

The Process of Salvation

I. Foundational Premises

The conclusions one draws are heavily influenced by the basic and foundational assumptions or premises one brings to the question at issue. The premises which underlie this study are as follows:

- 1) **That there is an objective right and wrong.** We live in a philosophical climate dominated by the theory of evolution which holds that life is a product of blind chance. There is no plan behind man's existence and, hence, ultimately no purpose to it. If there is no plan and no purpose to existence, then it follows that whatever moral or ethical standards mankind may have are purely subjective. Right and wrong have no meaning in and of themselves but only what a particular group or society agrees to recognize at any given time. If no objective values of right and wrong exist then there is also no objective basis by which to judge behavior and attitudes. If right and wrong is subjective there can be no real virtue or heroism nor can there be any real villainy, baseness or wickedness. To praise the works of a Mother Teresa is just as hypocritical as to condemn the actions of a Stalin. The actions of both a terrorist and the rescue worker who rushes to the aid of the terrorist's victims are totally amoral. In the absence of an objective value of what is right and what is wrong it is meaningless to discuss the topic of salvation because ultimately there is nothing from which to be saved. Every action, desire and attitude is morally equivalent to any other.
- 2) **That an eternal, omnipotent, omnipresent, consistent and unchanging God is the one who has determined what the objective values of right and wrong are.** It is not the purpose of this study to present the extensive and persuasive evidence for the existence of God or that He possesses the characteristics mentioned above. That He does exist and possesses these characteristics is assumed as axiomatic. It is enough for the purposes of this study to say that God's moral standards are internally consistent, that they apply equally to every society and culture and that they have remained, and will remain, the same in every era or historical age.
- 3) **That God has communicated His moral standards to mankind.** If God has established an objective code of right and wrong which He expects mankind to follow then it is only logical that He would have somehow communicated that moral standard. In one sense the knowledge of right and wrong is inherent within each person. In his book *The Abolition of Man* C.S. Lewis has admirably demonstrated that most, if not all, societies seem to have a common understanding of such basics as the wrongness of murder and the virtue of respecting one's parents. But in addition to this "Tao," as Lewis terms it, or Natural Law, one of the premises of this study is that God has communicated His will to mankind in, and through, the Bible. The Bible is not merely the words of man about God's will but, on the contrary, is actually the inspired

and inerrant Word of God. Among the things implied by “inerrant” are that the Bible is internally consistent, it does not contradict itself, it was accurately recorded in written form and has been accurately transmitted to us. It may also be said that, for the most part, it has been accurately translated. In this study the Bible is regarded as the objective standard from which the process of salvation will be derived and described. As such it is worth noting that it is by the standard of His Word that God will judge the actions and attitudes of people, not by any man-made creed or systematic theology no matter how popular it may be. God cannot, and will not, bend His eternal and objective standards to accommodate our desires. “...Let God be true, and every man a liar...” (Romans 3:4 NIV)

II. The Need For Salvation

Before discussing the process of salvation it is necessary first to define what is meant by salvation and to explain why salvation is necessary.

For the purposes of this study salvation is narrowly defined as “deliverance from God’s wrath” (see 1 Thessalonians 5:9). Salvation is actually far more comprehensive than this, but this is the core issue. It should be noted that once a person becomes subject to, or the object of, God’s wrath he is incapable of providing his own escape from it. Numerous Scriptures point out that it is God Himself who provides the means of escape or deliverance through Jesus Christ. It is beyond the scope of this study to explore in detail God’s provision or Christ’s role in the salvation process. The focus will instead be on how man may appropriate the salvation which is offered to him. The essential fact which must be kept in mind, however, is that according to what God has revealed to us in the Scriptures, Christ is the sole and exclusive means of salvation. If there is any other means or method of escaping God’s wrath, it has not been revealed. (For example, refer to John 14:6, Acts 4:12, Galatians 1:6-9 and 1 Timothy 2:5) Those who claim, no matter how sincere they may be, that other faiths or religions are merely different paths to God are mistaken.

