

Saved by His Life

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First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois — August 23, 2015

Romans 5:6-11 NIV

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

John 5:19-29 NIV

Jesus gave them this answer: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.

Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.

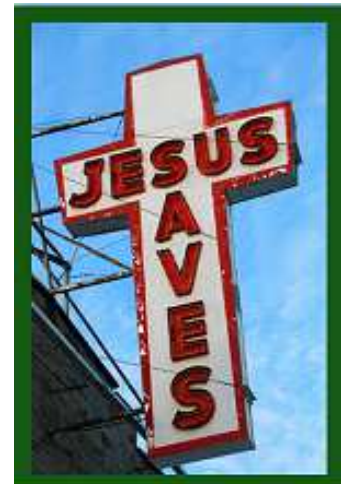
"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

"I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.

"Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."

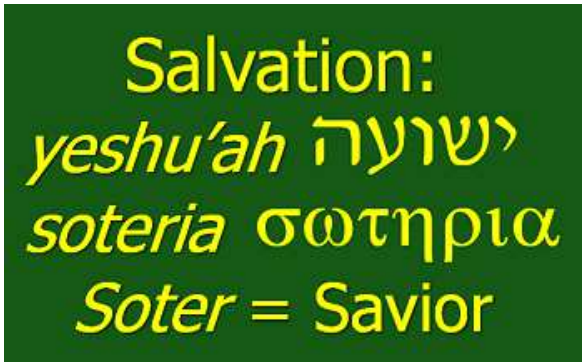
We're familiar with the song "Jesus Saves." In fact, we sang it during worship several weeks ago. "Jesus saves" is a short slogan that one might see on a bulletin board, or perhaps a billboard; I used to see it occasionally in neon lights on a rescue mission or a church. Probably you have, too.

We all believe "Jesus saves," but I sometimes wonder whether we really understand what that short slogan means. I recall that when I was in graduate school in Boston one of the professors published an article entitled "How Does Jesus Save?" That was back in the days before I had committed my life to Jesus — and as to why I went to seminary, and then to graduate school for a Ph.D. in Bible, before I knew the Lord — that's another story! I don't remember how the professor answered his own question, "How does Jesus save?" or whether I even read his article. But the question he raised has continued to intrigue me, more and more since I came to know the Lord, now some forty years ago.



So today I'd like to step back from just repeating that slogan, "Jesus saves," and take a more in-depth look at what the Bible has to say about it. I propose to do this by taking up four questions: (1) What is *salvation* in the Bible? (2) What is salvation *from* in the New Testament? (3) What is salvation *into* in the New Testament? (4) *How* does Jesus save?

So, first, **what is *salvation* in the Bible?** We often speak of concepts like sin or salvation as if they were entities with an independent existence somewhere "out there," entirely apart from the people affected by them. Thus we might speak of salvation as though it were a kind of substance we either have or don't have — like an antidote administered for a poison in our system — that is, sin — and which guarantees a heavenly destiny in the same way that a drug we might take would relieve us of the symptoms of an illness. It should be obvious, I believe, to anyone who knows the Bible that that this isn't a *biblical* way to speak about salvation. Salvation isn't a mechanical device we can apply, or a magical substance we can swallow. In Scripture, salvation is *something that happens to people* when they get the help they need.



Several years ago, while I was teaching a men's Bible class in another church in the Tri-State area, I did a study of the idea of salvation in Scripture. My approach was to look at the Hebrew and Greek words the English Bible translates as "salvation" to see what they really mean.

Without going into detail here, the main word in the Hebrew Bible is *yeshu'ah*. That word means liberation, deliverance, or rescue. It has the sense of freeing somebody from restrictions placed upon them, like clearing away a roadblock or opening up a wider pathway by which to escape danger. Other related words in Hebrew have much the same

sense. (As you know, Jesus' Hebrew name, Yeshua', comes from this word *yeshu'ah*, as we read in Matthew 1:21 where Joseph is told, "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.")

