

How Salvation Works

One of the key differences between genuine Christianity and false religions concerns the doctrines of salvation. There are many groups that claim to be Christian, but when you look at what they teach about salvation it quickly becomes clear that you're dealing with a false religion.

The purpose of this essay is to explain what the Bible teaches about salvation. Why do we need to be saved? How are we saved? These are very important questions – and this is one area where people *cannot* afford to be wrong! The difference between the right answer and the wrong answer is the difference between Heaven and Hell.

Born Guilty

In order to understand how salvation works we must first understand why we need to be saved in the first place. The Bible teaches us that when God originally created the world everything was perfect. There was no sin, or suffering, or sickness, or death. It was so perfect that even animals didn't eat each other! Both people and animals were vegetarians. The world was perfect in every way.

Sadly, things didn't stay that way. Genesis 3 tells us that the serpent tempted Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit, which was a sin. Eve ate of the fruit and also gave it to Adam, who ate of it as well. That was the original sin, and it condemned Adam, Eve, and all of their descendants.

There are a few very important things to understand about this story. First of all, the only reason we can be saved is because the story of Adam, Eve, and the serpent literally happened. If all of mankind isn't a direct descendant of Adam then salvation is *impossible*. If there was no Adam and Eve then there's no salvation either! The apostle Paul made this very clear in the New

Testament:

Romans 5:18: “Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.”

Some people teach that we are all born innocent, and we become sinners at some point in their lives when we sin. However, that is *not* what the Bible teaches! The Scriptures say that we are a sinner from the moment of conception:

Psalms 51:5: “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

This verse isn't saying that the psalmist was the product of adultery or fornication. Instead he's saying that he was a sinner from the very beginning of his existence. Why is this true? It's because we all inherit the sin nature (and the guilt) of Adam, our forefather. We are *not* innocent people who eventually become guilty; instead we *start out* as guilty! There is never a moment in our lives when we aren't a guilty sinner.

Romans 5:18 is critical to understanding why we can be saved. Since the sin of Adam caused judgment to come upon all men, it's possible for the righteousness of one man (Jesus) to save us. That means in order for us to be saved:

- Adam had to exist
- Adam's sin had to condemn all of his offspring
- All of mankind had to be the direct offspring of Adam

This is why the story of the fall of man in the Garden of Eden is so important. If the story that we find in Genesis 3 didn't literally happen, exactly as it's written, then salvation is impossible and we are all bound for Hell.

Condemned To Die

Next, the Bible tells us that the penalty for sin is death:

Romans 6:23: "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

The reason people die is because of the sin of Adam. His sin brought death into the world. That sin is responsible for all of the suffering and horrors that are around us. If it wasn't for sin, we would still be living in a perfect world today. Everyone who has ever died has died because of the sin of Adam.

The Bible also tells us that eternal torment awaits those whose sins are not forgiven:

Matthew 25:46: "And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal."

In order for us to avoid that everlasting torment, our sins need to be forgiven. That creates a *big* problem. Since God is just, He can't simply ignore our sins and pretend like they never happened. Our sins *must* be paid for! Someone must suffer the penalty that our sins deserve. This means in order for us to be saved, an innocent person must suffer in our place and take upon himself the punishment that we deserve. That's the only possible way we can obtain forgiveness. Moreover, this person must be sinless. After all, if this person has sins of his own then he can't suffer on behalf of someone else. The only thing a sinful person can do is suffer for his own sins.

The Sinless Sacrifice

The Bible tells us that Jesus meets all of these requirements. First of all, He was born of a virgin:

Matthew 1:23: “Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.”

Since Jesus was born of a virgin He didn't inherit the sin of Adam. This is because Joseph was His *adopted* father, not His biological father. (It seems that the sin nature is passed down through the male line.) If Jesus hadn't been born of a virgin then He would have had a sin nature like everyone else and He would have been just as much a sinner as we are. This is why the doctrine of the virgin birth is so important! Our salvation depends on it.

Second, Jesus lived a sinless life:

John 8:46: “Which of you convinceth me of sin? And if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me?”

If Jesus had sinned at any point in His life then He would have been a sinner. If He had been a sinner then it would have been impossible for Him to suffer on behalf of the sins of someone else. However, He never sinned! He led a perfect life.

Third, Jesus took our sin upon Himself and died in our place:

Matthew 27:50: “Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost.”

The reason Jesus had to die is because the wages of sin is death. Since the penalty for sin is death, the only way we can be

forgiven is if an innocent person dies in our place. That's exactly what the Bible says that Jesus did:

1 John 4:10: "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

The word "propitiation" means that the sacrifice of Jesus caused God to look upon us favorably. Since God poured out His wrath upon Jesus, we are forgiven. The wrath of God has been fully satisfied in the death of Jesus.

The Blood Of The Lamb

The whole point of the sacrificial system in the Old Testament was to point to Christ. That system taught that the only way sins could be forgiven was by the shedding of blood:

Hebrews 9:22: "And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission."

In order for our sins to be forgiven, the blood of an innocent sacrifice had to be shed. It *literally* takes blood to forgive our sins. Jesus was clear that the reason He shed His blood was because that's the price which had to be paid for our forgiveness:

Matthew 26:28: "For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins."

