What Christians Believe About Salvation: The Biblical Revelation

The existence of a redemption necessitates an application of that redemption. How we obtain the benefit of the work of Christ is an issue that has been hotly debated throughout the centuries. Questions about receiving God's grace begin in the Old Testament and develop in various ways throughout history. While Christians agree that we can be saved only by the grace of God, questions about how the grace of God is communicated to us vary from group to group. Unfortunately these issues have created divisions between denominations. Consequently the urgency of addressing these issues is a matter of ecumenical concern.

JEWISH ANTecedENTS

This chapter forms the complement to the two previous chapters on the work of Christ and is also inseparably related to chapters 5 and 6, "The Person of Christ." Here the emphasis is not on Christ's role in salvation, but on the application of the saving work of God through Christ. What does God require? To whom does God give his reconciliation and forgiveness? Such themes as grace, repentance, faith, justification, sanctification, election, predestination, regeneration, calling, adoption, eternal life, free will, perseverance, good works, obedience, union with Christ, and glorification are all involved. These remarks assume all that was discussed in chapter 9 about man's dignity as he was created in the image of God and his consequent fall into sin and disobedience.
The Pre-Mosaic Period—Faith as Repentance and Trust With Obedience

In the pre-Mosaic or patriarchal period, which includes the first eleven chapters of Genesis, Adam and Eve were in an assumed covenant relation to God from the beginning, inasmuch as the Lord addressed the man and woman as responsible persons and thus as beings accountable to God himself (Gen. 1:28; 2:15–16). They were to show their response to God by obediently following his commands and revealed will. After the Fall the man and the woman accepted the garments of skins provided as a substitute for their own fig leaves (3:21). Abel offered to God an acceptable gift, and the New Testament interprets his act as an act of faith (Heb. 11:4).

Curiously, during the lifetime of Enoch, the grandson of Adam and Eve, people “began to call on the name of the Lord” (Yahweh, 4:28). Could this perhaps refer to a relationship of trust and dependence on God evidenced by collective worship and prayer (cf. 2 Sam. 6:9; Pss. 79:6; 116:17)? Or does it refer to the beginning of the priestly prophetic office (Ps. 99:6)? In any event, it signals a response to the Redeemer God, Yahweh.

Enoch is said to have “walked with God” (5:22, 24; cf. Heb. 11:5–6). Noah “found favor in the eyes of the Lord.” He “walked with God” as Enoch did and “was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time” (6:8–9). He was obedient to the Lord’s command to build the ark and equip it for the Flood (6:22). God made the first-mentioned covenant with Noah, and the covenant was clearly initiated and fulfilled by God. Noah, as a representative man, received as a free gift of grace God’s promise that he would never flood the world again (9:11). Again, the New Testament interprets Noah’s obedience to God’s commands as a faith response (Heb. 11:7).

If we use “faith” as a broad theological category to describe the appropriate human response to God’s self-revelation to men and women, then it is possible to see even in this very early period that God delights in voluntary submission to his majesty and in an implicit trust in his gifts and promises, a trust that issues in obedience to God’s commands.

Abraham provides the first clear evidence of God’s expectation of our response to his saving purposes in history. God revealed himself to Abraham in his native homeland, Ur of the Chaldeans, and commanded him to leave and to go to a land that would be shown to him, in faith he obeyed (Gen. 12:1, 4; cf. Heb. 11:8–10). Note how his faith involved abandonment of his pagan past (repentance) and an embracing of the living God and God’s future based on his promise.

Such faith also involved, from the human perspective, risk and trust in God’s truthfulness and power to fulfill the promises. Furthermore, note that faith is not primarily about abstract, indifferent matters but about vital life issues.

In the reaffirmation of the covenant made by God with Abraham concerning the promise of a child (Isaac) to be born to Sarah in her old age, there occurs the first clear reference to faith’s relationship to justification before God. The biblical writer describes Abraham’s response by stating, “Abram believed the Lord.” Abraham “had faith upon Yahweh.” God accepted Abraham and counted him righteous on the basis of his faith apart from any meritorious good works (“and he credited it to him as righteousness” — Gen. 15:6; cf. Rom. 4:1–5). Several features of this amazing statement should be highlighted. This is the first occurrence of the word “righteousness” (tsedeqah) in the Bible. Whatever the term means, it cannot mean some conduct that Abraham presented to God as the basis or means of God’s accepting him, because the text says that God “credited it to him as righteousness.” There is only one condition for acceptance before God. That condition is faith—a settled confidence or trust in God, taking God at his word. “Righteousness” appears to be that saving, forgiving activity of God whereby he himself goes forth to cleanse, deliver, and empower us to follow him. We hold therefore that it is quite wrong to say that by these words “credited...as righteousness” the text implies that Abraham had no actual righteousness, but was credited with what he did not himself possess. “We fail to see,” Snaith rightly argues, “that he was credited with anything. He came to God in faith (i.e., in full trust in God, repentant and believing), and because he came thus, he was regarded as having fulfilled the condition for salvation.”

Abraham was the object of an unusual love—a love by which he was chosen—though neither “love” nor “chosen” are found in the text. Abraham’s faith was also tested, and, according to the New Testament, he was confident that God could and would raise his only son from the dead if he allowed him to be killed. This confidence in God’s supernatural agency in this world is an essential part of true biblical faith (Gen. 22:1–19; Heb. 11:17–19). Sarah, likewise, received through her faith in God’s promise, supernatural virility to conceive when she was nearly a hundred years old (Gen. 18:9–15; Heb. 11:11).