But the question is why do people need salvation? How do we become subject to God’s wrath? Simply put, God’s wrath is incurred when we sin. Scripture defines sin as lawlessness (see 1 John 3:4), that is, either actively breaking a prohibition or by refraining from action when God requires it (see James 4:17). In other words, God holds us accountable when we violate one of the objective moral standards which He has established. The Bible makes it very clear that the penalty for sin is death (see, for example, Ezekiel 33:13, Romans 6:23, Ephesians 2:1, Colossians 2:13).

It is important to make a distinction here between physical death and spiritual death. Physical death is a consequence of Adam’s sin. That one sin has subjected all of mankind to physical death. Some hold that each person dies because we each inherit Adam’s guilt. Kenneth Taylor’s rendition of Ephesians 2:3 notwithstanding (see the Living Bible and the New Living Translation) the Bible makes it very clear that guilt is not inherited. Each person is held responsible only for his own sin. This principle is explicitly stated in Genesis 18:25, Deuteronomy 24:16, 2 Kings 14:6, Jeremiah 31:29-30, Ezekiel 18:1-32, Matthew 16:27 and implied in many other passages. Even if the principle were not explicitly stated it could easily be inferred. If Adam’s guilt were inherited then either Christ could not have been born as a

human being, or He could not have been sinless. In either case, He would be disqualified as the Savior. Though God does not hold anyone morally responsible or guilty because of what Adam did, we all die physically just as if we were guilty for what he did. One of the purposes for Christ's coming was to redress this injustice. It is in this sense that God is the actual, not merely the potential, "...Savior of all men..." (1 Timothy 4:10) regardless of their relationship to Christ. All, not merely some, will be resurrected from the dead (see John 5:28-29, Revelation 20:11-15. The general resurrection of the dead may also be inferred from passages such as 1 Corinthians 15:12-23, though the primary emphasis is on the bodily resurrection of those who belong to Christ.)

But while none of his descendants is held accountable for Adam's sin, each of us is responsible for our own sin. Scripture indicates that nature itself was altered by the introduction of sin into the world (see Romans 8:19-21). It is possible that along with the general decay to which creation was subjected that certain vulnerabilities were also introduced into human nature which make us far more susceptible to sin. Be that as it may, the fact remains that sin is not inherited. We become guilty because we deliberately choose to violate God's objective moral standards. There are hints that God does not impute sin where the individual does not understand that he is committing wrong. Culpability increases with knowledge and the capacity to know. A child is born innocent, guiltless and not accountable, but gradually becomes accountable as it matures. Only God knows when moral innocence is lost and when wrongdoing is accounted as actual sin. It probably is at a different point in each person's development. What is certain is that, except for Jesus, no morally responsible person has remained sinless. Each one of us has deliberately violated God's standards and as a result is under a death sentence. Though the actual penalty will not be carried out until the judgment, Scripture refers to those who are under the penalty as being dead in the present. In God's eyes the sinner is judicially dead and is on "death row" waiting for the penalty to be carried out in fact. The time between the incurring of guilt and physical death may be compared to the time granted to a criminal to appeal for a commutation of sentence. No appeals will be heard after physical death.

At the beginning of this section salvation was defined as "deliverance from God's wrath." In light of this discussion it might also be defined as "rescue from the penalty of sin" or "the commutation or pardon of our spiritual death sentence."

