

What Is Salvation?

Millions of professing Christians believe they are “saved.” But from what are they saved? How and when does salvation take place? Let’s cut through the confusion and understand the truth.

by Noel Hornor

What is salvation? Why do we need it? How do we receive it, and when? If salvation results in everlasting life—as Christianity teaches—what will those who are saved *do* for all eternity? What is the penalty for those who fail to achieve salvation?

If Christians rely on the Bible for their knowledge of these matters, why do we find so many differing beliefs?

The publishers of *The Good News* believe the Bible is the revealed Word of God. In this article we see what the Bible teaches about salvation. As we do this, we discover that some popular views aren’t supported in the Scriptures. You should read for yourself what God’s Word teaches on this subject. It is much too important to simply accept what you’ve been told. You need to prove it from the Bible—because *your happiness and your eternal life are at stake*.

Salvation simply means the act of saving. When used in a religious sense, to save means to rescue someone from the eternal consequences of sin. Everyone needs salvation because, as the Bible tells us, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” and the wages of sin is death (Romans 3:23; 6:23).

How sin began

Sin entered the world with the first man. When God created Adam, He placed him in the Garden of Eden. The garden also included two special trees. The Bible account calls one of them the tree of life and the other the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:8-9).

The tree of life represented life. If Adam made the right choice, if he chose to eat of the fruit of this tree, he would eventually inherit eternal life. But, if he chose the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would come under a sentence of death (Genesis 2:17).

Why? Something called “the tree of life” obviously had to be good. But what was so bad about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?

God explained to Adam that He alone knew what was best for man. Partaking of the tree of life represented obedience to God, doing what He says is good. Godly obedience would eventually gain for Adam the fruit of eternal life (see also Proverbs 11:30).

On the other hand, if Adam disobeyed, as represented by his eating of the other tree, his disobedience would amount to deciding right

from wrong for *himself*. This would ultimately result in disaster because human beings, beginning with Adam, have lacked the innate ability to know what is good and what is evil.

As Proverbs 14:12 tells us: “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” Human beings are not always able, without God’s instruction, to discern what is God’s will and what is sin (the opposite of God’s will).

The history of the human race illustrates that people have failed miserably at rightly discerning between good and bad. We have some ability to distinguish and choose what will benefit us, but we demonstrate serious deficiencies in knowing right from wrong in many crucial areas. This is why the history of humanity is scarred with so much pain. *Sin* is the cause of suffering. When people reason for themselves what is right, without God’s revelation, the result is a life plagued by the miseries that result from sin.

Adam, responding to Eve’s persuasion, chose to eat from the tree that leads to death (Genesis 3:6). His rebellion against God was sin—and all humanity from that time has repeated Adam’s and Eve’s error. “. . . Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned . . .” (Romans 5:12).

Human beings do not usually die immediately after they sin, but they do come under a *death sentence* at that time. The Bible speaks of two kinds of death—the natural death that everyone experiences (Hebrews 9:27) and “the second death” (Revelation 21:8). The second death, which is permanent cessation of life without possibility of resurrection, is the ultimate penalty for sin (see “The Penalty for Unrepentant Sinners,” page 24). It is this death sentence from which we need God to save us.

God wants to save all of humanity. He wants every person to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). God is “not willing that *any* should perish but that *all* should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9, emphasis added throughout).

The Bible explains God’s plan for saving mankind. As the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: “. . . From childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to *instruct you for salvation* through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15, New Revised Standard Version). (If you have not proved for

yourself that the Bible is God’s Word, please request our free booklet *Is the Bible True?*)

How can we receive eternal life?

Eternal life is God’s gift to us. He tells us specifically how we can receive it. “. . . The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:12). Jesus Himself said: “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved” (John 10:9).

Once we sin and place ourselves under the penalty of death, we can do nothing that will ever free us from the sentence of death. Rather we must receive forgiveness and redemption through Jesus Christ (Romans 3:24).

Redemption means *to free or buy back someone or something by paying a price*. It is akin to paying a ransom for someone who has been kidnapped. To redeem humanity, the price that was paid for the sins of mankind had to be greater than *the total value of all human life*. Because He was the Son of God who never sinned as well as the very Creator of mankind (Hebrews 4:15; Ephesians 3:9), Christ’s life was of sufficient value to purchase everyone and pay the price for all sins (compare Hebrews 2:9-10).

Sin maintains a claim over us until God redeems us through Jesus’ sacrifice. “We have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:14). Jesus died an excruciatingly painful death through crucifixion, shedding His blood for us. This is why the Father sent Him into the world: “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

What must we do?

To have Jesus Christ as your Savior you must acknowledge that you have sinned, that your sins have placed you under a sentence of death and that you need forgiveness through Christ’s sacrifice. You must then accept Jesus as your personal Savior, recognizing that He died for you.