The Mosaic Period—Faith as Heartfelt Corporate Response to the Divine Act of Election

In the Mosaic period we are confronted with God's loving election of Moses and the people of Israel. Like Abraham, the people of Israel were the objects of a unique love. "Israel is loved so as to become Yahweh's priestly kingdom in the history of the world... Israel, the covenant people, is to mediate the presence of Yahweh to the world" (Exod. 19:4–6). Yet it is made very clear that this election is not because of any special merit that this people had, but it is wholly on the basis of God's grace:

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands. But those who hate him he will repay to their face. . . . (Deut. 7:6–10; cf. 9:4–6)

God graciously and lovingly initiated his saving covenant toward the people. Their responsibility was to "love him and keep his commands" (Deut. 7:9). Under the Mosaic covenant this involved an elaborate network of moral, civil, and religious requirements (some 613 commandments!). To repeat, we believe that the initial entrance into God's covenant is purely by grace. Thus, trust in God's truthfulness and faithfulness to his word is the essential response to this gracious covenant.

Once people are in the covenant it appears that the continued blessings of God under the covenant are dependent also on the exercise of love toward God and toward the neighbor and obedience to the commandments: "And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees, that I am giving you today for your own good?" (10:12–13). "Fear" is faith as it submits to his will. The "circumcision of the heart" is also an indication that our response to God is to be inward and heartfelt and not merely external (Deut. 30:6–10). That faith response was an essential part of entering into the covenant is further affirmed by Moses when he said:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not far from you, it is not in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven and bring it down, or who will descend into the abyss and bring it up?" (Deut. 31:11–14; cf. Rom. 10:6–8).

This is the strongest affirmation that faith and obedience are not inaccessible or impossible.

It must be pointed out that the primary emphasis on salvation applied in this Mosaic period is not on individual salvation from condemnation but on corporate deliverance and triumph over Israel's enemies and on the resultant possession of a people for God's inheritance (cf. Exod. 13:13; 15:2, 16). However, provision was also made for both individual and collective "atonement" for sin by the obedient observance of the sacrifices (Lev. 1:4; 4:35). This certainly anticipates later developments in the prophetic and New Testament periods where God's salvation, his righteousness, and the forgiveness of sins (atonement) will be all interconnected. There is, however, little said about eternal destiny.

The Prophetic Period—Salvation and Deliverance From Sin by Repentance and Faith

In the prophetic period there is more emphasis on salvation as God's deliverance from sin and on personal faith and trust in God. This is especially evident in the Psalms and in the Book of Isaiah. There is also a clearer delineation between faith response as the means of initiation into a saving covenant relationship with God and the consequent, but essential, continued obedience to God's revealed will stipulated in the covenant.

FAITH AS CHOICE OF LORDSHIP AND CONTINUED OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S REVEALED WILL

Early in this period we are confronted with this twofold distinction between faith responses in the challenge of Joshua to the new generation: "But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living. But as for me and my

household, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15). Right relation to the God of the covenant-salvation requires an act of the will to choose who will be Lord of one’s life. If Yahweh is chosen, then obedience to his revealed will is the accompanying evidence of such a decision. Faith is initially a turning to God, the Lord, from all false deities (repentance) to enter into a gracious covenant relation with him. Faith as obedience becomes one of the primary modes of living under the covenant and of staying in the covenant.

HESED AND EMUNAH

The Old Testament concept of God’s grace is bound up with the Hebrew word ḫesed ("faithfulness," "covenant love," "grace"). God’s grace (ĥesed) (Ps. 89:1–4, 33) is evidenced in the creation of the world (Ps. 136:1–9), in the giving of the covenant (89:1–4, 33; 136:21–22; Isa. 55:3), and in the forgiveness of sin (Ps. 103:11–12; Micah 7:18–19). It is because of God’s faithfulness in his covenant love (ĥesed) that he can be trusted to keep his word.

Faith in the thought of the Old Testament is expressed with the Hebrew word ēmunah, which means "firmness." Hence to believe or have faith is to consider God steady or trustworthy. The word can also refer to human "faithfulness" to God or to those acts of God’s grace by which he formed the destiny of the universe: Creation, covenant, and forgiveness. When directed toward God, it means “to have firm confidence in,” rather than mere assent to beliefs or doctrines about God (Isa. 7:9; 28:16; 43:10). Israel, the Northern Kingdom, is faulted for apostasy from God’s covenant: “But they would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their fathers, who did not trust in the Lord their God” (2 Kings 17:14). Ēmunah is linked closely to the Hebrew word bāṭah, "trust," which occurs more frequently: “But I trust (bāṭah) in you, O Lord; I say, ‘You are my God!’” (Ps. 31:14; cf. 37:3, 5 et al.). Trust may be directed immediately to God (Prov. 3:5–6), or to the name of God (Ps. 33:21; Isa. 50:10), to the ēmes of God (Ps. 13:4; 52:8), to the word of God (119:54), and to the salvation of God (79:22). This concept of “faith-trust” in the Old Testament should be borne in mind when the New Testament is read, inasmuch as the former is certainly behind the latter usage.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

We must look briefly at the prophetic conception of the righteousness of God in relation to salvation and forgiveness. David writes about the happiness of those who are forgiven their sins and trespasses (Ps. 32:1–2). While we are not explicitly told that faith-

trust in God is the means that brought about this forgiven-acquitted relationship with God, the fact that the person is a sinner and not righteous in his or her own deeds strongly suggests it. David elsewhere also argues, “Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you” (Ps. 143:2).

