

Plain Words

About

Salvation

- What does it mean to be saved?
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- How to be sure about salvation

by Pastor Art Sims

Plain Words about Salvation

Christian people are always talking about being “saved.” Why do they talk like this? What do they mean? Are you saved? Saved from what?

Salvation is one of the most important words in the Bible. Christians appreciate this very much and desire others to understand and appreciate it too. So they talk about being “saved.” But what, exactly, does it mean to be saved?

Kinds of Salvation in the Bible

For one thing there is more than one kind of salvation in the Bible. The most important kind is eternal salvation and must not be confused with lesser kinds of salvation. The Bible speaks of being saved from things like enemies in this present world (Luke 1:71), from needless heartache and trouble in daily life (I Timothy 4:15, 16), and from drowning at sea (Acts 27:31). These are important but not important enough to explain the blood of God’s Son being shed on the cross at Calvary.

What Jesus Died to Save Us From

The only salvation important enough to account for Christ’s suffering on the cross is salvation from eternal condemnation. Sinful man is under the sentence of death, eternal death, and is headed for “everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thessalonians 1:9). The apostle John was shown how this will ultimately be carried out. In the book of the Revelation he described what he saw, saying,

***“And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire.
This is the second death. And whosoever
was not found written in the book of life was cast
into the lake of fire.”
- Revelation 20:14-15***

The second death! A lake of fire!

Of course, we know there are many people who don’t believe anything like a lake of fire could be real. To them, death here in this present world is all there is. But according to these words in the Bible, a day is coming when people who have not received God’s gift of eternal salvation will indeed experience this second death.

Why This Terrible Fate?

The reason is because God’s perfect, holy character cannot allow sinful beings to live with Him in heaven. His standard is very clear. In 1 Peter 1:16, He says:

“Be ye holy for I am holy.”

The Old Testament made this same demand:

“Ye shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy.”
– Leviticus 19:2

But we humans are not holy. We are sinful, and God, in His perfect holiness, cannot overlook this. Doing so would not be a holy thing for Him to do. He loves us for sure. Indeed, He loves us so much, He was willing to give His own Son in order to provide a way for us to be justified and made holy in His sight. But what if we ignore what He, in His love, has provided? What if we reject His Son?

Consider an illustration. Here is a man found guilty of murder standing before a judge to be sentenced for his crime. But somehow the judge likes this man and says to him, “I realize you have committed a horrible crime but I want to be merciful to you, so I am not going to sentence you to any punishment. You are free to go.” What would you think of a judge like that? Why, we would say that judge is unjust, unrighteous.

God cannot be like that. His perfect, holy, righteous character will not allow it. No matter how much He loves mankind, He cannot simply ignore and dismiss our sinfulness. He has to be true to Himself.

But how severe do the consequences have to be? This depends on how holy God is, doesn't it? If He is slightly holy, perhaps the penalty of sin could be small. But God is perfectly holy. It is staggering to ask, “How great a penalty does absolute, perfect holiness require?” But what we do know is that **“everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord”** (2 Thessalonians 1:9) is taught in the Bible.

Christ Died for Our Sins

This is why our Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross. The book of Romans explains that Christ's death made it possible for God to be both **“just and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus”** (Romans 3:26). That is, Christ's death satisfied God's holy character, freeing Him to be merciful without compromising Himself. This is called “propitiation.” God's holiness was propitiated (satisfied) by the sacrifice of His Son. The apostle John wrote:

“And He is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”
- 1 John 2:2

This propitiation makes it possible for God to save anyone who will believe in His Son.

Justification

Another word for salvation is “justification.” By justifying us in His sight God saves us from being seen by Him as sinful beings. This makes us righteous in His sight and removes our condemnation. The way God does this is by crediting a righteousness to us that is not our own, a gift of righteousness.

Since Christ's death for our sins satisfied His holiness, God is free to give this righteousness to each person who receives the Lord Jesus Christ by faith. Notice how the apostle Paul expressed this in the book of Philippians:

***“And be found in Him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.”
– Philippians 3:9***

Paul wrote here about a righteousness that was not his own, a righteousness that he received through faith. It was given to him by God. Romans 4:5 reveals more about this, explaining that God “counts” this righteousness to us. That is, on the basis of our faith, He disregards our ungodliness and considers us to be righteous. Remember, He is free to do this because Christ has paid the penalty for our sins.

***“But to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.”
- Romans 4:5***

Acts 13:38 and 39 explain it, saying,

***“Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man (Jesus Christ) is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins:
And by Him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.”
- Acts 13:38-39***

What all of this means is that while we cannot become righteous in God's sight by doing righteous things we *can* become righteous by believing in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. God's gift of righteousness, bestowed upon us, justifies us in His sight.

