

Are VISIONS, DREAMS, and RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES *Proof of Salvation?*

IN THE PAST, a sizable segment of the religious community has believed that conversion to Christ has not been accomplished unless preceded and climaxed by some unusual, and sometimes bizarre, religious experience. This sensational experience is subjectively sought usually by “praying through” (associated with a so-called “altar”), seeking a sign, a vision—seeing a light, or hearing a voice, etc. When finally and supposedly “attained,” to some it means their sins were thereby forgiven. To others (extreme Calvinists), God has assuredly let them know that they are among His predestined elect. The truth is that not all professing religious people have experienced these things (although they may love the Lord dearly). As a matter of fact, not all who have sought these experiences (real or imagined) have been able to have them—although they were dead in earnest, and although they were told that they must have them before they could be saved.

Obviously something is strangely amiss somewhere because God wants all to be saved (2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:4-6). Let us look carefully into the Bible and examine the New Testament in particular on this matter.

The book of Acts in the New Testament has been called the “book of conversions.” In this short history of the early church we see how men were converted, how they became Christians. At least two of these records of conversion were accompanied by unusual and miraculous circumstances, but did this have anything to do with salvation? We shall now see.

The Household of Cornelius

The 10th and 11th chapters of Acts give the account of the conversion of the household of Cornelius, the first Gentiles to come into the church. To start with, Cornelius saw a vision of an angel in his house who actually talked to him (Acts 10:1-8; 11:13-14; etc.). Many today would declare that such a glorious vision would be definite evidence of salvation, but was that true of Cornelius? Did he think he was thereby saved? The angel told him to send for the apostle Peter “who shall tell thee *words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved*” (Acts 11:14). The parallel words to this in Acts 10:6 read: “...he shall tell thee *what thou oughtest to do.*” The messengers of Cornelius told Peter of the vision and how he (Cornelius) was waiting to “*hear words of thee*” (Acts 10:22). Upon the arrival of the apostle, Cornelius again told of the vision, and then said, “Immediately therefore I sent to thee: and thou hast well done that thou art come. Now therefore we are all here present before God, to hear *all things that are commanded thee of God*” (Acts 10:33). After the rapidly ensuing events, we read of what happened to these believing Gentiles. “And *he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord*” (Acts 10:48).

This same apostle had preached on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost [Spirit]. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Acts 2:38-39). Who were the ones mentioned as being

“afar off”? In Ephesians 2:11-17 (notice especially verse 17) we learn this expression refers to Gentiles (non-Jewish people). In other words, the apostle told the household of Cornelius the same thing he had preached on Pentecost (offering the same promise)—*Repent and be baptized; you will be forgiven and receive God’s Spirit*. This promise is for everyone who will do this, including Gentiles. Everyone who is Scripturally converted is converted in this way, “as many as the Lord our God shall call.” Visions and dreams have nothing to do with it.

And, again, this same apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:22-23, “*Seeing ye have purified your souls in OBEYING the truth* through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently: being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.” Furthermore, this same apostle likewise said in the same epistle, “The like figure whereunto even baptism doeth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:20-21).

The apostle Peter later (after Acts 10), reviewing before the Jerusalem church and the other apostles what actually happened when he went into this Gentile’s house, said, “And as I *began to speak*, the Holy Ghost [Spirit] fell on them, as on us *at the beginning*” (Acts 11:15). Also consider verse 14 again. Peter had not fully told them what to do in reference to being saved when this extraordinary manifestation of the Holy Spirit occurred as “at the beginning.” This plainly implies that this special outpouring of the Holy Spirit was not a common everyday experience in the early church. Why say “the Holy Ghost [Spirit] fell on them, as on us *AT THE BEGINNING*” (Pentecost: several years before) if it had happened with every conversion? This outpouring of the Spirit had nothing to do with saving them. Peter would tell them what they must “DO” (Acts 10:6, 33) to be saved (Acts 11:14). This special and unexpected outpouring of the Holy Spirit was to prove that the Gentiles, as well as the Jews, should have the gospel preached to them (they had been “dragging their feet” in doing this)—it was not for salvation (Acts 11:17, 18). It happened before they were fully told what they must “DO” and as the apostle “*BEGAN TO SPEAK*.”

The Case of Saul of Tarsus

Saul of Tarsus, leading a great persecution against the early church, was on his way to Damascus for that very reason. As he approached the city, suddenly he saw a great light, he heard a voice and he actually saw Jesus in this heavenly vision (Acts 9:1-6). Many contend that Saul was therewith saved, but is this the truth? Did this heavenly vision save him?

No. Three days later when Ananias came unto him, he still had his sins. In the record of Acts 22, Paul gives the details of Ananias coming to him. It was at this time Ananias said, “And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16). Why say such things to a poor, repentant sinner if he was already saved? This is no time for empty words. Now, remember what the Lord had said in answer to Saul’s question on the road to Damascus. “Lord, what wilt thou have me to DO? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city and it shall be told thee what thou must do” (Acts 9:6). This was part of what he “MUST DO.”

