

The Doctrine of Salvation

The Fundamental, Common Thread: Union with Christ

1. The most common New Testament description of those who are recipients of salvation is that they are “in Christ.” The saving benefits of Christ’s work are received through union with him (1 Cor 1:9, 30; Eph 1:3-14; John 15:1-10; Rom 6:3, 5; Eph 2:12-13).
2. This union is expressed in a variety of forms, from the vine and branches, to head and body, to husband and wife, even to the oneness among the Persons of the Trinity (John 15:1-10; 17:20-23; Eph 4:15-16; 5:28-32).
3. All of salvation, from election in him, through redemption, to glorification, is sovereignly planned and realized in Christ, and is accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-23; Rom 8:9-18, 23; 1 Cor 1:30; 15:22-23; Eph 1:3-10).

Election and Human Responsibility

1. Before the foundation of the world God the Father freely and graciously elected (or chose)¹ those whom he would rescue from Satan, sin, and death, based upon his own sovereign will and not upon any foresight or anticipation of an individual’s decision or efforts² (Eph 1:4-6, 11-12; Rom 9:11-23).
2. God’s sovereign choice does not contradict or negate humanity’s responsibility in any way; therefore, people are completely responsible for their decisions and actions and should be honestly called upon to repent³ and trust Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord (John 8:23-24; 12:37-40; Acts 2:23, 36-38; Rom 9:17-20).

The Call of God through the Gospel

1. All people who experience the hearing or reading of the gospel message are invited and commanded to repent and believe in Christ; this is the *external call* of the gospel. Yet, in their fallen condition none would believe due to their blindness to see and inability to receive spiritual truth or to please God (John 6:41-44, 64-65; Rom 8:7-8; 10:14-15; 1 Cor 1:21-23; 2:14; 2 Cor 4:3-4; 2 Thess 2:10-12).

¹ For more on election, see R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 1986.

² The doctrine of election has been understood differently by Christians throughout history, thus we see it as a secondary doctrinal matter. There are two main views regarding the basis of God’s election of those he will save. The Arminian view holds that God’s election is based upon his divine omniscience: God knows all things past, present, future, possible and actual. Because he is omniscient, God has known from eternity past those who would respond in faith and of their own free will to the call of the gospel. On the basis of this foreknowledge, before creation, God chose those whom he knew would one day choose him. The Augustinian or Calvinist view holds that God’s election is based upon his own sovereign will and not upon any foresight or anticipation of an individual’s decision or efforts. While we acknowledge that many godly men and women have held the Arminian view, we respectfully disagree. Rather, we believe that the Augustinian or Calvinist view is more consistent with the biblical text. God’s unconditional choice of those whom he would save is what enables and guarantees their willing response in faith to the gospel. For an explanation of primary, secondary, and tertiary doctrinal matters, see *Prolegomena*, “Our Theological System and Tradition.”

³ Repentance is the act of turning from sin to God and from wrong to right in one’s beliefs, affections and actions.

2. The grace of God includes the gift of salvation and the means of receiving it. Those whom God *effectually calls* to himself hear his summons and respond by means of the Holy Spirit. Only those whom the Father draws will come in faith,⁴ and all who come in faith will be received by the Father (John 6:35-37, 44-45, 63-65; Acts 13:48; Rom 8:30; 1 Cor 1:2, 24-31; Eph 2:8; 2 Thess 2:13-14; 1 Pet 2:9).

Regeneration (New Birth)

1. Those who respond in faith and obedience to Jesus Christ do so by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Though they are born spiritually dead and enslaved to sin and Satan, the Holy Spirit causes new birth and eternal life in them. He removes their spiritual blindness so that they are able to understand the truth of the gospel and have a desire to respond to it, overcoming Satanic bondage (Ezek 36:25-27; John 3:3-8, 16, 36; 5:24-26; 8:31-36; 10:27-28; Acts 16:14-15; Rom 1:5; 8:6-11; 1 Cor 2:10-14; 12:3; 2 Cor 4:3-6; Eph 2:1-4; Titus 3:5-6; 1 Pet 1:3, 23).
2. This new birth into the life of the Spirit becomes the defining reality for those who trust in Jesus Christ, resulting in love for God and others, conviction of sin, the desire and ability to repent, and the longing and ability to live in obedience to God's Word (Luke 3:2-3, 8, 10-14; Acts 11:18; 26:18-20; 2 Cor 5:14-17; 1 Thess 1:2-10; 1 John 2:29; 4:7; 5:1, 4).