Eternal Life

Another way the Bible presents salvation is in terms of “eternal life.” We are “**dead in sins**” (Ephesians 2:5), “**alienated from the life of God**” (Ephesians 4:18). But God, in His mercy, saves us from this spiritual deadness by making us alive in Christ. The life that He gives is eternal and will carry us beyond the grave and into His presence forever. The Bible says in Romans 6:23 that “**the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.**”

This life is given to us by means of a spiritual birth. Our Lord Himself referred to it as being **“born again”** (John 3:3). The apostle Paul used the word **“regeneration”** for it (Titus 3:5). The apostle Peter put it like this:

“Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth forever.”
- 1 Peter 1:23

We understand, therefore, that the human heart is like a womb into which the seed of God’s Word, the gospel enters. The Holy Spirit of God then causes that seed to influence us more and more until finally it is believed. When we do believe the gospel, at that moment, we are born spiritually into the family of God. The Spirit of God creates new life within us, making us members of God’s family. We previously were “generated” (born) by the flesh into the family of mankind. But we must be “generated” (born) by the Word of God and by the Spirit of God into the family of God. The Holy Spirit of God does this, creating new life within us. This new life is holy and produces holy desires within the heart of a Christian which oppose the old cravings of the flesh.

Basics of the Gospel

The apostle Paul explained the basics of the gospel of salvation in 1 Cor. 15: 3 and 4.

“For I delivered unto you, first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, And that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”
- 1 Corinthians 15: 1, 3, 4

These fundamental facts are a message of good news, informing us that the penalty for our sins has been paid. Our Lord Jesus Christ paid this penalty when He died on the cross. That is, by His death, the necessary payment for all that is wrong with us was made. He then came back from the dead and is now alive in heaven, willing and able to save anyone who will believe Him for the gift of salvation that He provides.

What God Requires and Why

It is clear in the Bible that this message of salvation must be preached and that people must believe it. The world, of course, considers the preaching of the cross of Christ to be foolishness but the Bible says, **“it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe”** (1 Corinthians 1:21). What God has chosen to do, therefore, is save those who will believe the gospel of Christ.

But why? Why has God made faith the condition by which people can be saved? Because faith recognizes and honors what Christ has done without contaminating God's holy provision of salvation. This is very important and helpful in understanding why faith is the one condition many must meet in order to be saved.

The apostle Paul explained this in the book of Ephesians, saying,

“For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.”
- Ephesians 2:8-9

This Scripture explains that God will not allow men to earn salvation by any works they do because if He did they would boast about what they did. Salvation is “not of works” it says, **“lest any man should boast.”** I once heard a preacher put it like this: “Imagine if you can someone in heaven saying, ‘If anybody deserves to be up here in heaven it’s me, just look at all the good things I did back on earth; God sure is lucky to have me.’ That’s silly, isn’t it?” People in heaven will not talk like that but will say things like, “God is wonderful; I don’t deserve to be here at all but I’m so glad He loved me and saved by His grace.”

The False Doctrine of Salvation by Human Deeds

We know, of course, that many people disagree with this teaching of the Bible about salvation by faith alone. They don’t believe what Jesus has already done for them is good enough but feel that His death for our sins must be supplemented by good works in our lives.

“Works” of course, are outward things that people do, not necessarily bad in themselves, except that when they are substituted for what Christ has done, this is bad. Some examples of works that many people do, trying to make themselves acceptable to God are these:

- Attend church regularly
- Be baptized
- Do your best
- Give to charity
- Keep the ten commandments
- Perform acts of kindness
- Holy Communion
- Prayers
- Obey the Golden rule

But these things cannot save us, nor help to save us. These are “works” that people do and the Bible clearly tells us salvation is **“not of works, lest any man should boast.”** (Ephesians 2:9).

The real truth is, we could never be good enough to be saved by our works, no matter how good or well-intended our works might be. Eternal salvation can only be received as a free gift from God by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior.

Faith is Not a Work, No Merit in Faith

Don't be confused by claims some people have made that faith is a work. People who say this are quite mistaken, having failed to pay close attention to what the Bible says. Notice how this verse, Romans 4:5, clarifies this matter:

“But to him that worketh not but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.”
- Romans 4:5

How can anyone read these words, “**worketh not but believeth,**” and think believing is a work? By not paying attention to these words! But this is really as clear as it needs to be and there is no excuse for anyone misunderstanding it. Obviously, God does not consider believing to be a work and we should not view it that way either. Notice also, the following verse in Romans chapter 3:

“Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? Nay; but by the law of faith.”
- Romans 3:27

This verse informs us that faith is a principle that excludes boasting. In other words, there is nothing to brag about in having faith. It is an humbling thing to depend on someone else to do something for you that you cannot do for yourself. It is, in fact, a blow to the pride of man that he can't make his own way and must have the mercy of God. We must understand, where faith is concerned, all the merit is in the object of our faith, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us and arose from the dead. Our faith glorifies Him, not us. Yes, by depending upon Christ alone we honor Him.

