

SOTERIOLOGY (145)

The prophet Jeremiah predicted an unprecedented time of trouble and distress for the nation Israel. He also predicted that many of the nation Israel would be saved and delivered from this terrible time of Jacob's trouble (Jer. 30:7). The Apostle Paul would later reveal that this event would occur after the Church Age or Gentile Age was complete (Rom. 11:25-26).

The context of Matthew 24 is that the disciples were interested in knowing when Christ would return to deliver Israel to her Kingdom in view of the fact that He had just told Israel that the program of God was leaving her for awhile (Matt. 23:37-39; 24:3). These Jewish disciples wanted to know what signs would precede Christ's second coming in which He would deliver Israel to her Kingdom. We must realize that the book of Matthew is designed to present Jesus Christ as King of the Jews, who specifically came to Israel to offer her the kingdom.

Christ, in answering the question, gives a series of things that will happen to Israel just prior to His return to establish His kingdom (i.e. Matt. 25:34). One of the things He specifically points out is that ALL nations will turn against Israel (Matt. 24:9). The Psalmist described the same event (Psalm 79).

There will be a major worldwide outbreak of anti-Semitism prior to Christ's return and many Jewish people will be killed. For the Jew, living during this time known as "Jacob's distress or trouble," it will appear that the entire race is about to be extinguished, which, in fact, it actually would be were it not for the sovereign intervention of God (Matt. 24:22). Christ promises that the Jews will not be totally extinguished and says, "whoever endures to the end will be saved" (Matt. 24:13, 29-31). That word "endure" is a Greek word that means to patiently wait. Christ is challenging Israel, the nation who will be His primary emphasis during the tribulation (i.e. Rev. 7), not to give up hope during the Tribulation, but to wait patiently for His return. He wants His disciples to realize that even though it may appear that the nation will be utterly destroyed, it will not be. Christ will return and will deliver many Jews who endured the seven-year Tribulation to the Kingdom. At this point in history, every Jew will say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" (Matt. 23:39).

This passage, this context and this verse has nothing to do with N.T. salvation or Christianity. This passage, this context and this verse has nothing to do with the doctrine of eternal security. In fact, for Israel, this text proves just the opposite—God will always preserve His people.

A proper application of this text is not using it to suggest that one may lose his salvation, but to use it to encourage the believer that we need to patiently endure troubles and trials and wait on God, for in His time He will deliver us from them all.

2) Ezekiel 18:20-26 - This is an extremely popular text that the Arminian uses in his attempt to prove one may lose his salvation.

Before giving the true interpretation of the passage, what immediately should be observed is that this is an O.T. passage, specifically aimed at Israel, several hundred years before N.T. Christianity.

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We may logically assume that the premise here has nothing to do with N.T. grace, salvation, or eternal security.

Again, the context becomes extremely important to determine the true and accurate interpretation of the text. The context of this passage clearly has to do with Israel and her land (18:2). This text is specifically addressing who, from the nation Israel, will have the privilege of living in the Promised Land.

The book of Ezekiel was written during the time when Judah was under the control of Babylon during Nebuchadnezzar's rule. 1) Ezekiel had predicted that Jerusalem would be destroyed as a judgment of God (Ezek. 4:1-4). 2) God would allow the Babylonians to dominate the land and destroy the children of Israel because of her abominations (Ezek. 7:1-4). 3) By the time Ezekiel writes chapter 18, the terrible destruction is very near (Ezek. 12:17-20). It is very plain and clear that what is being predicted here is a physical destruction of cities, land and people.

The obvious question of chapter 18 is the question of any Israelite surviving this terrible ordeal. Since Israel's abominations were the cause of this physical destruction and since these abominations which brought death and destruction to Israel had been committed by the Israelite fathers, some were wondering whether or not their children would have to suffer the same judgments (Ezek. 18:2).

The LORD, through Ezekiel, makes it very clear that each person will be judged on the basis of his own life. If a child chooses to walk in the ways of the LORD, when the destruction comes, he will live and not be killed (18:9, 14-17). If a child chooses to walk in the wicked ways of his father, who committed abominations, he will not live and will be killed when the destruction comes (18:10-13).

God wanted the children of Israel to know that each person was completely accountable for his own relationship with the LORD. If a person chose the ways of righteousness, God would see to it that he would physically live. If a person did not choose the ways of righteousness, God would see to it that he would physically die. In verse 21, God even extends His offer to any wicked Israelite or Gentile who would turn from his wicked ways to the LORD. Those who turn to God would not be physically executed as a punishment for their abominations.

Living and dying in the O.T. dispensation were just that—living and dying. For Israel, the concept of life meant being allowed to live in the Promised Land and the concept of death meant physically dying before one had the opportunity to inherit the Promised Land. Israel never ever would not consider herself to be the nation of God, for God, time and time again, reaffirms to Israel that she is His nation. To use this text as a proof for saying one can lose his N.T. salvation, is a terrible misinterpretation and misapplication of the Word of God.

The best N.T. application of this passage is this: Every believer in Jesus Christ is responsible to obey the Word of God. Those who choose to do so will enjoy many wonderful blessings of God and those who do not will experience many disciplinary judgments.