Isaiah, among others, argues that the “righteousness of God” shows itself preeminently in God’s saving work. His righteousness is his salvation or victory: “So his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him. He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head. . . . The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,” declares the Lord” (Isa. 59:15–17, 20; cf. 45:8–23; 46:12, 51:6). God’s own righteousness is his faithfulness to his covenant promises that bring salvation and forgiveness to those who turn in repentance from their sin to this Redeemer God. Paul especially delineated this relationship of God’s righteousness, his salvation, and his forgiveness in the epistles of Romans and Galatians.

HABAKKUK

Two further texts invite our attention. The first is the reference in Habakkuk to faith and righteousness: “See, he is lifted up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous will live by his faith (ēmunah)” (2:4). From the context we learn that there is a contrast in this verse between the Babylonian who is proud and filled with greed and the righteous one who lives by his faith or by his steadfast confidence in the Lord. The emphasis here is probably on the life of faithfulness that the righteous evidence. However, Paul sees a deeper sense also implied, namely, the one who through faith is righteous shall live before God now and in the age to come (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; cf. Heb. 10:38). In any case the prophets bear ample testimony to the needed response of faith in God that characterizes the righteous.

MICAH

The final text we will consider may perhaps be called the John 3:16 of the Old Testament. This classic statement of what God requires of us is given by Micah: “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy [ĥesed] and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8). In the context this is a response to the ultimate ineffectiveness of the prescribed system of sacrificial worship (cf. Heb. 10:4). It states that in the last analysis what God wants from us is (1) to “act justly,” i.e., to do God’s will as it has been made clear in past biblical history, (2) to “love ēmunah,”
i.e., to hold loyalty to the stipulations of the covenant, which include the knowledge of God and, issuing from that, loyalty in true and proper worship together with the appropriate behavior toward others of benevolence and (3) to "walk humbly with...God," i.e., to seek him in daily fellowship (cf. Isa. 55:6–7; Ps. 139:1ff.).

In looking back over the long history of grace, faith, and salvation in the Old Testament, let us summarize and conclude with a few broad strokes. From the very beginning God's saving acts were totally initiated by his own love and redeeming purposes and effected by his own power; in other words they flowed from his grace (hesed). This was true in the Garden of Eden, in the lives of the patriarchs, in the covenants with Abraham no less than those with Moses and David, and in the prophetic emphases.

On the human side, God requires the response of faith ("emunah) and trust ("batah). Faith has many facets. Faith is acceptance of and firm confidence in God's truthfulness and faithfulness to his words; faith is obedience to God's laws and directions; faith is trust in God's goodness and provision; faith is repentance, a turning by deliberate choice completely to God as Lord and away from all false gods; faith is loyalty to the one true God and his covenants; and faith is discipline, the desire to draw near to God in personal communion and fellowship. Faith brings God's public grace-salvation and forgiveness into our subjective experience.

This divine grace-salvation is likewise multifaceted. It involves deliverance from destructive enemies (Exod. 14:30; Ps. 6:4–5; Isa. 38:20), from sickness and peril of life (Ps. 40:13–17; Jonah 2), from sin and transgression (Ps. 103:10–12); it is verification or victory from injustice and oppression (Pss. 72:4; 76:9; 98:1–3; 103:6; 109:31), and leads to "peace" (Heb. shalom, prosperity, wholeness) and God's blessings ("berechot) and benefits ("jewni) (Ps. 103:2–5).

Finally, there is the eschatological (future) salvation, which the prophets especially announce will come into the world: "The LORD is exalted, for he dwells on high; he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness. He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the LORD is the key to this treasure" (Isa. 33:5–6). This coming great salvation will bring forgiveness and cleansing from sin (Ezek. 36:25–27), the light of God's justice to the Gentiles (Isa. 49:6), and universal salvation (52:10); violence and war will cease, and peace and righteousness will arise (60:17–18; Micah 4:3–4); the prisoner and captive will be set free; the gospel (good news) will be proclaimed to the afflicted and brokenhearted, and "everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved" (Joel 2:32, cf. Isa. 11:1–2). This is the vision with which the prophets close their story.

The Intertestamental Period

In the intertestamental period there are no sure guideposts to Jewish thought about grace, faith, and salvation. It has been traditional for Christians to describe the Judaism of this period and of the New Testament times as basically a system of works-of-law righteousness, mostly bereft of any genuine expressions of grace and faith. Recent scholarly studies have raised serious questions about the accuracy of this traditional description. We will not be able at this point to offer any substantial conclusion to the debate. Rather, we may briefly describe some features of the period that we hold to be correct in the light of present knowledge.