Where does our redemption come from? It comes from the shed blood of Jesus:

Colossians 1:14: "In whom we have

redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins:"

Ephesians 1:7: "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace;"

What is the cost of our "propitiation"? It is His blood:

Romans 3:25: "Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;"

Where does our faith rests? It rests in the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. The *only* path to salvation is by the blood of the Lamb.

The Resurrection

There's one more thing that had to be done in order for us to be saved. Jesus had to rise from the dead:

Matthew 28:7: "And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you."

The resurrection is extremely important. In fact, the apostle Paul says that if Jesus didn't rise from the dead then there's no hope:

1 Corinthians 15:14: "And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also

vain.”

Why? Because if Christ hasn't risen from the dead then that means no one else will rise from the dead either – and if no one rises from the dead then that means our sins haven't been forgiven:

1 Corinthians 15:16-19: “For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.”

Our salvation depends on a resurrected Christ – one who was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, and died in our place. That's why the Bible tells us that Jesus is the only way to be saved:

John 14:6: “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”

Jesus is the only person who was born of a virgin. Jesus is the only person who led a sinless life. Jesus is the only person who died in our place, taking our sins upon Himself. Finally, Jesus is the only person who rose from the dead. Since Jesus is the only one who meets all the requirements that are needed to be our Savior, that means salvation is only possible through Him.

The Way Of Salvation

So how does a person become saved? The Bible gives us that answer:

Acts 8:37: “And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”

Acts 16:31: “And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.”

Romans 10:9: “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.”

1 Thessalonians 4:14: “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.”

1 John 5:1: “Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him.”

All of these verses are saying the same thing, in slightly different ways. It can be summarized like this:

- We must believe that Jesus existed.
- We must believe what the Bible teaches us about Jesus. That means we must believe that He was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died in our place, and rose again on the third day.
- We must believe that Jesus is divine – that He is the everlasting God, part of the Trinity. Those who deny that He is God are *not* saved. When Jesus came into this world He became a man, but He never stopped being God. Believing in both the divinity *and* the humanity of Jesus is

a critical part of salvation.

- We must repent of our sins and seek forgiveness for them. Jesus won't save anyone who doesn't repent. Those who aren't sorry for their sins and reject God's commandments are not saved.
- We must bow down to Jesus and acknowledge Him as our Lord. It's true that we're saved by faith and not by works. However, those who reject the authority of Jesus and claim that He has no right to tell them what to do are not saved. This is because they're still living in rebellion to God and are on the side of the devil. In order to be saved we must surrender our lives to Him.

Saved By Faith

There are a few other points that need to be mentioned. First, we must understand that we're saved by faith and not by works. There are many people who claim that we need to perform some type of good works in order to be saved, but that is very wrong. All those who are trusting in their good works to be saved are on the road to Hell:

Galatians 2:16: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified."

Galatians 2:21: "I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain."

The Bible is *very* clear about this! *We are not saved by good works*. We aren't saved by keeping the law. We aren't saved

by getting baptized. We are saved by faith. (Anyone who tells you that you must be baptized in order to be saved is telling you that you're saved by your works, not by faith, and is leading you to Hell.)

If you read Galatians 2:16 carefully you may have noticed that it says we are saved by the faith *of* Christ. It's important to understand that what saves us is *Christ's* faith! This point is easily missed. Yes, it's true that we must have faith in Jesus in order to be saved, but the reason we can be saved is because of what Christ did – not because of what we did.

Another aspect to this is that we are saved by faith *and we are kept saved by faith*. Once we're saved, our salvation doesn't depend on our continued good behavior! That's another point Paul brought up in his letter to the Galatians:

Galatians 3:3-4: “Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh? Have ye suffered so many things in vain? if it be yet in vain.”

Paul was addressing people who believed that in order to remain saved they had to perform certain good works. Everyone who believes that is trusting in their works for salvation – and that means they're on the road to Hell. The Bible teaches that we're saved by faith and we're preserved by faith. Just as our salvation doesn't depend on our actions in any way (because it is all Christ), so we remain in the faith because of Christ as well. Our salvation is *entirely* a work of Christ!

Dead In Our Sins

There are some people who argue with this and claim that we're responsible for at least some of our salvation because we are the one who made the “decision” to “accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior”. However, that's *not* what the Bible teaches. The Scriptures are clear that we're utterly incapable of reaching out to

God:

Ephesians 2:1: “And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins;”

Ephesians 2:5: “Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;)”

Colossians 2:13: “And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses;”

We were *dead* in our trespasses and sins. Do you know what dead people can do? It's not a trick question: they can do absolutely nothing! This is because *they are dead*. When the Bible says that we were dead in our sins it's saying that we were utterly incapable of seeking after God. Yet when we were dead, God did something amazing: He “quickened” us. That means *He brought us to life!* The only reason we cried out to God for salvation is because God first raised us up from the dead. The apostle John put it this way:

1 John 4:19: “We love him, because he first loved us.”

Some people argue that God “quickens” everyone, and some choose reject Him while others choose to believe. However, that's not what the Bible teaches. Instead of saying that God showers this mercy on everyone, it states that God chooses to have mercy on some people but not others:

Romans 9:15-18: “For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have

compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy. For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth."

