

Why Three Different Answers to the Same Question, "What Must I Do?"

by Walton Weaver

One of the best ways to learn what one must do to be saved is to make a serious study of the examples of conversion recorded in the book of Acts. This may, however, be somewhat disconcerting, especially for one who is just beginning such a study, since the circumstances in the various examples often vary one from another. This makes it necessary that a person be able to differentiate between the varying circumstances in the cases and the conditions of salvation themselves. While the circumstances vary as one moves from one example to another, the conditions for salvation do not.

It is not our intention in this article to identify all the different circumstances in all the examples of conversion and show how they have no direct bearing on conversion itself. We will reserve that subject for each of the cases as we take them up one by one in separate articles. For now we will address only one such circumstance that people often wonder about: Why is it that in the examples of the conversion of the Philippian jailor (Acts 8:31), the Pentecostians (Acts 2:38), and Saul of Tarsus (Acts 22:16) three different answers are given to the same question, "What must I do to be Saved?"

The question asked and the answer given in each of these cases are not circumstantial matters. In all three cases both the question and the answers have to do with the matter of salvation, and they are dealing with the conditions of salvation, not mere circumstances. Yet, there was a particular circumstance for each of the subjects who asked the question, "What I [we] do?" that had a direct bearing on how the question was answered. That circumstance was the difference in distance from salvation for each of them at the time they made their inquiry. This difference in distance from salvation may be illustrated as follows:

A glance at the chart below shows that the Jailor was farther from salvation when he was told what to do to be saved than were those on Pentecost, and at the same point of inquiry (when they asked, "What must we do?") those on the day of Pentecost were farther from salvation than Saul of Tarsus when he asked the same question. A person like the Jailor who yet needed to be brought to faith in Jesus Christ should not expect the same answer to the question, "What must I do?" as one who had already come to the point of faith on his way to salvation. Nor should one like Saul who had already come to both faith and repentance when Ananias came to him expect the same answer as given to the Jailor who had not yet even come to faith, or those on Pentecost who had already been brought to faith before they asked the same question.

The Jailor – Acts 16

His State
Unbeliever
 when
 commanded

Command
 "Believe
 on the
 Lord"
 v. 31

Taught him the word
 of the Lord, v. 32

 Baptized him the
 same hour, v. 33

Those on Pentecost – Acts 2

Their State
Believers
 when
 commanded

Command
 "Repent
 and be
 baptized"
 v. 38

Testified, exhorted,
 w/many more words v. 40

 3,000 responded and
 were baptized, v. 41

Saul of Tarsus – Acts 22

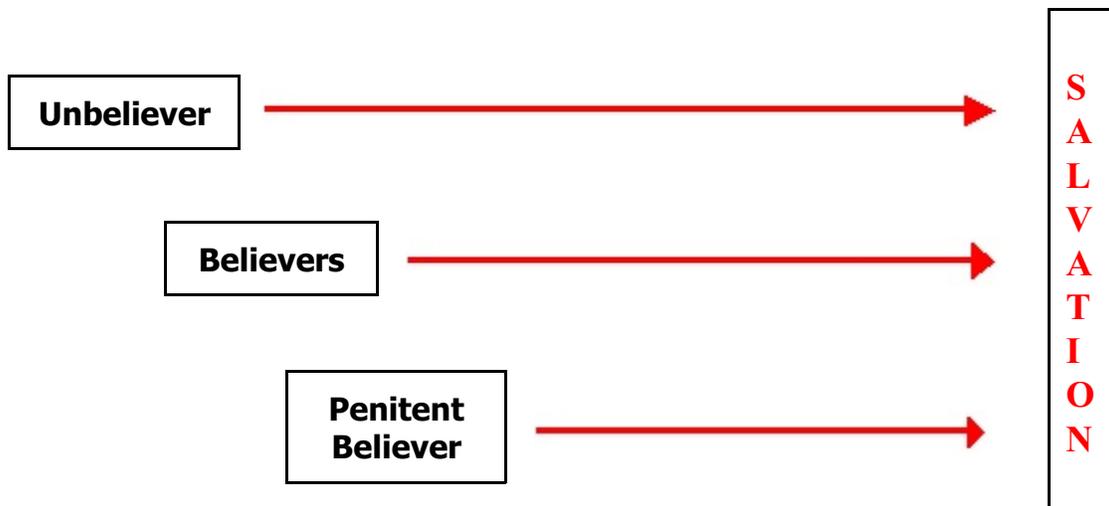
His State
**Pentitent
 Believer**
 when
 commanded

