

How Were People Saved Before Christ?



Faith Alone in Christ Alone

As Christians, we believe that we are saved by the grace of God, through faith in the Savior (Jesus Christ); it's faith alone, in Christ alone. Salvation then, is dependent on something that God has done for us rather than something that we do for ourselves. We know that our good works simply cannot save us, and we also recognize that Jesus did everything that needs to be done for us; He died on the cross to pay the price for our sin. From the Christian worldview, God not only exists, but He has done something to save us and all He requires is that we place our faith in Jesus for our salvation. But what about all those people who lived and died before Jesus was ever born? If faith in Jesus is required, how could they be saved prior to his appearance? Well, those who lived before Jesus were saved in exactly the same way that you and I are saved; by the grace of God and through their faith in the Savior! Those who lived before Jesus understood grace and they placed their faith in a coming Redeemer...



They Understood Grace

These early believers loved God and wanted to live with him forever. They listened closely to the words of God as they were revealed by the prophets and the scripture. As a result, they understood the nature of grace. David, for example, wrote about God's forgiveness and grace:



Psalm 32:1-5

How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit! When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. Selah. I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"; and You forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah.

David was fully aware of the nature of God's free gift of salvation, and Paul makes this clear to us when he describes the knowledge that David had in this regard:



Romans 4:6-8

...just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account."

David clearly understood that all of us are sinners who must be saved by the Grace of God (as Paul says, "apart from works"). David wasn't the only ancient believer who knew that they were going to be saved by their faith, even though the Savior had not yet arrived. The New Testament tells us that all our heroes of faith understood the role that faith played in their salvation:



Hebrews 11:13

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

These ancient believers certainly knew that their good works couldn't save them; like Isaiah, they knew that their 'goodness' wasn't 'good enough':



Isaiah 64:6

For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

Ancient believers also knew that God's standard was impossibly high. They knew that when compared to God, they fell far short of the mark, and like David, they knew that even animal sacrifices weren't going to ultimately please a Holy God:



Psalms 40:6

Sacrifice and meal offering Thou hast not desired; My ears Thou hast opened; Burnt offering and sin offering Thou hast not required.



They Expected a Messiah

The ancient believers knew that their own works were repeatedly insufficient in the eyes of a Holy God. With the limited knowledge of God that was given to them at the time, they understood that God would have to do something dramatic to save them. The followers of God who lived before Jesus placed their faith in the coming Savior who was described from the earliest of times. God told Adam and Eve that one of their descendants would eventually defeat Satan...



Genesis 3:15

And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel.

Abraham understood that God would provide a sacrifice for sin, just as he understood that God would provide the substitutionary sacrifice to replace his own son when God called Abraham to sacrifice Isaac:



Genesis 22:8

And Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

Looking back, thousands of years later, Paul reminds us that Abraham's faith saved him. Abraham took Isaac to the point of the sacrifice, fully expecting that God, in His goodness, would provide the "lamb":



Romans 4:3

For what does the Scripture say? "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

While Abraham may never have completely understood the role that Jesus would someday play, or the exact manner in which God would come to earth to be a sacrifice for all those in desperate need of a Savior, he did know that God would accomplish all that he had promised and he looked forward to the day of the coming Messiah:



John 8:56

"Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad"

Job had a similar expectation and hope for a Redeemer. He knew that God would somehow save Him, even if he was unsure of the exact details:



Job 19:25-26

"And as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God..."

In a similar way, Moses also expected and believed in the coming Messiah, and he anticipated the reward of Salvation:



Hebrews 11:26

"...considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward."

Moses even wrote scripture that pointed to the coming Savior!



John 5:46

"For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me."

And Moses wasn't alone. We know that many of the Old Testament prophets and wise men also spoke about the coming savior. Enoch, for example, talked about the second coming of the Messiah:



Jude 14

"And about these also Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, 'Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones...'"

Even though Enoch didn't write about it in scripture, it's reasonable to assume that he also talked about Jesus' first coming and his mission on earth! Believers heard about the Messiah from their prophets who clearly described where He would be born:



Micah 5:2

"But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity."

The prophets also described how the Messiah would be betrayed:



Zechariah 11:12

And I said to them, "If it is good in your sight, give me my wages; but if not, never mind!" So they weighed out thirty shekels of silver as my wages.

The prophets also described how the Messiah would die:



Isaiah 53:5

But He was pierced through for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed.

And the prophets also described the fact that the Messiah would be resurrected:



Psalms 16:10

For Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol; neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay.



Isaiah 26:19

Your dead will live; their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, for your dew is as the dew of the dawn, and the earth will give birth to the departed spirits.

In fact, so much was written and foretold about the Savior, even those who preceded Jesus were capable of recognizing His arrival!



Acts 10:43

"Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins."

The details were clear to those who honestly loved God enough to search the scriptures. That's why Jesus expected someone like Nicodemus to understand the truth of the Gospel even prior to His (Jesus') appearance:



John 3:10

Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things?"



A Sufficient Faith Alone in the Messiah Alone

The Old Testament saints understood the role and importance of faith, and they expected a coming Redeemer and Messiah who would save them. That really shouldn't surprise us, because according to the Bible, the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was planned by God from the beginning of time.



Revelation 13:8

And all who dwell on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not

been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain.

Those who loved God and lived before Jesus knew that their sins would be atoned by the sacrifice of this Savior.



Isaiah 53:6

All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.



Romans 3:25

...whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed

Just like us, these early believers were saved by grace alone, through the Savior alone, even if their understanding of the Savior may not have been as complete as ours is today. Now some might argue that their faith was incomplete; they did not understand the exact identity of the Messiah, and they did not know exactly how God would accomplish the sacrifice necessary to save them. But think about it for a minute. Who among us has a truly 'complete' faith? If you are a Christian, are you 'completely' knowledgeable regarding everything that could be known about God, his Savior and the plan of Salvation? How much of a theologian do you have to be to be saved? Must your faith be 'complete' or is there some level of 'sufficiency' required? How much do you need to 'know' to 'know' if you are saved?

Can you answer every question about the Trinity, for example? Do you completely understand how it is that Jesus could be completely human yet completely God at the same time? Does your lack of 'complete' understanding disqualify you from Salvation? Each of us is expected to do the most we can with the information that we have. Someday, each of us will be held accountable for the information that we have received from God. We will be asked, "What did you do with what I revealed to you?" Just like us, the Old Testament saints did the most they could with what was revealed to them. They placed all their faith in all that God had given them. And this faith in God and His promise of a future Savior was sufficient for them to be included in the family of God.