

Salvation

There are many different groups that claim to use the Bible for their definition of salvation, yet come up with different conclusions as to how we are saved. Most agree that we have a problem and that we need to be saved, but there is disagreement as to what that problem is and how we are saved from it. Let us look at what the Bible really teaches.

We are saved from sin. Our problem is our sin because God is holy and will not allow any unholiness to come into his kingdom and presence. Habakkuk 1:13 says, "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong." That is serious and we must take God, as well as our sinful lives, seriously. Romans 3:23 says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 6:23 says, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." We are saved from sin. Some people think we are saved from God's wrath which is eternal punishment in hell. This is true. Romans 5:9 says, "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" We are saved from the penalty of sin, but that is not all - we are also saved from sin. Some people will accept Jesus as a kind of fire insurance - "Yeah I'll trust Jesus to make sure I don't go to hell." They have no intention of getting rid of their sin; they just do not want to go to hell. These people do not understand biblical salvation; they want to receive Jesus as savior but not as Lord. We are saved from the penalty of sin, as well as from the power of sin (Romans 6), and we will eventually be saved from the presence of sin, either when we die or when Jesus returns, whichever comes first. Those who claim that they accept Jesus as savior but not as Lord do not understand what they need to be saved from. This is why true repentance is necessary for salvation. Acts 3:19 says, "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord." Wayne Grudem defines repentance as follows: "Repentance is a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ." We must want to be saved from sin before we can be saved from sin. We must feel sorrow over our sin (not just that we have been caught) and truly desire to be rid of sin in our lives. For someone to say, "I want to be saved, but do not want to give up my sin," is like holding onto a snake, clutching it without any intentions of letting it go, yet yelling "Help, save me from this snake."

When the Bible talks about salvation, it can be confusing because it uses this term in three different senses. In one sense we are already saved (Ephesians 2:8); in another sense we are being saved (2 Corinthians 2:15; Philippians 2:12); and in another sense we will be saved (1 Peter 1:5). This is because the term salvation is a broad term that includes justification, sanctification and glorification. Justification is a legal term meaning we are declared not guilty by God. Sanctification is the process of our being made holy after we are justified by God. Hebrews 10:14 brings out both of these aspects when it says, "Because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." In one sense we are already made perfect - that is justification. In God's eyes we are perfect because of the powerful blood of Jesus which cleanses all of our sin. But in another sense we all must admit we still sin (1 John 1:8) and need help by God to be holy - we are "being made holy" - it is a process that takes all of our lives to accomplish (Philippians 3:12). In one sense God has declared us righteous, and in another sense

we are being made what he has declared us to be. Glorification is the state of perfection we arrive at when we get to heaven.

When we hear the term "salvation" most people think of justification because this is how the term is used most often in the Bible. How can we be justified by a holy God who cannot look on or tolerate sin when we are so guilty? It is because of the work of Christ. Jesus' death and resurrection brought our salvation. Jesus paid the price we were supposed to pay for our sin by dying on the cross and suffering God's wrath in our place. It is not that God just decided to overlook our sin - that would be unjust. He announced the penalty and then paid it himself. Jesus suffered the wrath of God while on the cross; that is why he cried out "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). Jesus took our sins upon himself, and because of this God turned his back on Jesus and allowed him to suffer the wrath we were supposed to suffer. This is how God could be just and also justify those who place their faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26). Romans 3:28 says, "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law." God's requirement is faith alone. Romans 4:5 says, "However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness." We are declared righteous by our faith in Jesus and what he did for us. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "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." Our trust in Jesus is the only thing that saves us. Our works have nothing to do with our being justified. This is how powerful the death of Jesus is. We cannot add anything to the finished work of Jesus on the cross. In fact, when we say we are saved by faith plus being good, performing certain rituals, etc., we insult Jesus and are really saying his death on the cross was not good enough.

We are saved by faith and we remain saved by faith (Galatians 3:1-14). Some people say we are saved by faith but when we sin we lose our salvation. This is a form of works salvation – we keep our salvation by our performance. This is a tragic belief for two reasons: 1) We could never be assured of our salvation. We would always live in fear wondering if we were going to make it, wondering if Jesus might come back while we are sinning at some time. 1 John 5:13 says, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." God wants us to know we are saved. We are not born again and then unborn again every time we sin (that could give us a spiritual headache). Some have a variation of this belief by saying that we don't lose our salvation every time we sin, but if we sin a lot we could lose our salvation. Well how many times does it take? In God's eyes all sin is equally rotten and worthy of eternal punishment (James 2:10). The Bible certainly does not say how many sins it takes to lose our salvation, so if this is true we could never be assured of our salvation, especially when we consider that our hearts are still sinful even after salvation. There are things in our lives that God has not even dealt with us about yet. As we mature in the Lord he continues to reveal areas we need to work on. I do not know how many areas God has not dealt with in me yet, so for all I know, there could be enough sin in my life for me to lose my salvation. Thank God we don't lose our salvation because of sin. 2) This is a faulty view of God. When God forgives us he does not stop there. He takes off his judge's robe and throws away his gavel. Then he goes over to the other side of the courthouse and signs the adoption papers declaring us to be his children (1 John 3:1; Ephesians 1:5). To think of an earthly father that was willing to totally reject his son for disobedience is horrible, but to think this way of our

