

OPEN FORUM TRANSCRIPT

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by

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First and Last in the Kingdom of God & What Does “Believe” Mean?

HC: Good evening. Welcome to Open Forum.

CALLER: Brother Camping, I don't have the Bible reference for this question, so I hope you will be able to remember where this is. I think I recall Jesus in at least one of the Gospels talking about someone being the “least in the kingdom of God”, and there is another reference for “the first will be last and the last will be first”. The point I am trying to get at here is this: Is there a possibility of some being greater than others in heaven?

HC: No. First of all, let's talk about that phrase that we find in a number of places, “The first shall be last, and the last shall be first” [Matthew 19:30; 20:16; Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30]¹. There are those like Ancient Israel, for example, who for 2,000 years were in a favored position with respect to the Gospel because virtually all of the holy men of old, who spoke as God the Holy Spirit moved them, came from National Israel. So, the people of Israel were the **first** ones who heard the Gospel. Also, God used Ancient Israel very frequently as types, or pictures, or representations of the Gospel.

For example, David, who was one of their greatest kings, was a picture (a portrait if you will), an example, or a type of the Lord Jesus Christ. More than that, Christ Himself came out of the nation of Israel.

So they were **first**. They had all the priorities. They had all the advantages, and yet most of them perished at any time in their history because of unbelief. Whereas many Gentiles – who had never heard the Gospel and had none of the prerogatives and none of the privileges that National Israel had – very quickly after they heard the Gospel became saved.

We see this particularly in the book of Acts, where we find that Paul and Barnabas would go to a synagogue and the Jews, in the main, would not want their Gospel at all; but many Gentiles heard them gladly. In that setting, the Jews, who were **first**, became **last** – that is, they never did become saved –

and the **last**, those who had not previously heard the Gospel, became **first**. They became those who did become saved.

That, incidentally, is also true in churches today. There are individuals who have grown up in Christian families, who have gone to churches where the Gospel has been reasonably presented in truth, and they never became saved. They were **first** because all their lives they heard the Gospel.

Yet, on the other hand, that same Gospel goes out and here is an individual that never heard the Gospel before. His whole family is not saved. Then he hears the Gospel and things begin to happen in his heart. He realizes he is a sinner, and the next thing we see him as having become saved. He is the **last** who became **first**. The individual in the church who never did become saved was **first**, and he became **last**.

Now, the phrases “**great** in the kingdom of God” or “**least** in the kingdom of God” [Matthew 5:19; 11:11; Luke 7:28] do not indicate that there are degrees of greatness in the kingdom of God. We all stand on the same ground. No one is greater than another – except the Lord Jesus, of course. He is our King. He is the Head of the whole kingdom of God. But insofar as believers are concerned -- whether we are the Apostle Paul, or Mary the mother of Jesus, or Mary Magdalene, or the thief on the cross who became saved in the last hour of his life, or whoever – we all stand on the same ground in that we have eternal life. So, when we read about the “**great** in the kingdom of God” that is what God has in mind – that is, everyone in the kingdom of God is **great**. Not in the sense of their own personal greatness, but because they have become identified with Christ, who is King of kings and Lord of lords.

However, God also speaks of the kingdom of God frequently in a corporate, or external, sense. The churches, for example, that we belong to and that carry the Gospel with some degree of truth, corporately are identified with the kingdom of God. That does not mean that everyone in those churches are

eternally in the kingdom of God (there may be a few that are eternally in the kingdom of God), but corporately all the people in those congregations are identified with the kingdom of God. However, even though they are in those churches and are identified with the kingdom of God, if they are not saved, they are **least** in the kingdom of God. That is, they are not going to be there eternally. They are only there temporarily in an external fashion, but they have never become eternal residents, or citizens, of the kingdom of God.

CALLER: Thank you for that. I do have one more quick question, and I will listen to the answer on the air. I was wondering about the verse in one of the Gospels, and again I don't have the reference, where Christ asked Peter, or the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" One said "a great teacher" and another said something else. Then Peter replied, "You are the Son of the Living God." I believe that is the way he put it. Now, I believed from the beginning of when I was saved that Jesus is God, and I am wondering if that is given by the Holy Spirit. Is that the same as when Jesus said, "Flesh and blood has not revealed it to you"? [Matthew 16:13-17]

HC: Well, you see the word "believe" is a very misunderstood word. In the New Testament, where we find the word "believe" used very frequently, there is only one Greek word that is translated as "believe". And we find, for example, it says that the devils "believe" [James 2:19]. Well, they are in rebellion against God, and yet they "believe". We also read about those who "believe" for awhile, and then, when the cares of the world come, they fall away [Luke 8:11-18]. That is the same word "believe". We also read about those who "believe" because they have become saved [Acts 13:48]. They are called "believers" [Acts 5:14].

