

# Baptism & The “Sinner’s Prayer”

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## The Sinner's Prayer as a Substitute for Biblical Baptism

For the first fifteen hundred years of Christianity, baptism was viewed by Christians as the mechanism for receiving Christ and the remission of sins. It was the entrance into a covenant relationship with God through Christ. Baptism placed the repentant believer in contact with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ through a physical act of obedience to the Gospel. The command to be baptized carried with it the promise of remission of sins and the gift of the Spirit. Within the last few centuries, new ways of responding to the Gospel were invented to supersede what the Christian Church had taught and uniformly practiced from apostolic times.

The first to separate baptism from the remission of sins was the Swiss Reformer, Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1581). Rather than baptism being the sign of God's promise to the repentant believer and his covenant with God, Zwingli made baptism the sign of the Christian's covenant with the church, a testament to the church that he was a fellow disciple of Christ.

Following Zwingli's theology, Calvinistic revivalists began using methods and techniques for sealing a "conversion" completely unknown in the Bible and church history, including the "mourner's bench," the "altar call," and the "sinner's prayer."

The "mourner's bench" has fallen out of use in modern times. But the "altar call" is still widely used in churches and crusades. Usually, it is used in conjunction with "the sinner's prayer." This is a prayer that the seeker is encouraged to pray out loud, acknowledging his sinful state, and asking God to save him. Frequently the seeker is asked to repeat the prayer after someone. This method is used in many Evangelical and Fundamentalist churches, Gospel crusades, and in multitudes of radio and television broadcasts. The seeker is told, "if you said this prayer, and meant it with all you heart, you are now saved."

The problem is, there is no such prayer in Scripture. There is no Scripture that suggests that one can "pray" for salvation. There is no promise that one will be saved when repeating such a prayer. There is no example of anyone in Scripture encouraging others to pray for salvation. Nor is there any example of anyone being saved in response to repeating a prayer. This method of responding to the

Gospel is entirely extra biblical. It arises from the vacuum created by the omission of baptism as the proper response to the Gospel.

How can one rest his assurance of salvation on something that is not found in Scripture? Of course, those employing this method will say that it is not the prayer, but the faith of the person praying that matters. The problem is, whether someone has the faith to be saved is a very subjective matter. Assurance of salvation needs to be an objective matter. Why is it necessary to pray? And why does the Bible not use a "sinner's prayer" for salvation anywhere? This should give modern Christians pause, and reason to suspect that there is something seriously wrong in modern theology and practice.

### **The "Sinner's Prayer" in Luke 18?**

The idea of a "sinner's prayer" is commonly justified from two passages of Scripture, both of which are misused and misapplied. The first comes from Jesus' parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee praying at the Temple.

*Luke 18:9-14*

*9 Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:*

*10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.*

*11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men — extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.*

*12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'*

*13 And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'*

*14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

It is important to realize that these were hypothetical people. Jesus used this parable to illustrate a point about how God views a self righteous attitude. He rejects such an attitude, but responds positively to genuine repentance. The two men in this parable were Jews living under the Old Covenant, the Law of Moses. They were not believers in Jesus Christ. The tax collector had sinned under the Law, and stood condemned by the Law. He cried out to God for mercy, and received mercy. The Pharisee was "righteous" outwardly according to the Law, but in God's eyes he was not righteous at all, because he was trusting in his own works rather than God's mercy. This passage is not about how to be saved. It is

about God's attitude towards self righteousness contrasted with His attitude towards real repentance.

### The "Sinner's Prayer" in Romans 10?

Before we can understand what Paul meant by "calling upon the name of the Lord" in Rom. 10:13, we first need to understand that he was quoting Joel. Secondly, we need to understand the context, where Paul was explaining a prophecy of Moses from Deut. 30. Keep in mind that this was written to Christians.

Rom 10:5-11

5 For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, **"The man who does those things shall live by them."**

6 But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, **"Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'"** (that is, to bring Christ down from above)

7 or, **"Who will descend into the abyss?"** (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

8 But what does it say? **"The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart"** (that is, the word of faith which we preach):

9 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

11 For the Scripture says, **"Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame."**

12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him.

13 For **"whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."**  
NKJV

Color Code:

**Quotes from Moses,**

**Quote from Isaiah,**

**Quote from Joel**

Many quote verse 13 above as support for the so called "sinner's prayer." But, they have misunderstood the verse and Paul's point. In the larger context, Paul was contrasting two distinct statements by Moses, the first concerning the Law, and the second a prophecy of grace. The first quote of Moses is in verse 5 from Lev. 18:5. It essentially says that if Israel would obey the Law perfectly they would have "life" (salvation) through the Law. (Yet, Paul has already shown that they could not do this, and therefore righteousness does not come by the Law). He

then contrasted this statement with a prophecy Moses made in Deut. 30:12-14, which he quoted and explained in vs. 6-10. **Paul's point was that Moses prophesied the Gospel, and that Paul was simply proclaiming the Gospel that Moses prophesied would come.** Verses 9-10,13 were not meant to be used as conversion tools, or a "sinner's prayer." They are explaining what Moses prophesied about the "heart" and "mouth."

