

The Path to Salvation -- Part 1

Rod Reynolds

The Bible teaches that God has a plan of salvation for mankind. What does that mean, and why is a plan of salvation necessary? What is it that human beings need to be saved from? If there is a “plan of salvation,” what is it? Are there specific steps to be followed on the path to salvation?

In this article, I want to begin the process of answering these questions, and others, relating to the path leading to salvation for human beings. This article, part one of a series, will address the first two of the following questions relating to salvation:

(1) What is "salvation"?; (2) Are “good” people saved even if they don't know about Christ, or are unbelievers?; (3) Are infants and babies saved, even though they know nothing of Christ and lack the capacity to choose good or evil?; (4) Does the Bible teach “Universal Salvation”?; (5) Who qualifies you for salvation?; (6) Can one, after making a profession of faith in Christ, and receiving the Holy Spirit, be disqualified from salvation?; (7) Are those who do not attain salvation in this age eternally condemned?; (8) What is the path to salvation?

Questions:

(1) What is “salvation.”

One question we need an answer to is what is spiritual salvation, from the standpoint of Scripture? The answer has to do with the fact that God is the arbiter of life. He is the supreme lawgiver, and the supreme judge of all creation. His laws define what is right and wrong, what is good and evil. And he has the authority to pass the death sentence on those who violate his law. In the Bible, the violation of God's law is called sin. And God has decreed that the penalty for sin, is death.

The word for sin in the Greek New Testament is ἁμαρτία (*hamartia*). *Hamartia* is a noun form of a Greek verb which means to miss the mark, and hence to miss out on sharing the prize. The “mark” that is missed when one sins, is obedience to God's law. The prize that is forfeited by sin consists of the blessings of obedience. Any transgression of God's law is sin. “Whoever commits sin transgresses also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law” (1 John 3:4, AKJV).

God is the giver of life, and of every blessing. Acts 17:24-25 "God, who made the world and everything in it, gives to all life, breath, and all things.

God is the supreme Lawgiver and judge:

"There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?" (James 4:12).

"For the Lord is our Judge, The Lord is our Lawgiver, The Lord is our King; He will save us" (Isaiah 33:22).

"For the Lord will judge His people And have compassion on His servants" (Deuteronomy 32:36).

"Now see that I, even I, am He, And there is no God besides Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; Nor is there any who can deliver from My hand. For I raise My hand to heaven, And say, ' As I live forever, If I whet My glittering sword, And My hand takes hold on judgment, I will render vengeance to My enemies, And repay those who hate Me'" (Deuteronomy 32:39–41).

"...For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written: 'As I live, says the Lord, Every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall confess to God.' So then each of us shall give account of himself to God" (Romans 14:10-12).

God has power over life and death. "The Lord kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and brings up" (1 Samuel 2:6).

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

To some, it may seem harsh that God would condemn to death anyone who sins. Yet, the penalty is just, because of the gravity of sin, and what it leads to in terms of anguish and suffering.

For just a few of the more obvious examples, consider the victims of murder, who are deprived of life, and their families who suffer grief and the potential blessings accruing from the companionship and support of the one who was murdered.

War, with all of its evils, is a result of sin. "Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4:1-3).

Consider the victims of fraud and theft, who suffer the loss of property that is rightfully theirs. In 1 Kings 21 we read of Ahab, king of Israel, who coveted a vineyard belonging to an Israelite named Naboth. Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, plotted to frame Naboth with false charges of blasphemy, murdered him, and seized his vineyard.

"Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 'Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who lives in Samaria. There he is, in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone down to take possession of it. You shall speak to him, saying, "Thus says the Lord: 'Have you murdered and also taken possession?'" And you shall speak to him, saying, "Thus says the Lord: 'In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, dogs shall lick your blood, even yours'"'"' (1 Kings 21:17-19).

So we see the judgment of God on Ahab for his crime of murder and theft. The root of sin is in the heart, in the inner man. "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man" (Matthew 15:19-20).

Any major sin, or violation of God's law, invariably involves the transgression of multiple specific laws. Note that Ahab's sins in the incident we just examined included covetousness, lying, murder and theft. In principle other sins were included, such as idolatry.