eternal Father is blasphemy. God loves us with an eternal love. He does punish us when we sin (Hebrews 12:5-11), but this is done as a father punishing his son for his own good, not as a judge punishing a criminal. The view that we lose our salvation when we sin and will go to hell unless we repent is the view that God never becomes our Father but always remains our judge. Some believe we lose our salvation if we completely lose our faith. This position is not as bad as the others because it is not works salvation, but it is still a misunderstanding about what happens when we are really saved.

The fact is the Bible teaches that once we are saved God helps us to persevere unto the end, so we will not ever lose our salvation. John 6:39 says, "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day." God will not lose even one of his children. John 10:27-28 says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand." This verse says not even the devil can take us or lure us away from the Father. It also says "they shall never perish." If one child perishes then Jesus is a liar. The fact is that we can trust Jesus' word - we will never perish. Romans 8:29-30 says:

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

This verse says that the people God knew or fore-loved were predestined by God to be conformed into the likeness of Jesus. In other words, God determined that "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). There is no doubt they will be saved because he has predestined that they will be conformed into the likeness of Jesus. God will make sure we do not fall away. That is why Jude 24 says God keeps us from falling. He does this by changing our hearts, putting new desires in us and coming to live inside us to make sure we do not fall (Ezekiel 36:25-27). The passage in Romans 8 says that those who are predestined are called, justified, and glorified. The term glorified is in the past tense, even though it does not take place until the future, to show how absolutely certain it is that everyone who is justified will be glorified. You can not get unpredestined, unglorified or unborn-again. Romans 8:38-39 continue this teaching that once we are saved we cannot lose our salvation:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any power, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul goes out of his way to show that absolutely nothing can separate us from God once we are united to him. Some say that we can voluntarily leave God by renouncing our faith. This verse says nothing in all creation can separate us from him. We are in creation, so this verse applies to us as well. Paul did not forget. We do not need to put at the end of this verse, "Oh yeah, we can separate ourselves." This is true because God will not let us go. Once we are saved we are no longer slaves to sin. Instead we have become slaves to God (Romans 6:22) and are now owned by God (1 Peter 2:9). This does not mean that someone can believe in Jesus and then abandon him, yet still claim to be saved. The Bible says we will persevere. Hebrews 3:14 says, "We have

come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first." In other words, if we do not persevere in faith our abandonment proves we never came to share in Christ. 1 John 2:19 teaches the same thing: "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us." The very fact that someone leaves proves he or she never belonged. True Christians will continue to produce fruit and will continue to trust in Jesus because of the dramatic change God brought about in their lives. It is all up to God. If my salvation depended on me to hold onto it, I would lose it. I thank God it is up to him and not me. This is the remarkable change that takes place when we are saved from our sins. That is why it is called "eternal life" (Romans 6:23). To be eternal it would have to last forever; otherwise it was never eternal.

You may ask, "But what about the warning passages in the Bible?" Some passages seem to come to teach that we can lose our salvation. All of these passages fall into one of three categories, but before we discuss these categories let us understand what the implications are. The passages we just went over clearly teach that we cannot lose our salvation. If other passages teach we can lose our salvation then the Bible contradicts itself - this is not an option for Christians (2 Peter 3:16-17). Since the passages that teach we cannot lose our salvation are so clear, there must be an explanation for the other passages. If we look closely at these passages we discover there is an explanation that fits perfectly with the other passages, and we see the need for both the assurance passages, as well as the need for the warning passages.

The warning passages fall into one of three categories: 1) They could be Old Testament passages that no longer apply under the New Covenant, for example, The Holy Spirit left Saul (1 Samuel 16:14); David prayed that the Holy Spirit would not leave him (Psalm 51:11). Under the Old Covenant there was no assurance of salvation unless there was continual repentance (Ezekiel 18:21-24). Old Testament saints were saved by grace, but they maintained their salvation through repentance and the provision of the sacrificial system. This is why God replaced the Old Covenant. It did not guarantee salvation, and it did not make people perfect; whereas the New Covenant does guarantee salvation and does completely justify us because the sacrifice of Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice to end all sacrifices (see Hebrews 8:7-13; 10:1-14). Therefore Old Testament passages do not prove that we can lose our salvation.

