

I Believe

(The Essential Christian Truth About the Doctrine of Salvation)



The Six Big Questions About Salvation

Much has been said about the idea of Salvation. Think about it for a minute. All of us who consider the possibility of God's existence will eventually come to the most important issue at hand (at least from our earthly perspective): "What are God's plans for us, His created children? Does God have a plan to reunite us with Himself? Is there a way that we could someday be with God in the perfect realm where He exists?"

Many cases have been made for how is it that God might "save" us and end the separation that exists between God and man. The study of Salvation is called "Soteriology" and this rather long theological term simply comes from two Greek words:

"soter"	"logos"
which means	which means
"savior"	"word"
"deliverer"	"reason"
"preserver"	"principle"

Soteriology, therefore, is simply the study of how it is that we are saved. It is the 'reasoned' examination of the 'principles' that define salvation and describe how it is that God will eventually unite us with Himself. So, let's begin our study in a rather evidential way, asking six important questions and allowing the answer to these questions to define an orthodox Christian view of Salvation...



So, What's the Problem to Begin With?

Before we can begin to address the issue of how it is that we are saved, we first have to be clear about what it is that we need to be saved FROM! We simply have to define the problem: "What is it that needs to be fixed?" Let's look at it rationally and consider all the possibilities. Those who have thought long and hard about this issue divide into three camps as they try to understand the problem that we face as humans:

It's a Horizontal Problem

Our problem is that we have separated ourselves from each other by failing to treat each other in the way that we should. Salvation repairs the relationship between individuals and the larger society

"Liberation Theology"

It's an Internal Problem

Our problem is that we have internal feelings of guilt and lack of self-esteem. Salvation eliminates these feelings and provides self-understanding and self-acceptance as we discover all that we can be

"Existential Theology"

It's a Vertical Problem

Our problem is that we are separated from God by our disobedience and failure to follow his moral laws. Salvation restores the broken relationship between man and the God who created us

"Evangelical Theology"

The Bible is pretty clear on which of these three descriptions accurately describes our situation before God. The Scriptures declare that we have a SIN problem and that this sin has separated us from a Holy and Perfect God:



Romans 3:23

“...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...”



Romans 6:23

“For the wages of sin is death...”



Romans 8:5-8

“For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

Our first question has helped us to define the initial problem; our illness is wrapped up in our sin problem and the fact that our free CHOICE and natural disposition to commit sin has separated us from God. SIN is the base problem that describes why we have horizontal and internal problems to begin with! It is because we have a vertical problem FIRST, that we also find ourselves treating others poorly and suffering from the guilt and internal problems that plague us. The base problem is a vertical problem. Let's move on now and ask another question...



OK, So What (Therefore) is God's Focus?

If SIN AGAINST GOD is the problem that God is addressing in His offer of Salvation, we might next ask: “What or who is God focused on as He seeks to save His creation?” This is an important question because many theologians have divided on this issue. What is God's focus? There are two possibilities:

Human Beings

God's work of Salvation is intended for human beings. We are the crown of God's creation; all other aspects of the creation are merely a stage on which the human drama is acted

“Human Restoration”

All Creation

God's work of Salvation has a cosmic dimension. He desires to save not only humans, but all of His creation that has been impacted and affected by sin

“Cosmic Restoration”

Some have argued that there is Biblical warrant to believe that God wants to restore ALL of creation, and they typically go to a single verse in Paul's letter to the Romans to make their case:



Romans 8:16-25

“The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For

the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.”

This verse certainly seems to say that all creation waits for God’s redemptive activity! Is not all creation then the object and focus of God’s offer of Salvation? Well, let’s go back and read this passage one more time! This passage argues that both we, as humans, and the rest of creation are waiting for redemption. We are groaning in anticipation, and the rest of creation is groaning right alongside us! But what is described in the last part of the verse as the mechanism by which this salvation will eventually come?

“For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.” (Verses 24 and 25)

This sounds amazingly similar to another verse in the Bible:



Hebrews 11:1

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

It appears that it is faith (“hope”) that saves us. Can all creation have “hope”? Doesn’t “hope” require sentient free will and CHOICE? Can a tree, for example, have “hope”? If “hope” is what is required, then how can the focus of God’s redemptive work be anything other than free will creatures that can choose to have such hope? While we recognize the mystery that exists between God’s Sovereignty and man’s apparent free will, the latter part of this verse in Romans 8 does seem to mandate that humans, as free will creatures, are the focus of God’s offer of Salvation.



OK, So What (Therefore) is God’s Direction?

