

Southern Baptists' Most Serious Question 510

By Bailey E. Smith

Bailey E. Smith is pastor of First Southern Baptist Church, Del City, Okla., and was first elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention in June, 1980. He is a graduate of Ouachita Baptist University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and has served as president of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma and the Southern Baptist Pastor's Conference.

Let me ask you a question that you will not be able to answer. Not even all the demons of hell or the devil himself could answer this one. The cherubim, the seraphim of heaven or any other angel could not answer it either. It is a question of which not even God himself has given us an answer.

In actuality, the Bible poses many questions. In Genesis 3:9, "The Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou?" A little later the Bible records Cain asking, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen. 4:9). Job asked, "If a man die, shall he live again?" (14:14). Mark 8:37 records yet another question that ought to be asked, "What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" The previous verse says, "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Simon Peter asks in 1 Peter 4:17, "What shall be the end of them that obey not the gospel of God?"

We can ponder all of these questions. In fact, most of them can be answered because the Bible answers them. But, I'm going to ask you a question that you cannot answer. All the power of hell cannot answer it. It is a great question, but it has no answer.

The Bible has 1,189 chapters. Three of them tell man where he came from, and 1,186 tell him where he is going. The Bible is a road map to eternity. It is a directive toward destiny.

Let's examine Hebrews 2:3. Here we find a question for which there is no answer. However, it is a question that we must ask. "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?" This is an unanswerable question.

In the next few moments we shall take this powerful Scripture and consider it phrase by phrase to see what message God has for us.

Remember that these words were spoken to a body of Christians who were majoring on something besides that "great salvation." God was unhappy with their losing the priority of evangelism and he is unhappy with us as we do so.

1. PROPOSITION THAT IS IMPOSSIBLE. . . "How can we escape!"

We can sense the fact that, as he asks the question, he knows no answer. He knows that in all the universe of God, even if man comes with great powers of inspection, discovery, or clairvoyance that he will not be able to find an answer. We can observe despair welling up in the man who asks the question, "How can?"

He asked the question, knowing even before he finishes the sentence that it is much like asking, "How can a man toss a mountain over the sun?" "How can a child touch a star?" "How can a baby tutor his father in physics?" "How can an animal relate the theory of relativity?" "How can a salmon stretch its fins and fly to the moon?" "How can a dwarf leap to the top of the Eiffel Tower?" "How can a sparrow topple the Rock of Gibraltar?"

We might as well search for a man with gills and a fish with lungs as to search for an answer to the question, "How can we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" It is impossible to discover an answer to this query.

What will we not be able to escape as a people, a group of churches, or a denomination? We know one thing for sure and that

is, there is absolutely no escape. This question cannot be answered by the brilliant scholar, the clever attorneys, the philosophers of the ages, the crafty clairvoyant, or the studious theologian, the demons of Hell, Jesus, or the Jehovah God. How shall we escape—Southern Baptists we shall not!!

And what is it we will definitely not be able to escape? If Southern Baptists ever try to escape the absolute priority of evangelism and the authority of the infallible, inerrant Word of God, we will not be able to escape the mediocrity of other mainline denominations. I asked a former preacher who had graduated from seminary what his non-Baptist seminary did for him. He said to me, "It made me an atheist." Many of their edifices are no longer churches to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ. They are country clubs with steeples on top. They are conservatories of culture instead of lighthouses of Gospel truth.

I heard of a family who was having a very particular preacher to dinner. This preacher could not stand slang phrases at all. The father told his two sons that if they used one slang phrase he would work them over. As the preacher was eating with the family, one of the sons said, "Pass me those cotton pickin' potatoes." That father grabbed that boy, jerked him outside, dragged him behind the barn and beat him within an inch of his life. The boy's cries could have been heard for miles. The father got back into the house, sat down at the table, looked at his other son and said, "Now, what do you want?" "I'll tell you one thing, I don't want any of them cotton pickin' potatoes." We don't want the cotton pickin' potatoes that made the other denominations die.

To the degree that Southern Baptists move from this great salvation it shall move toward such mediocrity. We will not escape.

We will not escape the deadness of the so-called social gospel that has done very little good for society and has no gospel. They speak of race relations, world hunger, temperance, and human ethics, but it has always been the evangelistic Bible-honoring church that has opened its doors to all races and put food on the table of the hungry.