III. What Salvation Must Accomplish

Salvation, by definition, must provide reprieve from a sinner's spiritual death sentence. But there are at least two other requirements. There can be no salvation unless God can "...be just and the one who justifies..." (Romans 3:26 NIV)

- 1) **Be Just.** God will never violate His own standards in order to save anyone. He cannot, and will not, overlook sin. It must be paid for. Since sin carries a death penalty, the penalty must be paid in any workable scheme of salvation.
- 2) **Be the One Who Justifies.** On the other hand, God is love and will do everything short of compromising His own justice in order to save the condemned sinner. But how can a sinner be justified? As Psalm 49:7-8 says, "No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him— the

ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough—” The context of this statement is in regard to material wealth. No amount of material possessions can ever equal the value of a person. Whatever ransom is given on behalf of sinners must be of at least equal value. This principle was clearly stated in the Mosaic Law by the words “...life for life...” and similar phrases. (For example, see Exodus 21:23-25, Leviticus 24:17-22, Numbers 35:31 among others.) The reason one person cannot provide the ransom for another is that we all alike have sinned and are ourselves in need of ransom. If man is going to be ransomed at all, it must be God who ransoms him because it is beyond man’s own capability.

As previously noted, it is beyond the scope of this study to explore God and Jesus’ role in man’s redemption or salvation. Briefly stated, however, since mankind cannot redeem or save itself God Himself became a human being in the form of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived a perfect, blameless and sinless life and then willingly forfeited it as a ransom on behalf of sinners (see 1 Peter 3:18). The question this study attempts to answer is how Christ’s ransom is applied to, or appropriated by, the individual. Scripture puts it succinctly, “...If we died with him, we will also live with him...” (2 Timothy 2:11, see also Romans 6:5-8).

IV. Things That Accompany Salvation

Dying with Christ seems to be what makes one eligible to live with Him. In other words, participating in Christ’s death enables one to participate in Christ’s eternal life. But what does this involve? What does the Bible associate with salvation? There are at least three ways to find the answer to these questions. The following lists are:

- 1) **Derived from biblical example.** The book of Acts records and describes many incidents where people received salvation and/or the message of salvation was preached. Several things which are involved in the process of salvation may be gleaned from perusing these accounts. From some 24 passages in the NIV the following words and phrases (or variations of them) are found:

believe, put trust, faith, 19 times
hear, listen, see, 11 times
cut to the heart, repent, turn to God, 11 times
baptized, 9 times
accepted, honored or received the Word, 5 times
spoke the Word, told the good news, convinced, 3 times
calling on the name of the Lord (Greek: “on his name”), 1 time
receive forgiveness, 1 time

Note: From studying Romans 10 and other passages, the phrase “calling on the name of the Lord” may be considered equivalent to “confessing Jesus as Lord” or identifying oneself with Christ.

Note: In view of the emphasis in some circles on “praying to receive Jesus” or the “Sinner’s Prayer” it is worth pondering that prayer does not seem to be

mentioned in connection with obtaining salvation in any of the examples given in the Book of Acts. In fact, Saul was, in essence, told to stop praying and to be baptized so that his sins might be “washed away” (compare Acts 9:9-12 with 22:16). At the very least it could be said that Saul’s prayer was not effective (for obtaining salvation) until he was baptized.

- 2) **Derived from explicit statements.** Looking up the Greek words for save, justify, sanctify, forgive and their cognates leads to the following list of things which save:

Romans 1:16, the gospel and belief
Romans 4:24, belief in God
Romans 10:9, confession that Jesus is Lord, heart-felt belief that God raised Him from the dead
Romans 10:10, belief, confession
Romans 10:13, calling on the name of the Lord
1 Corinthians 1:21, preaching
1 Corinthians 15:2, holding firm to the gospel
2 Corinthians 7:10, repentance
Ephesians 1:13, hearing the word of truth
Ephesians 5:26, washing with water through the word (i.e. baptism)
2 Thessalonians 2:10, love of the truth
2 Thessalonians 2:13, belief in the truth
1 Timothy 4:16, persevering in (righteous) living and (true) doctrine
Titus 3:5, washing of rebirth (i.e. baptism)
James 1:21, accepting the word
James 2:14, a working faith
1 Peter 3:21, baptism

Note: The Gospels have deliberately been left out of the above list to avoid any possible confusion about whether any particular statement is applicable only under the Old Covenant.

