

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 16

Salvation—a rescue!

Salvation is a rescue operation. To understand salvation, we need to know what the problem was, what God did about it, and how we respond to it.

What humans are

When God made humans, he made them “in his own image,” and he pronounced his creation “very good” (Genesis 1:26-27, 31). Humans were a wonderful creation: made from dust, but energized by the breath of God (Genesis 2:7).

“The image of God” may include intelligence, creativity and power over creation. It also includes the ability to have relationships and to make moral choices. We are in some way like God himself. That’s because God has something special in mind for us, his children.

Genesis tells us that the first humans did something God had warned them not to do (Genesis 3:1-13). Their disobedience showed that they did not trust God, and it was a violation of his trust in them. By being faithless, they had broken the relationship and fallen short of what God wanted for them. They were becoming less like God. The result, said God, was struggle, pain and death (vv. 16-19). If they were not going to follow the Maker’s instructions, they were going to end up doing things the hard way.

Humans are noble and crude at the same time. We can have high ideals, and yet be barbaric. We are like God, and yet ungodly. We are not the way we are supposed to be. Even though we have messed ourselves up, God still considers us to be made in his image (Genesis 9:6). The potential is still there for us to be like God. This is why he wants to rescue us, to save us, to restore the relationship he had with us.

God wants to give us eternal life, free from pain, on good terms with God and with each other. He wants our intelligence, creativity and power to be used for good. He wants us to be like he is, to be even better than the first humans were. This is salvation.

The center of the plan

We need to be rescued. And God has done this—but he did it in a way that no human would have expected. The Son of God became a human, lived a perfect life, and we killed him. And that, says God, is the salvation we need. What irony! We are saved by a victim! Our Creator became flesh so he could absorb the penalty of sin for us. But God raised him back to life, and through Jesus, he promises to resurrect us, too.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus, the death and salvation of humanity is represented and made possible. His death is what our failures deserve, and as our Creator, he paid for all our failures. Though he did not deserve death, he willingly died for our sins, on our behalf.

Jesus Christ died for us, and was raised for us (Romans 4:25). Our old self died with him, and a new person is brought back to life with him (Romans 6:3-4). In one sacrifice, Jesus paid the penalty “for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). The payment has already been made; the question now is how we are to receive the benefits. We participate in the plan through repentance and faith.

Repentance

Jesus came to call people to repentance (Luke 5:32). Peter told people to repent and turn to God for forgiveness (Acts 2:38; 3:19). Paul said people

“must turn to God in repentance” (Acts 20:21). Repentance means to turn away from sin and toward God. Paul told the Athenians that God overlooked idolatry done in ignorance, but “now commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). They should stop their idolatry.

Paul was concerned that some of the Corinthian Christians might not repent of their sexual sins (2 Corinthians 12:21). For these people, repentance would mean a willingness to stop their immorality. Paul preached that people should “prove their repentance by their deeds” (Acts 26:20). We change our attitude and our behavior.

Part of our doctrinal foundation is “repentance from acts that lead to death” (Hebrews 6:1). But this does not mean perfect behavior—Christians are not perfect (1 John 1:8). Repentance means not that we arrive at our goal, but that we begin traveling in the right direction.

No longer do we please ourselves, but we live to please Christ (2 Corinthians 5:15; 1 Corinthians 6:20). Paul tells us, “Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness” (Romans 6:19).

Faith

However, simply telling people to repent is not going to rescue them from their failures. Humans have been told to obey for thousands of years, but they still need to be rescued. Something more is needed, and that is Christ. But we do not experience the blessing of forgiveness if we don’t believe that Christ has done this for us. We need faith, or belief. The New Testament says much more about faith than it does repentance—the words for faith occur more than eight times as often.

Everyone who believes in Jesus is forgiven (Acts 10:43). “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). The gospel “is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). Christians are known as believers, not as repenters. Belief is the defining characteristic.

Does this mean that we are to accept certain facts? The Greek word *can* mean that kind of belief, but more often it conveys the sense of trust. When

Paul encourages us to believe in Jesus Christ, he is not emphasizing facts. (The devil knows the facts about Jesus, but he isn’t saved.)

When we believe in Jesus Christ, we trust him. We know he is faithful and trustworthy. We can count on him to take care of us, to give us what he promises. We can trust him to rescue us from humanity’s worst problems. When we turn to him for salvation, we admit that we need help, and that he can provide it.

Our faith does not save us—our faith must be in him, not something else. We commit ourselves to him, and he saves us. When we trust in Christ, we quit trying to save ourselves. Although we try to have good behavior, we do not think our efforts are saving us (diligent effort never made anyone perfect). Nor do we despair when our efforts fail. That’s because we are trusting in Christ, not in ourselves, for our salvation. Our confidence is in him, not in our success or failure.

Faith is what motivates repentance. When we trust Jesus as our Savior, when we realize that God loves us so much that he sent his Son to die for us, when we know that he wants the best for us, then we become willing to live for him and please him. We make a choice—we give up the pointless and frustrating life we used to have, and accept his purpose and direction for what life is supposed to be.

Faith is the internal change that makes all the difference. Our faith doesn’t earn anything or add anything to what Jesus has earned for us. Faith is simply the willingness to respond to what he has done. We are like slaves working in the clay pits, and Christ announces, “I have purchased your freedom.” We are free to stay in the pits, or we can trust him and leave. The redemption has been done; our part is to accept it and act on it.

