



'I know I'm a sinner and on several occasions I've asked God to forgive me and asked Jesus to be my saviour, but nothing happened.'

This kind of experience is not uncommon, particularly among young people who've grown up in a Christian family. It causes confusion and frustration, and this is understandable. Sinners are told to confess their sin to God and to go to him in repentance and faith for forgiveness. So these people do so, but it seems as if nothing happens. What are we to tell them, and how are we to help them to find the Lord?

The first thing to find out is this: what did they expect to happen? Did they expect to hear bells ringing, an angelic choir singing, and God in a deep voice telling them that all

But nothing happened!

is now well? Perhaps not, but they probably believed they would feel something. That is not unreasonable, but feel what? Feelings are so unreliable, and are easily manipulated by others or by ourselves. When we are saved, we may or may not have a deep emotional experience; but that is not essential to our salvation. What we experience or feel may depend more upon our temperament and personality than the grace of God. It's true that no one is saved without some emotion, but it's not the main thing. To help these people we need to start not with their feelings, but with their mind. They say they asked Christ to save them. Why did they want to be saved? Do they understand what sin is, and what the cost of salvation was to God?

Dead in sin

The Bible says that the effect of sin on the human nature is to make us all 'dead' (Ephesians 2:1-3). This means that we're incapable of making a spiritual response to either God or the gospel. It doesn't mean that we can make *no* response to the gospel. A person who is spiritually dead can make certain responses to the gospel and may even on the surface appear to be spiritual, but in fact he or she is motivated by all sorts of other things. For instance,

when a person hears the gospel, he or she may have a measure of conviction of sin, and a fear of going to hell because of that sin. When the Roman governor Felix heard the apostle Paul preach on righteousness, self-control and judgement to come, he was afraid. But this was not a spiritual response of repentance, as the account of this incident in Acts 24 clearly shows.

The rich young ruler in the Gospels had a serious desire to have eternal life and go to heaven. He even came to Jesus with a humble spirit and asked the right questions (Mark 10:17), but it did not save him. In Hebrews 6:4-6 we see how far a person 'dead in sin' may go in response to the gospel. It's easy to see why some people think these verses refer to believers, but we're not told that they were saved, born again, justified, or any of the other words the New Testament uses to describe someone who has come to a saving experience of Christ. 'They had claimed to believe the truth; they had had some remarkable experiences in the realm of the Church together with others, some indeed may even have had some of the miraculous gifts. But all this does not necessarily prove that a man is a Christian, that he is regenerate' (D. M. Lloyd-Jones).

New birth first

Clearly, then, there are responses to the gospel that are not spiritual and, therefore, do not lead to salvation. In order to respond spiritually, a soul dead in sin must first be made spiritually alive. This is something that only God the Holy Spirit can do.

Regeneration, being made spiritually alive, precedes faith. A person must be born again of the Holy Spirit before he or she can make the spiritual response of faith to the gospel. If we take seriously the New Testament statement that we are all dead in sin, then this becomes obvious. But this truth is not popular among evangelicals today; the activity of the dead sinner, rather than the activity of the living God, has become the crucial thing in salvation. This basic misunderstanding of the gospel produces countless 'decisions for Christ', but nothing has happened in terms of the spiritual condition of many of these people. At the moment of the decision there may have been tears and deep feelings, but the subsequent weeks and months prove that there has been no real spiritual change. Of course, this isn't true in every case, and God graciously overrules our misunderstandings and wrong actions, but it is true of a great number of decision-makers. Something happened to them in the emotion of the moment, but nothing happened in terms of eternal salvation.

A saving faith

A spiritual response prompted by the Holy Spirit will bring men and women, conscious that they are sinners in desperate need of salvation, to Christ. The seriousness of the matter will dominate their thinking. Being saved will not be a vague desire, but an urgent necessity. They will also be aware that Jesus is the only one who can save them. All these things are produced in the heart and mind by the Holy Spirit, through the message of the gospel. Repentance from sin and faith in Christ alone will motivate these people.

Conviction of personal sin and guilt, a deep longing for salvation, and an awareness that only Jesus can save, are all essential to true faith. The rich young ruler had no conviction of sin, therefore he was not saved. Felix did have conviction of sin, but there was no longing in him to be saved, and he continued in his sin. These could be termed the natural responses of a person dead in sin. They may create a passing interest or even a profession of faith, but this is well short of what the New Testament means by salvation.

When people make a profession of faith in Christ, we should be looking to see a new creation in Christ—old things passing away and all things becoming new. New attitudes, new desires, and new appetites should gradually become evident. So when someone says, 'I asked Christ to be my Saviour but nothing happened', we need to

turn his or her thoughts from a passing emotion to a gradual and lasting change in life:

Do they now love the Lord Jesus Christ?

Do they want to meet with other Christians?

Have they started praying and reading the Bible regularly?

Is there a longing in them to be free from sin?

Do they want to see friends and family saved?

If these things are happening, then there is good ground to assure them that they are saved. Something amazing has happened to them that can only be explained in terms of the activity of the Holy Spirit.

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