

CHAPTER 3

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UNDERSTANDING SALVATION

The converted slave trader, John Newton, wrote a song with these words, “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.” Those words have reverberated around the world as Newton’s description of God’s salvation of sinners, the likes of us, and have touched the hearts of many. And yet, there is more. If we mine the Scriptures, we will find an even richer understanding of the meaning and depth of our salvation through our Savior Jesus Christ. It is easy, however, in the day-to-day activities of life to lose our sense of wonder and excitement over all that God has done to save us. The purpose of this study is to reignite that enthusiasm for God’s gift of salvation and inspire us to give thanks daily to the God who saves.

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The Christian faith engages both the heart and the mind. Thus the goal of the C.S. Lewis Institute, “discipleship of the heart and mind,” reflects what God would have for all his people: that they would love him with all their heart, soul, strength, and mind. This calls for a bit of reflection in light of our world’s contrasting view of spirituality. Many think the way to “god” is through an emotional or vaguely spiritual experience with little or no thinking involved. Others exalt the mind so far as to reduce the ultimate goal of life to mere intellectual prowess.

The Christian worldview values both mind and heart, seeing them as integrated rather than in competition. The Bible challenges us to understand, consider, know, and meditate upon truth as well as love, feel, taste, experience, and practice godliness. In fact, it is safe to say that the goal of godly living is impossible without rigorous thinking. To the extent that we understand our salvation, we are more likely to experience it.

The purpose of this article is to stimulate thinking *and* doing, reflection *and* obedience. We will examine what God’s Word says about our salvation and consider how those truths might work themselves out in our experience.

We could center our study on many different passages from the Bible. We’ll choose Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians and his introduction to the letter. Consider the first of the two passages:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:14–19)¹

To “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” is to understand our salvation. What follows is a reflection or meditation upon this prayer. It will not be as technical or intellectually deep as what you might find in a commentary² but more in-depth than what you might find in a brief devotional.³

Note first where this prayer occurs in the book of Ephesians. It serves as a hinge between a doctrinally rich description of many things that are true about us, now that we are Christians, and a section on practical Christian living. “For this reason” in verse 14 looks back on all that has been listed about our salvation in chapters 1 and 2. But this prayer also paves the way for all the commands listed and elaborated upon in chapters 4–6.

This pattern (doctrine followed by practice) is typical of Paul’s understanding of the Christian life. Who we are, in Christ, sets the stage for how we should live. Or, to be more concise, being

precedes doing. The fact that we are already declared to be chosen to be holy (see Eph. 1:4) paves the way for us to “live a life worthy of the calling” we have (see Eph. 4:1). This reverses the order of most other worldviews that say we should do in order to be. Other religions offer this kind of pattern: if you do this and this and this, you will be fulfilled or holy or enlightened. The gospel offers this instead: because you already are declared to be holy, because of Christ’s death on your behalf, you should now *do* things and obey commands *out of response* to your new identity.

If you want to use technical terms, you could say that other religions put the imperative (commands) before the indicative. Christianity puts the indicative before the imperative. The former motivates by obligation. The latter motivates from gratitude. Other religions require you to earn salvation. Christianity offers salvation based on what has already been earned by Christ on your behalf. The difference is monumental.

Second, note how this prayer weaves together the heart and mind. Paul prays (and thus we pray for ourselves and other Christians) that both our intellect and will become engaged. We are to “know” some things as well as be “strengthened.” We are to “grasp” and “be filled.” Paul reminds us that we already are “rooted and established in love” while praying that we will experience “strength” and “power.”

This prayer (3:14–19) echoes Paul’s prayer earlier in Ephesians (1:15–21), where he asks God to “enlighten” the “eyes of your heart” so that you/we may “know” several things. This is predominately, although not entirely, an intellectual matter. But that same prayer points to an experience of “power.” This is primarily, although not exclusively, an encounter of our entire being, not just our intellect. Again, we see that to understand our salvation is to be transformed by it.

Consider the many “spiritual blessings” enumerated in the introduction to Ephesians (1:3–14):

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

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In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

In this remarkably packed statement, we see mind-boggling components of our salvation:

- We are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ.
- We were chosen before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless before him.
- God predestined us to be adopted as his sons.
- We have redemption through Christ's blood.
- We have forgiveness for our trespasses.
- God has lavished his grace upon us.
- God has revealed mysteries to us.
- We have been sealed with the Holy Spirit.

And so much more. Take some time to list other blessings you see in this passage and reflect on what they mean.

Here are just a few sample reflections to model how your meditations on these beautiful truths can transform your life.

Because I have been blessed with every *spiritual* blessing, I can count on God to take care of all my other needs. If he's solved my most urgent eternal problem, alienation from him because of my sin, then I can trust him for temporal material needs such as finances, opportunities, and medical challenges.

Because God chose me before the creation of the world, I can rest in his timelessness. Nothing surprises him. There are no accidents or mistakes in his plan. Even setbacks (major ones, like a serious health challenge, or the most annoying of minor ones, like a flat tire) have a divine imprint upon them, being used by a good God to make me more and more like his Son.

Because God's saving design for me is to be holy and blameless, I can say no to temptations that can compromise my identity as a child of God or bring shame upon the name of Christ or mar my ability to love God wholeheartedly. I can see immorality for what it truly is, an attack against God's character and a poison for my soul, even if my surrounding culture laughs about it, approves of it, or promotes it as something good.