Moses wrote: *"Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'"* Paul interpreted this as meaning, *"Who will ascend into heaven to bring Christ down?"* referring to the incarnation. Moses continued, *"Who will descend into the abyss?"* which Paul interpreted as meaning *"to bring Christ up from the dead."* Moses continued, *"The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart."* Paul then indicated that this is the Gospel he preached. That is, this Gospel prophesied by Moses as opposed to the *"righteousness of the Law"* quoted from Lev. 18:5.

Paul then noted that Moses used both the "heart" and the "mouth" in His prophecy. So, Paul continued to explain how the "mouth" and "heart" that Moses mentioned in connection with His prophecy find their fulfillment in the Gospel that Paul preached. One believes the Gospel with the heart. And one makes the good confession, that Jesus is the Christ, with the mouth. In this way, Paul has connected His Gospel to Moses' prophecy.

Next, Paul quoted two more passages from the Old Testament, the first dealing with believing with the heart (Isa. 28:16, quoted in v. 11), and the second dealing with confessing with the mouth (Joel 2:32, quoted in v. 13).

Paul was NOT giving the WHOLE "plan of salvation" here. His comments were confined to explaining Moses' prophecy. His point was NOT to give them a "sinner's prayer" but to show that the Gospel He preached was not new or novel, or opposed to the Old Testament Scriptures. Rather, it was the fulfillment of what Moses prophesied in rather cryptic language in Deut. 30. Consequently, he limited his points to those mentioned by Moses, the heart and the mouth.

His last quote, from Joel 2:32-33, is supposed by many to teach the "sinner's prayer."

*Joel 2:32*

*32 And it shall come to pass that **whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.** For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, As the LORD has said, Among the remnant whom the LORD calls.*

*NKJV*

But, this is not the first time this verse was quoted in the New Testament. It was quoted first by Peter in Acts 2.

Acts 2:14-21

14 But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words.

15 For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day.

16 But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

17 'And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams.

18 And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; And they shall prophesy.

19 I will show wonders in heaven above And signs in the earth beneath: Blood and fire and vapor of smoke.

20 The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD.

21 And it shall come to pass that **whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.**'

NKJV

Peter quoted the whole passage. He said specifically that it referred to Pentecost, "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel..." Peter then set out to preach Jesus to the crowd. But, notice Peter's statement when the same crowd asked him, "men and brethren, what shall we do?" Peter did not interpret Joel's words he had just quoted as a "sinner's prayer." Rather, he interpreted Joel's prophecy in agreement with Jesus' Great Commission, "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved," (Mark 16:16)

Acts 2:38-39

38 Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

39 For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

NKJV

This is how Peter said to "call upon the name of the Lord." It was through ACTION not only words. The Greek text of verse 38 does not say "be baptized **IN** the name of Jesus Christ." It literally says, "be baptized **UPON** the name of Jesus

Christ." The preposition is "επι" which is the same preposition found in the quote from Joel in v. 21, "whoever calls **UPON** the name of the Lord..." To be baptized upon the name of Jesus Christ means to be baptized upon making the good confession regarding His name, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16).

That this was also Paul's understanding can be shown from his own conversion. Ananias said to Paul, "And now why are you waiting? **Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling upon the name of the Lord**." (Acts 22:16). This is an obvious reference by Ananias to Joel 2:32. He was telling Paul to enter into the promise contained in Joel, that was linked by Peter to baptism in Acts 2. Note that "calling upon the name of the Lord" was an integral part of baptism according to Ananias.

In his first Epistle, Peter gave additional insight into the relationship between "calling upon the name of the Lord" and "baptism."

*1 Peter 3:21-22*

*21 Corresponding to that, **baptism now saves you** — not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but **an appeal to God for a good conscience** — through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,  
NASB*

Peter associated the act of baptism with "an appeal to God for a good conscience." That is, in baptism Peter saw the repentant sinner appealing to God for the remission of his sins. This appeal was made through confession with the mouth as well as the act of baptism itself. Consequently, "confessing with the mouth" and "calling upon the name of the Lord" in Romans 10 is not to be divorced from baptism, but is an integral part of the act of baptism.

We would be well advised to handle Joel's prophecy as Peter and Ananias did. It is foolish to suppose that Paul had a completely different understanding of Joel 2:32 than did Peter and Ananias. This is especially important when we realize that at Paul's own conversion this passage was applied to him by Ananias!

Another example of the good confession being associated with water baptism is the Ethiopian Eunuch. He asked Philip "what hinders me from being baptized?" to which Philip responded that if He believed with all his heart he may. The eunuch made the good confession, "I believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God," and Philip baptized Him immediately. This is why it is proper to baptize upon a confession of faith. The confession and baptism are often viewed together in Scripture.

There is no command in Scripture to pray to receive Christ. There is no example of anyone praying to receive Christ in Scripture. And there is no "plan of salvation" given in Scripture that includes a sinner's prayer. These things are modern innovations which are substituted for what Word of God says. Why? Because some people have a problem with baptism being associated with salvation on philosophical grounds (the dichotomy between faith and works). So, they have changed the biblical "plan of salvation" into one more to their liking.