2 and 3) The passages could be either legitimate warnings to Christians, or warnings to those who have embraced Christianity but have not actually entered the family of God yet. The warnings could be to Christians and are either not referring to the loss of salvation but just to the loss of God's blessing, or they are warnings of the loss of salvation and the warnings themselves are one of God's ways of ensuring that none will perish. Hebrews 6:1-9 is a case in point. This passage describes people who have embraced Christianity to a certain extent and have even experienced the power of the Spirit in their lives, but it is clear that they never were Christians. The passage uses the illustration of a fruitless field, (7-8) which is proof that they never were Christians because all Christians will produce fruit (Matthew 7:15-20). This passage in Matthew goes on to describe people who were actually used by God to perform miracles and cast out demons (21-23) but Jesus says about them, "I never knew you." He does not say, "I once knew you, but you lost your salvation;" he says, "I never knew you." They were never Christians, just

as the ones described in Hebrews 6. We know this by the way the writer of Hebrews concludes this section in Hebrews 6:9: "Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case - things that accompany salvation." Those who have salvation will produce good fruit and will not lose their salvation. It is amazing that some will use this passage to prove we can lose our salvation and then gain it back again, because this passage says in verse 6 that those who fall away can't ever come back. The fact is that the passage is referring to non-Christians who, like the Pharisees, blaspheme the Spirit (Mark 3:20-30), which is the only unpardonable sin. Notice it is the Pharisees that were not saved whom Jesus accuses of committing this sin in Mark 3:30. Hebrews 10:26-39 is another example. The only ones who will experience God's wrath are "the enemies of God" (27). We, as Christians, are to take warning by this passage because our God is a consuming fire. We Christians will experience a judgment of our works, and if they don't measure up they will be consumed, and our lives will prove to be next to worthless (1 Corinthians 3:10-15); however, as this passage in 1 Corinthians concludes: "If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames." This is also how Hebrews 10:26-39 concludes: "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved." If we are truly a Christian we will persevere and will not shrink back - that is the fruit of true salvation. As Hebrews 3:14 says, "We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first."

The truth that once we are truly saved we cannot lose our salvation is a tremendous blessing. We no longer have to fear eternal punishment. Now we can serve God just because we love him, not because we don't want to go to hell. This is the only way our works can truly be unselfish. Some religions work hard obeying commands, knocking on doors to witness, etc., but it is all selfishly motivated - they are doing it, at least partially, for their own benefit. True Christians who rest in God's eternal security can serve God completely out of love and gratitude. We can also wholeheartedly serve him, even risking our lives because we know he holds us in the palm of his hand. We can truly say with Paul, "For Christ's *love* compels us..."

We are saved from sin by faith alone. Now you might say, "But I thought you said we are saved by repentance?" They are really two sides to the same coin. Faith naturally includes repentance. We can't put our trust in Jesus to save us from our sin unless we want to be saved from our sin; this is repentance. We also must surrender to Jesus as Lord. This is not a separate thing we are supposed to do to be saved. Some people have lists of things to do to be saved. There are no lists in the Bible. One church has four things we are supposed to do to be saved; however, there is no single passage in the Bible that includes all four of these things. Salvation is the most important thing we should be concerned with, and the Bible was written so that we could know how to be saved; yet it does not include this supposed list of four things to do to be saved? Obviously there is another answer. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me", meaning we must surrender to him as Lord (see also Luke 14:25-33). Surrender is also just a part of faith. When I say I trust in Jesus, I am saying I no longer trust in myself. I realize I have blown it and cannot save myself. I am handing over the steering wheel of my life to Jesus saying, "Here, I recognize I can't drive, but I know you can." Surrender is not a work unless when you say, "I must surrender" you mean, "I have to obey God to be saved." That would be works salvation. Repentance is not a work either

unless when you say, "I must repent" you mean, "I have to stop sinning to get saved." This would be silly. You would be saying, "I have to stop sinning in order to get the power to stop sinning." Surrender and repentance are an attitude, a desire - a part of real faith. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia* which literally means a change of mind (*meta* = change or after; *noia* = mind). It is a change of mind, "I don't want to sin anymore", not a change of action, "I stopped sinning." In other words you do not get cleaned up in order to take a bath - you come as you are with a desire to be clean. It is a matter of the heart: I feel bad about my sin; I wish I would not have sinned, and I don't want to sin anymore. Now true repentance will lead to a changed life, because when we get saved we receive the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit's job is to make us holy (and he is really good at it too). This is why the person who says he is saved, yet experiences no change in his life, is only fooling himself. We are born again (John 3:3); we are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17); and the Holy Spirit is in us (Romans 8:9). This is what James meant when he said, "In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." True faith will naturally lead to good works. But we are not saved by our works; we work because we are saved. Grace and works are the exact opposite of each other. Romans 11:6 says, "And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace." Grace means unmerited favor. We are saved by grace (we cannot merit our salvation at all), through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9), apart from works (Romans 3:28; 4:5), which will naturally lead to a changed life (Ephesians 2:10).