A social gospel was berating an evangelistic pastor saying that his efforts would put a new suit on a man. The Bible loving preacher said, "Yes, but Jesus will put a new man in the suit." We will not escape.

The third thing that we will not be able to escape is the shame of allowing millions of souls to plunge into the lake of fire. A person without Jesus Christ is one heart-beat from an eternal hell. That being the case, it behooves us to quit wasting our Sunday mornings on Deutero-Isaiah or Darwin idiocy and preach the joyful word of Jesus Christ. There is abundant life and everlasting life, for Jesus will not only add years to your life, but life to your years. No one in hell is glad that he went to a liberal church.

Years ago in Kentucky a family in a rural valley had the only radio within miles. On that little crystal-set radio they heard that a tornado was spotted and it was headed in the direction of the valley. The father sent his young son to warn a family by the name of Renfro of the coming storm and to advise them to get in the cellar. The boy ran out of the door and just a few yards from his home he noticed a lone bird on a tree over his head. As boys will do, he picked up a rock and threw it at that bird, but missed it. After a moment or so the bird came back to that same limb. This time the rock was on target and the little bird fell to the ground.

As the boy was holding the slain bird he heard a terrible roar and noticed the ominous green blackish clouds and in their midst, a swirling tornado. Instantaneously it struck the Renfro house and his horrified eyes saw four bodies thrown as straw out into the thick woods.

The little boy threw down the bird and ran to his home. The

father had seen the tornado strike the Renfro home and the family destroyed. As the boy approached the front porch of his home, the father grasped him with his strong hands cupped on each of the shoulders of his son. He said, "Merle, you had plenty of time to warn the Renfro family. Why didn't you?"

He said, "Oh, Daddy, as I was going I saw this bird in a tree and I threw this rock at it. I missed it so I threw another one and hit it and I was just holding the little bird when. . ." The father interrupted and said, "Merle, what's that on your hand?" He said, "Oh, that's the blood of that little bird." The father said, "No son, that's the blood of the Renfro family that you never told."

I wonder if we too often get busy throwing rocks at birds and families go untold. If so, the words of Ezekiel 33:8 ought to be considered. "When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, the wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand."

McGavran sees the great task before us and says, "We must equip Christians in the United States to spread the faith to millions. It is not sufficient to bring a few people into our church. The task is to win millions who do not now know Christ to earnest, ardent faith in him. Nothing else will roll back the tide of materialistic, superficial, sinful living."

Let's make as our theme song for this crusade for the Master the third stanza of Heber's great hymn "From Greenland's Icy Mountains."

Shall we, whose souls are lighted
With wisdom from on high,
Shall we to men benighted
The lamp of lights deny?

Salvation! O Salvation!
The joyful sound proclaim,
Till earth's remotest nation
Has learned Messiah's name.

2. PEOPLE THAT ARE INEXCUSABLE . . . "We"

This passage was not written to the lost, it was written primarily to Hebrew Christians and generally to all Christians of all generations. The pronoun "we" refers to those who are born again—those who ought to know better.

How easily "we"—"how shall we escape" can be applied to Southern Baptists. If any group of people on earth should not escape the responsibility to share this great salvation, it is the denomination that God has allowed to be the greatest evangelizing force on earth. For other mainline denominations who have lost their candlestick, it might at least be understandable, but not for the world's largest protestant denomination. We ought to know better. We are people of the Book.

It is inexcusable for a Southern Baptist to say he is a humanist and proud of it. It is inexcusable for Southern Baptists to pray for the opening of a brewery. It is inexcusable for a Southern Baptist to say Genesis is political rhetoric and not historical fact. It is inexcusable for a Southern Baptist to teach evolution in our schools. It is inexcusable that any Southern Baptist would social drink and have no shame about it.

How shall WE, how shall WE, how shall We Southern Baptists escape. *WE WILL NOT.*

We of Bold Mission Thrust commitment need to understand that there are some marriages that will not work. We cannot wed missions to liberalism; evangelism to liturgical worship; Spiritual power to high church music; Holy Ghost unction to sleepy sermons; or transformed lives to skeptical preachers. We must preach the Bible, live the Bible, and obey the Bible. We must not be bland, benign, bickering Baptists, but Bold, Believing, Bible Baptists.

