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Bridgeway Church / Foundations
Salvation (1)

Salvation: God's Pursuit of Us
Part One

Salvation

“Salvation” may well be the most commonplace yet deeply cherished word in the Christian vocabulary. Lamentably, though, this beautiful biblical term has suffered distortion by those who have sought to redefine not only the nature of salvation but also the Christian faith in general. Thus for many “salvation” is now little more than self-realization or attaining some vague sense of personal authenticity. What we are “saved” from is low self-esteem, an eerie sense of meaninglessness, aimlessness, and anomie. Others would point to the need for greater education to save us from ignorance. Some conceive of salvation as cultural refinement. One man said of the impact of his wife on rescuing him from loneliness and despair: “She was my *salvation*.”

The meaning we give to the notion of “salvation” clearly depends on what we perceive to be *the greatest threat* to us personally and corporately. In other words, the idea and experience of salvation will never have the rightful effect on our lives until we grasp both what we are saved *from* and *to*. The Scriptures consistently speak of our desperate plight apart from Christ. We are alienated from God (2 Cor. 5:18-21), subject to his righteous wrath (John 3:36; Eph. 2:1-3), and hostile to him (Rom. 3:9-18). We are, in fact, his enemies (Rom. 5:10), and under the curse imposed by divine law (Gal. 3:13-14).

As urgent and pressing as are the many psychological, financial, and personal predicaments we face, the most immediate and eternal danger to the welfare of individual persons is the judgment of God that we all rightly deserve because of sin and idolatry. Salvation, therefore, is primarily deliverance or rescue from the penal consequences incurred by our rebellion against the Creator. In sum, it is “from the wrath to come” that Jesus has saved us and set us free (1 Thess. 2:10).

There are three primary senses in which the verb “to save” and its cognates are used in the NT. First, it most often refers to our spiritual rescue from well-deserved damnation. Jesus used the language of salvation in this way (Luke 7:49-50; 8:12), as did Paul. Perhaps the most well-known text that uses the terminology in a redemptive or soteriological sense is the apostle’s declaration in Ephesians that “by grace” we “have been saved through faith” and not because of “works” (Eph. 2:8-9; see also Rom. 5:9-10; 1 Cor. 1:18, 21; Titus 3:4-5). Paul also makes it clear that although we are saved apart from works we are not saved without them. That is to say, whereas human moral effort is by no means the foundation or meritorious cause of salvation, grace-empowered works are the fruit and consequence of it. “For we are his workmanship,” says Paul, “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). Indeed, the “grace of God has appeared, bringing *salvation* for all people” (Titus 2:11). But this “salvation” is not without any regard to works, for it is designed to “train” us “to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (Titus 2:12).

A more expansive examination of this doctrine of salvation reveals that several interrelated truths are entailed, each of which serves in its own way to magnify the mercy shown to sinful men and women.

Regeneration, more popularly known as the new birth or being born again, is the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in which new life is imparted to those who were “dead” in their “trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1,5; John 3:1-8). This inner renewal is wrought through the preaching of the gospel (James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23-25) and issues in repentance from sin and saving faith in Christ.

The New Testament refers to this work of the Spirit in terms of the divine call of God by which the elect are effectually drawn to Christ (John 6:44; Acts 2:39; Rom. 8:30; 1 Cor. 1:9). Whereas all mankind are externally invited to embrace the saving benefits of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection (Matt. 11:28-30; 22:14), only the elect of God are the undeserved recipients of that internal call by which they are brought to spiritual life and enabled to see the glory of God as revealed in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). Awakened to the reality of their sin, the elect repent of it and

embrace by faith the offer of full and final forgiveness of sins secured for them through the atoning death of Christ on the cross (Eph. 1:7). At the moment of their conversion God imputes the righteousness of Christ to them and declares them forgiven and forever justified in his sight (Rom. 3:21-25; 2 Cor. 5:21). Salvation, therefore, becomes an experiential reality for the elect through faith in the alien righteousness of Christ, a faith that God graciously supplies (Eph. 2:8-9).

