

ARE WE SAVED BY CHRIST, OR DO WE SAVE OURSELVES?

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Mat. 1:21: . . . for he shall save his people from their sins.

Acts 2:40: And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.

I. INTRODUCTION

These two verses present what appear to be conflicting concepts on their faces: are we saved by Christ, or must we somehow save ourselves? The answer to this question can be quite confusing, until we understand that the answer itself revolves around the type of salvation under consideration in the context of each scripture. Ultimately, we will see that we are indeed saved by Christ with regard to eternity, but we must also save ourselves “here and now”! The bottom line is that these Scriptures are dealing with two different “types” of salvation taught in the Bible.

The fact that there are two different types of salvation taught in Scripture is a VERY important principle. Depending on our understanding of this concept, we will either be prevented from “rightly dividing the word of God” or we will be greatly assisted in doing so. There will be endless confusion and contradiction found throughout the Bible if we do not see this important point.

One very pertinent example of this is found in Romans 10:13: For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. This verse has caused untold confusion in the religious world! It can only be clearly understood, however, if we keep in mind this primary principle of bible study: **THERE ARE TWO DIFFERENT TYPES OF SALVATION TAUGHT IN SCRIPTURE!** We will come back to this verse later, after we have examined this concept more fully.

II. TWO TYPES OF SALVATION

Primitive Baptists usually refer to the two types of salvation as “conditional time salvation” (or “time salvation” for short), and “eternal salvation”. This distinction is essential in “rightly dividing” the word of God; without it, many people end up thinking that efforts of man are a part of our eternal salvation. Truly there ARE many situations wherein salvation can only be achieved through the efforts of man. However, these situations do NOT involve eternal salvation.

To understand this distinction, we first need to understand what the terms “saved” or “salvation” really mean. We can go to the Greek, or the Oxford English Dictionary, but I believe it is always best to let Scripture interpret Scripture. To that end, let’s look at Acts 2:21 and Joel 2:32. In Acts 2:21, we read that, “And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” This verse is quoting an Old Testament passage from Joel 2:32: “And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the LORD shall be delivered.” In this case, “saved” and “delivered” are interchangeable; thus, we can conclude that “salvation” is a “deliverance”. The question is, what are we being delivered from?

If I came running into your house with your toddler in my arms, and said, “I just

saved her!”, you would immediately want to ask, “Saved her from what? Did she nearly drown? Did she nearly get run over by a car? Was she almost bitten by a snake?” It would be important to you to know what your child had been saved from.

Likewise, when we read the words “saved” in Scripture, we should ask, “Saved from what?” When Peter cried out “Lord, save me!” in Matthew 14:30, as he was beginning to sink into the sea, was he asking the Lord to deliver him from burning in hell, or rather to deliver him from drowning in the water? Clearly, he was praying for deliverance from drowning in the water! When Paul wrote in Romans 10:1 that his “heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved,” was he begging God to deliver his countrymen from hell into heaven, or was he rather asking Him to deliver them from ignorance into the knowledge of the good news of Christ’s sufficiency? Clearly, as we will see, he was praying for deliverance from ignorance.

When it comes to eternal salvation, the answer to “saved from what” is clear: we are saved from the eternal penalty of sin. When it comes to conditional time salvation, it is further clear that we can be “saved” from many things: from divorce (by being faithful to our wives); from drug addiction (by never taking drugs); from specific sins in our daily lives (by studying the word of God and staying faithful to its teachings).

Let’s examine each type of salvation.

III. ETERNAL SALVATION

We have already seen that “eternal salvation” refers to the salvation we have from the penalty of sin. One of the most basic verses referring to this type of salvation is Matthew 1:21: “for He shall save His people from their sins.” Notice that there are no conditions placed upon this eternal salvation: HE shall save; His people have no active role in eternal salvation!

A. *Eternal Salvation is wrought by God alone.*

Without getting too deep into other doctrines, our basic understanding of the depravity of man in nature dictates that unregenerate man can play no part in his own salvation, including his own regeneration. 1 Corinthians 2:14: But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. Notice what Paul is saying here: the “natural man” (i.e., the man who is only born naturally and has never been born spiritually) not only WILL NOT receive anything that is of (or originating from) the Spirit of God, but he CANNOT receive such things! Why is he unable to receive them? Because he is “dead in trespasses and in sins” (Eph. 2:1). A dead man cannot perform any actions or exercise any will within the realm to which he is dead. Thus, as the physically dead corpse cannot move or think within the physical realm, the spiritually dead man cannot move or think within the spiritual realm.