The Jewish view that was developing during this time seems clearly to follow the line of reasoning that begins with the election of the people of Israel by grace through God's covenant. Once the covenant was accepted, an individual Israelite was "saved" and would have a share in the world to come so long as he maintained his desire to stay in the covenant. "The intention and effort to be obedient constitute the condition for remaining in the covenant, but they do not earn it." Repentance is the way that sins are handled within the covenant, thus restoring the sinner's relationship to God. In the view of some Jewish literature, however, certain sins such as the failure to circumcise one's children or to keep the Sabbath or racial intermarriage will damn one eternally because these offenses break the covenant. Gentiles are excluded and are therefore damned.  

How then does one get into the covenant? Some literature suggests it is by birthright (i.e., being born a Jew); others argue that it is necessary to join a particular Jewish sect by an act of the will, even though one was already born an Israelite. In the latter case the matter of predestination arises as an explanation as to why some individual Israelites were chosen by God to participate in the covenant and others were rejected. By grace God chose some to salvation and rejected others. In the former case predestination and election are for the nation of Israel as a whole rather than for individuals. Thus when one is born an Israelite, that person is in the

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5 Ibid., 180.
6 Ibid., 368.
7 Ibid., 270. He refers to the Dead Sea Essene community.
covenant unless he chooses to deny all the obligations of the covenant. In such a case the person is excluded and condemned.

One other concept from this period may be helpful to describe. Judaism believed in what is called "the acts of grace of the forefathers" or "the merit of the fathers." While all the faithful are expected to fulfill their social and moral responsibilities, there is also room for exceptional acts of kindness and goodness, a hessed act. These exceptional acts of human grace serve to build a protective barrier around sinners, and such acts of grace by our ancestors may be invoked in our behalf at the final judgment. It is not clear, however, as to whether these "merits of the fathers" can be transferred to others or can become in any way the basis of salvation in the world to come.9

We will want to bear in mind the recent scholarly challenge to the traditional view that pre-Christian and first-century Judaism was primarily a religion of law-works and meritoriousness for salvation. There may also be differences between the official doctrines taught in the Jewish literature and the popular versions and abuses of those doctrines as believed and practiced by many Jews in the first century. We are now ready to look at the Christian understanding of grace, faith, and salvation in the New Testament literature.

**SAVATION IN THE TEACHING OF JESUS**

When we open our Bibles to the first page of the New Testament, we discover that the birth of Jesus is described as God's saving event: "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). This is a note of continuity with the closing vision of the prophets in the preceding section. How then did Jesus understand the application to us of his saving mission?

The Parables

We begin again with Jesus’ parables. In the story of the prodigal son the younger son can be seen as participating in the father's forgiveness and reconciliation—not on the basis of his own idea and plan of repentance, which was to return to his father and repay his debt as a day laborer, but on the basis of his accepting his father's free offer of forgiveness and sonship and swallowing his pride, which urged him to work his way into acceptance (Luke 15:11-24). There is only one way back into right relationship with God. It involves turning away from our own devices, recognizing that God's grace, restitutition, and free forgiveness and reconciliation must be simply accepted. Here faith is humble acceptance of God's salvation as it is being extended by Jesus.

In the story of the sower and the different soils, several important features of salvation are described. From Luke's comment about the seed along the path we learn that entrance into the kingdom of God and salvation are identical: "The seed is the word of God [Matt., "the word of the kingdom"]. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved" (Luke 8:11-12). God's kingdom has dawned in history in the ministry of Jesus, the Messiah-Savior. This calls for decision involving faith as repentance and acceptance of the inbreaking rule of God in Jesus' life and message. It is also a call to faith as faithfulness and loyalty: "Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe [Heb. are firm, or steadfast] for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away" (Luke 8:13; cf. v. 15). The appeal to faith as repentance emphasizes that individual response is crucial to entrance into the kingdom. One cannot assume that birthright, even Israelite, is enough to assure admittance into the kingdom.

In the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt. 18:23-35) the gracious forgiveness of our sins is depicted by the king's free cancellation of an unpayable debt. All the recipients must do is accept the gift and allow it to transform him into a forgiving person. Tragically, however, the man in the story did not allow himself to be changed, and he forfeited the gift of the king's unbelievable grace (vv. 32-35).

So crucial to acceptance before God is the kind of response one gives to the messianic King and his kingdom message, that refusal to respond excludes one from the benefits of the covenants made with Israel. This is the clear import of the parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:16-24). The banquet (the kingdom of God) is "now ready" (v. 17), but those originally invited refused to respond and enter (the pious of Israel); therefore, the invitation went to the outcasts of the society (v. 21, poor, maimed, blind, lame) who are religiously the nonrighteous, and they enter in. This signals a change in the way God relates to the covenant election. In order to participate now in the blessings of forgiveness provided by the covenant, one must respond in obedient faith to the messianic King and enter into his kingdom.

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The Prayers of Jesus

As we turn to the prayers of Jesus in order to gain further help on his understanding of salvation applied, we find two matters that are worthy of mention. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Forgive us our debts [or, trespasses], as we also have forgiven our debtors [or, those who trespass against us]" (Matt. 6:12). Again, forgiveness of others is an expression of love, which appears in the teaching of Jesus as essential to genuine faith (cf. Matt. 18:23–35). In the longer prayer of Jesus he prayed, "For I gave them the words you gave me, and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me... Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me... My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message" (John 17:8, 11, 20). Jesus gives eternal life to all whom the Father has given him, and this life involves knowing intimately the Father and the Son (vv. 2–3). The condition for entrance into this life and fellowship is described as assent to the truth of the words of Jesus or of his witnesses that he came forth from God. John affirms that salvation is connected with the word of Jesus and the truth about his person. He makes more explicit what is implicit in the synoptic Gospels’ presentation of response to the messianic King and the word of the kingdom that he proclaimed.

