

How Can I be Saved?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in an eight-part series

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Genesis 12:1–3 (NIV)

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

²“I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
³I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

John 3:16 (NIV)

¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Ephesians 2:8–10 (NIV)

⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

James 2:14–26 (NIV)

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Perhaps the biggest question of all – how can we be saved from ourselves?

This week we move on to the second of the big questions posed in the Joneses’ book, *Scripture and the Wesleyan Way*: “How Can I Be Saved?” My first thought on seeing the title was to ask myself, “Saved from what exactly?” I imagine if you stopped random strangers on the street and posed that question to them, you’d get a wide variety of answers. Saved from illness, loneliness, boredom, bullies, poverty, drudgery, and much more. But what does the Bible say?

Saved from what?

Saved from sin. Now, nobody really likes to talk about sin, but if Christians are anything, we are realists. Rose-colored glasses have no place in our pockets. Sin is real and its presence explains a great deal about us and our world. The NRSV translation of the Bible uses the word “sin” or “sins” 916 times in 800 verses. The truth of sin is inescapable, but what do we mean by the word?

We tend to think of sin only as the breaking of a rule, as if we might look back over our day and count the sins we committed. And, surely, there are certainly many instances in Scripture where “sin” is used to speak of a specific transgression against God. But the place to begin is with the larger meaning of “sin,” which I sometimes capitalize as Sin.

Sin is whatever separates us from God. Sin is whatever diminishes the image of God in us all. Sin is whatever keeps us from functioning as God intended. Sin is our brokenness . . . and we are all broken . . . and we are often too blind to even know it.

The evidence of Sin in our own hearts is that we love the wrong things or love the right things the wrong way. The story of Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit illustrates that this darkness has been with us nearly from the beginning. They, and we still, choose against God and his ways every day, in ways large and small.

Adam, Eve, you, and I were all created by God so that we might love God and one another. When we chase after false gods or dishonor our parents or covet our neighbor's house or commit adultery, we are separated further and further from God. Adam and Eve, giving in to their pride and desiring to be like gods themselves, chose to follow their own way rather than God's way. And the result was that when God came to walk with them in the evening, Adam actually hid from God. The biblical story from that point forward is about God's work to put back together what was torn apart that day in the garden.

In the biblical worldview, Adam and Eve's choice is still with us. They ran from God, causing a tragic rip in the relationship between God and humanity. It is as if their bad choice passed on to us a flaw in our moral DNA, a flaw that we cannot fully heal ourselves, but must be healed by God. It is this flaw, shared by us all, that we can call Sin. So Paul writes, "... since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23) or even more clearly, "[God] made him to be sin who knew no sin" 1 Cor. 5:21. And, from Peterson's, *The Message*, (Romans 5:12-14),¹

"You know the story of how Adam landed us in the dilemma we're in—first sin, then death, and no one exempt from either sin or death. That sin disturbed relations with God in everything and everyone, but the extent of the disturbance was not clear until God spelled it out in detail to Moses. So death, this huge abyss separating us from God, dominated the landscape from Adam to Moses. Even those who didn't sin precisely as Adam did by disobeying a specific command of God still had to experience this termination of life, this separation from God. But Adam, who got us into this, also points ahead to the One who will get us out of it."

The wide-ranging nature of sin and its meaning in Scripture is illustrated well in the following dictionary entry on sin:

What is sin like? It is often described as a form of tyranny or bondage. Sin wraps the sinner up with strong cords (Prov 5:22), and it easily entangles its victim (Heb 12:1). The reason Cain is warned not to let sin have mastery (Gen 4:7) is that sin is a slave driver. The psalmist took the hint and prayed that sin would not rule over him (Ps 119:133). Jesus warned that "everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (Jn 8:34 NIV). Paul could vouch for the bondage of sin from his own experience as a man "sold as a slave to sin ... a prisoner of the law of sin" (Rom 7:14, 23 NIV; cf. Rom 6). Indeed, "the whole world is a prisoner of sin" (Gal 3:22 NIV).

Sin is like falling down or turning away from a good path. Ezekiel argues that silver and gold made the children of Israel "stumble into sin" (Ezek 7:19 NIV). To sin is to go astray, turning to one's own way (Is 53:6; cf. Dan 9:11). . . .

Sin is deadly. . . . The costliness and deadliness of sin are conjoined in Paul's memorable epigram "The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23 NIV; cf. Rom 5:12). To be a sinner is to be "dead in your transgressions and sins" (Eph 2:1 NIV; cf. Col 2:13). Paul goes so far as to personify sin as a killer or an executioner: "Sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death" (Rom 7:11 NIV). Alternatively, it is the mother of all death, for "when it is full-grown, [it] gives birth to death" (Jas 1:15 NIV).²

To speak of sin as the "mother of all death" ought to drive home the depth of our predicament. So then, we ask, how can we be saved?