While they were in the wilderness we read of the Israelites falling into the sins of Idolatry and adultery. "Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods" (Numbers 25:1-2).

God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel concerning the unfaithfulness of Israel while they were in the wilderness, having been delivered from slavery in Egypt. "So I also raised My hand in an oath to them in the wilderness, that I would not bring them into the land which I had given them, 'flowing with milk

and honey,' the glory of all lands, because they despised My judgments and did not walk in My statutes, but profaned My Sabbaths; for their heart went after their idols. Nevertheless My eye spared them from destruction. I did not make an end of them in the wilderness" (Ezekiel 20:15-17).

Note that their Sabbath breaking was coupled with idolatry.

Paul tells us in Colossians that covetousness is a form of idolatry: "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and **covetousness, which is idolatry**. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience" (Colossians 3:5-6).

James tells us that if we break one of God's commandments, we, in principle, are breaking them all, because behind every one of the commandments is the same authority, and the penalty for breaking any one and for breaking all is the same.

"For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty" (James 2:10-12).

While God condemns sin, and has decreed the death penalty for sin, at the same time, God understands our frame, our weaknesses, and our inherent tendency to sin.

God wants us to have life, not death. He wants us to have the gift of eternal life, with him in his kingdom. So God has offered us a means of salvation from the just penalty of death for our sins.

"The Lord is merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. He will not always strive with us, Nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, So the Lord pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass; As a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, And its place remembers it no more. But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting On those who fear Him, And His righteousness to children's children, To such as keep His covenant, And to those who remember His commandments to do them" (Psalm 103:8-18).

So **what we need to be saved from is death**. Salvation, in Scriptural terms, means the penalty of death, for sins you have committed, is remitted. **Salvation means instead of death, you are given an inheritance of eternal life in the kingdom of God.**

There are **many deceptions about salvation, and the path to salvation**, for Satan is the great enemy of God and of mankind ("Satan" is from a Hebrew word which means adversary), and the great deceiver.

"So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who **deceives the whole world**; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him" (Revelation 12:9).

Let's briefly examine some of the common questions or assertions related to salvation.

(2) Are "good" people saved even if they don't know about Christ, or are unbelievers?

In the last couple of centuries it has become an increasingly popular idea among Christians that a person may be "saved," no matter his background, even if he is an idolater, and has no knowledge of Jesus Christ or the gospel, or is an unbeliever for some other reason.

This is certainly not a teaching of all professing Christian Churches or ministers, perhaps not even the majority, but it is believed by many, nevertheless.

Some teach that those who "do good," even having never heard the gospel, but only believing that there is a God based on the "general revelation" of nature (Romans 1:19-20), will "be saved" or "go to heaven" if they have done "good."

"...there are enough hints to suggest that it is possible for the heathen to be saved, so we can't accuse God of being unfair to people who have never heard. They have been given general revelation and are responsible. They have no excuse" ("Can Heathen Who Have Never Heard the Gospel Be Saved?," Ralph F. Wilson, jesuswalk.com, retrieved 3-2-2018).

Others teach that it's not really necessary to actually "do good," but simply to believe that one cannot on his own account merit salvation, even if you believe in some other god as the means of your salvation:

For example, the following quotation is from "How can those who never heard about Christ be saved?" by Ernest Valea, comparativereligion.com:

"There have been many spiritual masters who recognized the necessity of grace and the impossibility of attaining salvation by one's own efforts. Ramanuja and Madhva are brilliant examples in the Hindu tradition, as is Shantideva in Mahayana Buddhism. The spiritual trend called prapatti in Hinduism and the Pure Land school of Buddhism focus on grace as the only solution for attaining liberation. According to them, the whole merit for being saved belongs to the god (in Hinduism) or bodhisattva (in Buddhism) they worship. There are also many cases of tribal religions in which grace plays a key role in salvation.