This means that a spiritually dead man cannot even receive the gospel message. Isn’t it clear in Scripture that the gospel message itself is a “spiritual” message? Therefore, it must be a basic Bible principle that the gospel message is a “thing of the Spirit of God.” Jesus Himself declared, “[T]he words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.” John 6:63. Therefore, applying the plain language

and clear meaning of 1 Cor. 2:14, a man who is spiritually dead (unregenerated) cannot receive any spiritual thing – especially a spiritual message such as the gospel!

Consider the following verses about how eternal salvation is accomplished:

Hebrews 1:3 tells us that “. . . when he [Jesus Christ] had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.” How were our sins purged? By Himself.

Isaiah 53:5 tells us that “with his stripes we are healed.” How were we healed? With HIS stripes.

Romans 5:10 states that “when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son. . . .” How were we reconciled to God? By the death of His Son.

Hebrews 9:12 tells us that it was not “by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.” How was eternal redemption obtained? By His own blood.

Hebrews 9:26 declares that “once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” How were our sins put away? By the sacrifice of Himself.

Finally, Hebrews 10:14 is clear that “by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.” How were we perfected? HE perfected us.

I could go on and on, but these Scriptures show us that our eternal salvation is solely in the hands of God. He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4; Rom. 8:29), justified us by the precious blood of Christ (1 Pet. 1:18-21; Rom. 8:29), and He quickens us by the direct operation of the Holy Spirit at some point between conception and death (Rom. 8:29-30; Eph. 2:1-3; John 3:1-9). We must conclude that eternal salvation is wrought solely and completely at the hand of God!

B. Eternal Salvation is unconditional.

By necessity, then, if eternal salvation is solely of God, it must be unconditional on the part of man. We understand that God the Father chose His people in Christ “before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4), that “whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). Children of God are called “elect according to the foreknowledge of God” (1 Pet. 1:2).

We understand that Christ went to Calvary to die for those same people who were chosen in Him before the foundation of the world. See John 17:1-2: “These words spake Jesus, and lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee: As thou hast given him power over all flesh, *that he should give eternal life to **as many as thou hast given him.***” When He died on Calvary, He died for a specific people, not some undefined mass who might or might not make it to heaven one day. “Moreover WHOM he did predestinate, . . . THEM he also justified: and whom he justified” (Rom.

8:30)(emphasis mine). This justification occurred by His death on the cross.

How is this eternal salvation applied to our lives here in this world? We have already seen that an unregenerate man – even though he may be an elect child of God – cannot receive, or even understand, the spiritual things that God has done for us while in his natural state. The only conclusion we can reach is that each and every child of God who has been chosen in Christ, and for whom Christ died, WILL NECESSARILY be regenerated at some point in their existence here on earth. To put it another way, at some point between conception and death, each and every elect of God WILL be born again! Jesus said, “Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye MUST be born again.” John 3:7 (emphasis mine).

The question then arises, “How does this new birth occur?” The Bible answer is that it occurs by the direct operation of the Holy Spirit, and without any means of man whatsoever – i.e., it is unconditional. That is, the new birth is dependent on no means of man – including the preaching of the gospel.

This is a very different position than that taken by either the Arminian or the Calvinist/Reformed theologians. The Arminian claims that a person must exercise his own will and “accept” eternal salvation as presented in the gospel in order for it to apply to that person. In other words, he must do something in order to get born again. If he never “accepts” the gospel message, he will die and go to hell.

Many who are called “Calvinist” or “Reformed”, on the other hand, hold the view that before the elect child of God can be regenerated, he must hear the gospel message, and that if he really is an elect child of God he will of necessity receive and believe it upon being born again. Both views are sometimes called “gospel means of regeneration”, or simply “gospel regeneration”. But what do we read in Scripture about the new birth?

(*NOTE: I want to point out that this is a different issue than the question whether all the elect of God will eventually hear and believe the gospel at some point after being born again; many of those who believe in sovereign grace hold the position that God will somehow get the gospel message to every elect child of God at some point in his life, and that he will then believe it if he truly is a child of God. That is a topic to elaborate on at a later time, but suffice it to say that Primitive Baptists do not believe that the gospel will necessarily get to every regenerated elect child of God. This is one reason we believe so strongly in preaching the gospel throughout the world!)