¹ This is a dense few sentences from Paul, but Peterson does a good job of unpacking it so we can see Paul's meaning more clearly.

² Leland Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 793.

How can we be saved?

Overcoming the darkness that resides in every human heart requires a mighty power. And, indeed, the only answer to sin is the love and grace and power of God – there is no other. Forgiveness is the remedy and God is the physician. I used to wonder why, when humanity chose violence and hate, God didn't just leave and start over with another planet and another people. But then I came to see it is simply that God loves, that God is love, and that true love is faithful and abiding. So if God was going to be God, then God had to stay, seeking always to restore us to a right and true and loving relationship with God. The over-arching biblical story is best seen as God's working out a rescue that was launched four millennia ago with Abraham and Sarah and came to its fruition in Jesus. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son . . ." (John 3:16). It is God's work by God's grace on account of God's love.

And yet . . . take a moment and read the two Scripture passages from Ephesians and James. . . . Don't you feel a bit forced into choosing between them?

Doesn't Paul write in Ephesians that we are saved by faithfully trusting in God, not by our actions? Isn't the Christian message all about grace; isn't that what makes it good news? But then doesn't James ask sarcastically, "Can faith save you?" Paul seems to make it all about faith while James, Jesus' half-brother, seems to make it all about our deeds, what we do and how we live. We wonder, which is it?

The all-important AND

But, as in much Christian theology, we don't have to and, indeed, must not choose between them. The Christian faith is built on a series of "ANDs" not "ORs." God is three and one. Jesus is fully God and fully human. Salvation is instantaneous and a process. And so on. We fall into error when we feel like we have to *choose* one or the other or otherwise resolve the tension. Roger Olsen's excellent book, *The Mosaic of Christian Beliefs*, is an overview of the history of Christian theology and is organized into twenty-two chapters, each one devoted to a theological "AND."

Salvation is both a gift and a task. Our re-birth into God's family³ is all about God's grace and his grace alone. We don't contribute to it or assist in any way. *And* . . . salvation is a process by which we come to entrust ourselves wholly and completely to our Savior (i.e., faith), thus making our rescue the beginning of a long journey toward true Christlikeness. Furthermore, this gift of salvation must be embodied in how we live. Both Paul and James embraced this "and." Both knew that genuine faith in Christ must result in good works, or, as Paul put it, the "fruit of the Spirit." Indeed, to say that our rebirth in Christ must result in good works makes it seem like a command or instruction, but that isn't going far enough. When we come to faith in Christ, we *will* have good works to show for it, we *will* bear fruit. If you claim to have put your faith and trust in Christ and yet have no fruit, Paul would ask you to reconsider where you have really put your trust. Is it truly in Jesus or does it still reside in your ability to save yourself?

Bearing the fruit of servanthood

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ by virtue of God's saving grace, we are re-born. But we still have to be made into disciples, for what we do (our "works") is the embodiment of our faith. It isn't so much that the good works are an "ought," but that they are the *inevitable* outworking of genuine faith. Thus, to reiterate, the New Testament writers can speak of salvation as both gift *and* task, as instantaneous *and* as a process.

³ Though "born again" is often used to denote some particular group of Christians, that is a mistake. In the Bible, all Christians, i.e., all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, have been born a second time, or born again. Jesus' conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus in John 3 sets forth the essence of this claim and Paul develops it further in his letters.

Jesus spent two and a half years or so with his disciples. Teaching them by way of parables and more. Enacting for them the arrival of God's kingdom. Showing them what it really means to live in God's way. Why? Why so much teaching and doing? Because Jesus was making them into disciples, genuine apprentices learning to be like the Master. They weren't to be just hearers of Jesus' words, but doers of them (see also James 1:22). And before Jesus returned to the Father, he told them, in the Great Commission, that they were to go out and make still more disciples (Matthew 28:19). We are re-born in Christ by God's grace, but we are made into disciples. Salvation encompasses acting like the people into which God has already made us, ready to serve others in the faithful practice of our discipleship.

Daily Bible Readings

More on salvation

Monday, Exodus 15:1-10 Moses sings praises God's salvation from the Egyptians.

Tuesday, Isaiah 56:1-5 Do what is right for salvation will come.

Wednesday, Psalm 119:166-176 Hoping for salvation.

Thursday, Acts 28:23-31 Paul, under house arrest in Rome, preaches salvation for the Gentiles.

Friday, Romans 1:16-17 The gospel is the power of God for salvation . . . for all.

Saturday, Titus 2:11-14 Salvation has come to all, training us to live virtuous lives.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Daniel.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Kings (1&2).

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *Embracing the Bible: an introduction to Scripture*

Video of each week's class is posted here: vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy