

Doctrines of the Bible Lesson 6

Salvation

Salvation is the appropriation and application of the atoning work of Christ, so that the believer's sins are forgiven, his relationship with God is restored, and eternal life in glory with God is guaranteed. The doctrine of salvation is therefore of the utmost importance to us since it pertains to the most crucial need of the human being. We act like the most crucial need is materialistic, or health related, or in human relationships; but the Bible makes it clear that man has a terrible need for a Savior. According to Romans 3:23 (and a wealth of other passages), "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God". Then in Romans 6:23 we read the consequences, "the wages of sin is death". Salvation is not just a life and death issue, it is an eternal life or eternal death issue. The term salvation may seem to have an obvious meaning, but based on various polls within the Christian community, there is a variety of understandings on what it means and how it occurs. It seems that the majority of professing Christians believe in a works based salvation. Therefore it is important to examine what the Bible teaches about salvation.

The Bible's emphasis on man's great need for salvation, and God's intervention to accomplish the salvation available to man, excludes any so called works based salvation. Mankind exists in a state of sin. We are not sinners because we sin, we sin because we are by nature sinners. Blaise Pascal said we should know this not only from Scripture, but from experience as well. He said, "If your opponent in Backgammon rolls double six twenty times in a row, you can be sure he is cheating." In the same way if you closely examine a multitude of humans and they all have imperfections and make mistakes, then we can deduce that humans as a race are imperfect. In Ephesians 2:1-3, Paul humbled his audience in Ephesus by reminding them of their great need by saying, "(Before Christ), you were dead (spiritually) in your sins, in which you formerly walked...we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh, and were BY NATURE CHILDREN OF WRATH, even as the rest."

Old Testament Salvation

In comparing the Old Testament with the New, many people feel there is a different God at work, and thus a different mode of salvation as well. The O.T. seems to be emphasizing the quality of temporal material life, but the N.T. seems to be emphasizing the spiritual and the future Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, we find that salvation is a gift of God that is received by faith. This is true in both Testaments. Abraham was the father of the people of God, and so represents not only Israel but all who believe God (Romans 9:6-8). In Genesis 15:6, we are told "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Paul made the same point in Romans 4:1-5 that no one is justified before God based on his own works; but God justifies the ungodly who believe in Him through God's act of grace. In the Law of Moses, the Levitical priesthood, and the sacrificial system were built around the assumption of sin. Most of the daily sacrifices were made for unintentional sin, and the national Day of Atonement was for the collective unknown sins of the entire nation. Even the priests were assumed to be sinners as they had to do sacrifices for their own sin before they could do sacrifices for the people. The offerings were never regarded as sufficient (Hosea 6:6), and they were never intended to save. The sacrifices were made for supposedly saved people in order to temporarily cleanse them until the perfect sacrifice (of Messiah) would come. Paul confirms this in Romans 3:25 when he wrote that our redemption is in Christ Jesus "whom God displayed publicly as a satisfaction of justice in His blood received through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness. Because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed." This means that, God being omniscient, passed over the sin of believers because God knew that a perfect sacrifice of infinite value would be made on their behalf in the future. Someone said that sins "were laid aside until Christ, then they were laid upon Christ".

The Nature of the Atonement

The atonement is the work of Christ on the cross that satisfied God's requirement for divine justice. The atoning work of Christ made possible our salvation. By the suffering of the divine substitute, the divine wrath against sin is appeased, and the punishment due the sinner is inflicted upon the Savior. The motivation for the atonement is the love of God as John 3:16 makes clear, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

The standard required was righteousness. We had no perfect righteousness of our own, therefore the righteousness of Christ was imputed to us through the atonement. Paul said this well in 2 Cor.5:21 by writing that God made Jesus the object of His righteous wrath so "that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." The problem that had to be overcome was sin. The sin of mankind is huge, so the solution had to be huge. The prerequisite for the atonement was the incarnation. God had to take on the flesh of man. It is not that God became a man and lost His attributes as God, but God voluntarily limited His attributes by adding the body of man. This was supernaturally accomplished in Luke 1:35 by the Holy Spirit coming upon Mary and conceiving the perfect child in her womb. Jesus was the perfect sinless God-man who alone was able to atone for our sin. A famous theologian in the 12th century named Anselm said it well, "Only a man ought to pay the price, and only God could pay the necessary price to atone for sin, then only the God-man can pay the price."

The idea of substitution runs throughout the Scriptures. Back in Genesis 22:13, when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God provided a substitute sacrifice of a ram which Abraham then offered as a burnt sacrifice to the Lord in place of his son. Thus the idea of the scapegoat was born. In Exodus 12 when the Lord executed the tenth plague on Egypt and all the first born in Egypt would die, the Hebrews were commanded to sacrifice a lamb for each family. They would then put the blood of the sacrifice on the doorposts so that the Lord would "Passover" the Hebrews and they would live. Thus the Passover lamb became the type of substitutionary sacrifice of Christ, and Christ was called the Lamb of God. Isaiah 53:7-8 prophesied that the Christ would be "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter", and Acts 8:32 tells us that this was fulfilled by Jesus. Therefore Paul explained the Gospel simply in 1 Cor.15:3 by saying "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures".

Propitiation is a theological term meaning to appease or remove God's wrath against sin. This was also accomplished by the atonement. God's holiness requires that He be angry against sin, and His justice requires that He punish sin. His anger was appeased, and justice was served in the atoning work of Christ. Peace between God and man is now possible, and reconciliation is now available.

The image of redemption runs through the N.T. as slavery was an institution in the first century world. You could buy or redeem a slave, and free him by paying a price. Paul had this in mind in 1 Cor.6:20 when he wrote, "you have been bought with a price (the blood of Christ), therefore glorify God in your body." Peter said it even better in 1 Peter 1:18-19, "you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver and gold...but with precious blood...the blood of Christ." They were saying that mankind is in slavery to sin, but Jesus has bought their freedom.

Justification by Faith

Another huge issue in salvation is justification. How can sinners be justified before a holy righteous Judge (God)? A righteous judge can't simply overlook transgressions, or turn a blind eye, or he would be considered an unjust judge. Romans 3:21-26 tells us that God remains a righteous judge in spite of justifying sinners by paying the penalty Himself. While justification is available at no cost to the believer, a high price has been paid in Christ's blood. Christ's sacrifice satisfied justice. Justice was demanded, and justice was served. The only question remaining is, "How can this all be appropriated?" How can I make it mine?

In Romans 4:4-5, Paul gives a contrast between faith and works in regard to salvation. If you try to earn your salvation by works then it is not grace, it is just what you deserve. "But to the one who does not work, but believes in God who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness". Don't worry, later in Romans 6 Paul will devote considerable space to the importance of works after salvation, but to initially receive salvation requires faith. Again in Ephesians 2:8 Paul wrote that "by grace you have been saved through faith; and not of yourselves, it is a gift of God, not as a result of works so that no man should boast." Grace is the free gift of God of the atoning work of Christ, and it is received by faith. To explain biblical faith, we use a cluster of terms like trust, belief, confidence, dependence, and commitment—all appropriate. Perhaps the best definition is found in Hebrews 11:1, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The content of faith (the gospel) is an assured reality to you, and brings such a conviction that you act upon it, you respond to it. Hebrews chapter 11 then proceeds to go through the lives of every major Bible character. All of them were saved because they believed the Word of God, committed themselves to it, and acted upon it. Why else would Abraham pick up and leave home for Canaan, or Noah build an ark with everyone making fun of him? Why else would you and I give up our agenda, and live for Jesus unless we "live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself up for me." (Gal.2:20)

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