Regrettably, many people stop right there and think that’s all there is to it. They fail to recognize the crucial necessity of *personal repentance*.

In recognition of Christ’s sacrifice and a desire to change our lives to please God, each of us must forsake the sinful ways that

brought the death penalty upon us and made Jesus' sacrifice necessary in the first place. We cannot continue to live as we lived before. We must undergo a life-transforming change of heart and direction, a process the Bible calls *repentance*.

Peter said, "*Repent*, and let every one of you *be baptized* in the name of Jesus Christ for the *remission* of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). *Remission* means *release*—that is, release from guilt for your sins. When you are baptized, God forgives your past sins and clears your record.

Baptism pictures the washing away of sins and signifies our faith in the sacrifice of Christ as payment for them. After our baptism, Christ's ministers are to place their hands on us and pray for the gift of God's Spirit for us. It is at this point that God gives His Spirit to a repentant, baptized person (see Acts 8:18).

The Bible says that, through the Holy Spirit, God *seals* us, His Spirit serving as a *guarantee* of or *down payment* on our salvation (2 Corinthians 1:22). The reason for this guarantee is to assure us *we will receive eternal life*. In other words, our sealing with the Holy Spirit is the proof we belong to God and Christ. "Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His" (Romans 8:9), and "as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God" (verse 14).

A life of obedience

After baptism and our receiving of God's Spirit, we are *justified*—that is, we become

righteous in God's sight. God counts none of our past sins against us (Romans 3:25). If we stumble and sin after baptism, we must ask God's forgiveness so that our state of forgiveness is not lost by our return to our old sinful way of life (1 John 2:1-6). When we are justified, God deals with us as though we had never sinned; the death penalty has no hold on us.

John made it plain that after baptism Christians at times will still stumble and sin. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9). John wrote these words after several decades as a Christian and an apostle of Christ, and he included himself among those who still fell prey to sin.

The difference in the life of a Christian after repentance and baptism is that he no longer practices unrighteousness as a way of life. "In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother" (1 John 3:10).

A Christian practices righteousness by *obeying God's commandments* (compare Psalm 119:172). This behavior is consistent with Jesus' words to a young man who approached Him with a question: "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" Jesus responded, ". . . If you want to enter into life, *keep the commandments*" (Matthew 19:16-17).

When the man persisted in questioning

Christ as to which commandments he must keep, Jesus responded by reciting several of the Ten Commandments, which summarize God's spiritual law. Repentance involves a commitment to live your life in obedience to that law.

Shortly before He died, Jesus again affirmed that Christians must obey the Commandments: "He who has My commandments and *keeps* them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him" (John 14:21).

It is important to remember that our obedience to God's law *does not* save us. It is *God* who saves us through Christ. The law cannot save us, but our striving to obey it is a *condition* of our salvation. If we ultimately *refuse* to obey God, He will not ultimately save us, as we will see shortly.

God's law is our guide to how we should live if we are to please Him. It is the law of love (Romans 13:10), reflecting God's nature, which *is* love (1 John 4:8, 16).

"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus," Paul wrote (Philippians 2:5). One who lives as Christ lived and whose mind is being transformed to be more like His is one who truly "has the Son" (1 John 5:12). It is such people who are being saved.

When is a Christian saved?

Is a Christian saved immediately upon baptism? Once you are baptized, have accepted Christ as your Savior and have committed your life to obeying God, are you saved? Is your salvation complete?

The Penalty for Unrepentant Sinners

Do sinners go to hell? God told Adam that if he disobeyed he would come under a penalty of *death*—not eternal life in another state or place. Yet many people through the ages have believed that the penalty for unrepentant sinners is to suffer forever in the fires of hell.

The 18th-century Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards struck fear into the hearts of many who heard his sermons in which he raged against sin and threatened sinners with an eternity spent in an ever-burning hellfire. "The pit is prepared. The fire is made ready. The furnace is now hot, ready to receive them. The flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is whet, and held over them, and the pit has opened her mouth under them . . . O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in."

Many religious people now reject this view of hell. Polls show that comparatively few believe that God will send sinners to a place of eternal fiery torment as punishment for their sins.

Some still believe in hell, but, when questioned about its nature, they fall back on concepts such as "separation from God" or "an anguished state of existence." Most who believe in this updated version of hell envision unrepentant sinners spending eternity there, though apparently few people believe they will go there themselves. One poll reported that only 4 percent of Americans thought they would go to hell.

In reality, the Bible does not teach the existence of any kind of eternally continuing torment in hell as the penalty for sin. (For a full explanation and proof from the Scriptures, request the free booklet *Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?*)

The belief that sinners will be conscious in death and confined to hell for eternity is an

outgrowth of another erroneous belief—that men possess an immortal soul. Belief in the immortality of the soul was imported into Christianity from Greek thought and is often attributed to the influence of Plato. "Plato . . . believed . . . that the soul was a fallen divinity, out of its element, imprisoned in the body" (Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, 1993, p. 35).