In the New Testament, the corresponding Greek word is *soteria*, related to the verb *sozo* which means to save, deliver, or rescue. The noun, *soter*, is translated "savior." What's interesting, in the New Testament, is that the Roman Emperor also called himself *soter* or savior. Through Roman domination of the Mediterranean world, Caesar claimed to bring peace, prosperity, and deliverance — that is, salvation — to the people under his rule. We can understand why the early Christians, who instead proclaimed Jesus as Savior, encountered persecution from Roman authorities. In our nation where public policy and morality have often been shaped through the influence of the churches, we have forgotten the political implications when we declare that Jesus is our Savior. But, sadly, we're beginning again to see the legal and political cost of being loyal to Jesus as Savior and Lord. Friends, I must warn you: If you're in church, you're in politics.

The point I'd like to make, in studying these biblical terms, is that most often salvation is *deliverance or rescue from an outside threat* that has attacked or enslaved someone. In many churches today, salvation is presented as deliverance from some internal state, usually called "sin" (we'll say more about that shortly). But typically, in the Bible, salvation is what happens when people are set free from an *external enemy*, some outside force that has them in its grip and threatens to destroy them.

And that brings us to our second question: **What is salvation *from* in the New Testament?** Usually we talk about salvation from sin, but *what is sin?* I think it's a fair statement that what the Bible means by sin is made clear in the first chapters of Genesis, where Adam and Eve yield to the tempter's enticement: Eat this forbidden fruit, and "you will be like God." In other words, sin is basically ignoring God and putting myself in his place. Sin is not just a specific action, as though I were to violate one of the Ten Commandments. All the commandments follow from the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). Sin is rebellion against God, refusing to take him into account, dropping him off your radar screen as though he's totally irrelevant to the way you think and the way you conduct your life. Everything else — murder, theft, lying, infidelity, enviousness, unforgiveness, and all results of self-centeredness — flow out of that basic attitude of indifference to the Creator.

But that indifference to God is built into human culture, for all people, like those who erected the tower of Babel, desire to “make a name for themselves” without taking God into account. Unless you regularly watch the news on Pat Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network, for example, you will listen for days to the news channels without hearing any reference to God. The dominant philosophy of our culture has ruled the Creator out of consideration, not only in politics or the economy but also in science, which is supposed to be the search for the facts. When the findings of scientific inquiry seem to point to the activity of a Creator — as, for example, in the information encoded in the DNA sequence of living cells, which could never have evolved by accident — many scientists refuse to follow that evidence to its rational conclusion, and remain adamant in their atheism.

The biblical authors are fully aware that a reasonable person has to accept the reality of God simply by observing the universe. Psalm 19 begins, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1). The apostle Paul reminds the Christians of Rome, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Romans 1:18-20).

In the light of Paul’s statement, shouldn’t we have said that salvation is rescue from God’s wrath, just as Paul says in Romans 5? But if you look at how Paul understands the wrath of God, we see that it’s not some special punishment, like a bolt of lightning or the earth opening up to swallow someone. Rather, God’s wrath is *self-inflicted* by those who ignore him; all God has to do to enact his wrath is to stand by — to “give them up,” as Paul says — and let people play out the consequences of the bad decisions they’ve made against his will. The worldview that excludes God, in spite of clear evidence of his reality, is what lies at the heart of all sin, and that worldview contains the seeds of its own judgment and condemnation. As the Gospel of John puts it, “This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

When we ask, then, “What is salvation *from* in the New Testament? the answer is that salvation is *deliverance from that false worldview*. Salvation is rescue from an enslaving and destructive prejudice that prevents a person, or a whole society, from recognizing God, especially what God is doing in world history through his risen Messiah, Jesus.

Repentance:
metanoia μετάνοια

- Change of mind
- A new way of seeing reality
- A new “worldview”



Salvation involves adopting a different worldview, a new lens through which we look at things. The biblical word for this is repentance, or *metanoia* — changing your mind. That’s exactly how the apostle Peter presents it to the Jews of Jerusalem in that first Christian announcement on the Day of Pentecost: You had Jesus crucified, but God raised him up as both Lord and Messiah, and you’ve seen the evidence for that. Therefore you need to repent — change your minds about God and what he’s doing. “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation,” Peter pleads with them, by coming to a different understanding of reality, of what’s actually happening. It’s the prevailing culture, with its twisted thinking, that has enslaved you, and from which you need to

be delivered or saved. In the opening of his letter to the Galatians, that’s what the apostle Paul says Jesus

came to do; he “gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age” (Galatians 1:4). So repentance doesn’t just mean, “Yes, Lord, I’ve sinned and I’m turning away from my sin.” Repentance means, “Oops — I see that my thinking has been wrong, and now I see things differently.”