I was looking again at the story of the Prodigal Son—not the one that went to the far country and wasted his substance with riotous

living, but the one that stayed home in self-righteousness. Do you remember how the older brother was angered at the attention given to the return home of the younger brother? He would have no part of the celebration or eat of the fatted calf and enjoy the homecoming.

I figured out his problem. That was his calf they killed. Sure it was. Who fed the calf and got out of bed early to get it back into its pen. Who cared for it while the younger brother was out spending his inheritance. The older brother, of course. So he preferred a kicking calf to a repentant brother.

Southern Baptists are going to have to allow some of our fatted calves to be slain before we ever get the prodigals of this world to the Father. Whatever they are, they must die that souls might live.

3. PROBLEM THAT IS INCONCEIVABLE . . . If we neglect."

It is inconceivable, indeed, that people like Southern Baptists who know better would neglect evangelism, bringing men and women and boys and girls to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. We would never reject, but just neglect, by being involved in lesser activities.

Dr. E. A. McDowell, commenting on Hebrews 2:1 and the phrase "lest we let them slip," says that the idea suggested is that the person is stationary and the things they have heard just flow by! The same meaning is here; the important issue flows by the preacher, denominational employee, or layman and they idly stand by. It is indeed a problem that is inconceivable, but so very prevalent.

Without question, there are preachers and denominational workers that have let this most important of all Bible doctrines slip. While there are undesirable elements of liberalism among us, the greatest diversity is between those with a vitality and the sleepy heads who have lost their mantle of excited faith. I meet men all the time who once had the power of God on their lives; once had the anointing of the Holy Spirit; once had a heart for soul-stirring music; once had a burden for souls, but not now—not now—not now. How shall we escape if we neglect, neglect, neglect.

One well-known Southern Baptist called me about a matter while I was at a First Baptist Church revival just two months ago. He said, "How is it going?" Before I could answer he said, "Of course, I know we don't have revivals like we use to." Then I said, "Well, we've had over 200 saved in the first four nights—most of them adults and young people."

People, listen to me. This is the most productive day in the history of Christendom to preach revivals, but we cannot change the message without changing the results. A preacher without a burning commitment to the whole Bible, apologizing for Hell, spiritualizing away Heaven, compromising on sin, doubting the distinctive nature of Jesus, will never know revival. Revivals are not more difficult, some just don't believe like they use to.

Somebody said to me, "Sure there was a day when preachers would preach the Bible as true from cover to cover, and sure that would do something to a community way back then." Ladies and Gentlemen, I declare unto you that if ever the Bible was the holy, infallible, inerrant Word of God, it is still the holy, infallible, inerrant Word of God.

How is this great salvation neglected among many Southern Baptists today? Let me just mention five areas where we need to be concerned. These are not guesses, but truthful observations as I've preached in 47 states since being your President and observed these phenomena.

First of all—far too many see money as synonymous with missions. When I was in Africa last year, I saw a little church built by a church here that would not allow black members. That's the height of hypocrisy. Money like that is not given to get people saved, it's to sooth a guilty heart of prejudice.

Secondly, we must be aware when programs become more important than people. If the program is not reaching people for Jesus, we need to chunk it.

Thirdly, worldliness is being confused for worship. We've got

our music bland; our order, stiff; our invitations like a funeral dirge and we call it worshipful. That's not worship, that's death. It is a carnal disease for worldly culture without spiritual power.

One of the Executive-Directors, Tommy Halsell of West Virginia, a former missionary, told me that in England there are signs in the front of abandoned churches that say, "Would you please contribute to help preserve this architectural masterpiece." Also in the British government, there is an Office of Church Dismantling—to tear down those left vacant by disinterested members.

Fourthly, we are neglecting so great a salvation by preaching that is more proper than powerful. My files are filled with letters from heart-broken members saying, "Oh, pray that our pastor will be a real spiritual leader with a burden for souls."