The Meaning of Grace

Understanding the meaning of grace further helps to clarify why God established faith as the condition to salvation. Romans 4:16 says, “**Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace.**” This is because faith and grace are fully compatible principles whereas works and grace are not. The following statement in Romans chapter 3 enables us to appreciate the nature of grace:

“Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”
- Romans 3:24

Think about these words, “**freely by His grace.**” If we will just grasp these words, “**freely by His grace,**” the true meaning of grace will become obvious to us. It means

we receive something for free, without meriting it. In other words, the Bible is telling us we are justified for free. This is grace. It means justification is not something we can purchase or earn in some way. It's free! Our Lord Jesus Christ has purchased it for us. We don't deserve it at all. We simply receive it as a free gift from God. That's grace!

We have seen that being justified means God considers us to be just, or righteous, in His sight and that this is possible because Christ died for our sins so that the barrier between God and ourselves, due to His holiness and our sinfulness, was removed. Now, when anyone receives Christ as Savior, God no longer looks upon that person as a sinner but counts him just, or righteous. What we are told in Romans 3:24 is that God does this **“freely by His grace.”**

This is further confirmed to us in Romans 4:4 and 5 where the opposite of grace is explained:

***“Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace,
but of debt.
But to him that worked not but believeth on Him that justifieth
the ungoldly, his faith is counted for righteousness.”
– Romans 4: 4-5***

This passage explains that the opposite of grace is to receive something by working for it, by earning it. It says, **“to him that worketh is the reward NOT reckoned of grace.”** Obviously, when you work for something it isn't free. You earn it; you deserve it; it is owed to you because of the work that you have done, and this is indeed the exact opposite of grace. If you have a job, when your employer hands you your paycheck at the end of the week it isn't a matter of grace. You have worked for your pay. You have earned it and therefore it cannot be called grace because grace is the opposite of receiving something by working for it.

Another important verse on this subject is Romans 11:6, which teaches us there is no middle ground between grace and works:

***“And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace
is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more
grace: otherwise work is no more work.”
– Romans 11:6***

This then, is why grace, with no human works whatsoever, is the only possible way of salvation. As soon as we work for something it isn't free anymore; it isn't grace. In other words, there simply is no middle ground between grace and works. Some people think they can be saved partly by grace and partly by works. That is, they want to say they believe in our Lord Jesus Christ but they also want to depend on their works just to make sure. But this is unacceptable. The Bible makes it very clear, in Romans 11:6 that you cannot have something by grace and by works too. It has to be by one or the other, which means if we could receive salvation by our works, then it would have to be 100 percent by works and not by grace at all. But since salvation is by grace, it is 100 percent by grace and not by works at all.

No Other Possible Way

There really was no other way. When God planned the way of salvation there were no rules that could be formulated for sinful man to comply with that could lift him up to God's level of holiness. The only way was for Christ to die in payment for our sins and for salvation to be available to us by faith. Let us appreciate how Paul expressed this in Galatians 3:21:

***“Is the Law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the Law.”
– Galatians 3:21***

Just think! If God could have given a law that could save us, that's how it should have been. Indeed, if there had been any other possible way, that's how it should have been. But the suffering of God's own Son was the only thing that could possibly resolve the barrier between our sinfulness and God's holiness and faith is the only thing God can accept from us without human deeds entering into the way of salvation.

What About Christians Who Disobey the Lord?

One reason why some people do not accept the teaching of the Bible about eternal salvation by faith alone is that they fear it as a dangerous doctrine. They fear that if people think they can be saved by faith alone they will have no reason to behave themselves and obey the Lord. But there are powerful teachings that God has included in the Bible to deal with this problem. For example, when any individual believes Christ for His gift of eternal life, at that moment, he or she becomes a child of God and God gives them His Holy Spirit. Then, when we disobey God, the Spirit is grieved within us (Ephesians 4:30). The fruit of the Spirit includes joy and peace (Galatians 5:22) but when the Spirit of God is grieved within us we cannot experience this joy and peace. Rather, at such times our faithful heavenly Father chastens us in our hearts. Hebrews 12:6 and 7 explain:

***“For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth.
If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?”
– Hebrews 12:6-7***

So while it is true that believers can disobey God, it is not true that they can do this and be happy. King David, in the Old Testament, described the great agony he experienced in his heart because of sins that he committed in his life. He felt like his bones ached within him because God's hand was heavy upon him (Psalm 32:3-4). In those days, the Spirit of God did not live permanently within believers as He does now. But the Spirit of God did minister to Old Testament believers and God faithfully disciplined them with

exactly the right degree of chastisement that each believer needed just as He faithfully does in dealing with each believer today.