The Sermons and Conversations of Jesus

"Early in Jesus' sermons and conversations he announced that the kingdom of God was immanent in his life and ministry and he called for repentance and belief in this good news: 'The time has come... The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news'" (Mark 1:15). "Repent" (metanoeō) means to turn from our own ways to God's ways, to turn from false deities to the one true and living God, from other words to the Word of God, from disobedience to God's commands to obedience, from incredibility and uncommitment to the good news about God's kingdom to full confidence in Jesus as God's messianic servant of that very promised kingdom ("believe in the good news") (cf. Luke 5:32). "The fundamental idea in the biblical conception of repentance is that of turning or returning to one's due obedience, as of rebels returning to serve their lawful king, or of a faithless wife coming back to her husband." 11 Later the New Testament makes explicit what is implicit in Jesus' teaching that

repentance and faith are a gift of God's grace, yet a gift that can be refused (cf. Acts 5:31; Eph. 2:8–9; Heb. 3:12–14, 18–19).

Jesus is all-important to a right relationship with God, for he said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt. 16:24–26). Here we see faith as loyalty and identification with Jesus in his sufferings and in his death on the cross. Faith is discipleship (cf. Luke 14:25–33). What is important in any individual life is not its perfection, but its orientation and direction. Faith is the setting of the heart totally in the path of Christ. It is recognizing his lordship over our life. Faith is continual commitment to letting Christ have his way totally in our experiences.

That faith is characterized also by simplicity, sincerity, and spontaneity is seen by Jesus' reference to the little children: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3–4). There is something not only simple and open about children but also a spirit refreshingly free from prejudice. "True simplicity implies love and trust—it does not expect to be derided and rejected, any more than it expects to be admired and praised. It simply hopes to be accepted on its own terms." 

Jesus said of Zacchaeus, "Salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham" (Luke 19:9). Here Zacchaeus' faith was expressed when he not only sought to see Jesus, but when he "welcomed him gladly" into his home (vv. 3, 6). His repentance and faith also evidenced itself in his declaration to restore fourfold anything he dishonestly stole from his tax creditors and to sell and to give to the poor half of his wealth (v. 8). "Salvation in the story of Zacchaeus included the new social relationships that grace made possible in the life of the repentant, forgiven Zacchaeus. The salvation of Jesus' dawning kingdom is corporate and social as well as personal and individual." Zacchaeus had become a true child of Abraham because of his reception of Jesus.

After the resurrection, Jesus instructed his disciples to go into all

14The Mishna connects running water with the end times and its emphasis on purity (Yomah, 8:9).
salvation. He is the One who is absolutely sovereign in his grace. No human merit or achievement counts in the least before God in terms of our acceptance before him. It is perhaps not claiming too much to say that everywhere in the Gospel of John it is clear that believing in Jesus, in the sense of placing firm reliance on or trust in him as the Messiah and Savior who comes from God, is the way that we enter into God’s saving benefit and eternal life (1:12; 4:41-42; 5:24; 6:35, 40; 8:24).

To sum up the teaching of Jesus briefly on the application of salvation, we may note the following: His message is that the kingdom of God has been inaugurated in his own life and ministry. The basis of salvation and forgiveness is no longer in the acceptance of the Mosaic covenant and obedience to its precepts. Now response to the messianic King and his message is absolutely crucial. This response is the exercise of faith, understood as humble submission to and acceptance of God’s gift of grace. As a transforming faith it has social dimensions, creating loving acts in our lives such as the forgiveness of others, restitution for former wrongs done, and acts of caring compassion. It is faith as faithfulness and loyal identification with Jesus in his sufferings of death and as repentance from every form of idolatrous belief and trust, including our own good works, and a turning to the God who is now redeeming his people from their sins. This salvation is nowhere the result of human striving, but it is totally accomplished by the free sovereign grace of God alone and is offered not only to Israel, but to the whole world to freely accept or refuse.

Predestination and election references, though infrequent, seem to stress God’s freedom in ordering his economy of salvation in terms of pure grace rather than lineage, religious affiliation or rites, or any other form of “chosenness.”

**SAVATION IN THE TEACHING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH**

A key question arises at the outset as we examine the New Testament church period. Has the church remained faithful to the teaching and emphasis of Jesus concerning salvation? Is there development, and if so does it emerge in continuity with the teaching of Jesus? Our approach as in previous chapters is to look first at the early sermons in Acts, then at various liturgical materials, and finally at the early and later epistles.

The Sermons in Acts—Repentance, Faith, and Baptism

In Acts the Pentecost sermon of Peter provoked this response: “Brothers, what shall we do?” (2:37). To this Peter replied, “Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38). Peter both reaffirmed Jesus’ call to repentance with respect to the messianic King as the precondition to the forgiveness of sins and limited the gift of the promised Holy Spirit to this faith-repentance (cf. John 7:37–39). The call to be baptized should also be linked to Jesus’ commission statements in the Gospels (cf. Matt. 28:19–20; Mark 16:15–16) as the God-ordained way to exercise faith in Jesus and to identify with him. “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (2:41). Again, after the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, Peter said, “By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see” (3:16).