Today millions are trapped in bondage to false understandings of what’s real — whether imposed by media, the educational establishment, political ideologies, non-Christian religions, dysfunctional behavior patterns or destructive habits. These are the enemies from which people need to be delivered, or “saved,” so that they can enjoy the life for which God has created them. Salvation, in the Bible, isn’t just a matter of fixing something inside you or me so we can be assured of a place in heaven. It’s a matter of rescuing us from false values and perspectives that have been imposed upon us from outside — things that keep us from being what God want us to be.

So that brings us to our third question: **What is salvation *into* in the New Testament?** To introduce that topic, let me read from the words of Jesus in the 5th chapter of the Gospel of John: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24). Jesus isn’t speaking here of life after death, or to use the traditional English phrase, “everlasting life.” The Greek expression is *zoen aionion*, literally, “life of the aeon,” or of the age, a phrase that has no time qualifier. N. T. Wright translates this verse as follows: “Anyone who hears my word, and believes in the one who sent me, has *the life of God’s coming age*. Such a person won’t come into judgment. They will have passed out of death into life” (*The Kingdom New Testament*).

Life:
zoen aionion
ζωην αιωνιον

- “life of the age (aeon)”
- “The life of God’s coming age”

It’s clear that people who’ve put their faith in Jesus already have a different kind of life from what they had before, and that’s what they’ve been *saved into*. This note is struck repeatedly in the New Testament. For example, the apostle John writes in his First Letter, “This is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:11). Earlier in the letter, he states, “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death” (1 John 3:14). The apostle Paul writes to the Colossians, “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:1-3).

Since Jesus, John and Paul were speaking to people who were walking around in an ordinary, earthly existence, evidently the life they could have as a result of being “saved” wasn’t something that had to wait for them to pass away before they could enjoy it.

What, then, is this new life, “the life of God’s coming age”? It is, obviously, the replacement for the old life, the life of “the present evil age” Paul wrote about to the Galatians, or the life of the “corrupt generation” that Peter appealed to his audience to save themselves from. It’s a life that follows from *repentance*, changing our mind about what’s real. It’s a life that results from adopting a different worldview that lifts us above the false values and twisted choices thrust upon us by a corrupt culture that has no place for God. It’s a life based not upon our Adam-like self-centered striving, but on the image of true humanity revealed in Messiah Jesus, the “second Adam.” As the Spirit of Jesus works out his purposes in us, we take on a changed attitude and a new pattern of behavior that reflects the reality of God, in whom we “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

In the New Testament there are plenty of descriptions of this new kind of life, “the life of God’s coming age,” the life of the future world God is building already in the midst of the present era, beginning with the resurrection of the Son of God. Just to give one example, let’s look at Ephesians 4:22-32:

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Saved into the life of God's new age (an example):

- A renewed way of thinking
- A new self, recreated with God's faithful qualities
- Truthfulness in the body of Christ
- Sharing with those in need
- Compassion toward others
- Forgiveness of past hurts
- A life modeled after Jesus

(Ephesians 4:22-32)

This, then, is what Jesus *saves us into*: a new kind of life that expresses God's purpose for all people, and which will be the possession of all faithful people once God restores this world to what it was supposed to be before human sin ruined it.

But there remains the fourth question in our outline: **How does Jesus save?** Multi-volume theological tomes have been written on this topic, and I have only a few pages to deal with it before my time expires! We're going to have to just scratch the surface, but let's see what we can do. And let me add that explaining *how* Jesus saves comes after the fact. First Jesus saves, and then we try to figure out how he did it. So there may be multiple ways in which he rescues us, and my explanation is only one of many.

For a start, let's look at this summary of salvation Paul offers in Romans 5: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" (Romans 5:6-11).

