

## Salvation Pinned Down?

March 2009

As Jack walked across the street and heard the cars screeching to a halt, he turned to see the cars just inches away from his legs. The taxi cab driver laid on his horn and that was the last straw. Jack pounded the hood with both hands and screamed, "Leave me alone!" He then ran to the other side of the road. So many things were running through his mind. He had just been diagnosed with cancer, his wife was leaving him for another man, and he was working through a psychological illness where he can hear voices that tell him to kill himself. Jack was met on the other side of the street by a man with a giant sign that read, "Repent or go to Hell." Jack couldn't handle this man yelling in his face, "Jesus will save your soul!" Jack thought, "My soul's fine. It's the rest of me that needs help." But sure enough, in true fire and brimstone yelling, the man decided his eternal fate without asking one thing about his life or him.

Although this fictional story is a characterization of several types, the descriptions help us to see from a different perspective the topic of our discussion this month. Salvation, a very large word, has been defined and redefined. I have noticed throughout my studies that groups tend to define it according to the distinctive of their group. I think that salvation suffers this projection of our own desires and descriptions upon it.

The doctrine of salvation usually is redefined by entire segments of Christianity, such as Catholicism, the Orthodox

Churches, and Protestantism. Many groups have some similarities on what it means to be saved, but some of them have narrowed salvation down to something so slim that, although not being doctrinally incorrect, does not reflect the entire scope of salvation. On the other hand, others have such a wideness in salvation that it has no qualifications or criteria at all. There is a robust balance between both views in which rests a more biblical framework for understanding salvation in its fullest use in Scripture.

God's salvation of humanity must reflect His own grace and greatness. It must not be narrowed down, for God cannot be put in a box, so neither can His works. It must not be too wide, for God's character demands certain criteria for salvation. The source and object for salvation has always been Jesus and His death on the cross. The Bible clearly lays out in John 14:6 and some other passages that Jesus is the only way into eternal life. This much of the doctrine of salvation must not be any wider than Jesus, the narrow gate. Universalism overreaches this key truth.

Salvation maintains under the narrow gate Jesus a very wide spectrum of action. The Greek term often used in the New Testament to speak of this miraculous work of God is soterion, the verb is sozo. This word in different contexts can mean to save (with a militaristic bent, to rescue), to deliver (also militaristic), and to heal. In English, the word save is often chosen. But this is one of

the reasons passages like the one where the four friends lower the paralytic to Jesus and He says to a man who needs healing, “Your sins are forgiven. Get up and walk” greatly confuse us. Salvation was a holistic work of God. It touches the sinner’s situation in life, not just one part of it.

Another aspect of biblical salvation is tied up in salvation working two different ways. We are not just saved out of something, like out of our sins or from this world or from the sinful nature. We are also saved into the Kingdom of God, into God’s grace, and into God’s family. Salvation has a very wide scope of effect in the believer’s life. Through salvation, God didn’t just take you out of your bad situation. He simultaneously put you in a very good situation. The power of salvation must not be limited either. God made us new creatures in salvation. He literally re-created you with different senses and different leanings.

These different ways in the Bible of explaining salvation come from images used to describe the results of God’s saving work. Some of these include being reborn (John 3), being adopted into God’s family (Rom 8:15, 23), the building of a house (Eph 2:19-21; 1 Pet 2:4-10), citizens of the Kingdom (Eph 2:19), those who are chosen or predestined (Col 3:12; 1 Thess 1:4; 1 Pet 2:4; Rev 17:14), to name a few. There are many different images used to describe salvation, but the entire New Testament makes some key points of salvation very clear.

First, we are saved on the basis or foundation of Jesus. In the metaphors of the body of believers in 1 Corinthians 12 and of the holy house being built unto God in 1 Peter 2, we see that Jesus is the cornerstone or the head. Jesus is large and in charge. The New Testament is clear on this point! Any

“salvation” that does not maintain clearly Jesus as the one saving and the one for whom you are saved is not Christian salvation.

The Bible clearly defines also the transformation of the human being. In 2 Corinthians 5:16-20, Paul clearly lays out that we are new creatures. The old has passed away and the new has come. In Galatians 1, Paul affirms this change in his own life when he who used to kill Christians now led them into Gentile missions. You must have a life change if you are saved and, although it may not be immediate, a changing of your desires, your thought patterns, and your lifestyle. This change does not occur because the Bible said so, but it naturally flows from God’s miraculous work in your life and your desire to please Him. So there needs to be a heart change with visible implications!

Finally, salvation is the beginning of the process of becoming the person God has created you to be. God has a vision for you, a goal in mind when he saves you from this world and into His Kingdom. He wants to make a unique and wonderful person dedicated to Him and His Kingdom. The miraculous initiation to this transformation is salvation, the event which spurs on a process in the life of the disciple. Now, after God has begun the work, the disciple learns to follow God’s leading and obey His proddings. But it all starts with salvation.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, evangelism tended to move toward making a decision to accept Christ. This is not a wrong approach, but I include it with those narrow doctrinal attempts to pin down salvation. There are people who made decisions to follow Christ in the Gospels, such as Zacchaeus, the disciples themselves

who chose to leave their businesses and follow Christ, and other groups. One of the new trends in the church nowadays is to bring people into God's house, blur the lines of believer and unbeliever, and they sort of just become a believer over time, as if time itself brings them into the fold. I believe that a message must be preached and heard and responded to. But I don't believe the response must be a volitional acceptance of Christ alone. I believe that people respond differently to God.

One of the problems I have with a decision-based evangelistic program is that it is mechanical and that it has everything figured out. Some people did not chose for themselves to be saved, like the paralytic whose friends brought him to Jesus. There is no phrase in his whole story of him accepting the healing or salvation that Christ gave. It's on the basis of his friends' faith that he is healed, and Christ proclaims his salvation. But it is imperative that a person responds to the Gospel! I am not saying that decision-based evangelism is wrong or inaccurate in any way. But I am making a case for a broader understanding of what it means to be saved. I can make a decision that doesn't change the way I live.

Another recurring trend in some churches is for people to be saved a million times. I have friends who prayed the prayer of salvation or went to the altar twenty times in their teenage years. Many of their reasons were different. Perhaps a good fire-and-brimstone message scared them into Jesus' arms. Perhaps they saw the beauty of God's grace and ran there. Either way, salvation didn't "stick" for them for quite a while because they felt that the life change was not present. It is time for a balance in our doctrine of salvation.

There are those who believe that once you are saved, you are always saved. There are others that believe you can fall away from God's grace and lose your salvation. I have written an article earlier called "Losing Ground" this is concerned with this very idea of apostasy, falling away from the faith. So you know that I believe you can lose your salvation, but it must be an active attempt. However, I see the other side of the issue in the arguments of those who are "once saved always saved" folks. I believe in a balance on this issue. God's grace is so powerful that it saves for life! But it does not take away our free wills. If we choose to reject the work that God is continuously doing in us, we don't become prisoners to that same powerful grace. Once you are in the palm of God's hand, you stay there until you, and only you, can willfully choose to leave.

As we close out this article on salvation, I cannot get over the complete, comprehensive, and holistic way that God saves us out of our former way of life into a new way of life that glorifies Him. In fact, before sin invaded the human nature, we were tracking with God in His plans for us. He has found a way to cut through all the sin and disobedience in our lives to bring us into a saving and reconciled relationship with Him. His grace saves us in all the facets of our being from our relationship with Him and others to the way that we use our minds for His glory to the actions we take to bring Him joy. One undeniable note about our salvation that God our Hero has provided: He took a monster for the devil and made me a monster for the Kingdom!