Justification

1. Justification is an act of God whereby sinful humans who have faith in Christ alone are declared righteous by God, without compromising or diminishing God's justice (Rom 3:24-26; 4:4-5).
2. The basis for justification for believers is solely redemption by Christ, who by his substitutionary, sacrificial death satisfied God's wrath towards his people due to their rebellion against him (Rom 3:24-26; 5:9; 1 John 4:10). This justification has individual and corporate dimensions:
 - a. In one sense, the individual is declared righteous by the imputation⁵ of the believer's sin to Christ and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer (Isa 53:5-6; Rom 4:5-8; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 3:24).
 - b. In another, equally significant sense, God's people are justified by virtue of being granted membership in the new humanity "in Christ," in place of their prior membership in the old humanity "in Adam" (Rom 5:12-21; Eph 2:15; 1 Cor 15:21-22).

⁴ Regarding those who are not capable of responding in faith to the gospel message, while Scripture indirectly addresses this matter, Christians throughout history have held different convictions. As a tertiary doctrinal matter, we believe that those God may be pleased to save, though incapable of comprehending the gospel message and responding in faith due to age (i.e., infants and the unborn) or mental or physical disability, he saves according to his almighty grace alone, apart from the ordinary means of receiving the gospel message (Luke 1:13-15; 18:15-16; John 3:3, 8; Acts 2:39; Rom 9:15-16, 18). For an explanation of primary, secondary, and tertiary doctrinal matters, see *Prolegomena*, "Our Theological System and Tradition."

⁵ Imputation refers to a "legal transfer," as Sproul explains: "[Christ] became the sin bearer when God the Father transferred or reckoned our sins to Him... The other transfer occurs when God imputes Christ's righteousness to us." R. C. Sproul, *Everyone's a Theologian* (2014), p. 235.

- i. Prior to regeneration, believers shared in the condemnation and death resulting from Adam's disobedience, and performed sinful deeds in keeping with that family identity (Rom 5:12-19; Eph 2:3; 1 Cor 15:21-22; Titus 3:3; 1 Pet 1:18).
- ii. Now, by God's grace, believers share in the free gift of righteousness and life resulting from Jesus' obedience, and are being trained by God's grace to perform righteous deeds, in keeping with this new family identity (Rom 5:15-21; Eph 2:15; 4:17-24; 1 Cor 6:9-11; 15:21-22; Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-8).

Redemption

Throughout the Bible, the language of redemption, ransom, and purchase recurs. The fundamental ideas expressed are those of being freed from a state of bondage or oppression, the cost or payment required for deliverance, and the resulting state of those redeemed (Ex 6:6-7; Isa 43:1, 3-4; 48:20; Mark 10:45; Titus 2:13-14).