Those whom God thus effectually calls to faith in Christ are blessed with adoption as the spiritual sons and daughters of their heavenly Father (John 1:11-13; 1 John 3:1-3). In redeeming for himself a people, God sanctifies them both *definitively*, in setting them apart and consecrating them unto himself as his unique possession and eternal inheritance (2 Cor. 6:11), and *experientially*, by inaugurating through the Spirit a process by which they are progressively conformed to the image of Jesus himself (Rom. 8:29; Phil. 2:12-13; Heb. 10:14). The assurance is repeatedly given in Scripture that those whom God has in this way chosen, called, regenerated, justified, and is in the process of sanctifying, will in fact be preserved indefectibly for the consummation of salvation in the glorification of their bodies (Phil. 1:6; 3:20-21; 1 Pet. 1:5).

A person may also be “saved” from perilous circumstances, be it political oppression and tyranny, famine, plague, or the many and varied threats posed by natural catastrophes. The disciples cried out to Jesus in the midst of a life-threatening storm on the Sea of Galilee: “Save us, Lord; we are perishing” (Matt. 8:25). Paul took comfort that the Philippians were praying for him while he sat in prison: “for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance” (that is to say, his release from incarceration and the ever-present threat of execution while he remained in chains). The word translated “deliverance” is the Greek noun *sōtēria* or salvation.

Finally, a third way in which the words “to save” and “salvation” are used is with reference to the healing of the body. This concept of “salvation” is found frequently in the gospel narratives and in conjunction with the ministry of Jesus to the diseased and demonized. The woman with the discharge of blood was “made well” (lit., “saved”; Matt. 9:21-22) when she reached out in faith and touched the hem of Christ’s garment (see also Luke 17:19).

These many ways in which the word group is used points to the fact that the salvation secured for us in Christ is holistic. God in his grace holds forth for all believers the prospect of complete restoration in body, soul, and spirit in order that the whole person might live joyfully in his presence forever.

A mistake frequently made by Christians is to think of salvation as deliverance or rescue from the physical body as well as from the earth. Christ’s coming, or so they think, was designed to facilitate the release of the soul from the body so that believers might live eternally in an ethereal, immaterial, and altogether spiritual heaven. This concept is due far more to the influence of Greek philosophy and Gnosticism than it is to Scripture. The Bible never speaks of the body as inherently evil or as a prison from which one should seek escape, but instead promises that our physical frame will be transformed to be like the “glorious body” of the risen Christ (Phil. 3:21). Likewise, this earth will be set free from the curse consequent to the sin of Adam and will, in a very real sense, be “saved” as a holy habitation for God’s people into eternity (Rom. 8:18-25; 2 Pet. 3:10-13; Rev. 21:1-4).

Finally, we should not overlook the many and varied blessings that come with salvation. That is to say, Christ delivers us *from* both spiritual and physical destruction that he might bring us to God (1 Pet. 3:18). We are his beloved children (Rom. 8:15-17) in whom the Spirit abides as an indwelling and empowering presence (Eph. 2:22). We have been saved *unto* an abundant life (John 10:10) and the knowledge of God (John 17:3). Thus salvation is not only *from* divine wrath but *into* the experience of love for Christ and a joy that is inexpressible and full of glory (1 Pet. 1:8).

It is, then, “to the only God, our *Savior*, through Jesus Christ” that we should ascribe glory, majesty, dominion, and authority” because he “is able to keep” us “from stumbling and to present” us “blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy” (Jude 24-25).

Grace

If it is “*by grace you have been saved*” (Eph. 2:8a), we can hardly expect to understand what it means to be delivered from sin, death, and condemnation until we understand what the Bible means by *grace*. Several points must be established about grace.

(1) Let's begin with a definition. Herman Bavinck defined the saving grace of God as "his voluntary, unrestrained, unmerited favor toward guilty sinners, granting them justification and life instead of the penalty of death, which they deserved" (*The Doctrine of God*, 208). Louis Berkhof defined it as "the free bestowal of kindness on one who has no claim to it" (*Systematic Theology*, 71). J. I. Packer put it this way: "The grace of God is love freely shown towards guilty sinners, contrary to their merit and indeed in defiance of their demerit. It is God showing goodness to persons who deserve only severity, and had no reason to expect anything but severity" (*Knowing God*, 120).

(2) Grace is not the same as mercy. Whereas grace is God's goodness toward sinners, mercy is God's goodness toward sufferers. As a result, mercy does not appear to be as free as grace. Says John Piper:

"When we show mercy it looks as if we are responding to pain and being constrained by a painful condition outside ourselves. It is a beautiful constraint. But it does not seem to be as free as grace. Grace, however, contemplates the ugliness of sin, and, contrary to all expectation, acts beneficently. This looks more free. Pain seems to constrain mercy, but guilt does not seem to constrain grace. Grace looks more free. I don't mean that God's mercy is in fact less free than his grace. No one deserves God's mercy. And God is not bound to be merciful to any of his creatures. What I do mean is that 'freeness' lies closer at the heart of the meaning of grace. Grace, by definition, is free and unconstrained. It even lacks the *seeming* constraint of naturalness that exists between suffering and mercy. If God's grace is 'natural' in response to sin, it is owing entirely to something amazing in God, not in the constraining power of sin. Suffering constrains pity; but sin kindles anger. Therefore grace toward sinners is the freest of all God's acts" (*Future Grace*, 78).

(3) Grace always presupposes sin and guilt. Grace has meaning only when men are seen as fallen, unworthy of salvation, and liable to eternal wrath. What makes Paul's declaration that we are saved "by grace" so significant is his earlier declaration that we were "dead" in trespasses and sins, "gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature," "carrying out the desires of the body and the mind," and were by nature the children of divine wrath (Eph. 2:1-10).

Or to put it in slightly different terms, grace does not contemplate sinners merely as undeserving, but as *ill-deserving*. ***It is not simply that we do not deserve grace: we do deserve hell!*** Fallen and unredeemed humanity is not to be conceived as merely helpless or neutral, but as openly and vehemently hostile toward God. It is one thing to be without a God-approved righteousness. It is altogether another thing to be wholly unrighteous and thus the object of divine wrath. It is, then, against the background of having been at one time the enemies of God that divine grace is to be portrayed (Rom. 5:10).

(4) Grace is not to be thought of as in any sense dependent upon the merit or demerit of its objects. This may be expressed in two ways. In the first place, *grace ceases to be grace if God is compelled to bestow it in the presence of human merit*. Second, *grace ceases to be grace if God is compelled to withdraw it in the presence of human demerit*. Indeed, grace is seen to be infinitely glorious only when it operates, as Packer says, "in defiance of" human demerit. *Therefore, grace is not treating a person less than, as, or greater than he deserves. It is treating a person without the slightest reference to desert whatsoever, but solely according to the infinite goodness and sovereign purpose of God.*

(5) Grace cannot incur a debt, which is to say that it is unrecompensed. Since grace is a gift, no work is to be performed, no offering made, with a view to repaying God for his favor. The biblical response to grace received is faith to receive yet more.

(6) With respect to justification, grace stands opposed to works (Rom. 4:4-5; 11:6). However, in respect to sanctification, grace is the source of works. This simply means that whereas we are saved by grace and not of works, we are saved by grace unto good works. Good works are the fruit, not the root, of God's saving grace (see esp. Eph. 2:8-10). It thus comes as no surprise that in Scripture grace and salvation stand together as cause is related to effect. It is the grace of God which "brings" salvation (Titus 2:11). We are saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9).

(7) Grace is *sovereign*. That is to say, it is optional in its exercise and extent. Although God is gracious in his eternal being, he need not be gracious towards or shower his grace upon anyone. If grace were at any time an obligation of God, it would cease to be grace. God's grace, therefore, is distinguishing. He graciously saves some but not all, not based on anything present in the creature either possible or actual, foreseen or foreordained, but wholly according to his sovereign good pleasure.

(8) Whereas grace is certainly free, it isn't always unconditional. The grace of election is **unconditional** (Rom. 9:11). But many of God's acts and blessings are **conditional**. See for example, 2 Chronicles 30:9; Isaiah 30:19; Psalm 33:22; 103:17-18; Ephesians 6:24. Note especially James 4:6, where we read that God "gives more grace. Therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble'" (James 4:6; cf. 1 Peter 5:5).

But conditional grace is not earned grace. Why? Because

"when God's grace is promised based on a condition, that condition is also a work of God's grace. . . . God's freedom is not reduced when he makes some of his graces depend on conditions that he himself freely supplies" (John Piper, *Future Grace*, 79).

Or again,

"conditional grace is free and unmerited because ultimately the condition of faith is a gift of grace. God graciously enables the conditions that he requires" (235).

Finally,

"this covenant-keeping condition of future grace does not mean we lose security or assurance, for God has pledged himself to complete the work he began in the elect (Philippians 1:6). He is at work within us to will and to do his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13). He works in us what is pleasing in his sight (Hebrews 13:21). He fulfills the conditions of the covenant through us (Ezekiel 36:27). Our security is as secure as God is faithful" (248).

(9) Grace is the power of God's presence. It is more than an attitude or disposition in the divine nature. Grace is the power of God's Spirit converting the soul. It is the activity or movement of God whereby he saves and justifies the individual through faith (see esp. Rom. 3:24; 5:15,17). Therefore, grace is not something in which we merely believe; *it is something we experience as well.*

Grace, however, is not only the divine act by which God initiates our spiritual life, but also the very power by which we are sustained in, nourished, and proceed through that life. *The energizing and sanctifying work of the indwelling Spirit is the grace of God.* After Paul had prayed three times for God to deliver him from his thorn in the flesh, he received this answer: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Although Paul undoubtedly derived encouragement and strength to face his daily trials by reflecting on the magnificence of God's unmerited favor, in this text he appears to speak rather of *an experiential reality of a more dynamic nature.* It is *the operative power of the indwelling Spirit* to which Paul refers. That is the grace of God.

That grace is the power of God's presence explains why Paul opens his letters by saying "grace be to you" and concludes them by saying "grace be with you" (see Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:3; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:2; Titus 1:4; 2 Cor. 13:14). This is an earnest and constant wish of Paul that his converts may continue to experience grace, that they may know afresh the gracious power of God moving in their lives, that they may find in that grace the spiritual resources by which to live in a way pleasing to him.

(10) Besides the general soteriological usage of the word, grace can also denote the particular acts of God whereby he grants enablement for some service or authorization for a specific duty or mission (Rom. 12:3; 15:15-18; 1 Cor. 3:10). It is not without significance that the word grace and its derivatives are used in the description of what we call "spiritual gifts." We read in Romans 12:6: "Having gifts [*charismata*] that differ according to the grace [*charin*] given to us."

Finally, the word grace is used in a variety of ways in the course of Paul's discussion of Christian stewardship (2 Cor. 8-9). It is used with reference to the supernatural enablement bestowed by God, as a result of which one gives despite poverty (2 Cor. 8:1,9). It refers to the ministry of giving (2 Cor. 8:6, 7, 19), the privilege of giving (2 Cor. 8:4) and even to the gift itself (1 Cor. 16:3).

Discussion Questions

- (1) Early in this lesson I spoke of the “greatest threat” to your soul. What is it? Do you agree with my conclusion? In light of this, from what specifically does the Bible say we are “saved”? Contrast your answer with what many in the professing church today are saying about the meaning of “salvation.”
- (2) Give your own definition of the word “grace”. How has “grace” been undermined or misunderstood in the church today?
- (3) Is “grace” always unconditional? If not, in what sense is it at times suspended or conditioned upon something we do? How do we avoid destroying the essence of grace by suggesting that in some sense it can be conditional?
- (4) Talk about the difference between “grace” and “mercy.” Read Piper’s explanation. Do you agree? If not, why not?
- (5) In what sense is it biblical to say that God’s saving grace is sovereign? Is God under obligation from his own nature or from something he has promised in his Word to be gracious to all humanity?