

PART 8: SALVATION—THE ATONEMENT

WE NEED A SAVIOR

When we come to read God's word in the New Testament it becomes obvious to us that Israel was looking for a coming Messiah, an anointed one, an earthly political ruler, to deliver them from their enemies, the boot heel of Rome, and to restore their kingdom. God's people needed deliverance. When we turn to the story of how Nicodemus came to Jesus, we can see the picture of a man on the lookout for the long-awaited Messiah, the savior of God's people.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. He knew about the prophecies recorded in the Old Testament, he had obviously heard about Jesus, and he wanted to find out if Jesus was the savior of Israel. Nicodemus knew there was something special about Jesus, for he said: *"Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him"* (John 3:2), to which Jesus answered *"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God"* (John 3:3).

Nicodemus then asked: *"How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"* (John 3:4), to which Jesus replied: *"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and*

that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' (John 3:5-7.)

Nicodemus was looking for a Messiah that would liberate God's people from oppressive earthly rulers like those from Rome. But Jesus introduced him to a liberation that was far deeper than the political one Nicodemus expected, for Jesus was making known the basic need of all humanity, which is that unless something radical happens in the life of Nicodemus, he, or anyone else for that matter, cannot enter in or even see the Kingdom of God. Jesus compared this radical idea to a new birth. In other words, just as a man was born in the flesh, so too he must be reborn in the spirit.

We saw in the chapter on the doctrine of sin that we are all born under the curse of sin and death and deserve eternal punishment. The terrible effect inherited from our first parents reaches all mankind, all individuals regardless of color, creed or sex.

As King David lamented: *Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me.* (Ps 51:5)

We cannot save ourselves; no human being has that kind of power, for we are all, as Paul says, *dead in trespasses and sins* (Eph 2:1), helpless to rescue ourselves from this lost sinful condition. But God in His mercy provided a path

back to Him, by way of the atonement through the work found in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

SALVATION A GIFT FROM GOD BY FAITH ALONE IN CHRIST ALONE

To understand this salvation so freely offered by God there must first be a realization that it is a gift from God given by grace alone, obtained by faith alone and not earned or rewarded by works of any kind.

Faith is the instrument, and the only instrument, by which this wonderful gift of salvation comes. And this faith is not a faith in a philosophical idea, political opinion, psychological advice or an economical movement, but faith in a person.

..for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day. (2 Tim 1:12)

Put differently, the object of our faith is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Paul summed this belief (or faith) in the person and work of Christ when he wrote: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For*

in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith." (Rom 1:16-17)

Easton's Bible Dictionary defines faith as: in general the persuasion of the mind that a certain statement is true (Phil 1:27; 2 Thess 2:13). Its primary idea is trust.

In other words, saving faith is based on a conviction of sin follow by a surrender to God in absolute trust that He and He alone can save.

"The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): 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. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame. (Rom 10:8-11).

Here is the heart of the gospel message. God saves all who by His grace believe on the Lord Jesus and accept Him as Lord and Savior by faith.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SALVATION?

The Greek word for salvation is “*soteria*” which Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words denotes as "deliverance, preservation, salvation."

The New Unger's Bible Dictionary describes salvation as: “A term that stands for several Heb. and Gk. words, the general idea being safety, deliverance, ease, soundness. In the Old Testament the term refers to various forms of deliverance, both temporal and spiritual.... In the New Testament salvation is regarded almost exclusively as deliverance from the power and dominion of sin.”

Any discussion of salvation must recognize that salvation is first and foremost from God, for there is no savior other than God, and the promise of redemption is given not only to the nation of Israel alone but to every nation and tribe one earth.

I, even I, am the Lord, And besides Me there is no savior. I have declared and saved, (Isa 43:11-12)

For to this end we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe. (1 Tim 4:10)

THE ROLE OF THE TRINITY IN ATONEMENT

The full scope of salvation takes into account the whole work of the Godhead.

Just as there are three persons in the Trinity, united in one essence, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, there is a unity and harmony within the Godhead to secure salvation for the believer. That is to say, each person of the Trinity plays a distinct role in redemption.