If humans are the focus of God’s redemptive work, then we might find ourselves asking, “How does God move to restore humanity? Does he begin at the level of the individual or at the level of the group?” There are two possibilities as we consider the direction in which God moves to restore us as humans:

Inside – Out Movement

People are inherently fallen and our own personal sinfulness must be addressed before the larger society can be impacted

“Social Gospel”

Outside – In Movement

People are basically good, but are corrupted by the fallen society. The ills of society must be addressed before individuals can be impacted

“Evangelical Gospel”

Now let's think about these two possibilities for a minute. While it is true that God does want us to impact our world for good, how exactly might we be able to do this? We've already discovered that the problem we are trying to solve is a SIN problem. Sin is all about choosing to do what offends God in order to satisfy our own selfish desires. In order to address sin, we must first understand where sin BEGINS! Before we can step out to any final impact we might have in the world around us, we have to know where the problem begins. The Scriptures tell us what we already instinctively know to be true:



Jeremiah 17:9-10

“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds.”

The Bible confirms what we already know. Sin begins in the heart of each individual. As a detective I also understand this reality. While I've investigated a number of conspiracy cases, I recognize that all conspiracies have a “ring-leader”; a person who first conceives of the evil idea and CHOOSES to do something wrong. Yes, it is true that eventually the entire group decides to do the crime together, but sin began in the heart of an individual and spread to the group like wildfire. Like many other human movements (both good and bad), if you can “take out” the “ring leader”, you can go a long way to stopping the movement.

The Bible tells us that our individual hearts are sick and capable of tremendous sin. The Scripture also tells us that God searches the heart of each individual. God's redemptive work is an “inside – out” process because this is the way that sin manifests itself to us. It begins in the heart of an individual, so it makes sense that it would need to be addressed here first, before any possible transformation might have an impact on the nature of the larger group.



OK, So What (Therefore) is God's Number?

If this is the way that God works (if God moves from individual hearts to the larger group), we might find ourselves asking the next question: “How many will be saved by God? How many individuals does He have in mind? How large is the group?” These questions has also divided theologians, as there appear to be two possible answers:

A Specific Group

Salvation will not ultimately be applied to everyone. Some will be lost, while others will be saved. Not everyone will go to heaven

“Particularism”

Everyone

Salvation will ultimately be applied to everyone. God will restore all of us to the relationship we originally had with Him

“Universalism”

How are we to determine which of these positions is true? Well, we already know that the problem is SIN, and that sin requires a free will CHOICE. It makes sense, then, that God would require another choice in order to address our sin problem (more on that later). But let's face it; if we as a species are going to be given some latitude here; if humans are going to be given the

opportunity to choose God, it makes sense that not everyone will make this kind of choice. Some will choose to repent, and others will not:



John 3:18

“He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”

If some are going to be judged, then clearly some are not going to be saved. This means that not everyone will enter into the realm of God:



Matthew 7:21

“Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven...”

Without looking specifically at what it is that saves us, it is clear that God has a particular offer that He is making to mankind, and this offer won't be accepted by everyone. As a result, some will come home to Him, and some will not.



OK, So What (Therefore) Are God's Means?

Now we come to the biggest question of all, and you'll notice that we didn't get here until we first asked four important foundational questions. But if we know that our individual predisposition to choose sin is the problem, and we know that God wants to offer us a solution at the level of the individual heart, we now can ask about the means by which He would make that effort, and you and I have already built the foundation for the answer! Theologians have given this issue a lot of thought, trying to answer the question: “How is it that God saves us?” The answer historically has fallen into one of three camps. Theologians have claimed that God affects the Salvation of individuals in one of three ways:

A Physical Activity

Salvation is transferred to the individual by way of some physical object or physical process

“Sacramental Theologies”

A Moral Effort

Salvation is created by changing the way things are through some effort on the part of the individual

“Social or Liberation Theologies”

A Faith Placement

Salvation is the result of our placing our faith in the work that has already been done by God through Jesus

“Evangelical Theologies”

Now let's take a look at these three possibilities in light of what we already know from the questions we have already asked. We agree that our problem is a SIN problem and it comes from our conscious choice to do what we know we ought not do. When we rely on OUR biased and self serving judgment, we end up in sin. So it makes sense that the solution to the problem would NOT be tied up in anything that we could do, but instead on something that God would do. WE are the problem, GOD is the solution.

If God is the solution to our problems, how is it that we might embrace some material physical object as the means by which this Salvation should be transferred? God, after all, is not a physical, natural being. He is a supernatural, spiritual being:



John 4:24-25

"God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

God is spirit, and as such, when we assume that any aspect of His power can be transferred to a physical object, we give that object the status of God Himself. This is clearly a form of idolatry. When we ascribe God's power, authority and identity to things that we craft with our own hands (and even to physical processes that we design with our own minds), we anger the God who wants to be at the center of our worship:



Leviticus 19:4

"Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves molten gods; I am the LORD your God."



Deuteronomy 32:21

"They have made Me jealous with what is not God; They have provoked Me to anger with their idols."

For these reasons, any sacramental system does not seem to reflect the evidence of the scripture. But wait a minute, couldn't the argument be made that Salvation could be achieved if we simply exchanged our sinful desires for God's righteous desires? Couldn't we just begin to OBEY God and earn our Salvation? Well, we need to remember that the problem is US in the first place. When we claim that OUR efforts might help to solve OUR problem even as WE are the problem to begin with, we foolishly trust the illness to cure itself! The Bible is clear in describing the fallen nature of humans:



Romans 3:10-18

"There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one. Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness; their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace have they not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes."