One last thing remains to be said, "What about baptism?" Baptism is very important and is a part of salvation when we are using the term 'salvation' to refer to the whole process, including sanctification. The New Testament church did not even consider the possibility of getting saved and not getting baptized; in fact, baptism was the normal outward expression of faith (not walking an isle or saying a prayer). In Acts 2:37 Luke says, "When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.'" Baptism is not an option. Notice the people did not ask, "What must we do to be justified?" or "What are the steps of salvation?" They just said, "What must we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized." Repentance is one aspect of true faith in Jesus, which is what Peter was discussing with them when they were cut to the heart. Baptism is our declaration to the world that we have decided to follow Jesus. It is the first work of a Christian, the first act of obedience according to Matthew 28:19. The repentant heart of faith brings the forgiveness of sins – not the ritual of baptism; however, baptism is essential to our Christian walk. Jesus could say in Mark 16:16, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." The Bible does not even consider the possibility of a person getting saved and not baptized, but it is the belief that saves, not the baptism, which is why he didn't say, "But whoever does not believe *or is not baptized* will be condemned." If Baptism was essential for our justification Paul would have mentioned in his two great books on salvation (Romans and Galatians) that baptism was necessary for salvation; however, the only thing he mentions is faith. Baptism is assumed and it symbolizes what takes place in our hearts (Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:27), but it does not save us. God did not just forget to throw in the matter of baptism in all the passages on salvation that say faith alone saves us, because faith alone is what saves us. Acts 10:44-48 proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that baptism does not save us and is not essential for justification. In this passage the people were saved and even received the gift of the Holy

Spirit before they were baptized. Baptism is important; therefore Peter immediately baptized them, but he didn't say, "Oh no, God made a mistake. He filled them with the Spirit before baptism; we had better correct that mistake." Someone once told me, "Well Acts 10:44-48 is only one place in the Bible." My response was, "One place is enough if you believe the Bible is without error and completely sufficient for our lives" (2 Peter 3:16-17). If it is in the Bible once, it is true. The thief on the cross also proves that baptism does not save us (Luke 23:39-43). Some say that the thief was still under the Old Covenant, so this does not count as proof. But the thief did not die until after Jesus died, and he trusted in Jesus rather than in the Old Covenant (which would not have done him any good because under the Old Covenant he would have had to offer a sacrifice). His trusting in Jesus saved him, which puts him in the New Covenant; therefore, he is excellent proof that baptism does not save us. No, baptism does not save us, but it does symbolize the cleansing that comes through repentance. It is a wonderful picture of what takes place in our hearts when we are saved. We die to sin (we are saved from sin), pictured by the burial in water and we are raised to a new life, pictured by our coming out of the water. When a person has seriously considered the ramifications of salvation and counted the cost (Luke 14:25-33), he or she then places his or her faith in Christ and outwardly expresses that faith through baptism.

We are saved from our sin by the grace of God through faith in Jesus and his death on the cross. This faith naturally includes surrender and repentance. After we are saved we are immediately baptized and a changed life follows. This is true salvation!

How can we be assured of this salvation? There are three tests:

1) The Holy Spirit will assure you in your heart by your sensing his presence (1 John 3:24; 4:13; Romans 5:5; 8:16).

2) The Bible will assure you (Romans 10:9-13). Did you do the things the Bible says are necessary for salvation? Did you Biblically trust in Jesus with a faith that includes repentance and surrender? Then you are saved. The Bible does not lie. Do not go by your feelings. "Well I don't feel saved today." Feelings come and go. Go by the truth of the Bible.

3) Your life will be changed. All Christians produce fruit (Matthew 7:16-23). How do you tell an apple tree is an apple tree? By the fruit. The fruit is not what saves you, but it is evidence that you have been saved (Ephesians 2:8-10; 1 John 2:1-3). This does not mean you are perfect. The Apostle Paul had not even arrived at perfection (Philippians 3:12-14). But it does mean there is a noticeable change in your life and you are beginning to experience the fruit of the Spirit in your life (Galatians 5:22-23).

If all of these tests apply, then you are a Christian. If they do not, then you can become a Christian. Repent of your sins and place your faith in Jesus. You can do this by a simple prayer if you truly mean it with your heart:

God, I am a sinner. I don't deserve your grace. I am tired of this life of sin. Please save me from it. I believe that Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead so my sins could be forgiven. Jesus come into my life; save me from my sins; change my life and

make me the person you want me to be and I will follow you the rest of my days. Thank you for saving me. Amen.

Once you are saved, get baptized, join a Bible believing church, start serving God with the spiritual gifts He gives you, and seek to grow in Christ through daily Bible reading, prayer, worship and fellowship. And please tell someone else about Jesus!