Note: It is good to keep in mind that Romans is written to those who were already Christians. Therefore, the primary application of specific statements in Romans 10 might not be in regard to initially receiving pardon from sin. For example, while reading the statement in 10:9 about confessing Jesus as Lord, a Roman Christian would probably have thought of the “oath of loyalty” which citizens were forced to make to the Roman emperors, not salvation from sin. That does not mean, however, that the principle does not hold for the sinner seeking pardon.

- 3) **Derived by exegesis.** The Bible not only contains example and direct statements concerning how people are saved, but also contains detailed teaching on the subject. Perhaps the most comprehensive explanation of need for salvation, both God’s provision of it and man’s response to God’s provision, is found in the book of Romans. Foundational material is also found in several other of the New Testament books, particularly Galatians and

Hebrews. An in-depth exegesis of these books is far beyond the scope of this study. For current purposes it is enough to say that the teaching of these books does not disagree with what is being presented here but gives more detail and depth to what is being presented.

V. Putting It All Together

From the information collected above it is now possible to outline what God requires from a person in order to receive the forgiveness of sin. It is essential to note that each of the items mentioned works in conjunction with every other as part of a whole rather than being several means of accomplishing the same end. In other words, it is not enough to merely repent or to merely listen to the word. One must listen to the word and repent and do all of the rest also in order to receive salvation. Salvation results when one:

- 1) **Loves the truth.** This is the basic prerequisite which leads to all the rest. Unless one has a regard for the truth, and is willing to accept it, then it will be impossible to even acknowledge the need for salvation. Similarly it will be impossible to come to Christ for salvation because He Himself is Truth (John 14:6).
- 2) **Believes in God.** As noted above, if God does not exist then there can be no objective moral standard and the question of sin and salvation from the effects of sin does not arise. But aside from that, it is obvious that if a person does not believe in God he will neither seek God, nor come to Him for pardon. “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6 NIV)
- 3) **Hears the gospel.** Though natural revelation and the human conscience can, to certain extent, convict a person of wrongdoing no one can really appreciate what sin is or their spiritual condition without hearing God’s word. Similarly, while one might hope for a savior, only God’s word can reveal that there is a Savior and who He is.
- 4) **Honors, receives or accepts the word.** Merely hearing the word, in the sense that one’s ears have been stimulated, or reading the word, is insufficient. “Hearing” in the biblical sense also implies the intention to obey or act on what one hears. In biblical language this is also referred to as having an open or tender heart as opposed to a hardened heart (see Acts 16:14 and Hebrews 3:7-4:11).
- 5) **Repents.** Repentance implies a change of mind. It is a turning away from sin and the things which produce sin, and a turning towards God. It is produced by a genuine sorrow for committing sin (as opposed to sorrow for getting caught, compare 2 Corinthians 7:10 and Hebrews 12:16-17) and the hurt it has caused God.