Now, what does the word "believe" really mean? You see, we normally think of "believe" as acknowledging something – that is, we agree that something is true. We agree that we are sinners. We agree that Christ is the only One who can save us. We agree that He is the Son of God and the Son of Man. We agree on a lot of these principles. However, Satan knows all of those things too. He knows about Christ better than we do because he was living in heaven with Christ. "We know who You are", the devils say, "Thou art the Son of God" [Matthew 8:29; Mark 3:11; Luke 4:41; 8:28]. So, just agreement with all of these principles is not "believing". It is acknowledging, but it is not "believing".

Now, there are those who really think that they have come to a "belief" where they truly have become

saved because they think they have hung their lives on the Lord Jesus, and they really want to follow Him. That is a result of true "faith". That is what would happen if they were truly saved. But in their case, that "faith", or that "believing" (and believing is just another way of saying we have "faith"), or that trust is a product of their own desire to be right with God and did not come from God. Because it did not come from God, in time they will fall away because they get tired of trying to do it themselves. They don't realize that it came out of their own personality and not from God.

Now, on the other hand, there are those that God begins to draw. He begins to deal with that person, and we read in Philippians 2:13, which is talking about someone that God is working with, "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of *his* good pleasure." So "believing" begins to show up in that person's life. That person is not necessarily saved yet, but he begins to trust more and more in what the Bible says – "I'm a sinner." He is not just acknowledging it; but he begins to come under conviction – "I know I'm a sinner!" He is not just acknowledging that Christ is the only One who can save him, and it begins to penetrate into the very core of his being that he has to get right with God. He has begun to hang his whole life on Christ. Christ is increasingly Number One in his life. He is still not saved necessarily; but then at some point, God saves him.

Because he has begun to trust in God more and more and because he realizes that he is going to hell for his sins, he also begins to turn away from his sins. He begins to repent. Yet all of that "believing" activity is **not** a precondition for salvation. God does not require any of that in order to save someone. Because, on the other side of the coin, here is a little baby that is just a day old, or maybe not even born yet, who knows nothing about all of these things; and yet God can save that person just as readily as the one that has been learning more and more about his sins and is beginning to get more and more of a desire to turn from his sins.

None of this is a precondition for salvation. At some point God is going to save the ones that He wants to save. That is strictly the work of God. Whether it is a baby in the womb, or whether it is a child that does not have a mind at all, or whether it is an adult who has been seeking the Lord for a long time and has begun to trust God more and more in his life and has begun to turn away from his sin – it is all the same action. God makes that person a brand new personality by giving him a brand new resurrected soul.

That is what happens at the moment of salvation; and at that moment, he is justified. That is, the fact that Christ paid for his sins long ago is applied to his life, and from that moment on he is no longer under the wrath of God.

Now, the **consequences** of the fact that he has truly become saved is that he **will** have an earnest desire to **do** the will of God. He will trust God. He will know that Christ is everything and that He has to be Number One in his life. He will be turning away from his sins like he never did before, and that will go on for the rest of his life. At the moment of salvation, these things get locked in because he has been given eternal life and never again will he turn away.

While God is drawing him before he is saved, there may be periods when he is not that interested in the Gospel. Then God draws him some more, and maybe he becomes somewhat more interested in the Gospel. But when he has truly become saved, he has eternal life in his new resurrected soul. From that point until he dies, there will always be an ongoing, earnest desire to do the will of God. There will be an ongoing trust, or faith, in the Lord Jesus Christ; and that **faith** (or trust, or believing) as well as the **doing** of God's Law are all **works** that are seen in his life. These are the **results** of – not the bases for nor the causes for – God's salvation.

CALLER: That's very good. I appreciate that information. Thank you so much.

HC: Thank you for calling and sharing, and shall we take our next call please.

¹ Verse references in brackets [-] were added by G. D. Mittelstadt, who transcribed and edited this document on March 20, 1999.

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