Is that clear enough? Do we really think that we are capable of doing ANYTHING that might impress God and be credited to us as righteousness? When compared to the righteousness of God, our works don't seem to be all that great:



Isaiah 64:6

For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

Given that this is our state of affairs, it seems that any system which maintains that our moral effort can contribute to our Salvation is hopelessly optimistic. The third possibility seems most consistent with the four foundational questions that we first asked. Our inability to do what we ought to do is the problem. It makes sense that the solution would not be more of the same. The solution is not to add more of US to the equation. The solution is a GOD solution. Choosing is

the mechanism, but GOD'S power is all that we can trust. That makes sense philosophically (given the nature of the problem), and this is also the clear teaching of the Bible:



Romans 3:21-28

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law...

That's pretty clear as well, isn't it? Paul tells us that our Salvation is not dependant on anything that we do or ever could do. It is built on our faith in Christ APART FROM THE WORKS OF THE LAW! It's faith apart from works (faith ALONE) that saves us. This is the means by which God imparts His righteousness to us! Salvation is not a physical activity or a moral effort; Salvation is a faith placement.



OK, So What (Therefore) Is God's Timing?

Now let's get to the final question! If it is faith that saves us, we can probably deduce the timing that is required for this to happen. Here is the question: "When can someone assume that they are saved? Does it happen immediately? Does it take a lifetime? Does it even happen at all in this lifetime?" These are important questions and many answers have been offered. The answers typically fall into one of three categories:

A Process of Time

Salvation is a slow process of transformation that occurs over the lifetime of the individual. One can, therefore, never be sure if he or she is saved while in this life

"We are being saved"

A Future Time

Salvation is a future event and a decision that is made by God in the next life. For this reason, one can never be sure if he or she is saved while in this life

"We will be saved"

A Moment In Time

Salvation takes place as a Single occurrence at the decision point of the Christian life. For this reason, one can have certainty that he or she is saved while in this life

"We have been saved"

If Salvation is something that we earn as we try hard to obey God's moral rules, then it is true that we might never know for sure if we are truly saved. We could never assume that we have done enough to please God. We would have to wait and find out at the final judgment of God. In a similar way, if God determines our Salvation in the next life, we would also have to wait until then to know for sure if we are saved. But what if Salvation is truly a "faith placement" issue as we have already described? If this is the case, wouldn't we know that we are saved at the moment that we place our faith in Christ? If it is FAITH alone that saves us, then it seems reasonable that we should KNOW if we are saved even in this life, long before we are reunited with God. Well, this seems to be the clear teaching of Scripture:



1 John 5:9-13

*If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater; for the witness of God is this, that He has borne witness concerning His Son. The one who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the witness that God has borne concerning His Son. And the witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may **know** that you have eternal life.*

John tells us that we are saved when we place our faith in Jesus, and because this is a decision point in time, we, as Christians, have the true blessing of KNOWING NOW that we are saved. The word “know” as it is used in the last verse of this passage is telling us that we can have certainty NOW. This could only be true if Salvation is not a ‘process of time’ and does not occur at a ‘future time’ but is instead something that happens at a ‘moment in time’.



OK, So What Have We Learned?

We’ve asked and answered six important questions, reasoning through the answers and exploring their ‘interconnectedness’. We’ve been studying the ‘reasonable principles’ of salvation; we’ve been studying ‘Soteriology’! What have we learned so far? Well let’s summarize what we’ve discovered:



Our problem is a vertical problem

We are separated from God by our disobedience and failure to follow his moral laws. Salvation restores the broken relationship between man and the God who created us



Human beings are the focus of God’s redemptive activity

God’s work of Salvation is intended for human beings. We are the crown of God’s creation; all other aspects of the creation are merely a stage on which the human drama is acted



God’s work of Salvation moves from the individual to the group

People are inherently fallen and our own personal sinfulness must be addressed before the larger society can be impacted



God’s offer of Salvation is intended for a specific group

Salvation will not ultimately be applied to everyone. Some will be lost, while others will be saved. Not everyone will go to heaven



Salvation is based on a “placement of faith” (not our good works)

Salvation is the result of our placing our faith in the work that has already been done by God through Jesus



Salvation takes place at a moment in time

Salvation takes place as a single occurrence at the decision point of the Christian life. For this reason, one can have certainty that he or she is saved while in this life

There you have it. These six answers to the six big questions about Salvation summarize the orthodox Christian believe in Salvation by faith alone. We've reasoned through the answers and seen how they contribute to one another. We've looked at lots of possibilities. But possibilities don't help us to understand the truth. Yes, anything is possible but that doesn't really help us, does it? Instead, we are concerned NOT about what is possible, but what is most REASONABLE given the evidence before us. And the orthodox view of Salvation is the most reasonable inference from the evidence.