Command
 "Arise and
 be
 baptized"
 v. 16

Immediately began to
 preach Christ, Acts 9:20

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It is not that difficult to see that the place where we have put the Jailor, the Pentecostians, and Saul of Tarsus in relation to salvation when they were told what they must do (see the first column in the chart) is precisely where they were when they were told what they must do to be saved. This explains why they were given different answers to the same question (see the second column in the chart). If one is traveling to Los Angeles, CA from Memphis, TN and he asks someone in Memphis, "How far is it to Los Angeles?" he will be given a certain number in answer to his question. If he stops in Oklahoma City, OK and asks the same question, he will be given a different answer. If he then stops in Albuquerque, NM and asks the same question a third time, he will be given yet another answer. Why three different answers to the same question? Because each time the same question was asked he was at a different location (closer) in relation to his destination. Notice in the illustration below how each of the people in our study was in a different position in relation to the salvation they were seeking when they were told what they must do to be saved. The Pentecostians and Saul had already made some progress in that direction when told what to do.



That the people on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) had already become believers in Christ when they asked "What must we do?" is obvious. Peter had preached the first major part of his sermon (Acts 2:14-36). This part of his sermon was a message about Christ, and it clearly was meant to bring them to faith in Him. "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:16). Not only had Peter emphasized his life, death, resurrection and ascension to help them come to revere Him, but He also had put responsibility for his death squarely upon their shoulders: "Him . . . ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (v. 23), he charged. That they were pricked in their heart and cried out "What must we do" (v. 37) shows there was conviction, and conviction is a part of faith (See Heb. 11:1). This is why in answer to the question, "What must we do?" they were not told to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as was the Jailor.

Saul of Tarsus had asked the same question of Jesus when he said, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6). The Lord did not answer his question, but told him to "go into the city and it shall be told thee what thou must do" (v. 7). By the time Ananias came to Saul to tell him what he must do, it is obvious by the answer he gave that he had already come even a greater distance toward salvation than those who had asked the same question on the day of Pentecost. Ananias would not have left out faith had it been true that Saul did not already believe in Christ. The same is true regarding repentance. Saul had been showing his repentance for three days when he went without food and water for that period of time (v. 9). As a devout Jew he had also been praying (v. 11). All of this shows that he had already come to both faith and repentance so that now what he needed to do was what Ananias told him, "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16).

The Jailor, on the other hand, having heard very little about Jesus Christ, if anything at all (possibly a reference here and there in the songs he may have heard Paul and Silas singing, v. 25), had no real reason for believing in Jesus Christ at this point. He knew something extraordinary was happening, and perhaps he had heard enough to

want to know more, and this gave rise to his question. Paul's answer that he must "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" takes him where he is and begins to help move him toward the salvation he sought. It must be obvious to all that at this point he had not believed like the Pentecostians when he asked his question, nor had he repented of his sins as had Saul of Tarsus when Ananias came to him to give an answer to his question. In the absence of greater knowledge about Christ, and not having been taught anything about his sins, he had no ground for believing in Christ, nor any clear understanding about what it means to be a sinner who needs to repent.

This information helps us understand what we read in verse 32 about the case of the Philippian jailor: "And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house." As we noted earlier, faith comes by hearing God's word. The jailor was taught the word of the Lord so that he might learn about Jesus Christ and believe on him. He needed this knowledge before he would be taught other things that must follow one's faith, like those things that had been first taught to the Pentecostians in Acts 2, and what Saul had learned when the Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus. The answer, then, that is given to the question, "What must I do" is determined by exactly where one is on his way to salvation. If he has not yet learned about Jesus Christ, he is told to "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ," and then he is taught about him so he can believe on him. Other instruction is also given so he will know that he must also repent and be baptized to wash away his sins. Paul and Silas were successful with the jailor and his household because the jailor "took them [Paul and Silas] the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway" (V. 33).