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Those who obey God will have a spiritual life that is alive and those who don't will have a spiritual life that is dead. Verse 24, if applied to the N.T. believer, would seem to suggest that it would be possible to lose all rewards and even end up being executed by God. But the context is clear that even when these judgments were being given, Israel was still Israel (18:25, 30-32). God was using this warning of judgment to motivate Israel to repent so she could live in her land and receive all of His blessings. The N.T. believer would repent so he could receive full rewards in heaven, not because he could lose his salvation. The loss of N.T. salvation is not a proper interpretation or application of Ezekiel 18.

3) Ezekiel 33:7-9 - Here is another popular text of the Arminian in the claim that one may lose his salvation.

The teaching of the Arminian is that it is possible for a N.T. Christian to wind up bearing the eternal penalty of some lost soul. Those who hold to this view suggest that this passage teaches that it is possible for a Christian to wind up bearing the eternal penalty of one who is lost. Specifically, if a believer refused to warn or witness to an unbeliever, the blood of the unbeliever would be required from the believer. In such a perspective, the requirement of blood is equated with the loss of salvation.

Before we give a proper interpretation of the text, it needs to be pointed out that the context of this O.T. passage is not a context dealing with the theme of N.T. salvation. The context is one clearly aimed at Israel (33:7, 10) in the O.T. dispensation, at least 500 years before Jesus Christ came to this earth. To make this a proof-text for the loss of N.T. salvation is a great misuse of the passage.

In studying Ezekiel and this immediate context, it is relatively easy to see the true interpretation. Ezekiel was a prophet and priest of God (Ezek. 1:3). He was given a very difficult ministry; namely, take God's Word to a stubborn and obstinate people of Israel, who probably would not even listen to him (Ezek. 2:1-7). His job as a prophet and priest was to hear the Word of God and to speak the Word of God, even if God's Word were a warning (Ezek. 3:16-21). The prophet had been specifically chosen by God and was responsible to communicate His Word to Israel, no matter what the state, receptiveness or rebellion. The entrustment of God's revelation was to the prophet. It was his job to proclaim the truth regardless of the spiritual state of the hearer. If Ezekiel did his job and faithfully communicated the truth of God, he would be innocent regardless of the response of the people. If, on the other hand, Ezekiel refused to communicate the truth of God, he would be guilty and accountable for not sharing the warnings God wanted him to share. Before the Scriptures were written, God communicated His Word through prophets. Ezekiel was never to water down any message of God, but was to faithfully and accurately proclaim it.

The idea of "requiring blood" from someone seems to be specifically aimed at those who have been called by God and given the responsibility of communicating His truth. The Apostle Paul used the exact same imagery concerning himself and his responsibility to declare the "whole" counsel and purpose of God (Acts 20:26-27).

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The warning does not appear to be aimed at the majority of people, but at those specifically called and gifted by God to proclaim His Word. For this age, the minister, the pastor-teacher, or the evangelist who failed to declare the whole counsel of God would be one who would be guilty in God's estimation.

In the specific case of Ezekiel, it is very legitimate to equate "bearing the blood" with physical execution. There can be absolutely no doubt that in the context of Ezekiel, physical destruction and execution were clearly in view (33:1-4, 8, 11, 13-20). The warning to the general populace of Israel is that their response and reaction to God's Word will be a determining factor as to living or dying and as to destruction coming to the land. If a prophet of God refused to communicate God's truth and God's warnings to His people, even though he may have been a righteous man, he himself would die because of the many that would die who had not heard God's truth. A prophet could receive the death penalty if he refused to communicate God's truth to whomever God wanted that truth communicated (i.e. Jonah).

In Paul's case, he, too, sensed the same weight and responsibility in the N.T. age. As an apostle, he was given a gift and responsibility to communicate and write God's Word. It does not appear that Paul viewed "requiring blood" in the N.T. age as referring to physical execution, but it does seem that he viewed it as something he would be specifically held accountable for at some future judgment (Acts 20:24-27). On the basis of other Pauline writings, we may carefully observe that Paul believed he, as a minister, would be held highly accountable to God. He believed and taught that it was possible for one to lose and be denied all rewards, even though one was in heaven (I Cor. 3:8-15; 9:27; II Tim. 2:5, 12). Paul viewed accurate teaching of God's Word as his and other ministers' highest responsibility. According to Paul, it was this issue that determined whether a minister would someday be ashamed or not be ashamed when he would get before God (II Tim. 2:15). Paul wanted ministers to devote themselves to the teaching of God's Word (I Tim. 4:13-16; II Tim. 4:1-5). Paul never believed it was possible to lose salvation; in fact, he is the apostle who is credited with developing the doctrine of eternal security. Paul did, however, believe it was possible to lose all rewards.

A "rightly divided" application of Ezekiel 33:7-9 for this age is this: Any man of God who has been given a special gift of God to be able to understand and communicate God's Word had better make certain he declares the whole counsel and purpose of God to the people or he will receive serious judgment. Teachers of God's Word will receive a much greater judgment than the average person sitting in the pew. In fact, James wrote: "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment" (James 3:1).

On the basis of this and in the context of this study, we may conclude dogmatically that those teachers who are telling people they can lose their salvation and use a passage like this one to try and prove their thesis are those heading for strict and serious judgment because they are not "rightly dividing" the Word and the doctrines of God and they are not declaring the whole purpose of God.