

# *What Is the Meaning of The Expression to...*



## **“CALL UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD”?**

**WE HAVE HEARD** preachers tell alien sinners (people who have not become Christians yet) to “pray the sinner’s prayer,” to “call upon the name of the Lord,” and they would be saved. Perhaps you have heard and witnessed this too. Such is very common. Some of this may in a sense be Scriptural language, but for the most part Scriptural thought is not behind the use of the language. They are simply saying for the

sinner to ask the Lord to save them, and that they are therewith saved in this asking and calling. But is that really what the Bible teaches? Is this really how a person is saved? Perhaps it would be well for us to get a deeper insight into the use of these words in the Bible and then to more fully understand what is involved in a sinner being saved.

## I. THE SCRIPTURAL USE OF THE EXPRESSION TO "CALL UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD"

A study of the Scriptures has led us to the conclusion that for the most part the expression "to call upon the name of the LORD" is a technical use of words with a distinctive meaning. Let us illustrate.

### Old Testament Scriptures

The first use of this expression in the Bible is found in Genesis 4:26. It involves the righteous line of Seth, son of Adam and Eve. It reads, "And to Seth, to him also was born a son; and he called his name Enos: then began men *to call upon the name of the LORD.*" We next find this expression in Genesis 12:8. Here, after coming into Canaan, we find that Abraham built "an altar unto the LORD, and *called upon the name of the LORD.*" Genesis 13:4 tells us that after an interlude in Egypt, he returned "unto the place of the altar, which he had made there at the first: and there Abram [Abraham] *called on the name of the LORD.*" Later the same language is used in connection with Isaac. This happened at Beersheba: "And he builded an altar there, and *called upon the name of the LORD,* and pitched his tent there: and there Isaac's servants digged a well" (Genesis 26:25).

The first time an expression is used tends to identify and define its usage. Thereafter it can be used as a point of reference in understanding the word. In these references in Genesis, from the very first one going back to Seth, we get the impression "to call upon the name of the LORD" means to worship God. It takes on this decided technical flavor, and even is expanded in the New Testament to identify followers of the Lord. It has reference to the worship of God and the lifestyle of those who worship God. It encompasses the life of trust and reliance upon God.

## New Testament Scriptures

Let us pinpoint some New Testament Scriptures that make use of such expressions having to do with calling upon the name of the Lord. The use of these expressions is quite interesting as well as being very informative.

”Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy *saints* at Jerusalem: And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind *all that call on thy name*” (Acts 9:13,14).

“And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. But all that heard him were amazed, and said: Is not this he that destroyed *them which called on this name* in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests?” (Acts 9:20,21).

- “Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with *all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord*, both theirs and ours” (I Corinthians 1:2).

- “Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with *them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart*” (II Timothy 2:22).

- “And if *ye call on the Father*, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man’s work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear” (I Peter 1:17).

In these Scriptures, “*saints*” and *they that call upon the name of the Lord* are used synonymously. *They that call upon the name of the Lord* is talking about Christians. It is a very fitting appellation. It is all-inclusive of the life of trust. One commentator said, “To call on this name is to confess it as being the bearer of salvation, to pray and to worship God in this name, and to expect all help in time and eternity from him who is revealed in the name” (Lenski). It is not talking about becoming a Christian as much as it is in being one. The life of prayer, and consequently trust, characterizes the Christian’s life.

### Acts 2:21 and Romans 10:13

This information being crystal clear, there is no reason why we can’t understand Acts 2:21 and perhaps consider Romans 10:13 in this same light.

Acts 2:21 reads, “And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Whether we understand the context of this Scripture (read the verse before) as leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem or the end of the world, the statement of truth is still the same. Those who are calling upon the name of the Lord will be saved. Christians by their lifestyle will be ready. It won’t do any good to call upon the Lord when that day has actually come. The book of Revelation ends by saying, “And he saith unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand. He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still. And, behold, I come quickly: and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be” (Revelation 22:10-12). The five foolish virgins, who were not ready, cried out, “Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh” (Matthew 25:11b-13).

The context of Romans 10:13, “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved,” is to be understood in the larger context of Jew and Gentile alike being accepted by God. The things that are said here in reference to calling upon the name of the Lord could be a panoramic view that encompasses the life spent in calling upon the name of the Lord or it could refer to the initiation into the Christian life. All of the things we have said about this expression characterizing the Christian life are true, but if it pertains specifically to becoming a Christian here, we must call upon the Lord in the way the Scriptures say.

## **II. “CALLING UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD” AND BEING SAVED (BECOMING A CHRISTIAN)**

Does the book of Acts, the book of conversions (and history of the early church), record any cases of men calling upon the name of the Lord to be saved in the sense that denominational preachers tell people to do today? Here specific cases are seen in the 3000 on Pentecost (Acts 2:36-41), the Samaritans (Acts 8:5,12), the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:27,35-39), Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:1-18; 22:12-16), Cornelius and his household

(Acts 10 and 11:13,14), Lydia and her household (Acts 16:14,15), the Philippian jailor (Acts 16:27-34), the Corinthians (Acts 18:8), and some disciples of John who got a deeper insight into the gospel (Acts 19:1-7). Today people are told to pray the “sinner’s prayer,” and to ask the Lord to save them, and that they are at that moment saved. We have yet to find anything like this in these accounts in the book of Acts. Let us “zero” in on some of the more explicit examples.

### **Baptized for the Remission of Sins**

Take note of the conversions on the day of Pentecost in the second chapter of Acts, the day the church was started (Acts 2:36-41). A vast number, after being told to “know assuredly” the truthfulness of that which they heard, were pricked in their hearts. They wanted to know what they must do. The apostle Peter under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit said, “*Repent and be baptized* every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ *for the remission of sins*, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost [Spirit]” (Acts 2:38). Then we read, “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). Having truly repented of their sins, remission of sins would come in connection with baptism (not in asking God for forgiveness independently of baptism).