Again, Luke reports that, when Philip preached Jesus to the Samaritans, “they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, and they were baptized, both men and women” (8:12). If we combine these incidents with others like that of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–40), a pattern seems to emerge. The preaching about Jesus including the significance of his death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins was followed by an individual response of repentance and faith most often expressed in water baptism (cf. 10:36–48).

At the conclusion to his sermon in the synagogue at Antioch, Paul declared, “Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses” (13:38–39). We are impressed here to find Paul reaffirming also that forgiveness of sin is proclaimed through Jesus Christ but not on the premise of the fulfillment of the ethical demands of the law. The one condition is faith. Furthermore he uses the expression “justified” (dikaiō, translated “freed” in the RSV) as the result of the exercise of one’s faith and apparently closely related to “forgiveness” in the previous verse. We hold that the correct sense of the verb “justify” is “to save.” This will be clarified in the next section. In any event, the characteristic terms of Paul—“forgiveness of sins,” “justification,” and “faith”—all resound
throughout his sermons in Acts and his epistles as he expounds the

There are several texts in Acts that refer to election-predestination.
Notably among these is the passage that reads, “When the Gentiles
heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord, and all
were appointed for eternal life believed” (13:48). On first sight
this seems to teach that God had appointed certain individuals in the
city of Antioch to eternal life prior to their belief. On closer
examination, however, the context stresses the human response to
God’s grace-gift: “Since you [Jews] reject it [the gospel] and do not
consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the
Gentiles” (13:46). While the Jews were disposed to reject the
message and thus judged themselves unworthy in God’s sight to
receive eternal life, those Gentiles who were “dispensed” (not
ordained) to eternal life received the message by faith and were
saved. Why they were so disposed or why the Jews at Antioch were
not so disposed is not mentioned by the author.

The Liturgical Materials

It is surprising that in the very early liturgical materials of hymns,
creeds, baptismal formulas, etc., there is very little about the
conditions necessary for salvation. Of course, they are by their very
nature confessions of faith. Baptism was viewed as a “putting on of
Christ,” by which the individual expressed her faith and was at the
same moment incorporated into the community of the children of
God, where no social distinctions counted (Gal. 3:27–28; Col. 2:12).
In one early hymn in 1 Timothy we do find a brief mention about
faith in the Messiah: “...was preached among the nations, was
believed on in the world, was taken up in glory” (3:16). In one of
these statements is what may be the earliest prayer of Christians: “If
anyone does not love the Lord—a curse be on him. Come, O Lord!”
(1 Cor. 16:22). Here the loyalty of faith in Jesus Christ is appropriately
described as personal love toward him.

The Early Epistles—Grace and Faith

JAMES

Among the earliest epistles is that of James, who calls for an
attitude of faith. “Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can
save you” (1:21). But James insists that genuine faith must be in
obedience to specific divine commands (2:1) and evident in loving
acts toward others (2:15–16, 25). So he concludes: “What good is it,
my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such
faith save him?” (2:14). James is not opposed to faith alone being the
only adequate response to God, since he later affirms that Abraham
was justified by his faith (v. 23). Rather, he insists, as Jesus did
repeatedly, that faith as mere assent to truth is not adequate to justify
(or “save”) [v. 14]; vv. 19, 21, 24–25]. To this Paul also would not
object (Gal. 5:6).

ROMANS

We must now focus on Paul’s understanding of the application of
salvation. The epistle of Romans probably more than any other has
long been considered the crucial Christian statement on salvation.
The reader should be aware that there has been considerable current
discussion on Paul’s central doctrinal emphasis, as well as on the
meaning of righteousness and justification in his writings. In the first
chapter he strikes the chord of his theme throughout the letter: “I am
not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the
salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the
Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a
righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, “The
righteous will live by faith” (Rom. 1:16–17). There is no question
that for Paul faith is the necessary condition for participation in God’s
saving event effected through Jesus’ death and resurrection (cf. 3:22,
25–26, 31; 4:1–25; 5:1; 10:9–10). The chief question is, What does
Paul mean by the “righteousness of God” and “justification”?

From the Old Testament background we have already seen that the
term “the righteousness of God” is a salvation term as Snith
correctly concluded over forty years ago. Therefore, God’s
righteousness, which is proclaimed in the gospel, is not his own righteous
character, or the standard by which he measures human performance,
but it is his own covenant faithfulness and trustworthiness whereby
he fulfills his promise to Abraham to bring salvation to all people
(Gen. 12:3; 3:7–8). God’s righteousness refers to God’s saving
activity in Christ by which he fulfills his covenant promises, effects
the satisfaction of his own holiness in the death and resurrection of
Jesus for our sins (cf. 3:25–26), and extends to us guilty sinners a free,
full pardon and restoration to himself (justification). We

15 Norman H. Snaith, The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament (London:
Epworth, 1944), 92. More recently also Sam K. Williams, “The ‘Righteousness
16 See Alan F. Johnson, Romans (Chicago: Moody, 1984, rev. ed.), 1:29
that inaugurate the new transformed life of the believer by placing
the sinner into a wholly new relationship to God—a relationship of
forgiveness, reconciliation, and blessedness—and union with a
people who are likewise saved. Justification for Paul is salvation in its
initial stage. In holding this view it is also affirmed that the basis of
such a saving experience is the pure grace of God and it has no
relationship to law, works, or any other form of merit or achievement

Furthermore, we hold that when God justifies sinners, no righte-
ousness is imparted, infused, or imputed to them—that is, if
righteousness is construed to be primarily a moral quality either of
divine or human origin. In saving us God does not first make us
righteous or even acquit us because of the imputed merits of Christ.
Rather, he totally forgives us and through Christ's work on our behalf
accepts us fully into his fellowship even though we are guilty sinners.