1. *Redeemed from:* The helpless condition of all humanity is revealed in the grim realities of enslavement to sin, death, and Satan (Hos 13:14; John 8:34-35; Rom 6:19-21; Titus 3:3; Heb 2:14-15; 1 John 5:19).
 - a. Jesus has freed those in Christ from their slavery to sin, and will free them from its presence (John 8:35-36; Rom 6:6-14; 7:21-25; Eph 1:7; Titus 2:11-14; 1 Pet 1:18-19).
 - b. He set his people free from the fear of death and ultimately will abolish death (Hos 13:14; Rom 8:23-25; 2 Tim 1:8-10; Heb 2:14-15; Rev 20:14).
 - c. The dominance of Satanic power over God's people has been broken, and Satan's influence will eventually be entirely undone⁶ (Matt 12:28-29; John 12:31; Rom 16:20; Col 1:13; Heb 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8; 4:3-4; Rev 20:10).
 - d. Each of these freedoms is *already*, but *not yet*: Believers experience them presently in a way that is real and partial, but not yet complete.⁷
2. *Redeemed by:* The price paid for our redemption is the precious blood of our redeemer, Jesus Christ. Not only did he give his entirely obedient life as the ransom *price* for many, but he also acted as the substitute *in place of* his people, taking their curse, condemnation, and death as their guilt offering (Isa 53:4-6, 10-12; Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45; Acts 20:28; Gal 3:10-13; Eph 1:7; 1 Pet 1:18-19; Rev 5:6-12).
3. *Redeemed for:* The results of Christ's redeeming work encompass not only the freedom of his people *from* bondage, but also God's intentions *for* those he has freed: they are adopted as sons and receive God's Spirit. Therefore, through love they serve one another; they live for Christ and display his glory; they are his dwelling place and possession (his servants), zealous for good works; they conduct themselves in the fear of God; and they constitute his kingdom and royal priesthood⁸ (1 Cor 6:19-20; 2 Cor 5:15; Gal 3:13-14; 4:4-7; 5:13; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet 1:17-23; 2:4-10; Rev 5:10).

⁶ For more, see *Doctrine of Created Spiritual Beings*: "The Christian and the Spiritual Realm" pt. 2.

⁷ For more on the concept of "already, but not yet," see *Doctrine of the Church*: "The Church in the Biblical Story" pt. 4 and *Doctrine of Last Things*: "The Last Days Have Already Begun."

⁸ The royal priesthood of believers refers to those who honor God as King (as his subjects and children) and are purified and sanctified (as described below) in order to draw near to his presence and offer themselves as living sacrifices (Heb 10:19-22; Rom 12:1). Their priestly duties entail both representing God to other people in their service, and representing people before God in prayer.

Reconciliation and Adoption

1. Jesus Christ, as God the Son, became a man in order to reconcile the relationship between God and humans. Christ died and rose again in order to remove God's alienation from and wrath towards his people,⁹ so that he might bring them near to God and adopt them into God's family as beloved sons and daughters (Rom 5:9-11; 8:14-17; 2 Cor 5:18-21; Gal 3:26-28; 4:4-7; Col 1:21-22; 1 Pet 3:18).
2. The reconciliation to God that those in Christ experience also enables and obligates their reconciliation to one another by the Spirit (Eph 2:11-19; 4:1-6).
 - a. As adopted sons and daughters of God, believers share an eternal bond as brothers and sisters in Christ (Eph 1:5; 1 John 2:11-18; 4:19-21).
 - b. This new family identity must take precedence over all other group identities, whether ethnic, cultural, political, economic, etc (Matt 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; 10:29-30; Luke 14:26; John 17:11, 14-18; Gal 3:26-29; Col 3:11).
 - c. It is the duty and privilege of all believers both to call those who are still separated from God to be reconciled to him, and to pursue unity and reconciliation in relationships with one another, as an expression and extension of God's mission to unite all things in Jesus Christ (Rom 12:14-21; 2 Cor 5:17-21; Eph 1:7-9; 4:1-6).

Sanctification

1. Everyone in Christ is sanctified (or set apart) by God, and is therefore both declared holy and identified as a saint (holy one). Sanctification has both definitive and progressive dimensions,¹⁰ but the main focus is upon God's purpose in setting apart his people in Christ (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Tim 2:20-21; Heb 10:10, 14; 1 Pet 2:9-10).
2. Throughout Scripture, it is evident that God has two main purposes for making his people holy: First, that they might live in a committed, covenant relationship with him (Ex 19:5-6), and second, that they might make him known to those around them (Deut 4:5-8; 1 Pet 2:9).
3. Those in Christ have been definitively sanctified by their union with him in his death and resurrection, putting an end to sin's bondage and dominion over his people (John 8:31-36; Rom 6:1-14; 1 Cor 6:9-11; Eph 5:8-11).
4. Those in Christ are being progressively sanctified as they grow toward maturity in Christ in faith and practice. This vital and irresistible transformation into the image of Christ is performed by the Holy Spirit, through the obedient effort of his people (John 17:17-19; Rom 6:15-22; 8:28-30; 2 Cor 3:18; 7:1; Philip 1:6; 2:12-13; 1 Thess 4:3-8; 2 Thess 2:13-14).
5. All believers will continue to battle with sinful desires throughout their lives; however, through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit and the means of grace appointed by the Lord for our strengthening and growth, those who believe are empowered and expected to live lives of increasing holiness, in conformity to the will of God, becoming more and more like Jesus Christ¹¹ (2 Cor 3:16-18; Gal 5:16-25).

⁹ For more on the intent of Christ's atoning work, see *Doctrine of the Trinity*, "The Son" pt. 6.

¹⁰ Thus, Paul can say that those who believe in Jesus have been sanctified (1 Cor 6:11), and also pray that God may sanctify them completely at his coming (1 Thess 5:23).

¹¹ For more, see John Murray, *Definitive Sanctification*, Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 2, 1977 (pp. 277-284).

- a. The eventual outcome of conformity to the image of Christ is certain, being based upon the work of the sovereign Spirit (2 Cor 3:18; Philip 1:6; 1 Thess 5:23-24).
 - b. The commands, exhortations and warnings of Scripture must be taken seriously as obligatory upon his people, as a vital means of grace used by the Spirit to accomplish God's purpose within us. This may be done through reading the Word, hearing it read, preached, taught, or discussed, memorization, and meditating upon its meaning and application (Neh 8; Ps 1; 19:7-14; 119:9, 11, 97, 105; Matt 28:18-20; 1 Thess 2:13; 2 Tim 3:16-4:2; Heb 4:12-13; 1 Pet 1:23-2:2; Rev 1:3).
 - c. God has appointed additional means (spiritual disciplines) to assist our growth in grace, including: fellowship and accountability within the local church, prayer (private and corporate), fasting, and right use of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper).¹² None of these means invariably brings the grace of God to us, but puts us in the path where, by his appointment, grace may be found. To neglect these appointed means is sinful and detrimental to growth (Matt 28:19; Luke 18:1-8; 22:40-46; Acts 2:37-42; 1 Cor 10:14-22; 11:17-34; Titus 3:4-7; Heb 3:12-13; 10:24-25; James 5:13-20).
 - d. Since those in Christ do not fully and finally achieve in this life the perfect obedience and holiness to which they are called, God the Father graciously disciplines us as his beloved children, that we may share in his holiness (Deut 8:2-5; Heb 12:5-11).
6. Those in Christ no longer live according to their own purposes, but according to God's purpose in setting them apart: to *know him* and *make him known* (2 Cor 5:15; 1 Pet 4:1-2).
 - a. All those in Christ should live in such a manner as to bring glory to and not reproach upon the name of Jesus Christ (Isa 61:1-7; 1 Pet 2:9-12; 4:15-16).
 - i. Those in Christ should seek to live in ongoing repentance from sinful pleasures, practices, false teaching and deceitful schemes (Ps 51:9-10; 2 Cor 12:20-21; 2 Tim 2:24-26).
 - ii. Those in Christ should seek to be transformed by the renewal of their minds, rather than be conformed to the patterns of this world (Rom 12:1-2; Eph 4:20-24).
 - b. This does not mean that those in Christ are to have no dealings with those outside the church, but they are to be a distinct community, set apart from the world for the sake of the world (John 17:11, 14-18; 1 Cor 5:9-10).
 - c. Those in Christ should seek to actively engage in the life of their surrounding community, so that they might make known the goodness of Christ's kingdom (Matt 5:13-16; Col 4:5-6).