Peter briefly touches on this when he writes: *To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: (1 Peter 1:1-2)*

Here we see the distinctive work of each person within the Godhead concerning the initiating, completing and applying of salvation.

Redemption first originates with God the Father who instigates the process by His foreknowledge, election and calling of those to be saved.

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, (Rom 8:29)

Scripture says that none can come to the Jesus without the calling of the Father.

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:44)

There are different views within the church as to how this election and calling of the Father is worked into the life of the believer. But whatever our differences in interpretation, all orthodox Christians are agreed that salvation begins with God.

Atonement is then carried out and accomplished by the Son who by His sinless life, ministry, death and resurrection achieved all that is necessary for our salvation. Peter tells us: *“knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Peter 1:18-19).*

Paul, when speaking of Jesus' great work of mercy toward us, says: *we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace. (Eph 1:7)*

Paul makes it clear that forgiveness flows through the blood of Christ (that is the sacrifice of Christ) and by no other means. In other words, God's justice is satisfied by the death of Christ.

The idea of sacrifice for sin was first pictured in the Old Testament. Throughout Israel's history restitution by sacrifice, or atonement, was required in order to appease any offence against God.

Atonement was more than just a simple act of forgiveness for an infraction against the moral law; sin is, first and foremost, an affront to God's holy character, nature and His right to rule and govern our lives. As noted theologian R. C. Sproul once famously commented: "Sin is cosmic treason. Sin is treason against a perfectly pure Sovereign. It is an act of supreme ingratitude toward the One to whom we owe everything, to the One who has given us life itself. Have you ever considered the deeper implications of the slightest sin, of the most minute peccadillo? What are we saying to our Creator when we disobey Him at the slightest point? We are saying no to the righteousness of God. We are saying, "God, Your law is not good. My judgement is better than Yours. Your authority does not apply to me. I am above and beyond Your jurisdiction. I have the right to do what I want to do, not what You command me to do.""

Sin is an offence against God in that we have stolen His honor. Paul remarks in Romans that all in authority, regardless of who they are or what they represent, is to be given a certain degree of honor because they represent God's authority over us: *Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God... For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor. (Rom 13:1-7).*

To show honor to any authority over us is to obey them in that area in which they rule over us. In other words we give honor by our obedience.

If honor is due to all people in authority because they are appointed by God, how much more honor is due to God because He is the ultimate authority of us all?

Sin in any degree is to steal God's honor. How so? Because God has an absolute right to rule over you, and when you sin (which is disobedience to God's commands), you dishonor Him. When we sin, we as much as declare that God's rule is not something we wish to obey. We would rather obey our own sinful inclinations than obey God. All sin is a matter of choosing ourselves over God, a matter of saying we would rather rule over ourselves instead of allowing God to rule over us.

In the beginning of his letter to the Romans, Paul addresses the common need for the gospel and points to man's rejection of God's revelation beginning with the universal sin of: *because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, (Rom 1:21).*

The English Standard Version renders Rom 1:21 as: *For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.* In other words sin is more than just doing wrong. It is betrayal, mutiny and rebellion.

Because sin is treachery against God, it requires more than just a simple act of forgiveness and leaving it at that; it requires death. This point is so important that we need to labor it a bit more. Even secular mankind recognizes that treachery against sovereign authority is the worst criminal act one can possibly commit. Throughout the world we have seen that most of the so-called “enlightened” nations (and some not so enlightened) have removed the death penalty from the books as a possible punishment for murder, no matter how heinous the murder may be. So, in most countries, even the mass murderer will not face the death penalty, even if he is declared legally sane. Nevertheless, even in these countries where the mass-murderer is never put to death, the one who commits treachery against the state (particularly in war) is still liable to the death penalty. Why? Because such a crime is an attack against the very order of things that makes an ordered life possible. If this is true for a secular state, how much more is it true for the Creator of all order?