Paul's emphasis on God's grace is everywhere evident (cf. 1:5;
3:24; 4:4, 16; 5:2, 15, 20; 6:1, 14) but is nowhere more clearly stated
than in 1:5–6: "So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen
by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were,
grace would no longer be grace." Grace is a pure gift. It is naturally
incompatible with merit or achievement. God chooses to give
salvation. Those who respond by faith to God's choice become a part
of the "election according to grace." That justification and salvation
are virtually synonymous in the apostle's mind is seen from another
context where he delineates the conditions for salvation: "That if you
confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart
that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." For it is with
your heart that you believe, are justified, and it is with your mouth
that you confess and are saved" (10:9–10). What the heart believes
soon finds expression on the lips. Note also the parallelism between
"...and are justified" and "...and are saved." Much needless debate
and speculation in the history of the church could have been avoided
if this basic biblical equivalence (Old and New Testaments) between
justification and salvation had been understood.

This salvation involves not only forgiveness and reconciliation
with God but also deliverance (redemption) from sin's power over
our lives: "For we know that our old [sinful] self was crucified with
him so that the body of sin [the body used as an instrument for sin]
might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to
sin...You have been set free from sin [and] have become slaves to
righteousness" (6:6, 18; cf. Gal. 5:1, 13). Charles Wesley has
magnificently captured this part of our salvation in the words of the
great hymn "And Can It Be That I Should Gain?"

Further, the result of faith is the endowment of the Holy Spirit as a
central part of our salvation. The Spirit brings life and moral holiness
into our salvation journey (8:1–16; Gal. 5:16–26; cf. chapter 7). While
the experience of salvation is also the experience of being "in Christ"
in a deeply personal and individual sense, it is also the corporate
experience of being spiritually united to every other Christian in the
world: "So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each
member belongs to all the others" (Rom. 12:5; cf. 2 Cor. 6:17; Gal.
1:22). So although we are saved individually and personally, we are
never saved alone. Our salvation is inseparably bound up with the
salvation of the whole people of God. There is a threefold experience
of salvation, and Paul expresses this throughout his writings: salvation
as past in our justification; salvation as present in the sanctifying
power of the Spirit in our lives; and salvation as future expectation of
the redemption of the body (i.e., resurrection) and participation in the
coming manifestation of the kingdom of God (8:18–25).

PAUL AND ELECTION-PREDESTINATION

Paul also makes some contribution to the question of the extent of
the saving work of Christ and the extent of its application. This theme
is linked to the matter of election and predestination. In Corinthians
he states, "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced
that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that
those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who
died for them and was raised again" (2 Cor. 5:14–15). This seems to
indicate that the death of Christ was for every person because
everyone had died in sin. Otherwise the next statement does not
make good sense—"...that those who live..." which refers to the
application of Christ's death to some but not all. Those who "live"
must be the believers. Therefore those who died (v. 14) cannot be
believers who died with Christ in his death. To limit the "all" to a
number of elect individuals seems quite unwarranted.

On the other hand does God elect some and not others to
participate in the universal provision made in Christ's death? Two
passages in Romans bear heavily in the discussion over this question.
We can but touch briefly on them. The first is 8:29–30: "For those
whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the
likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” At first glance this looks like a chain that begins with “foreknew” and ends with “glorification,” with the links of predestination, calling, and justification in between. If you are connected at the first link (foreknown), everything else follows in course. Furthermore, God is the author and initiator of each link. The great debate here centers on one important feature of the text: whether “foreknow” (proginosko) means to predetermine individuals (cf. 1 Peter 1:2, 20), to know beforehand, or to predetermine a people. Whole systems of theology root back to how we answer this question.17 Without trying to cut the Gordian knot, we should see that the primary emphasis in the context is on the certainty of God’s plan for his redeemed people despite their present adversities (Rom. 8:18–27).

The other passage in Romans that addresses the election-predestination subject is chapters 9–11. Paul’s great burden here is to explain why the Jews did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. God has worked in history through the process of selection (election) to accomplish his purposes (9:6). His ways are always based on his own free decisions. He has chosen to be merciful to those whom he has called on the principle of grace apart from all merit. Again the debate hinges on one crucial question: Does Paul refer to individuals who are elect to salvation, or does he refer to nations or groups such as the remnant? Again, we hold that Paul’s purpose is to emphasize God’s freedom to choose who will and who will not be the recipients of his grace. According to Paul, God chooses to apply his salvation to those who through faith in his Son form the “election according to grace” (11:5–6). This elect people stands in saving relationship to God on the basis, not of its lineage, circumcision, or moral achievements, but wholly on the basis of God’s gift of salvation in the Messiah—Redeemer. While this does not solve the problem created by the election references, it puts the emphasis where the text puts it—on salvation by God’s grace alone—and ought to instruct us in any further views we take on the teaching.