Good Works

1. The Word of God alone – not human tradition – defines what may be called good works. No human works can contribute to our justification; however, good works are a necessary and inevitable outworking of our sanctification, and are the fruit of the Spirit as we abide in Christ (Isa 64:6; Mic 6:8; Matt 5:16; 12:33-35; 15:1-9, 18-19; John 15:4-8; Rom 3:12, 23; Eph 2:8-10; Philip 2:12-15).
2. Though a believer's good works are imperfect – reflecting our weakness – they are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (Luke 17:7-10; Rom 7:21-25; 12:2; 1 Pet 2:5). These good works vindicate a living faith, benefit others, are productive in God's kingdom, adorn

¹² For more on the sacraments, see *Doctrine of the Church*, "The Sacraments."

the gospel for his glory, and silence false accusations (John 15:5, 8; Titus 2:7-8, 10, 14; 3:1, 5, 8, 14; James 2:14-26; 1 Pet 2:11-15; 3:13-17).

3. The works performed by unregenerate¹³ people, though they may benefit others, are not motivated by love for God, or done according to God's will or for his glory, and therefore are not good in his sight (Matt 12:33-35; John 5:39-47; Rom 1:21; 1 Cor 13:3-7).

Perseverance and Preservation of the Saints

1. Because the accomplishment and application of salvation are wholly the work of the Trinity, the final preservation of God's people is certain. They are chosen by the Father, apart from any consideration of their future effort or faith. They are redeemed by the Son from all iniquity and its eternal consequences, and they are kept by the Spirit by whom they are sealed for the final day of redemption. Those in Christ are guarded by the power of God through faith for the coming completion of salvation, and none of his own can perish (John 6:37-40; 10:27-29; 17:11-15; Rom 8:28-39; Philip 1:6; 1 Pet 1:3-9; Heb 7:24-25; Jude 1:24).
 - a. God's people are responsible to exercise faith and repentance. However, since both faith and repentance are gifts of God, they cannot finally fail and thwart God's plan to save his people. God's people will persevere because of his sovereign grace working in them, not due to their own ability to be faithful. Though our best intentions unaided by his grace will fail, Jesus' intercession on behalf of his own prevents the loss of our faith and relationship with him (Matt 12:20-21; Luke 22:31-34; Rom 8:34; Philip 2:12-13; 2 Tim 2:10-13; Heb 7:25; 1 John 2:1).
 - b. Throughout their lives, Christians will still succumb to temptation, doubt, and outright disobedience. Our wise Heavenly Father knows our weakness and has not only forgiven our ongoing lapses into unbelief and sin, but provides for ongoing training and growth in holiness, to advance our perseverance (Ps 103:8-14; Col 2:13-14; Titus 2:11-13; Heb 12:5-11; 1 John 1:6-9; 2:1-2).
2. As God alone knows the heart, it is possible for professing believers to be self-deceived and to deceive others concerning the reality of their salvation. Though by outward appearances one may give the impression of true devotion to Jesus, this may prove to be temporary or superficial, and end with judgment as an unbeliever. Hence, not all professing believers persevere, and it is imperative for all believers to confirm their calling and election by supplementing and thereby demonstrating their faith with other fruitful, godly qualities¹⁴ (1 Sam 16:7; Matt 7:21-23; 13:18-23; John 2:23-25; 6:64-66; Acts 8:13, 18-23; 2 Tim 2:16-19; Heb 6:4-12; James 2:14-24; 2 Pet 1:5-11; 1 John 2:19).

¹³ Those who remain "in Adam," not having experienced the new life generated by the Holy Spirit. See above: "Regeneration (New Birth)."

¹⁴ We identify the perseverance of the saints as a secondary doctrinal matter. We recognize that many godly believers have held the conviction that a Christian can "fall away" or lose their salvation due to unrepentant, habitual sin or repudiation of the truths of the gospel. We respectfully disagree with this position. Rather, we believe that one who thus departs from the faith--and does not later repent--reveals that they were never truly regenerated by the Spirit or possessed saving faith in Christ (1 John 2:19). One of the marks of a genuine believer is their obedience (albeit imperfectly) to Christ's commands (John 14:15, 23-24; 15:5-8). Therefore, passages that warn of falling away or being cut off from Christ (i.e., John 15:2; Rom 11:21-22; Gal 5:2-4; Heb 6:4-12) are not intended to unsettle true faith; rather, they are meant to preserve and motivate our perseverance in faith. For more, see *Sanctification, 5b* (above). For an explanation of primary, secondary, and tertiary doctrinal matters, see *Prolegomena*, "Our Theological System and Tradition."

