

# How We Must Receive God's Word to Be Saved

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May God grant all of you much grace and peace by the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In our dear Savior, Beloved hearers!

Even reason must admit and agree that God could not have created man for this life and for this earth. Most men go through life sighing. Most must say from experience with Sirach: "All men's existence is a miserable thing, from the womb till we are buried in the earth, the mother of us all. There is always care, fear, hope, and at last - death."

Who therefore may assert that man has been created by a wise, just and kind God for this passing, shadowy life? Who may assert that God put man on earth so some should enjoy themselves, others cry, and finally all should be reduced to nothing again? -- No, no, man, fleeting time cannot satisfy your immortal spirit! You were not created for this poor world, you were created for heaven. This life here is meant to be but your preparatory school.

Here you are to sow your seed in the sweat of your brow, but there you are to harvest. Here you are to be proved, and when you have been found approved you are to see God face to face.

Here you are to contend for the crown and to pursue after the precious stone. But beyond the grave you are to be crowned and to receive the victor's prize. Your goal is the enjoyment of everlasting bliss. Oh, that we would only see this and would long for nothing else but our eternal salvation!

Man is led to this important truth by mere reason if he reflects only a little. But *how* to attain salvation, *how* to come to God, *how* to receive eternal life - the answer to *this* question is sought in vain in man's heart or reason.

The true way to salvation is a secret of divine grace, of which flesh and blood, that is, natural man, knows nothing. God alone can reveal it to us. God is the *Lord* of heaven, therefore He alone has the keys of heaven, and He alone can determine the road by which we are to find Him.

Now, how do most men hope to be saved? They think that if they beware of all sins as much as possible, if they do not injure their fellow men, if they are kind and neighborly towards everyone, if they trust God and are religious, they may certainly hope that God surely will not reject them.

Obviously, this is the road which most men in the world from the beginning till now have considered the right and infallible road to salvation. Why, it is self-evident, people think, that those who have led a religious and decent life must be accepted! God certainly would not prefer the ungodly to the pious and just!

But, dear friends, you may speculate about the road to eternal salvation by your reason as cleverly as you wish. Reason cannot show us the road to God's salvation any better than a blind man could show us a road on earth.

Just as we are powerless to tell God how to bring us into this life on earth, we are powerless to tell how we might come to life eternal. God alone can do this. And what does He say? "Blessed are they who hear God's word and keep it." Here you have in short words the only true road to salvation. It consists in hearing and keeping the word of God. The word is the bridge God built for us to cross over into life eternal. There is no other. This is the life-line of His love and the hand God extends to us to pull us upward to Himself. Nothing else will do. All depends upon hearing the word of God. But the point is not merely that we hear it, but *how* we hear it.

It is true that you all hear the word of God, for I know that I preach to you nothing but the pure unadulterated Gospel of Jesus Christ. But would that it might not become apparent so often that many among us are not walking the road to salvation!

Who will deny it? Many hear, and even hear with joy, but in the hour of trial when they are to show the fruit of the word, it becomes apparent that they heard in vain. Oh that God would pity them, so they might know by the light of His Holy Spirit the things needful for their peace! For they who hear God's word but do not bring forth fruit are accountable for far more than they who never heard His word at all. To wake such from their perilous slumber, and to edify all of us, let us now consider *how* we must *receive God's word to be saved*.

*Scripture text: Luke 8:4-15. And when much people were gathered together, and were come to him out of every city, he spake by a parable: A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it. And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it. And other fell on good ground and sprang up, and bare fruit an hundredfold. And when he had said these things, he cried, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. And his disciples asked him saying, What might this parable be? And he said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand. Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. They on the rock are they which when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away. And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection. But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.*

As we heard, Christ told the parable of the Sower in our Scripture at a time when "much people were gathered together and were come to Him out of every city" in order to hear him. It also contains a reminder to those who hear God's word and shows them that hearing is not sufficient.

From this text let us now answer the question:

## HOW MUST WE RECEIVE GOD'S WORD TO BE SAVED.

1. We Must Hear it with Earnest Attention;
2. We Must Implant it Deeply in our Hearts;
3. We must not implant Other Things in our Hearts Besides it; and
4. We Must Keep it with Great Care.

{Prayer} Merciful God! We ask Thee humbly and fervently in the name of Jesus Christ, bless this instruction richly to every one of us so that Thy holy word may, as often as we hear it, accomplish in us that for which Thou hast sent it to us undeserving creatures, so we might be sinners in and by ourselves, but just and holy beings in Christ, and thus be saved. Amen

### [1. We Must Hear God's Word with Earnest Attention]

Christ begins His parable with the words, "A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it."

This Christ explains as follows: "The seed is the word of God. Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved." Here He describes to us the first class of those who hear God's word and yet are not saved: those who do not even hear it with earnest attention!

There are large numbers of people who would like to be saved and, so to speak, want to be on good terms with God. Therefore they diligently attend church, hardly ever miss a sermon or a prayer meeting, in short, they outwardly fulfill all duties of a sincere Christian with great care.

But they believe that they already do a great service to God and are real Christians by their mere attending of church services, sitting alongside others in the pews, joining thoughtlessly in the singing of congregational hymns, and hearing the words of the sermon as they would hear the babble of a brook by the wayside. It is only now and then that they really *hear* a word of the sermon. Most of the time their soul is fast asleep so that the sermon often must serve them as a lullaby to croon their bodies to sleep, too.

They are pitiful, unfortunate, miserable listeners. The word of God is lost to them. None of it reaches their hearts, but Satan takes all of it away, lest they believe and be saved. They sit down at God's table and merely look at the bread of life without partaking of it, remaining in their spiritual death and finally die, forever unsaved.

Therefore remember, friends, if you would hear God's word to be saved, you must first of all give it your earnest attention. Therefore Solomon says: "Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear." (Ecclesiastes 5:1). Thus, as often as the Christian goes to hear a sermon, he must first sigh in his heart: Oh that I would hear today what I must do to be saved! Oh that I would learn today where I am still erring; that today my sin might be more revealed to me, and that my faith would be stirred up and strengthened. Oh that by God's word my lack of zeal, or my sadness and grief might be changed to joy and peace! Oh that I might find even today what is the need of my poor soul! Oh this is how the Christian must come, armed and prepared by holy sighs.

Then, when he hears God's word, he must think nothing else but that God Himself is speaking to him. When punishment is mentioned, he must not think it concerns others, but must search his own heart. But when comfort is offered, he must implore God: Oh that I might be counted worthy to receive this comfort and might be quickened and nourished by it! He must look for that part of the sermon which is the very message fitted for his own condition. If his very own sins are hit, he must not become angry but rather think: God has inspired this for the very purpose to bring me to knowledge and repentance.

If at times it seems to him that a sermon has nothing at all to offer him, then he must the more earnestly ask God prayerfully in his heart that He would not let him go away completely empty, but rather grant at least a small crumb of the true bread of life as a blessing to his soul. Thus we must listen to God's word with attention. We must listen in such a way that we search it avidly for our salvation.

It is true, friends, that God's word will pierce with divine power the heart of hearers who enter God's house frivolously at first. Often a single word will strike such a one and make him realize quite clearly that in his present condition he can never be saved, but that he must change radically. His heart fills with grief, his eye with tears, his entire soul with sighs for mercy, and he is thus suddenly and instantly awakened, changed and converted. But these are special outpourings of grace which God has promised to no one.

Whoever therefore wishes to hear God's word without earnest attention, and to wait for the outpouring of God's Spirit in sudden overwhelming power, might by that very wish bring the judgment of hardening upon himself so that he, as Christ says in our Gospel of many hearers, "seeing might not see the mystery of the Kingdom of God, and hearing might not hear." Yes, it is true, without God no man can understand God's word. It is foolishness to him, no matter how carefully he may hear, read or study it. Yet Christ does call out to you and to me: "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."

## **[2. We Must Implant God's Word Deeply in our Hearts]**

However, Christ now continues: "And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away because it lacked moisture."

This He again explains Himself in the following words: "They on the rock are they which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away." Here we hear that it is not enough to hear the word with attention. We must also implant it deep in our hearts if we would hear it for our salvation.

You see, there are many who have great joy in hearing God's word, and therefore listen to it with great attention, but who nevertheless cannot be saved in this their condition. Christ was being heard by thousands with joy. They traveled for several days to hear Him, and in their great desire to hear Him they even forgot food and drink, yet most of them did not win the precious prize.

Why not? - Their joy was only a passing emotional upheaval.

Their heart was, so to speak, only shone upon on its outer shell by the light of the word, but was not pierced through. Their heart remained, as the Lord says, hard as a rock so the water of life trickled down upon the heart, but could not enter in. The seed of the Gospel sprang up quickly in the scant good ground of passing emotions. But the plants soon withered away as soon as a little heat of temptation touched them.

In these people we have an example to prove that in order to hear God's word for our salvation we must also implant it deeply in our hearts. For God's word is to affect us far differently from the words of human eloquence and wisdom.

The word of God is not merely to persuade our reason of the truths it contains, but - listen, every one of you! - by it we are to be made different men, new creatures, partakers of the divine nature, men whose inner being is in God and in heaven! (II Corinthians 5:7, II Peter 1:4). Our heart, soul and spirit is to be completely converted and changed, or born again, by it. (I Peter 1:23).

But for this to happen we must first of all become poor lost sinners, that is, first of all our sinful corruption in which we all lie by nature, and our complete worthlessness before God, must be revealed to us by God's word, and must be recognized by us.

Our heart, hard as a rock by nature, must by God's word be shattered and softened and filled with fervent care and grief for the condition of our soul and our eternal salvation, so that we begin to seek first after the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and daily and hourly after the mercy of God in Christ Jesus.

