prophets. The OT writers recorded pieces of information about the way of salvation, but this was not their focus.

C. HOW DID PEOPLE KNOW HOW TO BE SAVED AFTER THE OT WAS COMPLETED?

Now, let's consider the third period of time. How did people know how to be saved after the OT was completed? Let's consider three possible sources.

First, people could have known how to be saved from the OT. While there may be only one passage in the OT that by itself explains the way of salvation (Job 19:25-26), the necessary pieces of information can also be found in various scattered passages. In fact, God expected the rabbis to find these pieces, put them together, and verbally explain what they found to others. For example, as Jesus was talking to Nicodemus about the gospel, He said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not know these things?" (John 3:10).

Second, prophets could have continued to proclaim the way of salvation as the prophets before them had done. It should be noted, however, that the Bible says nothing about prophets being on the scene during the four hundred years from Malachi until prophecies were made concerning the conceptions and births of John the Baptist and Jesus (see especially Luke 1:67 and 2:36). The Bible's silence does not preclude the presence of prophets during this time period, but it does keep us from being certain that they were present.

Third, believers who were not prophets would have verbally transmitted the message of salvation. However, if prophets were not on the scene during that time period, believers would have been that much more dependent on the OT to anchor the truth of their message to keep it from becoming distorted.

In summary, during the time period after the OT was completed and before Jesus came, people could have known the way of salvation from three possible sources: the OT explained by teachers, prophets who may or may not have been on the scene, and believers who were not prophets.

IV. HOW DID PEOPLE KNOW HOW TO BE SAVED AFTER JESUS CAME?

We will better understand how people knew how to be saved before Jesus came if we compare that to how people knew how to be saved after He came. Again, we need to consider distinct periods of time. First, let's consider the period of time after Jesus came and before the NT was completed. Then, let's consider the period of time after the NT was completed.

A. HOW DID PEOPLE KNOW HOW TO BE SAVED AFTER JESUS CAME AND BEFORE THE NT WAS COMPLETED?

Before the NT was completed, Jesus and His followers verbally told people the way of salvation, sometimes using passages from the OT to explain it. For example, Jesus used the story of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness to help explain the gospel to Nicodemus (John 3:14-16). As Philip presented the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch, he explained that Isaiah wrote about Jesus when he said, "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter" (Acts 8:26-35).

In summary, after Jesus came and before the NT was completed, people learned how to be saved by the same method as people who lived before Jesus came, that is, through a verbal presentation of the gospel, sometimes using the OT to explain it.

B. HOW DID PEOPLE KNOW HOW TO BE SAVED AFTER THE NT WAS COMPLETED?

After the NT was completed, people knew the way of salvation from the Gospel of John. John is the only book in the NT written for the purpose of explaining how to have eternal life (John 20:30-31). The rest of the NT emphasizes discipleship. While the way of salvation can be found in other NT books, it is rarely found explicitly, and where it is alluded to, the writer assumes that the readers already know it and believe it.

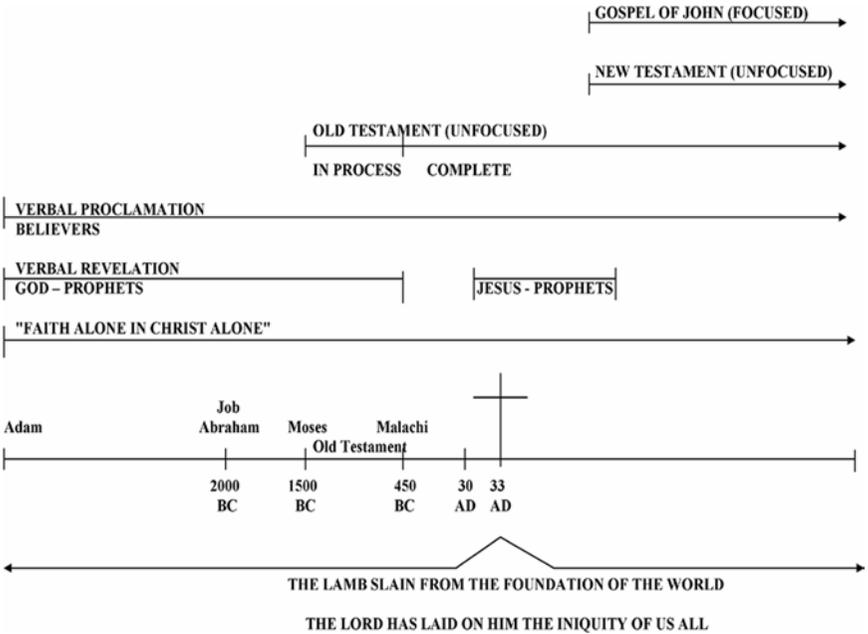
Since the NT has been completed, the message of the Gospel of John has been spread verbally by evangelists and other believers. Verbal proclamation is still God's primary method of spreading the gospel, just as it was before Jesus came. As Paul says in Rom 10:14-15, "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As

it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!’”

V. CONCLUSION

How were people saved before Jesus came? Just like you and I are saved—by faith alone in Christ alone. For them, it was by faith in the Christ who had not yet come. For us, it is by faith in the same Christ who has come.

No one has ever been or ever will be saved apart from believing in Christ for eternal life. We must reach people with the one and only message that provides eternal salvation today, just as it did before Jesus came.¹



¹ The diagram above summarizes, in timeline form, what I have presented in this article.