In essence, if people believe that man has an immortal soul, they believe that man *already* possesses eternal life. The concept of hell as a place of eternal torment developed as an explanation of where supposedly immortal souls of evil people will spend eternity.

The Bible does not teach that human beings have immortal souls. In Genesis 2:7 we find that, when God created Adam, he *became* a "living soul" (King James Version). In Genesis 9:12 the same two Hebrew words are translated "living creature" and refer not to human beings, but to every sort of animal distinct from man.

According to the Bible, the soul is what the person *is*; it is not something he *has*. Ezekiel 18 tells us plainly that "the soul who sins *shall die*" (verses 4, 20)—not that the soul will live forever in some other place or state of consciousness.

The New Testament confirms the Old Testament teaching (see Matthew 10:28). In a familiar passage, Paul explains that "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). He clearly contrasts the two. Those who please God receive salvation—eternal life. Unrepentant sinners, in contrast, do not live forever while enduring torment in hell; instead their fate is *annihilation*—eternal, permanent death from which there will be no resurrection.

For further proof on this subject, write for our free booklet *Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?*

According to the Bible, repentance and baptism mark the *beginning of the salvation process*, the time of a Christian's commitment to continue to serve God. The completion of our salvation, as long as we remain in this physical life, is *yet in the future*. As Jesus said, "He who endures to the end shall be saved" (Matthew 24:13).

Paul wrote, "... Having now been justified by His blood, *we shall be saved* from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, *we shall be saved* by His life" (Romans 5:9-10). Notice that Paul wrote in the future tense: *We will be saved*. Our salvation is not complete.

We must endure faithfully to the end of our lives. Or, if we remain alive until Christ returns to earth, we must endure until the time of His coming. If a Christian at some time during his life, after committing to serve God, turns away and renounces Jesus and God's way in word or action, he will *lose* his salvation—unless he repents of his error.

Jesus described such a situation. "... If that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites" (Matthew 24:48-51).

"Carousing with drunkards" can describe the literal behavior of an errant Christian, or it can be a metaphor for evil habits in general. *Drunkenness* is sometimes used in the Bible to symbolize those who are immersed in the sinful attitudes and practices of the world.

Paul made it plain that a Christian *can* fall away and even lose salvation. He wrote that in his own life he found it necessary to practice firm self-discipline, guarding against the encroachment of sin, "lest, when I have

preached to others, *I myself should become disqualified*" (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Once we commit our lives to obeying God, the process of being saved has begun in us—although it is still possible for us to fall away (Luke 8:13). Paul said we will be saved if we continue to the end while *holding fast* the truth preached to us (1 Corinthians 15:2). Our salvation is assured if we do. But our salvation will be complete only at the second coming of Christ—when "He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation" (Hebrews 9:28).

Salvation—assuring eternal life—will then go to those in the faith who have endured and overcome. Those who are engaged in this spiritual battle need not harbor fears that they will fail to receive eternal life. As we ask God for help, He will keep us from stumbling (Jude 24). "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). Indeed, we can be "confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6).

What will salvation be like?

When Christ returns from heaven and our salvation becomes an eternal reality, what will we be like? What will be the form and appearance of those who receive eternal life? Does the Bible tell us?

Indeed it does! "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called *children of God!* . . . Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, *we shall be like Him*; for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:1-2).

This may sound incredible, but when our salvation is complete we will have *the same glorious appearance* as Jesus Christ (see Revelation 1:13-16). Like Him, we will be glorified children of God—though

obviously He will forever be greater.

In recent years—with the development of gene therapy, organ transplants and artificial intelligence—some scientists have come to believe that science will someday provide man a form of immortality. But this is a far-fetched hope at best. Even if such could be accomplished, that sort of existence would be inferior to God's gift of eternal life.

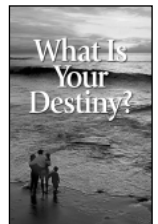
God's salvation will provide us an existence that far surpasses anything this present life offers or that scientists can conjure in their wildest hopes. After Jesus died and was resurrected, He returned in a new spirit body and appeared to His disciples. We will have a body like Christ's. God "will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body . . ." (Philippians 3:21).

Our new bodies will never tire nor grow ill. Further, we will have minds that possess the kind of supernatural abilities God has. We will possess greater power than even the angels have. We will reign with Christ (Revelation 2:26; 3:21; 5:10) and help bring peace to the world.

We can live forever in God's eternal Kingdom. This is what salvation is. This is what God offers you. God's gift of salvation truly is *good news* for all.

Recommended Reading

This article has only briefly outlined the biblical teachings on repentance, baptism, conversion and salvation. For a deeper understanding of these crucial truths and what God expects you to do, be sure to request the booklets *What Is Your Destiny?*, *The Road to Eternal Life* and *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*. All are yours free for the asking.



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