Fifthly, soul-winning has become secondary. We have preachers that are not soul-winners. In one church where I preached this year for a State Evangelism Conference, the State Director of Evangelism told me that that particular church had not had a baptism in three years, and yet the same pastor had been there all that time. I need to be a better soul-winner, our Executive Directors, our Executive Committees, our Deacons—We need to ask God's forgiveness of neglecting so great a salvation.

4. *PROMISE THAT IS INVALUABLE . . .* "So great a salvation."

"So," is a superlative which defies man's comprehension, as we see in the phrase, "God so loved," so says Hershel Hobbs. Even the little word "So" indicates the interest in which the writer portrays the vital truth that this is a very special Gospel—so great, so great, so great a salvation.

The one great need of all mankind is to be born again. A lady journalist sent me an article from an Eastern newspaper where she was putting down what she called the born-again movement in America. She said in her letter to me that she was a Christian, but she was not a part of that, because she was only a once born Christian—not a twice born or born-again.

The fact is, she's not a Christian at all, because there is only one kind of Christian on earth and that is a born-again Christian. If you have not been born again, you are not a Christian and you're one heart-beat from a devil's hell.

No longer are there bits and pieces of law and ceremony, rituals, systems, and superstitions, but it has all been gloriously fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Jesus the Christ.

Why is it a great salvation? Here are five reasons.

(1) First, it is great because of its donor. Who is the donor? Jehovah is the donor. The almighty God, the omnipotent God of Heaven is the donor. Salvation was created in the councils of Heaven. It is a great salvation because of the fact that God gave it.

(2) It is great because of its doctrine. I am so glad it is not a salvation of works because no one would make it. I am so grateful that we are not under the old legal system anymore, and that we don't have to die on a cross ourselves! It is a great salvation because it is not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by the precious blood of Jesus. He has washed us clean. It is a salvation by grace. It is not what we do, but what God has done for us. We only receive it. What a beautiful doctrine!

(3) It is great because of its duration. An eternal God has an eternal salvation. God has saved us forever.

(4) It is great because it is distinctive. Distinctive means unique; one of a kind. It is the great one because it is the only one. It is not the only religion, but it is the only salvation. A lady said to me, "You seem fair-minded. Don't you believe all religions are about the same and one is about as good as another?" I said "Yes, I do. In fact, they will all send you to Hell."

(5) It is great because of its donation. The other day I was with a group planning a picnic. A lady said, "One of you bring the salad. Another will bring the meat, and another will bring the dessert."

In another planning meeting, God was planning man's salvation. I can imagine the angels said, "We'll bring the message." The prophets said, "We'll donate the preaching." John the Baptist said, "I'll prepare the way." And God the Father said, "I'll give my son." It is a great salvation because of its donation. Jesus Christ was donated by God in our behalf. Because of the donation of Christ, man can be saved.

Is the work of God in creation the greatest thing God ever did? I think not. The greatest thing is not creation, but re-creation. It is not generation, but rather, regeneration. You say, "Oh, Preacher, how about the different versions of the Bible? It is not the versions God is concerned with. It is the conversions. You see, when the world was created, not one person shed a tear. There was not one drop of blood shed. But, when God re-created the world, the blood of His Son was shed, and Christ wept. What a price was paid! It was a great salvation, because it had a great Saviour.

The greatest man that ever lived was Jesus;

The greatest love ever shown came from the heart of Jesus;

The greatest wisdom ever spoken came from the mouth of Jesus;

The greatest forgiveness ever bestowed flowed from the power of Jesus;

The greatest humility ever exemplified was born in the will of Jesus;

The greatest and most profound thinking ever acquired came from the mind of Jesus;

The greatest and most cherished teaching ever taught was exhibited in the knowledge of Jesus;

The greatest service and cost of discipleship ever rendered was ministered in the name of Jesus;

The greatest strength ever portrayed rose from the power of God in Jesus;

The greatest words ever proclaimed sprung out of the abundance of the heart of Jesus;

The greatest obedience ever exercised to the Heavenly Father was in the will of Jesus;

The greatest commitment ever dedicated to God was in the spirit of Jesus;

The greatest acceptance ever felt was opened in the heart of Jesus;

The greatest healing ever administered was shown in the compassion of Jesus;

The greatest model ever imagined to pattern our lives after was shown in the image of Jesus;

The greatest man that ever lived was JESUS.