In the third chapter of John, we find a man named Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night. He salutes Him, but before he can even really begin questioning Jesus about His ministry, Jesus jumps right into the theological truth of regeneration: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). He emphasizes this fact a couple of verses farther along: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Jesus then explains to Nicodemus how the new birth occurs: “The wind bloweth where it listeth [wishes], and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

Notice what Jesus is saying here: the new birth does not occur at the behest of men! Rather, it is subject ONLY to the sovereign will of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, every single new birth occurs *in exactly the same way*: “so [thus, in this way] is

EVERY ONE that is born of the Spirit!” This means that, if we find any example anywhere in the Scripture where one was regenerated apart from hearing the gospel, or any other means of men, then everyone who is ever born again is regenerated without any means of men. We find such an example in the first chapter of Luke.

In Luke 1, we read about Mary visiting her cousin Martha after the angel revealed to Mary that she was to be the earthly mother of the Christ. After she was made with Child by the Holy Ghost, she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was carrying John the Baptist in her womb. When she came into Elizabeth’s presence and greeted her, “the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost” (Luke 1:41). Elizabeth further explained what happened: “For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, *the babe leaped in my womb for joy*” (Luke 1:44). Remember, the “natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:14), and since “joy” is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), this means that the babe in her womb – John the Baptist – must have been born again, otherwise he would have had no joy!

Clearly, the gospel was not “preached” to John the Baptist. Thus, we see that he was regenerated in the womb without ever having heard the gospel message. He had not even formed the capacity to think or speak words, and he certainly had no ability to “accept Christ” or otherwise exercise his own will in any way that would have been effective in achieving his own eternal salvation. The Bible does not teach “innocence” until a certain “age of accountability”; rather, David says that even infants are corrupted by the sin of Adam: “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 51:5). The only conclusion we can reach is that John the Baptist was regenerated in his mother’s womb, apart from any of his own efforts or any other means of men, including hearing the gospel.

Paul tells us in Galatians, “And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.” Gal. 4:6. This is a description of the application of our eternal salvation to our hearts through the new birth, and it clearly involves no means of men. The bottom line is that eternal salvation is applied to the elect child of God through regeneration, which is accomplished by the direct, immediate, and sovereign action of the Holy Spirit, and is unconditional.

IV. TIME SALVATION

Let us now deal with the concept of “time salvation.” What do Primitive Baptists believe the Bible says about this type of salvation? Does such a concept find any support in Scripture?

A. *Time salvation is a Scriptural doctrine.*

The first question we must ask when dealing with any doctrine is, “Does the Bible teach it?” In the case of “conditional time salvation,” the actual title of the doctrine does not appear in Scripture. The title is simply a convenient way to refer to the teaching, but the question is not whether the title itself appears in Scripture, but whether the Scripture teaches the doctrine. There are other instances where a theological term itself may not appear in Scripture, but the concept it represents clearly exists. The best example of this is the theological term “Trinity,” which never appears by name in the Bible, but is clearly taught! See, e.g., 1 John 5:7.

In Exodus 14, we find the children of Israel facing the Red Sea before them, and the Egyptian army behind them. Their situation looked desperate, and they began

to cry out to the Lord. But Moses told them, “Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will shew to you *to day*: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever.” Ex. 14:13. Later we read that “Thus the LORD saved Israel *that day* out of the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea shore.” Ex. 14:30.

Clearly the Israelites here were not clamoring for “eternal salvation”. Had they wanted to be eternally saved, they could have run back upon the spears of the Egyptians or drowned themselves in the Red Sea! The salvation under consideration was not eternal, but temporal: it was called a “today”, or a “that day”, salvation. This is a clear reference to a type of salvation that was timely and not eternal.

In Matthew 8, we read of a similar situation. Verses 23 through 27 give the account of the disciples on the sea in the midst of a storm, while Jesus was asleep in the ship. When they woke Him up, they cried, “*Lord save us*: we perish!” Mat. 8:25. Were they asking Him to save them eternally? No! They were afraid of drowning in the sea, and needed to be delivered from the stormy waters!

One final passage that we should examine is found in 1 Peter 3:21. In this verse, Peter has been discussing Noah and the Flood, and makes the comparison that “The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now *save* us.” Does this mean that a child of God must submit to water baptism in order to go to heaven? No! This passage is speaking of another type of salvation, and NOT eternal salvation!

Clearly, at least in some passages of Scripture, the term “save” or “saved” or “salvation” does not always refer to eternal salvation.

