



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

Are You Saved?

Explore the meaning of salvation through Scripture and various Christian perspectives, enabling participants to better understand their own beliefs about salvation.

Introduction

“Are you saved?” Some Christians answer this question “Yes!” with certainty, while others wonder what, exactly, “being saved” entails. Still other Christians find the question somewhat offensive. What is salvation, and how is a person saved? This study will examine several biblical and theological understandings of salvation to provide a starting point for discussion.

Salvation as Caring

In the Bible, “save” (Hebrew *yasha* and Greek *sōzō*) literally means to rescue or look out for someone. Moses rescued the daughters of Midian (Exod. 2:16–17). A woman cried out for someone to rescue her (Deut. 22:25–27). Paul wanted his fellow travelers to be saved from shipwreck (Acts 27:20, 31).

Salvation in the Bible often looks like caring. God saves by providing the necessities of life: food and drinkable water (Exod. 16:13–15; 17:6) and healing (Ps. 147:3). God defends Israel (e.g., Ps. 44:3–7). God is also the rescuer of souls (Ps. 6:4) and a personal savior: “The LORD will save me” (Isa. 38:20). Many Christians have memorized the comforting words of the Twenty-third

Psalm: “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Ps. 23:1).

Patterned on Old Testament images of God, the New Testament portrays Jesus as caring for people as shepherd (John 10: 11) and savior (Acts 5:31; Phil. 3:20). Just as God saves those crushed in spirit, the needy, and the humble (Pss. 34:18; 76:9), Jesus blesses those who are poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3), the poor (Luke 6:20), and the meek (Matt. 5:5). Jesus provides food (Matt. 14:15–21) and heals (Luke 17:11–19). Jesus forgives sins and makes people whole (Mark 2:2–12).

Salvation from Sin

Though there are many biblical examples of salvation, the primary Christian focus tends to be salvation from Sin. This emphasis came about because the apostle Paul, who greatly influenced Christian theology, thought that the most urgent human condition was profound alienation from God. Paul believed the world was ending very soon (1 Cor. 7:29–31; 1 Thess. 4:15–5:7) such that all

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worldly cares and needs would end. While he cared for people, he emphasized the predicament of Sin.

Sin and sin

Paul Tillich, in his *Systematic Theology*, wrote that the human state of estrangement from God is “Sin” with a capital “S.” Individual actions that stem from Sin are “sins” with a lowercase “s.”

Paul knew that humans are sinful no matter how hard they try not to be (e.g., Rom. 3:11–12, 23). Paul knew the psalmist’s lament, “Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me” (Ps. 51:5) and reasoned that because Adam sinned (Gen. 3:1–24), all descendants of Adam are sinful. Paul argued that because Sin came through one man (Adam), there is one man who can justify sinners—Christ (Rom. 5:12–14, 18–21).

From Paul’s theology of Sin, a Christian theologian named Augustine developed the doctrine of “Original Sin,” which states that Sin is literally passed down from parent to child. For Christians, the only way to be saved from Original Sin is through Christ.¹ Jesus is the sacrifice that atones for the Sin of all who accept him as savior (Rom. 3:25), and Christians are “justified by his blood” (Rom. 5:9).

Sacrificial Atonement

Jesus was crucified during the week of Passover, the Festival of Unleavened Bread that commemorates God’s saving Israel from slavery in Egypt. At the first Passover, the Israelites sacrificed lambs and put the blood on their doorposts so that the angel of death would “pass over” their houses (Exod. 12:1–32). Jesus symbolically became the lamb whose blood causes God to pass over human Sin. Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

Just as Jesus broke Passover bread and drank from the cup at his last Passover meal, commanding his disciples to remember him through these actions (Luke 22:7–20), so Christians celebrate the Lord’s Supper by eating bread representing Christ’s broken body and drinking wine or juice representing his sacrificial blood (1 Cor. 11:23–26).

For many Christians, Jesus’ sacrifice belongs at the core of Christian faith because it shows both God’s vulnerability in becoming human and suffering pain and death and God’s power to overcome the most evil and sinful of human inclinations. That God raised Jesus from death and glorified him gives ultimate hope to Christians that Jesus’ resurrection has conquered death for all who believe in him; for Paul, this was a central tenet of Christian faith (1 Cor. 15).