It would have been easy for God to say that He has mercy on everyone, but some people choose to reject His mercy. However, that's not what He said! The Lord told us that He has mercy on some people *but not others*.

The Bible is clear that there are some people God has predestined to experience His everlasting wrath, while there are others He has predestined to experience His everlasting mercy:

Romans 9:22-24: "What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?"

Who are the vessels of wrath? They're the ones that God has "fitted to destruction". Who are the vessels of mercy? They're the ones that God has "prepared unto glory". In both cases God is the one who gave them those destinies.

This is one of the major themes in the Bible. Who will be saved in the end? Those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life:

Revelation 20:15: "And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into

the lake of fire.”

When were our names written in the Book of Life? They were written there when God created the world:

Revelation 17:8: “The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.”

Our names were *not* written in the Book of Life the moment we cried out to God and asked Him to save us. Instead our names were written there long before we were born. In fact, the reason they were written there is because God chose to save us.

Can we save ourselves? Absolutely not. We need a Savior to take upon Himself the punishment that we deserve for our sins. Can we be saved by our good works? Absolutely not. Salvation only comes through faith, not by works. Can we seek God on our own? Absolutely not. Since we're dead in our sins we're incapable of seeking God at all. The only reason anyone is saved is because God did a miracle in that person's life and “quickened” him – and all those who God raises up are saved. Can we lose our salvation? Absolutely not. Since we did nothing to earn our salvation, we can do nothing to lose it. Our salvation is *entirely* a work of God. Did God choose to save us because of anything that we did? Absolutely not. It was entirely His sovereign choice.

Limited Atonement

There's one final point that must be brought up. The reason we're forgiven is because the Lord Jesus Christ took upon Himself the punishment that we deserved for our sins. Since God

has already punished Christ for our sins, He won't punish us as well. (It would be unjust for God to punish Christ for our sins, and then turn around and punish us for them as well.) Our sins have been atoned for by the blood of Jesus and we are forgiven.

However, that brings up a point. Whose sins did Jesus suffer for on the cross? This is a very important question that many people never consider.

It's common for people to say that when Jesus died on the cross He suffered for the sins of everyone. This is very widely believed, but there's a big problem with that teaching! If Jesus suffered for the sins of literally everyone then that would mean everyone is saved, because everyone's sins have been paid for. After all, it would be wrong for God to punish Jesus for someone's sins and then turn around and punish that individual as well. If Jesus atoned for the sins of everyone then everyone is saved – but the Bible does not teach universal salvation. Instead Jesus Himself said that very few people are saved:

Matthew 7:14: “Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.”

It would have been very easy for the Bible to teach that everyone is saved, but it doesn't do that. Instead it tells us that few people are saved and many are lost.

So whose sins were atoned for on the cross? The answer is simple. Jesus only made atonement for the sins of those that He decided to save from the foundation of the world. All of those people will be saved, because He atoned for their sins on the cross and will “quicken” them and raise them to life. Jesus did *not* die for the sins of everyone. Instead He died for the elect. Jesus Himself said that His blood was shed for *many*, not for all:

Matthew 26:28: “For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”

Some people argue that the teaching of “limited atonement” contradicts John 3:16:

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

The message of this verse is that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but will have everlasting life – and that message is absolutely true. All those who believe will indeed be saved! However, those who are dead in their sins *cannot* believe. The only ones who will believe are those that God chooses to “quicken”, and as we saw earlier God doesn't give that mercy to everyone.

Some people claim that this verse contradicts limited atonement:

1 John 2:2: “And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”

I think this verse has been widely misinterpreted. The apostle John is saying that Jesus isn't just the savior of the Jews. He's the Savior of all of the Gentile nations as well – of every nation in the world. This isn't teaching universal atonement; it's teaching that salvation is not restricted to the Jews. (One of the recurring themes of the Bible is that the Lord is gathering a people for Himself from among all nations in the world.)

The teaching of universal atonement is identical to universal salvation. Since universal salvation contradicts *many* passages in the Bible, that means Christ couldn't have died for the sins of those who are in Hell. It's simply not possible that Hell is full of people whose sins were forgiven by Christ's atoning death on the cross.

Conclusion

There's a saying that there are only two religions: those that teach we can save ourselves, and the one that teaches we're incapable of saving ourselves and we need God to save us. All false religions teach that we can take some sort of step in order to obtain salvation. Christianity, however, teaches something very different: it says that we're utterly incapable of saving ourselves and we need a Savior. We need someone who can take upon Himself the punishment that we deserve for our sins. We need someone who can give us His perfect righteousness, so that when God look at us He sees the perfect works of Christ and not the countless sins that we've committed. We need someone to remove our corrupted nature and give us a new righteous one. We need someone who will work in us to perfect us and make us like Christ. We need someone who will justify us, sanctify us, and glorify us.

That person is the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no other – and there never will be.