We are so used to sin in our lives and in the lives of everyone else around us that we must constantly remind ourselves that, when, to take just one obvious example, we commit adultery, we not only offend your spouse, children, and so many more people, but we also offend and commit treachery before God. When we do something less serious (at least, less serious in our sight), such as cheat people out of what we owe them, we have also committed treachery before God. In fact, whenever we fail to act in such a way that is in conformity with loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, or, to put it even more simply,

whenever we fail to be perfect as God is perfect, we commit treason against God. Do we ever need a savior! Thanks be to God, He has provided one—Himself!

Because of sin, whether inherited or personal, all of mankind is under the just punishment of death, and in order for redemption to occur, God's justice must first be satisfied in that something must die and its blood be shed. This is what the entire Old Testament sacrificial system was all about,

Scripture designates sacredness to blood, for it considers that the life of every living being is in its blood. It was because of the significance of the blood that Israel was forbidden to eat meat with blood.

But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. (Gen 9:4-5)

The use of blood was reserved for the sacrifice exclusively, for it was by its value that remission of sin could be found when blood was shed.

And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission. (Heb 9:22)

God forbids human sacrifice because man is in the image of God. So in the Old Testament, especially in the sacrificial system given by God in His covenant with Israel, animals were allowed as a substitute sacrifice to suffer the penalty of death in order to appease the just punishment of the disobedience of man. In other words an animal was slain in place of the person.

But so wicked and egregious is sin, even in the smallest of error, no animal sacrifice could ever satisfy the righteous justice of God. Only the death of a human nature, which was assumed by God Himself in the incarnation of Christ, could appease so terrible an offence against God.

The sacrifices of the Old Testament pointed to the kind of death Jesus would undergo for His people. The writer of Hebrews says: *Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Heb 9:12-14)*

Because of rebellion and sin, man has obtained two debts toward God. First, there is the debt of the obedience due Him. Second, because we have not paid the first debt, there is the additional moral debt of our sin in refusing the obedience that is rightfully due to God in the first place.

At the cross Jesus accomplished our redemption by cancelling out man's debt to God in two ways. First, by being a man who lives a sinless life in order to meet the requirements of God's law. Second, by agreeing to pay the penalty for all the sins of His people so that they may call on Him as Lord and Savior even though He personally was guiltless of any sin.

As Paul remarked in Col 2:14: having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. And in Romans 3:24-26: being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Christ took on the just punishment we deserved and he gave to us His righteousness as a free gift. He first took our sins and bore them on the cross outside the city of Jerusalem. Because of Christ's sacrifice God does not visit His judgment upon us but instead grants us His mercy and peace. In short, our justification is from Christ through our faith in Him and His work on the cross.

As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us. (Ps 103:12)

Christ then rose from dead. By the resurrection He not only assured eternal life for all believers but proved that He was God in the Flesh and that all who believed on Him would be resurrected on the last day.

But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. (Rom 8:11)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (1 Peter 1:3)

Salvation, which originates from the Father, is accomplished by the work of Christ and is then communicated to us by the third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who opens the heart to receive the message in order that regeneration may do its work and redeem the life of the believer.

And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there. Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. (Acts 16:13-14)

...for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. (Phil 2:13)

THE BENEFITS OF SALVATION

The benefits inherited in this salvation cannot be exaggerated. They are more than can be written about here but here we summarize the most notable.

1. Justification

We are justified by our faith in Christ.

Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. (Rom 5:9)

Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary comments on justification saying that it is:

“The process by which sinful human beings are made acceptable to a holy God.... When God justifies, He charges the sin of man to Christ and credits the righteousness of Christ to the believer.”

It has been said that the term justified can best be understood as just-as-if-I'd never sinned. By the act of justification we are now freed from all guilt and shame and are made acceptable to God.

2. Declared Not Guilty

We have been declared not guilty (because of what Christ did for us in taking the penalty upon Himself) and are no longer under the wrath of the judgment of God.

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life". (John 5:24)

Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. (Rom 5:9)

The theme of judgment was always on Paul's mind and is found throughout his sermons. For example, when Paul preached to the Athenians, he declared that, *God...commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. (Acts 17:30-31)*

And again in his defense before Festus, the Roman governor of Judea, Paul is said to have, *reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, (Acts 24:25)*

Paul also said that it was one of main forces behind his desire to preach the gospel.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are well known to God, and I also trust are well known in your consciences. (2 Cor 5:10-11)

3. A New Life

We have been given new life. This is known as being regenerated or born again.