FAITH, WORKS, AND SALVATION

While Paul denies that any good works contribute to our justification before God, he does see (as did Jesus and other New Testament writers) a connection between justifying faith and the evidence of loving acts: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor

17 Ibid., II, 37–38, especially footnote 24.
Jesus Christ (cf. Luke 9:35; 23:35), when he says, "For he chose us in him" (v. 4). Whichever view is held, it is surely right to insist that the primary purpose of election is to insure that salvation is totally from God, arising out of his grace alone and not because of human works or merit (cf. 2 Tim. 2:10). On the other hand, the Bible nowhere underestimates the choice we make to accept or to refuse this gift offer. No view of election that excludes human responsibility or fails to stress God's absolute sovereignty in providing salvation and in establishing the terms for applying his grace gift is acceptable.

In Hebrews we discover that repentence as a response to the saving work of Christ does not occur frequently (6:1, 4), but faith as faithfulness and obedience as in the Old Testament is prominent (3:6, 12-14, 18; 4:1-3, 6; esp. 6:12; 10:22-23). Thus in chapter 11 there appears the Bible's longest and fullest description of faith as steadfastness and endurance. "Faith" is the "being sure [hypostasis, substance, foundation] of what we hope for and [being] certain of what we do not see" (11:1). In this epistle faith does not have the meaning of believing into Christ as in the Pauline letters (but cf. 4:2). In Hebrews salvation is an entering into the great eschatological sabbath-rest promised in the creation-sabbath and later in the Psalms and realized in the finished work of Christ (4:8-11). It is called an "eternal salvation" (5:9), one that saves completely and forever (7:25; 10:14). While election and predestination curiously do not seem to play a part in the salvation language of Hebrews, the question of apostasy looms large and raises the question of whether unbelief and disobedience which lead to disloyalty to Christ can forfeit a salvation once received (cf. 2:1-3; 6:1-8; 10:26-31, 35-39).

In the Petrine and Johannine epistles salvation is again firmly linked to faith as a dynamic entrusting of oneself to Jesus Christ as the Son of God (1 Peter 1:9, 1 John 5:5, 13). Both writers incorporate this language of "new birth" to describe the salvation experience (1 Peter 1:3, 23, 2:2, 2:2; 2 John 2:29, 3:9, 4:7, 5:4, 18). In Peter salvation is both a present experience of forgiveness of sins (2:4) and deliverance from darkness into Christ's light (2:9), but it is also the future realization of the kingdom (1:1-5, 9, 5:10). Salvation is knowledge of God and fellowship with him and his Son (1 John 1:3-7). Salvation is cleansing from sin's effects and deliverance from its power in our lives (1 Peter 2:1-2, 24; 2 Peter 2:20-22, 1 John 3:5-9; Jude 4); it is the reproduction of authentic love for others (1 Peter 2:22; 2 Peter 1:8, 1 John 2:10; 3:10, 4:7, 20). Peter has one important reference to election and predestination that is significant to the interpretive and theological problem mentioned earlier (1 Peter 1:2). If we follow the view that this refers primarily to the church as chosen and foreknown, sanctified (separated for the service of God) for obedience and sprinkling by his blood (when a decision was made and the blood appropriated), then there is strong evidence for a view of salvation as corporate transformation.

Finally, what does the Book of Revelation indicate about the application of salvation? Repentance is used chiefly of Christians as a term describing essential renewal in their congregations (more of a corporate term than individual) (2:5, 5, 21-22; 3:3, 19). Faith is almost exclusively faithfulness or loyalty to Christ and his word rather than entrustment (1:8, 10, 13, 14). Grace as a term is not used in the book, but it seems everywhere assumed in the imagery used (cf. 1:6, 22:14, 17). The idea of faith as a conquering of the great enemy Satan, seems prominent (e.g., 1:7, 11, 17; 12:21, 27). Salvation is making us to become a kingdom of priests (1:5-6); it is also the corporate victory of God's people over their enemies (12:10, and the future wholeness of the kingdom of God (chapters 21-22).

In conclusion, the New Testament church's understanding of the application of salvation is entirely compatible with Jesus' teaching in the Gospels. The initiative in salvation is everywhere ascribed to God alone, who graciously, apart from any form of human merit or achievement, enters the invitation to all persons to receive his marvelous gift of forgiveness, transformed life, and eternal hope. While the gift may be refused, faith is a required condition for experiencing this great divine salvation.

Faith has a rich variety of expressions such as reception, obedience, loyalty, trust, endurance, repentance, and conquering. Faith is invariably associated with loving acts in the way that the spirit of life is wed to the physical body in James' analogy. Salvation is primarily deliverance from the past condemnation of sin, from its power over the life now, and to the promised future fulfillment of the kingdom of God. There is also a strong social or corporate dimension to salvation. We will discuss that in a following chapter on the church.

QUESTIONS

1. How would you explain the Bible's teaching (in both the Old Testament and the New) about the relationship between faith and works in our relationship to God?

2. Can you summarize Jesus' teaching about faith and grace? Paul's?

3. Which view of election-predestination do you hold? What Scripture passages lend support to your view?

4. Does regeneration (the new birth) precede or follow saving faith in Jesus Christ? What biblical passages would you use?

5. What is Paul's teaching on justification?