Some Christians today question whether it is right to uphold sacrificial atonement as a primary Christian metaphor for salvation. Upon hearing the story of Jesus’ passion, some think that God must be a violent father if he demanded the suffering and death of his own son, an image that subtly justifies domestic violence. God spared Abraham’s son Isaac (Gen. 22:12). Why, then, doesn’t God spare his own son? These Christians wonder if perhaps God does not require an act of violence for salvation. They object to the glorification of suffering and death (e.g., Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 3:18; Rev. 12:11) because they undermine belief in a loving, gracious God, and some people have used Jesus’ suffering and self-emptying (e.g., 2 Cor. 1:5; Phil. 2:5–11) to justify oppression and impose subservience on others.²

Salvation by Faith

“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). Paul was adamant that salvation comes only through faith in Christ. There is nothing a person can do to earn God’s grace except to believe that Jesus is Lord and Savior (Gal. 2:16).

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Christians well versed in the doctrine of salvation by grace sometimes misunderstand what Paul meant by it. As a result, “being saved” can begin to sound, to some people, rather trite and shallow.³ When Paul said that the law does not save (Gal. 2–3), many scholars point out that he was referring mainly to the Jewish covenant of circumcision and dietary restrictions. Paul argued that Gentiles did not have to follow these laws

to become Christian because being circumcised did not “save” (Gal. 2:1–16).

Paul did *not* mean that those who accept Christ can do whatever they please. Though merely following commandments does not save, Paul still expected those who converted to Christianity to strive to do good, serve the community, and heal the world. A Christian might be saved from Sin and set on the right path to a relationship with God, but it was still quite possible to commit sin.

In Corinth, Gentile Christians thought salvation by faith meant that they were above the law and could do anything they wanted (1 Cor. 5–6; Gal. 5:13). In dismay, Paul asked them, “Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!” (Rom. 6:15). Paul warned that those who gratify the “desires of the flesh” (licentiousness, idolatry, strife, envy, drunkenness, etc.) will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:16–21). Paul expected a certain standard of ethical behavior and community responsibility (Rom. 6:12–14; 1 Cor. 10:1–33).

Some Christians think that Jesus disdained Jewish law, but this is not the case. Jesus quibbled about details of the law from time to time, but he said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I

Jesus Saves

Jesus’ name in Hebrew, Yehoshua or Yeshua, means “Yah(weh) will save.” In New Testament Greek, the name is transliterated Iēsous, which then becomes “Jesus” in English. Though Yeshua (Joshua) was a common name, it had special meaning for Jesus. An angel told Joseph: “You are to name him Jesus (Iēsous), for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21).

have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Matt. 5:17). He warned, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). Several of Jesus’ parables indicate that good works are necessary. In the parable of the final judgment, Jesus separates those who have cared for those in need from those who have not (Matt. 25:31–46).

Jesus taught about salvation as caring in the tradition of the Jewish *mitzah* (from Hebrew *tzavta*, meaning

“a connection” or “a binding”). A mitzvah is a charitable act that connects or binds one to God and to others. A person performs a mitzvah not for recognition or to earn points toward salvation but because it is the right thing to do. In Jewish tradition, the best sort of mitzvah is done in secret. Jesus affirms this tradition when he says to give alms, pray, and fast in secret, because one’s reward from God will be greater (Matt. 6:1–6, 16–18).

The book of James says that it does not make sense to bless someone piously but not care for their immediate needs. “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. . . . I by my works will show you my faith” (Jas. 2:17–18).

Salvation as Process

Perhaps the reason Christians argue about “salvation by faith alone” vs. “faith *and* works” has to do with restrictive either/or thinking. A solution to the problem is to consider salvation as a process. Yes, it is only God’s grace that saves, and there is nothing a person can do to earn it, but at the same time, God has made us partners in God’s work to care for others and the world. Salvation is not a one-time “shazam” moment; a Christian must “grow into salvation” (1 Pet. 2:2).

Paul himself says, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling . . . it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13). Paul’s letters are full of advice to his tender new Christian congregations about how to grow in faith, and much of this advice is about building up the church and caring for the needs of others (e.g., 1 Cor. 8–10).

Process theology is a way of thinking about God’s power as more relational than coercive and of considering the role of human partnership in God’s work. God’s presence and power are important influences in what happens in the world, but God has given humans free will, and thus God does not completely control the outcome. The individual, the church, and all creation are participating, becoming, and growing with God.⁴ God is always with us, working with us and through us, urging us to do our best to build up a loving community and healthy world.