- 6) **Believes or puts their faith in Christ.** A saving faith or belief is far more than a mental assent that certain information is correct. It is entirely possible to know that something is fact and yet recoil from it or hate it (for example see James 2:19). Saving faith is not merely an acceptance of Christ's true position (see Confession, below) and that He has the power and willingness to save, but is also the giving of one's allegiance to Christ. In addition, the kind of faith or belief that saves is active. It always causes a person to act on the basis of, or to follow through on, what is believed.
- 7) **Confesses.** In its full sense, confession includes the acknowledgment that Jesus is: a) the Son of God, b) the Christ and c) Lord. (see Acts 8:37, Matthew 16:16-17, Acts 2:36, Philippians 2:9-11) To confess Jesus is the Son of God recognizes His deity. To confess Him as the Christ recognizes that He has been anointed to be Prophet, Priest and King. To confess Jesus is Lord recognizes the divine authority vested in Him both by inherited right as descendant of David and by appointed position. Confession is not merely the acknowledgment of fact but implies the intention and willingness to submit oneself to Jesus in the roles being confessed. Scripture is not clear as to how much a person must actually understand about Jesus' various offices before salvation is granted. But it would seem that a recognition of His Sonship, and therefore His deity, and the willingness to submit to Him as Ruler (i.e. Lord or King) would be the minimum.
- 8) **Is baptized.** Baptism plays a crucial role in the salvation process. According to Scripture, baptism is associated with the action of, or the receiving of, the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:28-39, Acts 19:1-5, 1 Corinthians 6:11, 1 Corinthians 12:13, Titus 3:5). It is a participation in Christ's death, burial and resurrection (Romans 6:3-7, Colossians 2:11-12, 1 Peter 3:21). Through baptism the "sinful nature" (NIV) is "put off" (Colossians 2:11-12) and rebirth occurs (compare Titus 3:5 with John 3:3-8). It is the "pledge of a good conscience" (1 Peter 3:21). It is through baptism that a person becomes part of the "one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13) i.e. the Church. It is in, or through, baptism that a person receives a new identity by being baptized "into Christ" and being "clothed with Christ" (Galatians 3:26-28). In other words, it seems that baptism is the defining moment at which one becomes a Christian.
- 9) **Perseveres in holy living and sound doctrine.** Scripture speaks of salvation in two senses. On the one hand, it refers to those who have gone through the process outlined above as having been saved. On the other hand, salvation is not a "done deal." The process will continue until Christ returns. Though it is impossible for anyone to take a person's salvation away (John 10:27-30) it is entirely possible for someone to turn away from it of their own volition and "fall from their secure position" (2 Peter 3:17, see also 2 Peter 2:20-22, Hebrews 10:26-31). It is for this reason that it is essential to make sure that one's doctrine is sound and that there is consistency between the doctrine which is professed and the lives which are lived (see 1 Timothy 1:3-5, 18-19).

Note that while some of these items depend on others, for example putting one's faith in Christ depends on hearing the gospel, they are not to be regarded as activities which are completed before moving on to the next step. Certainly items 1 through 6 are to be a continuing part of a person's life even after salvation has been granted. They are concurrent, or repeating aspects of the salvation process rather than something that is compartmentalized and linked to a specific moment in time. For example, it may not always be possible to identify the exact moment when one began to believe in God. On the other hand, number 8 does take place at, and is linked to, a specific, identifiable point in time.

VI. Two Objections

A number of people would object to the process outlined above. The objections may be summarized as:

- 1) Man is so depraved that it is impossible for him to respond to God at all unless God grants it. Therefore salvation is entirely dependent upon God and it is impossible for man to play an active role in his own salvation. Passages such as Philippians 2:13 are used to support this position. Implicit in this view, along with the doctrine of "original sin," is that man does not really have a free will and that every action and response is predestined.

If, however, people do not have a genuine choice then the whole discussion about salvation is totally pointless. There is no use even bringing up the issue if there is nothing that a person can do about his eternal destiny. Secondly, this line of thinking reflects very poorly on God. Why would He urge people to respond to the gospel if they do not have a genuine choice of whether to do so or not? At best, it would be a pointless charade.

- 2) We are saved by faith in Christ not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9), therefore how can any action such as baptism have anything to do with it? This second objection deserves more consideration. It is absolutely true to say that "works" do not save. Scripture is clear on that. There is no meritorious action that anyone can do in order to place God under any obligation, or to earn salvation. Salvation is a gift. In this light it is totally wrong to regard baptism as something which earns salvation. It is equally wrong to think that there is some inherent quality in the baptismal water which imparts salvation.

On the other hand, it is also wrong to equate biblical baptism with a "work." That many in evangelical circles do so is inconsistent as well as based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of baptism. The inconsistency is this: Baptism is viewed as a "work" while at the same time it is said that one must pray to "receive Jesus." How is prayer any less of a "work" than baptism? Logically, the act of praying is even more of a "work" than baptism since prayer is something which a person does, while baptism is something which is done to a person. The same could even be said of repentance, confession, belief and honoring the word.