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12-13)

The new life we have been given is so much better than the old life that there is no real comparison between the two. In fact, Paul characterizes the old life as being *dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1)*. The new life is the real life, which is why Jesus proclaimed: *I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. (John 10:10)*

The word for “life” in the above verse is the Greek word “zoe” which Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words says: is used in the NT "of life as a principle, life in the absolute sense, life as God has it, that which the Father has in Himself, and which He gave to the Incarnate Son to have in Himself.”

This new life brings with it a new heart and spirit.

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. (Ezek 36:26-27)

4. Members of a New Kingdom

We are taken out of the kingdom of evil put into the kingdom of God. Satan no longer has a claim over us. Though never being completely free of sin in this life,

we are no longer slaves to it. We now have a will to do good and avoid evil. We want to fight the good fight of faith, and we get better and better at this fight as we progress in godliness.

He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, (Col 1:13)

5. Adopted Into a New Family

We have been adopted by God. Paul writes that, *“having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will” (Eph 1:5)*. We are part of God’s family. We can call God our “Abba” Father, which is like saying “poppa” or “daddy.” Jesus is our older brother. Every child of God is our brother or sister, even more so than our natural family members. We are no longer part of Satan’s family, and in a sense, our natural family is no longer our main family. This doesn’t mean we are no longer to care for our natural family members, but it does mean that our natural family is no longer the center of our existence. No, it is God and His family who takes the place as the center of our lives. Our Father is working within us as individuals and as members of one family (as all good fathers do) in order to get us to be more and more like our elder brother, Jesus.

6. Interceded for by Christ

Christ continually intercedes for us, Himself being our High Priest who understands our weaknesses and failures.

Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. (Heb 7:25)

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Heb 4:15)

CHRISTIANITY NOT COMPATIBLE WITH EASTERN RELIGION

In closing this section we would like briefly to touch on how different God's plan of salvation, as revealed in Scripture, is from the idea of salvation taught in various forms of contemporary religious beliefs influenced by Eastern Mysticism. These religious beliefs popularly used to be known as "New Age," but we rarely hear that term anymore. Nevertheless, these beliefs persist and are becoming ever more popular in our culture.

With the influence of eastern mystical religious ideas that invaded the shores of America in the 1960's none has been more intrusive to western thinking than the idea of Karma.

In basic Buddhist and Hindu belief, Karma is the idea of salvation that one's life as lived at present will determine the quality of life in the next reincarnation until, ultimately, one passes out of individualized existence altogether. Like most eastern beliefs that have entered into western thought, Karma is understood through the prism of western concepts, which have led some to believe it is compatible to Christian beliefs.

Many Christians who have been involved with the New Age or have been exposed to the teaching of Karma have fallen prey to the idea that one can collect brownie points before God by good works which can be redeemed for help from God in times of trouble.

They may have come to think that the idea of Karma can be found in Galatians 6:7: *"Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap."*

There are several problems with this viewpoint.

For one thing, Karma deals with the Eastern belief of reincarnation. Scripture stresses that life is not a series of life-death-reincarnations. Christianity is absolutely opposed to the idea of reincarnation. The Bible makes plain that life here on this earth is a one time event just as it says in Hebrews: *And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation. (Heb 9:27-28)*

For another thing, the Christian idea of justification means that our ultimate salvation has been settled once and for all by the atonement and accrued to us not by works but by faith.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. (Eph 2:8-9)

Yes it is true that sin can cut the believer off from fellowship with God and hinder our prayers, but restoration of is found in repentance and forgiveness not by good works or the accumulation of points.

Good works for the Christian are done not to earn points with God but to show gratitude for all He has done for us. Christians can do good works—works that are truly pleasing to God—only because the Holy Spirit lives within them: *“for it is*

God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. (Phil 2:13)
and is a witness to the grace of God that has now changed their life: *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16).*

In summation: the religious ideas of salvation taught by Eastern religions and the New Age are in no way compatible with what is taught by God in His Scripture.