Then, for those who put great faith in “praying through,” please notice this about Saul (later called Paul). He fasted and prayed for three days (Acts 9:9, 11) and still had not “prayed through.” The truth of the matter is that a person cannot “pray through” to salvation. One must repent and be baptized for the remission of sins to get “through.” Therefore, Ananias urged Paul, “And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord?” (Acts 22:16).

What was the purpose of the vision if it was not to save Paul? Christ said to Paul, “I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things thou hast seen, and of those things in which I will appear unto thee” (Acts 26:16). Paul further said, “I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision” (Acts 26:19). He later wrote, “Am I not an apostle?...have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?” (1 Corinthians 9:1). The purpose of the heavenly vision was not for salvation, but to qualify Paul to be an apostle of Christ, although arriving belatedly on the scene (1 Corinthians 15:7-9). Apostles were the “official” *eyewitnesses* of Christ.

The Ethiopian Eunuch

Now examine the case of the Ethiopian eunuch. This sincere man was riding along in a chariot returning from Jerusalem when God directed the evangelist Philip to join him. The Ethiopian was reading from the Old Testament Scriptures and invited Philip to comment on it. “Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same Scripture, and preached unto him Jesus. And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:35-39).

You see the direction this religious discussion takes as these two men ride along in the chariot. You see the simple sequence. When the Ethiopian said, “See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?” What was the answer? “You must see a vision first”? No. “You must pray through first”? No. “The church must vote on you first”? No. It was rather, “If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” He confessed his faith and was straightaway baptized. It was that simple.

The Other Conversions

Upon analyzing the different accounts of the Great Commission given by our Lord, we come to the conclusion that faith, repentance and baptism are necessary to becoming saved; then continuing in what has been commanded in remaining saved (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-47). The conversions in the book of Acts correspond exactly and faithfully to this simple arrangement. Men preached the simple gospel. Sinners believed it, repented of their sins and were baptized for the remission of their sins (Acts 2:38-41; 3:19; 6:7; 8:12, 35-39; 10:48; 16:14-15, 30-34; 18:8; etc.) Paul asserted in 2 Corinthians 4:7 that “we have this treasure in earthen vessels.” Paul also says

that “it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe” (1 Corinthians 1:21). Nowhere is it recorded that God directly spoke from heaven to tell sinners what to do to be saved. Nowhere do we find angels doing this. The seeing of visions (whether real or imagined) does not save nor is it proof of salvation. God has ordained through the “foolishness of preaching” to save the world. This treasure is carried in the earthen vessel of man. God uses men to tell other men what to do to be saved.

Fact, Faith and Feeling

The mind of man with its intricate emotional makeup many times is tricky. It can prove to not be altogether reliable—especially when all of the facts are not in hand.

In the Bible we read of Joseph with his coat of many colors. His father had showed partiality in giving him this special gift which served only to make his neglected brothers more jealous. We know the story how these brothers sold Joseph into slavery because of their bitterness toward him. Dipping his coat of many colors in the blood of a goat, they brought it to their father. The heart of old Jacob was broken as he was overcome with anguish and grief. As far as he knew and was concerned, his favored son was dead; a wild beast had killed him and torn his body to pieces. He actually felt, acted and reacted as though it had happened. Many years later when word came that Joseph was alive and well down in the land of Egypt, he refused to believe it. He was so firmly convinced that his son was dead.

And experiences in religion within themselves prove nothing. One’s emotions and feelings are not a safe guide alone. A thing can be taught a person so strongly, and he believe it so assuredly, that he acts and reacts to it as though it were the truth (although it may not be; everything cannot be right religiously—there are too many conflicting beliefs). Fact, faith and feeling should be there, *and in that order*. Without the fact of God’s Word producing the feeling and backing it, our feelings are merely delusion. We are going to be judged by God’s Word, not by what or how we may feel about something.

Then, many times people seek after a tangible feeling or experience because they have little faith. But Paul says, “We walk by faith, and not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). We have seen faith come alive in such people. Then they stopped talking about feeling. When one truly believes, repents and is baptized into Christ, like the Ethiopian, he will go on “his way rejoicing.” But his personal makeup, disposition and circumstances will determine the degree of it. He has obeyed from the heart (Romans 6:17). He has done the right thing and is happy and pleased about it. His sins have all been taken away. His religious experience comes as a byproduct of his faith and not his faith as a byproduct of his religious experience.

Would you put your faith totally in Christ and HIS WORD and get your fixation off of yourself and your feelings? Do what God commands and He will take care of the rest. Unsolicited, feelings of assurance will come. We can take God at His Word. God cannot lie (Titus 1:2).—*James E. Gibbons* □

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