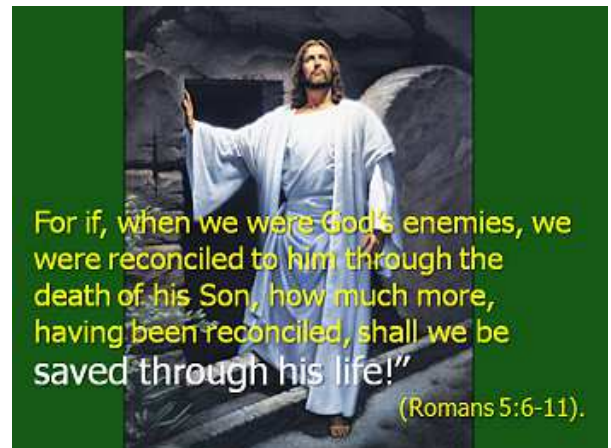
The Messiah died for us, Paul says — because that's what "Christ" means, not Jesus' last name but his title as Messiah of Israel. That's hugely important, because we have to see the work of Jesus as the fulfillment of God's plan for Israel. Adam messed up, the Bible tells us, and as a result the whole human race got messed up. So God chose one people to do the right thing, and get his message to the rest of the world — in fact, to *be* the kind of world God wants to rebuild. Thus God called Abraham as the father of a new people, and then confirmed that calling in giving Israel the Law through Moses. But even Israel messed up and turned away from the Lord; the people God chose to begin solving the problem became part of the problem, as God knew they would. Somebody had to bear the penalty for that faithlessness, and also do what God's faithful people were supposed to do: to bless all the people of the earth. But that somebody could only be one who summed up Israel in himself; he could only be the Son of God, a title given to the kings of Israel. He could only be Israel's Messiah.

Therefore the Messiah had to die upon the cross, bearing in his tortured body all the sin not only of Israel but of all the people Israel was supposed to bring back to God, but couldn't — namely, you and me. "At just the right time," Paul says, "Christ died for the ungodly" — people without God, and with no concern for, nor any understanding of, his ways. In this way people could receive forgiveness and be brought back to God. As Paul writes elsewhere, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

That's the way salvation is usually preached: "Christ died for our sins, so God won't condemn us but will give us a future and a hope." That's true, supremely true — but it's only half the story. As Paul says in our

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.



lesson from Romans, "If, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be *saved through his life!*" It was not only by going to his cross that Jesus "rescued us from the present evil age," but also *by rising from the dead* so that we could share in "the life of God's coming age" by sharing his life — just as Jesus tells us, "Anyone who hears my word, and believes in the one who sent me, has the life of God's coming age."

Unite with Jesus



What has happened to him will also have happened to you.

That's how Jesus saves us, but to enjoy that deliverance there's a step we need to take. A day will come, Jesus reminds us, when *all will be raised from the dead* to one destiny or another. Meanwhile, only Jesus lives the resurrection life. There's only one way to have that life, and that's *to unite with Jesus* so that what has happened to him will also have happened to us. As Paul writes in Galatians, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me"

(Galatians 2:20). Salvation is *salvation by incorporation*, that is, by *membership in Jesus* so that we participate in his death and are therefore saved by his life. The sign of our membership in Jesus is baptism, and the working out of our membership in him is the life we share as members of his body, the community of those who belong to Jesus — namely, the church, the temple in which the life of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, dwells and does his life-transforming work.

In our individualistic American culture this may be a hard concept to grasp. We've been rescued from our enemy, the "corrupt generation" that has imposed its warped worldview upon us, not by something we've done for ourselves. We've been rescued by uniting our life with One who has overcome that enemy for us by dying and rising again: the Son of God, Messiah Jesus. Christianity isn't just a belief about Jesus. *Christianity is Jesus* — his life in me, my life in him. And so I am *saved by his life*. Therefore I'm not a sinner any more, subject to the wrath of God. How could I be, if I'm a member of Jesus who is without sin?

Let's summarize. (1) What is *salvation* in the Bible? Rescue from an enemy that wants to destroy us. (2) What is *salvation from* in the New Testament? From a sinful environment that warps our worldview, or understanding of reality. (3) What is *salvation into* in the New Testament? Into the life of God's coming age. (4) *How* does Jesus save? By taking us into himself, through his death and resurrection, so we can have that new life. That's New Testament theology, perhaps in a form you haven't heard before, but one that makes sense to me.

- **What is *salvation*?**
Rescue from an enemy that wants to destroy us.
- **What is *salvation from*?**
From a sinful environment that warps our worldview.
- **What is *salvation into*?**
The life of God's coming age.
- **How does Jesus save?**
By taking us into Himself.

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