Many Christians are not comfortable with a “process” point of view. They feel safer with the traditional idea of an all-knowing, all-powerful God who controls every aspect of history. Process theology

does not challenge the reality of God’s power—it changes our perception of that power, from coercive to cooperative. Christians need not fear participating with God in an unfolding relationship, a process of becoming that saves. Christians can have hope that all is not lost, that even the worst actors have a chance to change and grow in God’s light, and that even the most hopeless situations can be salvaged with God’s help. The ending is not fixed but open to wonder and mystery.

Who Can Be Saved?

The disciples asked Jesus who can be saved. Jesus replied, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God” (Luke 18:26–27).

Since the early days of the church, many Christians have asserted that non-Christians are damned. However, there have always been Christians who believe that God will manage, eventually, to bring everyone to salvation. Paul says as much in Romans 9–11 as he talks about the fate of Israel. Even modern conservative Christians have begun exploring the wideness of salvation. In his popular book *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, pastor Rob Bell explores God’s all-encompassing love and suggests that humans should not claim to be so sure we know what will happen.

Jesus referred to himself as a “door” or “gate” to salvation: “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved” (John 10:9). Many Christians believe Jesus will bar non-Christians from going through the door. Some Christians think there are many paths through the door. They give the example of Mohandas Gandhi, a Hindu who clearly represented God’s goodness. Though Gandhi was not a Christian, surely he is “saved.”

The Christian apologist C. S. Lewis offers another point of view: perhaps some will enter the door at Christ’s invitation, even if they do not know the name of the one who calls them. Sometimes children’s stories offer the best illustrations of complex ideas. In his book *The Last Battle*, C. S. Lewis sets a scene around an ordinary door. On one side is paradise and on the other is a dark and ugly place that has been ravaged by war. Animals approach to see the lion Aslan (a Christ figure) standing by the door. They look into his face, love him, and enter into paradise. Others

run away in fear and hatred. Some of the characters blunder accidentally through the door into paradise but cannot see the loveliness and newness; they think they are still in the dark.⁵ In Lewis’s understanding, Jesus does not prevent anyone. The door is open, if only we will enter it.

Saviors in the Ancient World

Early Christianity was born in the Roman Empire, where gods bore the title Savior: e.g., *Zeus Sōtēr* (“Zeus the Savior”) and kings called themselves “god” and “Savior.” King Ptolemy I minted coins with the imprint of his face and the Greek word *Sōtēr* (“Savior”). When Christians called Jesus their Savior, they were claiming Jesus as their only God and king.

One of the biggest objections to salvation from non-Christians is that this isn’t fair to the people who have confessed Jesus and worked hard all their lives to be faithful. Jesus understood people’s frustration with God’s last-minute mercy to the seemingly undeserving. He told a parable about workers who complained because some laborers worked only a short while but received the same pay. The employer said that he can do what he wants with his money, and they should not be jealous of his generosity (Matt. 20:1–16).

In Romans 8, Paul passionately expresses God’s grace. Though Paul has eloquently argued for salvation by faith alone, here he takes radical grace to its logical conclusion: all creation is groaning as it waits for salvation (Rom. 8:19–22). God’s grace is so all-encompassing that nothing can separate us from the love of God (8:31–39).

Conclusion

Clearly, the earliest Christians did not agree about salvation, and the debate about what a Christian should believe continues today. The Bible offers several perspectives: salvation is God’s gift, not something that can be earned, and yet charity and responsibility are expected too. Salvation is more involved than a one-time confession of faith; Christians must continually strive with God for the good of all people and all creation. Salvation is both exclusive and inclusive, but ultimately, it is up to God.

Endnotes

1. Though Jews believe humans are sinful from birth, they do not believe in original sin. God pardons sins if a person sincerely repents. In Jewish tradition, people are a mixture of good and evil and are called to help speed the redemption of the world. See Stephen M. Wylen's *Settings of Silver: An Introduction to Judaism* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000).
2. For more information, see J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) and Christian A. Eberhart, *The Sacrifice of Jesus: Understanding Atonement Biblically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011).
3. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer's classic treatment of "cheap grace" in *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), first published in 1937.
4. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God Christ Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).
5. *The Last Battle* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), by C. S. Lewis, is the final book in the Chronicles of Narnia series. Lewis develops a similar idea in *The Great Divorce* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), which is about Christian concepts of heaven and hell.

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