Grace

Salvation is God’s gift to us, given by his grace, his generosity. We can’t earn it, no matter what we do. “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Even our faith is a gift of God. Even if we obey perfectly from now on, we do not

deserve a reward (Luke 17:10).

We were created for good works (Ephesians 2:10), but good works cannot save us. They follow salvation, but they cannot earn it. As Paul says, if salvation could be achieved by law-keeping, then Christ died for nothing (Galatians 2:21). Grace does not give us permission to sin, but grace is given to us when we sin (Romans 6:15; 1 John 1:9). Whatever good works we do, we thank God for doing them in us (Galatians 2:20; Philippians 2:13).

God “has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace” (2 Timothy 1:9). “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy” (Titus 3:5).

Grace is the heart of the gospel: We are saved by God’s gift, not by our works. The gospel is “the message of his grace” (Acts 14:3; 20:24). “It is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved” (Acts 15:11). “We are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24). We would be hopelessly in sin and condemnation, except for grace.

Our salvation depends on what Christ has done. He is the Savior, the one who rescues us. We cannot brag about our obedience, or our faith, because they are always defective. The only thing we can be proud of is what Christ has done (2 Corinthians 10:17-18)—and he did it for everyone, not just us.

Justification

The Bible explains salvation in many ways: ransom, redemption, forgiveness, reconciliation, adoption, justification, etc. That is because people understand their problem in different ways. For those who feel dirty, Christ offers cleansing. For those who feel enslaved, he offers redemption, or purchase. For those who feel guilt, he gives forgiveness.

For people who feel alienated and put at a distance, he offers reconciliation and friendship. For those who feel worthless, he gives an assurance of value. For people who don’t feel like they belong, he describes salvation as adoption and inheritance. For those who are aimless, he gives purpose and direction. For those who are tired, he offers rest. For the fearful, he gives hope. For the anxious, he offers

peace. Salvation is all this, and more.

Let’s look at justification. The Greek word is a courtroom term. People who are justified are declared “not guilty.” They are exonerated, cleared, acquitted, declared OK. When God justifies us, he says that our sins will not be counted against us. They are removed from the record.

When we accept that Jesus died for us, when we acknowledge that we need a Savior, when we acknowledge that our sin deserves punishment and that Jesus bore the punishment of our sins for us, then we have faith, and God assures us that we are forgiven.

No one can be justified, or declared righteous, by observing the law (Romans 3:20), because the law does not save. It is only a standard that we fail to meet, and by that measurement, all of us fall short (v. 23). God “justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (v. 26). We are “justified by faith apart from observing the law” (v. 28).

To illustrate justification by faith, Paul uses the example of Abraham, who “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:3, quoting Genesis 15:6). Because Abraham trusted God, God counted him as righteous. This was long before the law was given, showing that justification is a gift of God, received by faith, not earned by law-keeping.

Justification is more than forgiveness, more than removing our debts. Justification means counting us as righteous, as having done something right. Our righteousness is not from our own works, but from Christ (1 Corinthians 1:30). It is through the obedience of Christ, Paul says, that believers are made righteous (Romans 5:19).

Paul even says that God “justifies the wicked” (Romans 4:5). God will consider a sinner righteous (and therefore accepted on the day of judgment) if the sinner trusts God. A person who trusts God will no longer want to be wicked, but this is a result and not a cause of salvation. People are “not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ” (Galatians 2:16).

A new start

Some people come to faith suddenly. Something clicks in their brain, a light goes on, and they accept

Jesus as their Savior. Other people come to faith in a more gradual way, slowly realizing that they do trust in Christ and not in themselves for their salvation.

Either way, the Bible describes this as a new birth. When we have faith in Christ, we are born anew as children of God (John 1:12-13; Galatians 3:26; 1 John 5:1). The Holy Spirit begins to live within us (John 14:17), and God begins a new creation in us (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15). The old self dies, and a new person is being created (Ephesians 4:22-24)—God is changing us.

In Jesus Christ, and as we have faith in him, God is undoing the results of humanity's sin. As the Holy Spirit works within us, a new humanity is being formed. The Bible doesn't say exactly how this happens; it just says that it is being done. The process begins in this life and is finished in the next.

The goal is to make us more like Jesus Christ. He is the image of God in perfection (2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3), and we must be transformed into his likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 4:19; Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 3:10). We are to be like him in spirit—in love, joy, peace, humility and other godly qualities. That's what the Holy Spirit does in us. He is restoring the image of God.

Salvation is also described as reconciliation—

the repair of our relationship with God (Romans 5:10-11; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21; Ephesians 2:16; Colossians 1:20-22). No longer do we resist or ignore God—we love him. We are changed from enemies to friends. And even more than friends—God says that he adopts us as his own children (Romans 8:15; Ephesians 1:5). We are in his family, with rights, responsibilities and a glorious inheritance (Romans 8:16-17; Galatians 3:29; Ephesians 1:18; Colossians 1:12).

Eventually there will be no more pain and sorrow (Revelation 21:4), which means that no one will be making mistakes. Sin will be no more, and death will be no more (1 Corinthians 15:26). That goal may seem a long way off when we look at ourselves now, but the journey (just like any other journey) begins with a single step—the step of accepting Christ as Savior. Christ will complete the work he begins in us (Philippians 1:6).

And in the future, we will be even more like Christ (1 Corinthians 15:49; 1 John 3:2). We will be immortal, incorruptible, glorious and sinless. Our spiritual bodies will have supernatural powers. We will have a vitality, intelligence, creativity, power and love far beyond what we know now. The image of God, once tarnished by sin, will be restored even better than it was before—and that was God's plan all along.

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