

The Unfinished Work of Christ on The Cross

“What must one do to receive forgiveness of sins?” “Nothing! Christ did it all for you. That was the finished work of Christ on the cross.” Such expressions are the kind of answer some are giving now that more attention is being given to grace in recent times. They argue that, if a person must meet any condition to receive grace, it is not really free.

Does that mean that everyone is saved whether they have responded to Christ or not? Some say “yes” for universal salvation would be a logical conclusion. Others would limit salvation to those whom God has elected and later called.

Does it mean that one may be forgiven in impenitence and unbelief? “No,” still others say, explaining that God gives faith and repentance to the individual whom he chooses to save. Such a concept leaves out any work (conditional action) of the one to be saved. It is all done for him. How convenient! How, then, does a person know when he is saved? By feeling! Totally subjective! I have long wondered what forgiveness of sins feels like, especially if it were completed on the cross. While giving full recognition of grace offered through the atonement, I think it appropriate to point out some things that were not finished by Christ on the cross.

1. On the cross Jesus did not prove himself to be the Son of God. In fact, his death might raise doubts that a Son of God could die. Paul writes of the Son, “*who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus our Lord*” (Rom. 1:3-4 NIV). If his work was finished on the cross, it was without the real proof that he was the Son of God by his being raised from the dead. And without the resurrection, no life beyond the grave would have been evident.

2. He did not finish / fulfill the hope of Israel on the cross. A misguided hope of Israel was for the restoration of their earthly kingdom, but the true hope of Israel was for a resurrection. Their dead were still retained in hades awaiting redemption and resurrection, for the way into heaven had not been opened. Paul left no doubt that the hope of Israel was the anticipation of resurrection of the dead (See Acts 23:6; 24:14f; 26:6f; 28:20).

3. By his death on the cross, he did not open the way into heaven. The Tabernacle of Israel was a type of spiritual things to come. The writer of Hebrews observed that “*the priests go continually into the outer tent, performing their ritual duties; but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood which he offers for himself and for the errors of the people. By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary is not yet opened as long as the outer tent is still standing (which is symbolic for the present age) [the then-present age, the ‘last days’ of the former covenant -ch]. ... But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with*

hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:6-12). Eternal redemption had not been secured on the cross.

In his ascension, he took his blood into the Holy Place in heaven “*who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God...*” (9:13-14). Continuing, “*Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant.*” Then and there, in presenting his sacrifice to the Father, Jesus gained redemption (forgiveness) for Israel, thus opening the way into heaven for them. Please read the text on to Verse 24: “*For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. ... But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him*”

The scriptures do not use the term “second coming of Christ”! Here it is said that he will appear a second time. This is it!! Just as the people stood outside the tent awaiting the appearance of the High Priest who had taken the blood of atonement into the holy place in the tabernacle, so the disciples being addressed here were waiting the return of Christ from the Holy Place in heaven. That would be his appearance, his “parousia,” not in body but in demonstration of his presence in fulfilling what was prophesied. It was the last days of the covenant with Israel, the end time for the tabernacle, the fulfillment of the Law of Moses, the ending of the earthly kingdom, and the confirmation of the spiritual kingdom. Jesus had met the appointment of death and judgment for all men. He freed us from spiritual death and judgment. He would not have to deal with sin at his imminent return but he would receive those who were redeemed. That was all accomplished almost two thousand years ago. If these things are not true, heaven is still unoccupied!

Three times Jesus stated that the resurrection would be on the “last day,” and he did not correct Martha when she affirmed that belief (John 6:40, 44, 54; 11:24). At his soon return, having now opened the way into heaven at the end of the age, he could welcome the righteous dead of Israel who had waited in hades, and also receive the firstfruits of the disciples who had died. Believers dying after this have no waiting in hades, but at our physical death, we put off mortality and put on immortality. We have touched on these things in previous lessons.

All of this was not finished on the cross but it was fulfilled in Jesus’ return about forty years later during the lifetime of some of his listeners. He came in demonstration of power at the end of the Jewish age in the circumstances surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem, the end the covenant relationship with Israel, and the confirming of the new and spiritual kingdom in the events surrounding AD 70.

4. Jesus did not give immortality on the cross. Man is not born with an immortal soul, neither is it granted at the time of conversion, so he remains vulnerable. According to Paul, immortality was unique to God “*who alone has immortality*” (1 Tim. 6:16). But Paul explains that now those in Christ will put on immortality when they put off this mortal body of flesh in death (1 Cor. 15:51-54). Immortality is not attained in this earthly life.

5. Christ did not forgive my sins on the cross. I was not living then. My sins have been committed centuries later. He did not give me an advance indulgence to take care of my sins. His forgiveness is an ongoing process. It is explained, “*The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them*” (Heb. 7:23-24). Note that he applies his saving atonement to those who draw near to God through him. The Father draws through teaching, as Jesus stated, “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught of God.’ Every one who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me*” (John 6:44-45). His offering on the cross was once for all time, but the application of it to us individually is a continuing process.

John gives us that comforting assurance: “*If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:6-9). Please be aware that John says he “will forgive” our sins, not he “has already forgiven” our sins. To assert that the sins of a disciple may destroy fellowship with him but not the relationship with him is a vain effort to make a distinction where there is no difference.

The atonement for sin was finished on the cross. No one can detract from that. Yet the full history of redemption was not finished until the “second coming” of Christ at the end of the age of the covenant with Israel.

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(Cecil Hook; October 2003)