### **“If You Believe With All Your Heart”**

Acts 8:35-38 present a very plain and explicit account of conversion to Christ. “Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus. And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.” Philip simply preached the simple gospel message, using Isaiah 53 as his text. Obviously as he expounded this message, the Ethiopian was told what he must do to accept it. So, as they rode along, he said, “See, here is water, what hinders me from being baptized?” What did Philip tell him? Preachers today would have

said, "You have to pray through first"? Is that what Philip told him? No, Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." He therewith confessed his faith, and without any further adieu he was baptized into Christ (Galatians 3:27). That was the nature of his "calling upon the name of the Lord." How simple! All of this is in harmony with Mark 16:16.

### **"Thy Prayer is Heard"**

Acts 10 contains a most interesting case of a man named Cornelius coming to the Lord. Read it. He was a Gentile earnestly seeking after the true God, and God used him to open up the gospel to the Gentile world. An angel appeared to him, and said, "Cornelius, thy prayer is heard." (Acts 10:31). Was his prayer heard in the sense that he was at that moment saved? No. He was told that a man by the name of Peter would come, "who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved" (Acts 11:14). Before this was fully accomplished, a charismatic outpouring of the Spirit occurred to demonstrate that the Gentiles should be accepted, prompting Peter to say, "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized?" (Acts 10:47). This phenomenal happening did not set aside Christ's plan of salvation. This same apostle Peter had told the believing Jews earlier on the day of Pentecost to repent and be baptized for the remission of sins. He then continued saying in Acts 2:39, "For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off [Ephesians 2:11-17], even as many as the Lord our God shall call." This included the household of Cornelius, and everyone who ever will be saved will receive the promise of salvation in this way. And from the example of Cornelius we conclude it is fitting for a sinner to pray in seeking after God (although this is the special privilege of Christians). It is only natural as he reaches out to God. But it is not fitting to think that a person can be saved by praying without doing what the Lord says.

### **"Be Baptized, and Wash Away Thy Sins, Calling on the Name of the Lord"**

A study of the conversion of the apostle Paul should clear up any misunderstanding about being saved by simply praying to be saved. A record of his conversion is found in Acts chapter

9, 22, and 26. We are first introduced to him as Saul of Tarsus, prime persecutor of Christians. On the way to Damascus to carry out such a mission, the Christ of eternity abruptly appeared to him in a light that was overwhelmingly brilliant. As we read on we find this appearance was to qualify him to be an apostle, as he accepted the gospel message. But in the meantime, he was blinded for three days and was praying (Acts 9:9,11). God sent a devout believer by the name of Ananias to convey the gospel message to him and to tell him of the Lord's plans in reference to him. Having done this, Ananias said, "And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and ***be baptized, and wash away thy sins***, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). Paul had been praying, but his sins were still there. Now he was to be baptized to get his sins washed away, "calling on the name of the Lord." It would be a cruel joke to tell a repentant sinner he needed to go ahead and be baptized to get his sins washed away, although he had been praying for three days, if it were not so. Saul therewith was baptized (the blood of Christ spiritually is applied to wash away sins in baptism, Romans 6:3-6; Revelation 1:5) and accepted the call to be an apostle.

### III. APPENDAGE CONSIDERATIONS

#### "Pray the Sinner's Prayer"

Before closing this study, it would be good, in particular, to look into what is called the "Sinner's Prayer." The alien sinner is told to "pray the sinner's prayer" and be saved. They have in mind Luke 18:13. It reads, "And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, ***God be merciful to me a sinner.***" This is given as a model of what a non-Christian must do to be saved. Just pray, and you are therewith saved. Certainly the alien sinner must come with such an attitude, or he can't be saved. But Luke 18:13 is not talking about the alien sinner. It is talking about Jews who have come into the temple to worship, one a Pharisee and the other a publican. Jews were God's Old Testament people, and the publican was a renegade Jew who had cooperated with the Romans, a Roman tax collector. He was in the category of chief of sinners to his fellow Jews. This particular one in Luke 18 is not self-righteous

like the Pharisee, but humbles himself, acknowledging his unworthiness before God. He is parallel to an errant Christian repenting, not an alien sinner accepting Christ. The alien sinner must repent and be baptized for the remission of sins to be saved.

### **An Altar in the Church?**

Also, as a student of the Scriptures, we have long been perplexed by men calling the front of the church building an altar. Sinners are urged to come to the altar and pray through. We are at a loss to understand this. In the Bible an altar was a raised platform of stone or earth upon which animal sacrifices were made. We are not under that old system any more. Could it be that the front of a church building being called an altar is a carry over from Catholicism? We understand that these people believe when the priest says his ritualistic words in the mass, the emblems turn into the body and blood of Christ. In essence, Christ is sacrificed all over again (although in their double talk they would seem to say this, yet deny it). Thus, the front of the church building would be called an altar where this takes place. Could this be the origin of this expression? However, any way that you look at it, it is not fittingly used in reference to Christianity. Christ has once and for all been sacrificed for us. We accepted this sacrifice when we repented and were baptized for the remission of sins.

### **Concluding Statement**

In conclusion, let us say that we must call upon the name of the Lord, but this is to be understood in the larger context of accepting and doing the will of the Lord. Otherwise it is meaningless. We must call upon the Lord in the way the Bible teaches. The words of the Lord Jesus Christ are true any way that we choose to look at them. "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

—*By James E. Gibbons*

***The SWORD and STAFF***  
***Post Office Box 147***  
***Mt. Airy, NC 27030 USA***