Therefore, a Christian may try to live as he pleases but God will not leave him alone to do it. In His goodness, God works in the hearts and lives of His people, knowing just the right degree of chastisement needed by each of His children. Most of the time this chastening is something we experience in our hearts. But there have been times when God's chastening has produced severe external consequences in the lives of seriously disobedient believers (see 1 Cor. 11:30-32).

The writer of Hebrews asks, **“What son is he whom the father chasteneth not?”** (Heb. 12:7). Therefore we know every person who belongs to the Lord does receive chastening. We should keep in mind however, that God does this for our good because He loves us. **“For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.”** (Heb. 12:6). Of course, it is much better to obey the Lord and enjoy the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives than to experience chastisement in our hearts as a result of disobeying God.

Teachings in the Bible such as the chastening of the Lord, love for the Lord, our gratitude to Him and the coming day when we will be evaluated and rewarded by Him are teachings that deal with our behavior without contradicting the truth of salvation by faith in Christ alone. There is no reason therefore; to fear the Bible doctrines of salvation by faith alone because this wonderful teaching does not take away any true motives for Christians to be obedient to the Lord.

Believing in Christ Means Trusting Him

We must understand that believing in Christ is not just knowing about Him. It means to depend upon Him, to trust Him, to count on Him for what He has provided. “Trust” is a word the apostle Paul used in the book of Ephesians when writing about this. He said,

“In Whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation . . .”
- Ephesians 1:13

Perhaps you, dear reader, have been aware for some time that Christ died to save you but you have never actually trusted Him to do it. It is one thing for us to know that Christ died for our sins, was buried and raised from the dead but it is something else to actually depend upon Him, in view of His death for us, to be our Savior and give us eternal life. This is a vague concept in the minds of many people. They feel that somehow Christ's death on the cross might help their case but they have never taken hold of it by faith and believed that eternal life is really theirs because Christ died for them.

Please understand that if this important matter isn't already settled with you, you can settle it, even now! In your own mind and heart simply cast yourself upon the Lord Jesus Christ, trusting Him to do for you exactly what He promised. The gospel is His truth. He is the One Who gave it. The apostle Paul explained that the gospel he preached was given to him directly by the Lord Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11-12) which

means, when we believe the gospel we are actually believing what Jesus Christ Himself has said. Believing in someone, no matter who they are amounts to counting on them, trusting them to be true to what they say and are supposed to do. We most certainly can believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, counting on Him to stand by the gospel that He has given, and thus, to save anyone who depends upon this good news for salvation.

How to Be Sure About Salvation

According to the Bible, we *can* be sure about salvation. Observe what the apostle John said about this in the book of First John:

***“These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.”
-1 John 5:13***

We see here that John wrote a portion of his first epistle so that believers can be sure about salvation. Obviously then, God has not left us to wonder if we are saved or to wish for salvation. He directed John to write about this so that believers can know that they have eternal life. It says, **“These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God that ye may know that ye have eternal life.”**

Consider also the following brief verse from John chapter 6 where our Lord Jesus Christ said this:

***“Verily, verily I say unto you, He that believeth on Me hath everlasting life.”
- John 6:47***

This simple statement spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ, registered powerfully with me when a friend asked me to answer four brief questions about it:

- **What kind of life did Jesus promise in this verse?**
- **Who did He say would have this life?**
- **Have you believed on Him?**
- **If so, what does this verse say about you?**

You can rest your heart, dear friend, on these clear and plain words from the Son of God Himself. His words are faithful and true. Believe Him and the gift of everlasting life will be yours. It is wonderful that He, by His death and resurrection, fully paid the price for us to be saved. Believe this good news, depend upon it, and you will have everlasting life. God sees your heart. He knows your thoughts and the moment you trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior He will know it. In that instant He will save you; He will make you His child and eternal life will be yours. You can speak to Him about it in prayer, “Dear God, I do believe the Lord Jesus Christ died for me and the best I know how I now trust Him as my Savior.” Saying a prayer like that can help you to be clear, in your own heart, that you have indeed put your trust in Christ. Of course, God sees your

heart and knows if you have believed in His Son but He is also pleased for you to pray and talk to Him about.

If you do believe in Christ as your Savior, you can enjoy the wonderful assurance that God has provided by the Bible. Read carefully, the following passage from chapter 5 in the book of First John:

“If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life. These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.”
- 1 John 5:9-13

The book of Titus also assures us that eternal life is something **“God Who cannot lie, promised before the world began.”** (Titus 1:2). He doesn't promise things that aren't really true. His own holy character would not allow Him to do that. He cannot lie! When He tells us in the Bible that anyone who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ has eternal life, we can depend on it, knowing it is true. We really can know that we have eternal life because the Bible tells us this is so.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”
- John 3:16

Avalon Grace Church
3801 Guilford Road
Naples, Florida 34112