But the notion that baptism is a work, in any sense of the word, is a fallacy. To equate the two fails to recognize the logical inequality between works and the actions which are inherent in saving faith. As an example of a logical inequality consider the following statement: “All pears are fruit, but not all fruits are pears.” Or, “All fathers are male, but not all males are fathers.” Similarly, it can be said that “Actions do not save, but saving faith always involves action.” Baptism without faith does not save, but saving faith includes baptism.

This is not merely an exercise in logic. Scripture plainly recognizes the link between faith and baptism. Compare, for example, Romans 6:4 which says, “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead... we too may have a new life” (NIV), with Colossians 2:12 which clearly says that we are raised through faith.

Baptism and faith are linked in another way as well. There is a Hebrew parallelism in Hebrews 3:18-19 which equates disobedience with unbelief. If disobedience is unbelief, then it is logical to also equate obedience with belief. The link is certainly implied, if not made explicit, in passages such as 1 John 3:21-24. In light of this, since Christ commanded baptism (Matthew 28:19) it can be said that belief in Christ includes obedience to this command.

In conclusion, it seems clear that baptism is an integral part of saving faith.

VII. Another Objection

But what about those who have never had the opportunity to hear the gospel? Some would object to the process of salvation outlined above on the grounds that it is unjust. It is not fair that many will be condemned merely because they had no opportunity to hear the gospel, and therefore to believe on Christ. Actually, this argument is usually made, not out of concern for those who haven't heard the gospel, but as an excuse not to obey it. In any case, the argument is specious on at least two grounds.

- 1) It is not true that anyone is condemned because he had no opportunity to believe on Christ. If anyone is condemned it is because of his sin. God is under no obligation to save. It is only because of His mercy that He saves. There is no injustice in someone reaping the consequences of his own choice to violate God's moral standards.
- 2) If it were possible to know that no one who did not have the opportunity to hear the gospel would in fact be saved, then it might be possible to charge God with partiality. But this is something we do not know. There are hints in Scripture that God will judge people on the basis of what they did with what they knew, and extrapolating from that how they would have responded had they had the opportunity to hear the gospel (for example see Luke 12:47-48 and Romans 2:6-16). Be that as it may, it would be extremely foolish to reject the salvation in Christ one knows about because of a hypothetical conjecture about the fate of someone who never had the chance to know it. One thing we

can be absolutely certain of, is that if we have been privileged to hear the gospel, then we will certainly be condemned if we do not obey it. (Hebrews 10:26-31)

If it is true that there is a possibility that those who have not had the opportunity to hear the gospel might be saved, then the question can be asked, “Why bother to take the gospel to them at all?” Have the centuries of effort and the vast treasure which has been poured into missionary activity been wasted? Not at all. First of all, we do not know how God will judge – only that He is just. The speculation that some who have not heard the gospel might be saved is just that – speculation. Secondly, it is not our responsibility to second-guess how God will judge, but to obey. As Christ told Peter when he inquired about the fate of someone else, “...what is that to you? You must follow me.” (John 21:22) If we fail to obey God’s command to preach the gospel to those who do not know we are merely exposing our own lack of faith. Christians should spread the gospel, if for no other reason, to be obedient. Thirdly, as anyone who knows Christ can testify, there are incalculable benefits from obeying the gospel. The spiritual blessings and peace of mind, the joy of being reconciled to God are beyond price. If Christians have any compassion or feelings for their fellow human beings, this alone should motivate them to share the gospel to those who do not know.

VIII. Conclusion

The reason people need salvation is because they have freely chosen to violate God’s moral standards and so have become guilty of sin. The penalty for sin is spiritual death. Through Jesus Christ’s sacrifice of His blameless and pure life on the cross, God has made salvation, or redemption from the consequences of sin, possible. Just as a person has chosen to deliberately sin, so too, a person must deliberately choose to take hold of or receive the salvation God offers. This is done by participating in Christ’s death so that he may be raised from spiritual death just as Christ was raised from physical death. This salvation is available to anyone who chooses to accept it.