B. Time salvation IS conditional.

Simply put, conditional time salvation is indeed “conditional.” This means that a child of God can do something to achieve it, or can do something to fall short of it! At the most basic level, this type of “time” salvation is conditioned on our *obedience* to God in this life. This was what Peter was speaking of in Acts 2:40, when he told them to “save yourselves from this untoward [crooked] generation.” He was speaking NOT of eternal salvation, but of a “time salvation” that was conditional on what they did or did not do.

Let us look at some examples of “conditional time salvation,” that demonstrate that this type of salvation is dependent in large part upon whether we are obedient to God or not. Perhaps nowhere in Scripture is this summed up better than in Isaiah Chapter 1: “If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.” Isa. 1:19-20. In other words, there are blessings in obedience here and now, but these blessings are conditioned upon our willingness to be obedient to God! “Eating the good of the land” is a conditional blessing (salvation) that is contingent on our actions (being “willing and obedient”). If, on the other hand, we “refuse and rebel,” we will not receive this blessing but rather will be “devoured with the sword.” Again, the receiving of the blessing is conditioned on our obedience.

What about membership in church? There is certainly a conditional time salvation in becoming a member of the visible aspect of the Kingdom of God! In Luke 16:16, Jesus makes the following statement: “The law and the prophets were until John:

since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man *presseth* into it.” The word “presseth” means “to force” or “to crowd oneself into” (Strong’s Concordance). Can a person “force” or “crowd himself into” eternal heaven? No! But he CAN “press into” the Kingdom of God that is “here and now” – i.e., the Church, which is the visible aspect of the Kingdom on earth. This is another example of conditional time salvation: a blessing that we will only experience if we are obedient to God and join one of His churches.

We have already mentioned 1 Pet. 3:21, wherein we read that baptism “saves” us. Once again, we must ask, “saved from what?” In this case, the salvation is clearly not “eternal”, but rather involves conditional time salvation – a “here and now” deliverance that occurs when we are baptized. We are told here that baptism is an “answer”: it is “the answer of a good conscience toward God.” If we never submit to baptism, we will never have relief from this nagging question of conscience; when we DO submit, we are “saved” from our conscience’s continual prodding to be obedient to God.

There are many other examples of conditional time salvation. We can save ourselves from alcoholism by abstaining from alcohol, or only drinking in moderation. We can save ourselves from drug addiction by avoiding the use of any drugs. We can save ourselves from the breakup of our marriages by following the biblical pattern for our homes. The list goes on and on.

But before we leave this topic, I want to look at one more issue and examine one more set of Scriptures found in the 10th chapter of Romans, which give us another important example of “conditional time salvation.”

C. Gospel Salvation: Rom. 10

In Romans 10, we find one of the clearest examples of conditional time salvation in Scripture. Unfortunately, many people mistake the Apostle Paul’s writings in this chapter for “eternal salvation.” This chapter actually contains one of the most misunderstood and misapplied verses in the Bible: “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Rom. 10:13). Our Arminian friends believe that this verse teaches that you must call upon the Lord in order to be saved eternally. That is, before you are born again, and IN ORDER TO get born again, you must call upon the name of the Lord. Our Calvinist and Reformed friends believe this verse teaches that, if someone truly is an elect child of God, he WILL call upon the Lord in faith, and that if he never does this then he really was not an elect child of God to begin with.

However, I suggest that when we apply our framework of analysis for eternal versus time salvation, and ask ourselves, “Saved from what?”, we will find that this verse (along with the entire chapter 10) is speaking of conditional time salvation instead of eternal salvation. Let’s look at the context of the entire chapter in order to answer this question.

(*NOTE: This type of conditional time salvation is also often referred to as “gospel salvation”, or “conversion,” and rightly so. I mention this because it might be helpful to some who have never heard of the term “time salvation” to correlate these terms together as they attempt to rightly divide the word.)

Earlier in this chapter, we read about a people with a “zeal of God”, whom Paul desires to be “saved”. This is what Paul says about them:

- 1 Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved.
- 2 For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.
- 3 For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.
- 4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.

Notice that Paul describes these Jews as having a “zeal of God.” The word “zeal” means an “ardent feeling” or an “eager desire” (The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary On Historical Principles, Third Edition 1952). It comes from the Greek word ζήλος *zēlos*, which literally means “heat,” and figuratively denotes “zeal” or “ardor” in a favorable sense, or a “fervent mind” (Strong’s Concordance). It connotes the idea of “pursuing something with fervor.”