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"Such spiritual trends in other religions prove that the Holy Spirit is at work in the world, convincing people of their sin and limitations and turning their hearts toward God's grace. According to the character displayed by the God of the Bible, we can expect that he will save such people, by the grace available for all in Jesus Christ. They will be saved not through their native religions, but despite them, not because they didn't hear about Christ, but despite the fact that they didn't hear about him, as a reward for their humility and recognition of the need for grace. In other words, it is not Vishnu or Amida who saves them, but Christ through his grace, as a result of their need for grace expressed towards Vishnu or Amida" ("How Can Those Who Never Heard About Christ Be Saved," Ernest Valea, comparativereligion.com, retrieved 3-2-2018).

A Catholic who styles himself a "theologian" declares the following: "The proposed doctrine of Mystical Baptism... asserts that adults who have not received a formal Baptism might attain a mystical Baptism, at anytime during their life, if they respond wholeheartedly to God's grace by choosing a substantially selfless act of love and mercy (or a set of such acts) in accordance with God's will. In this way, they are united to Christ's preeminent selfless act of love and mercy in His suffering and death on the Cross, and they receive a mystical Baptism from Christ on the Cross" ("Catholic Teaching: Mystical Baptism and Limbo," Ronald L. Conte, Jr., catholicplanet.com, 10-24-2016, retrieved 2-15-2018).

This "Mystical Baptism," he goes on to explain, might apply to people who have never heard of Christianity, or barely heard of it, and, also, to people who have rejected Christianity and baptism, if they have done a selfless act or acts at some time in their lives. In this case, the persons in question would not go directly to heaven, but first to "Purgatory."

The Vatican itself proclaimed in a document associated with the second Vatican Council of 1964 the following: "Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience" ("*Lumen Gentium*," 2.16, vatican.va. Retrieved 3-2-2018).

There are far too many errors in these statements to deal with in detail presently. Some of them we will deal with in due time, as we proceed, but no human being merits salvation on account of his own goodness.

"Now behold, one came and said to Him, 'Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?' So He said to him, 'Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments'" (Matthew 19:16-17).

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23)

Paul, in writing to the Ephesians, who had been Gentile worshipers of false gods, characterized their condition before they heard the gospel: "And you He made alive, who were **dead in trespasses and sins**, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and **were by nature children of wrath**, just as the others" (Ephesians 2:1-3).

He went on to say of them before their conversion as a result of the preaching of the gospel: "...that at that time you were **without Christ**, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, **having no hope and without God in the world**. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:12-13).

John wrote to the Church: "We know that we are of God, and **the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one**. And we know that the **Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true**; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen" (1 John 5:19-21).

Satan has blinded the world: "But even if our gospel is veiled, **it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded**, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them" (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

Only through Jesus Christ is salvation possible, according to Scripture. "For 'whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' **How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?** And how shall they hear without a preacher? (Romans 10:13-14).

"Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

"So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17).

"This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the **futility of their mind**, having their understanding darkened, **being alienated from the life of God**, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness" (Ephesians 4:17-19).

The truth is that idolatry is sin, the world is deceived, and those who are steeped in a false religious system embracing idols do not have salvation.

But don't misunderstand. Does God want all men to be saved? Yes. "[God] ... **desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth**. For there is one God and **one Mediator between God and men**, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, **to be testified in due time**" (1 Timothy 2: 4-6).

"Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the **knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord**, as His divine power has given to us **all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which** have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having **escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust**" (2 Peter 1:2-4).

Note that the things that pertain to life and godliness come through the **knowledge of Jesus Christ**. **There is no salvation apart from that knowledge**. Salvation is **accompanied by a knowledge of the truth**, the truth about the true God, **to be testified in due time**.

Does that mean those who have not heard the gospel in this age are eternally damned, as many have taught? No. God's plan is a **plan of salvation**, and **everyone** will ultimately be given ample opportunity for salvation. "... **they shall all be taught by God**" (**John 6:45**). See our article "Are the Lost Predestined to Hell?" (cogmessenger.com) for an explanation of how God intends to make salvation available to all people in due time. If you would like to have print copy of the article, call or write to us and ask for it by title. Be sure to give us your address if you want it mailed to you.

In the next article in this series, we will pick up with the answers to additional questions regarding the path to salvation.

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Messenger Church of God
PO Box 542
Peculiar, MO 64078
USA