But is it not just this very transformation which is lacking in so many of us? Do not many of us still resemble a rock with a little land on top in which the seed of the word springs up fast, yet withers away again just as fast? I cannot say anything else but that you listen with greater joy according as God gives me more grace to praise His grace to you from the Gospel.

But do not many of you make *this joy and this pleasure* in the evangelical doctrine of God's grace the comfort of their soul, their pillow of rest, their savior by whom they expect to be saved?

Would that such men might consider that every sermon which they hear with joy, but by which the ground of their heart is not changed, is vain for them, as it is only reckoned a debt to them by God!

### **[3. We Must not Implant Other Things in our Hearts Besides the Word]**

But let us go on. Christ continues: "And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it."

Christ's explanation of this verse is: "And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares, and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection."

Here we hear: If we are to receive God's word for salvation, we must not let our hearts receive other things along with it.

Most people who still retain a little concern for eternal life in their heart and therefore hear God's word, stand in the ungodly thought that besides God they may also serve the world.

Most, therefore, want to be middle-of-the-roads.

They want to serve God, but also mammon; pursue after eternal riches, but also be rich in earthly treasures; care for heavenly things, but also for earthly things; pass for Christians, but also be popular with the unbelievers; live in the Spirit, but also in the flesh; do God's will, but also their own; be blessed in heaven, but not lose the enjoyments of this life. In short, they want to combine Christ and Belial, light and darkness, the friendship of God and the friendship of the world. This is the compromise to which all men are inclined by nature.

But, oh miserable men! it is a vain endeavor. Such men may diligently hear God's word, it is fruitless in them, for the word of God wants to move man to this, and nothing but this, that he surrender his entire being unreservedly and undividedly to God and Christ.

Christ says: "Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:33).

God wants to receive in heaven the entire man, not just half of him. Therefore man shall go to heaven whole, not half. Therefore Elijah already said to the apostate people: "How long halt ye between two opinions? If the *Lord* be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him." (I Kings 18:21).

If we share our heart with God, He will not share salvation with us. We may do as much as we please, try as hard as we can, be extremely zealous, do great and hard works: it is nothing to God. If we do not want to be *entirely* God's property, then we do not belong to Him at all, and all our labor is lost. "Put the old man clean off, Christ on; the thing is done."

In vain therefore he hears the word of God whose heart is burdened with the cares, the riches or the lust of this life. In him the heavenly plant of the true faith cannot spring up, and even if it did take root for a little moment, it is soon choked by the thorns of worldliness.

Consider this therefore, you who would like to tread both ways, the narrow one and the broad one, Christ's and the world's. Consider that thus you will never arrive at the heavenly goal. You will only make this life sour and bitter, and also trifle away eternal life.

There is therefore no other advice for you: surrender yourself entirely to God, who also gave Himself entirely to you, and you will be joyful here in God, full of comfort, peace and hope, and in the life to come you will be saved.

#### **[4. We Must Keep the Word with Great Care]**

But now we arrive at the last statement Christ makes about the proper hearing of the word of God. He concludes: "And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit a hundredfold."

He explains it thus: "But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience."

Thus the final point which pertains to our proper hearing of the word of God is our careful keeping of it.

As often as a man hears the word of God with attention, he receives a treasure of eternal life into his heart. He either receives enlightenment about his condition, about his sins, about the grace of God, about the doctrine of salvation, or else he receives a new awakening or quickening by the power of the Holy Spirit, or else sweet comfort, new courage and zeal, a powerful pull toward God and heaven, or some similar blessing. But as precious as this blessing of God's word is, as easily and as quickly we may lose it again. But then God bestowed labor on us in vain.

Therefore if we would be saved, it is not enough for us to preserve in our memory the doctrines delivered to us. Those who have a weak memory will retain very little despite all their attention. But that is not the principal point anyway. The principal point is that we keep the divine *effects* which the word produces in our soul.

Therefore we are to come to the house of the Lord praying, and to leave it praying.

We are to practice immediately in our lives that which we have heard. Having received new light, we are to walk in it.

If a sin has been revealed to us, we are to turn against it in battle.

If we have been encouraged, we are to show new zeal.

If we have been comforted, we are now to entrust ourselves to God's grace all the more trustingly.

In short, having recognized the will of the Lord, we are not for one moment longer to confer with flesh and blood, but rather do the will of the Lord promptly.

Oh, beloved friends, if only we had always thus properly received the word of God, how good and blessed the condition of our souls would be! How rich would we be in knowledge of ourselves and our Savior, how rich in experience, how strong in the faith, how full in all good works!

Well, the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. (Psalm 103:8). Whoever therefore has heard His saving word without results, ought to confess it to his Lord and beg for mercy through Christ, his Savior. And God will pardon his sin and have mercy on him. From now on, however, may he hear God's word properly, and keep it in an honest and good heart.

May He thus help each of us by Jesus Christ, our only Savior and Mediator. Amen. Amen.