In the KJV translation from the Greek phrase, it is rightly translated “zeal OF GOD”. The newer translations miss this; in fact, every other translation I have seen renders this phrase “zeal FOR God” instead of “zeal OF God.” The problem with this rendering is that it is NOT the sense of the Greek phrase at all! The Greek word “God” in this passage is in the genitive case, which denotes “possession” – i.e., it belongs to God. In this case, then, the point that Paul is making is that their zeal comes from God! It is not just a “fire in their bellies” FOR God, but rather something that has been given to them FROM God. This zeal that is within them emanates from God, and was placed within them in the new birth.

Which brings us to a critical point: the fact that these Jews possessed a zeal that had been given to them from God means that they were already regenerated! We know that the “natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:14), and therefore these were not simply “natural men.” Rather, they were men who possessed a spiritual nature and were zealous to serve God!

The problem is stated in verse 2, however: they had this zeal of God, “but not according to knowledge.” Their zeal was an “ignorant” zeal, not informed by the truth of the gospel. In fact, they were “going about to establish their own righteousness,” and had “not submitted themselves” to God’s righteousness (which is found only in the imputed righteousness of Christ). The gospel clearly teaches that Christ has imputed His righteousness to us (v. 4), yet they were still trying to “work their way to heaven.”

Clearly, then, the “salvation” under consideration here could NOT be eternal salvation, since these Jews were already regenerated, and therefore already in possession of eternal salvation. So, what kind of salvation IS being taught here? What is it that Paul is desiring them to be “saved” from? In this case, he is referring to a conditional salvation in this time world: salvation from ignorance of the gospel! His countrymen were regenerated, but instead of resting in the good news that Christ has done it all, they were wearing themselves out trying to work their way to heaven.

To put it another way, these people were “saved” eternally, but they were lost in a timely or temporal sense because they refused to believe the gospel. As we keep reading in this chapter, we find that Paul emphasizes this point by telling them that the Law service required them to keep the Law (v. 5), but the righteousness that is

of faith doesn't ask if we have to work our way up to heaven (v. 6), nor does it ask if we have to figure out how to cheat death (v. 7), but rather it (faith) speaks as follows:

- 8 But what saith it? The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach;
- 9 That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.
- 10 For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.
- 11 For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.
- 12 For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him.
- 13 For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

In verse 8 he tells them that the word of faith is already in their mouth and heart, and they are able to speak this word of faith. Why? Surely not because they have worked it up within themselves to do so, while yet dead in sins, in order to try to get themselves born again! No! The reason the word of faith is present in their mouths and hearts is that they have ALREADY been born again!

Then, in verses 9-13, he sets forth the clear path to deliverance through believing the gospel message, culminating in the admonition to believe, confess, and call on Christ. Once again, the idea is NOT to call on Him in order to get born again, but rather to call on Him because they have ALREADY been born again. A dead man cannot call on anyone for anything! But a living man can and should call upon the One Who has already delivered him from eternal damnation and is able to deliver him from the continual condemnation of the sin burden here and now.

Ultimately, in this chapter, the answer to our question "Saved from what?" is "saved from ignorance and unbelief." This is a conditional time salvation here in this time world, sometimes called "gospel salvation" or "gospel deliverance" or "conversion" by Primitive Baptists.

CONCLUSION

There are other examples in Scripture of those who are children of God in possession of eternal salvation, but who did not enjoy the conditional time salvation in certain areas here in this life. King David comes to mind; due to his unfaithfulness in the matter of Bathsheba, his family was shattered and fell apart. King Solomon is another example; as wise as he was at the beginning of his reign, by the end of it he had "loved many strange women" and not only slipped into idolatry himself, but permitted the nation of Israel to do so as well.

We began this article by asking, "Are we saved by Christ, or do we save ourselves?" The answer is that BOTH are true! We are saved eternally by Christ, but we "save ourselves" from many troubles of life by being willing and obedient!

Thankfully, the eternal destiny of God's children is in the sovereign hands of God. But our salvation from many things here on earth – such as the consequences of sin, the struggle of trying to work our way to heaven, the despair of not grasping the full extent of the finished work of Christ, and even the failure to walk in faith in His blood – is in large part dependent upon our faithfulness to God's word.

As a final thought, perhaps the best advice I could give anyone who is studying to “rightly divide” the Scriptures is something I’ve already stated: when you see the word saved, ask “Saved from what?” And as a dear old deacon once told me, if the type salvation in question has an “if” in it – i.e., if it depends in any way on the efforts or participation of man – it is NOT eternal salvation!

I hope these thoughts are helpful in some way to our understanding of Scripture.

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