Assurance of Salvation

1. All true believers share in Christ Himself as their salvation, but our confidence that we belong to him by a genuine, living faith is strengthened and confirmed by certain evidences of spiritual life.
 - a. These evidences include dependence on the grace of God in Christ (faith), the fruit of the Spirit, love for God and his children, desire to know and be like Christ, obedience to his commandments, not continuing in habitual sin, and crying out to God as our Father (Rom 5:1-5; 8:14-17; Gal 5:22-24; Philip 3:8-11; 1 John 2:3-6, 28-29; 3:6-10, 14; 4:7-15; 5:1-3).
 - b. Conversely, neglect of the means of grace,¹⁵ misunderstanding of suffering, disobedience, temptation, and even temperamental inclinations¹⁶ can weaken this assurance (Matt 26:40-41; Mark 9:22-24; 2 Tim 1:5-9; Heb 3:12-13; 12:3-13; James 1:2-4; 1 Pet 4:12-19).
2. Apart from evidences of a living faith, we have no grounds for assurance that we truly belong to God, and should test ourselves whether we are in the faith or not (Rom 8:12-13; 2 Cor 12:20-13:5; Gal 5:16-21; James 2:14-26; 2 Pet 1:5-10; 1 John 2:9-11; 3:4-8, 10-17; 4:20).
3. It is the will of God that we may know that we have eternal life. If we have this confidence, the result will be great peace, joy, hope and fruitfulness in Christ (Heb 10:19-25; 1 Pet 1:8; 2 Pet 1:5-11; 1 John 5:1-5, 10-13).

Glorification

1. The glory which is rightly God's alone has already begun to be shared with those in Christ, as he restores the glory we lost due to Adam's rebellion, though the fullness of this glory has not yet been revealed (Ps 8:4-6; Isa 42:8; John 17:22, 24; Heb 2:6-10; 1 John 3:2).
2. The apex of human privilege will occur when the exalted Christ returns to eternally share his glory with those who are his. This glory includes the redemption of our bodies to be like his glorious body, thus completing the work of sanctification and our adoption as sons. We will therefore reign as fellow heirs with Christ forever. When our redemption is complete, the curse and physical consequences of his people's sin (death, disease, pain, sorrow) will be removed (John 3:16; 6:40; 17:1-3; Rom 8:16-18, 21, 23, 28-30; 1 Cor 15:35-55; Philip 3:20-21; 1 Thess 5:23-24; 2 Tim 2:10-12; Rev 21:3-5; 22:1-3).
3. Glorification also includes the redemption of all creation from its bondage to corruption, renewing the heavens and earth for the completion of a new creation in full harmony with renewed humanity (Isa 11:1-9; 65:17-25; Rom 8:19-22; 2 Pet 3:10-13).

Recommended Resources:

Beginner:

- Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction*, 2013.
- R. C. Sproul, *Everyone's a Theologian*, Part Six: Soteriology, 2014.

¹⁵ See "Sanctification" pts. 5b and 5c above.

¹⁶ For various reasons, some people are more prone to doubt themselves and the love of God for them, thus making assurance that they belong to God harder to believe and more of an ongoing struggle.

Intermediate:

- Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Part 5: The Doctrine of the Application of Redemption, 1994.
- John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2: Systematic Theology, 1991.
- John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 1955.
- R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 1986.

Advanced:

- Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*. 3rd ed., 1965.
- B. B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation*, 1914.
- B. B. Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines*, rev. ed., 1988.

Sanctification, Spiritual Disciplines:

- Tim Chester, *You Can Change: God's Transforming Power for Our Sinful Behavior and Negative Emotions*, 2010.
- Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 1978.
- Brian G. Hedges, *Christ Formed in You: The Power of the Gospel for Personal Change*, 2010.
- David Mathis, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines*, 2016.
- Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed., 2014.