Because God predestined me (yes, I know this is controversial; I'll leave it to you to sort this out on your own⁴), I can see that my salvation is not something I manufactured or earned. I can also extend grace and patience to those around me who don't seem to care about God. Did I come to this place of faith because I was so smart or clever? No, God woke me from my slumber ("dead in your transgressions and sins" is the way Paul describes it in Eph. 2:1). A proud Christian is the ultimate contradiction.

Because I've been adopted, I have privileges and access to God as my father. I can come to him with any and all needs. I don't have to view myself as a second-class citizen in his kingdom. I am a son. (Both men and women should explore the unique term *son* in the New Testament vocabulary. To change this word to *child* does lose something of the special privileges of sonship that the Bible teaches.)

Because I have redemption, I can rejoice that the purposes for which I was originally created can now be experienced. Redemption is a difficult concept for our democratic culture to grasp. There were economic and military realities in New Testament times that, once understood, can illumine our consideration of this term. Sometimes a slave was "redeemed" out of his economic servitude or military status as a prisoner of war so that he could experience freedom. The most graphic depiction of redemption in the Bible occurs in the story of Hosea's wife, Gomer. As an unfaithful wife, Gomer slept around with various men, bringing shame and humiliation upon her husband, children, and herself. Ultimately she was discarded by all her "lovers" and offered up as a slave on the auction block. Who should choose to purchase her after everyone else wanted nothing to do with her? Hosea, her husband! He bought her out of bondage and took her back, so she could fulfill the purposes for which she was created—to be a faithful, loving, accepted, and clean wife. To experience redemption means to be bought back and brought back to the position and purpose for which you were created. When we are redeemed in Christ, even though we once played the whore and worshiped all sorts of other gods, we can now be declared clean, part of the bride of Christ, and return home to the place where we worship the true God. This is what we were made for. This is what we were remade to do and be.

Because we have forgiveness for our trespasses, we don't need to try to balance the books with our good works. We don't need to pursue some system of having our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds. (Is that even possible? Are all deeds weighted the same? Could a good deed of giving money to the poor outweigh an outburst of anger? Could such things really appear on some balance sheet in any kind of meaningful way? Or is this entire system absurd?) Instead, I see all of my sins nailed to the cross. That's why I have forgiveness! It's not based on any deeds I have done. My forgiveness is all based on that one, unspeakably marvelous deed of Christ.

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Because my forgiveness flows out of “the riches of God’s grace,” I can rejoice that it’s limitless. In fact, God has “lavished” his grace upon me. The well of forgiveness will never run dry. There will never come a point when I confess a sin to God, and he says, “That’s it! No more! I can’t forgive that same sin again. You’ve pushed me past my limit.” No sin, no matter how severe or frequent, falls outside the realm of God’s forgiving grace.

Because God has made known to me the mystery of his will (specifically, that aspect of his will “which he purposed in Christ”), I can make sense of some things that might otherwise seem confusing. While I might not understand everything and I certainly won’t like everything I see happening in the world, I can grasp why some terrible things happen. People are in rebellion against God and have fallen for the devil’s schemes. I can understand why I have cravings for sin that I know are evil. I still am drawn to the devil’s influence because of my flesh and his dominion as “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2, KJV). But I can recognize all this because God has granted me insight to the spiritual realm. His grace, which has been lavished upon me, comes along with “all wisdom and understanding.”

Because I have been sealed with the Holy Spirit, I can rest in confidence that nothing can snatch me out of God’s hand. I can look within and find God’s power at work in my life. This gives me hope, because the Holy Spirit is a down payment and a guarantee of the ultimate total redemption I will experience when I get to heaven. At this point in time, I have but a taste of my ultimate glorification. Every time I experience victory over a sin that tempts me or feel overwhelmed with gratitude for God’s blessings or rejoice in praise for who God is, it’s like an appetizer of a meal I will one day enjoy in Christ’s presence where there will be no temptation or sin or sorrow. Hope for the future flows from the Holy Spirit’s work in my life today.

Because Paul describes so many of these blessings with the terms *in Christ* or *with Christ*, I can see all of my life through that lens. The only reason I have a right standing before God or any blessing, for that matter, is because of Christ and his atoning death for me. I can take credit for none of it. I can look at every blessing in my life, from the most dire (deliverance from God's wrath) to the most mundane (daily bread) and respond with "Thanks be to God."

In conclusion, let us reflect on the multifaceted dimensions of our salvation. It obviously centers upon our right standing before a holy, righteous God. Our salvation reflects both his holiness and his love, because he saved us while we were still sinners. Our salvation also penetrates within us and changes us from the inside out. It also overflows into our relationships with others. And it connects us to our temporal world in redemptive ways as well as to the eternal realities where God is glorified endlessly. Understanding our salvation is of utmost importance in the here and now and will continue with increasing joy forever and ever.

NOTES

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*, 1984.

²Reading a commentary on this and other passages is highly recommended as part of the process of "discipleship of heart and mind." Two helpful resources are Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* in The Pillar New Testament Commentary series; and John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* in The Bible Speaks Today series.

³One very helpful devotional to give you a good overview of the entire Bible is D.A. Carson, *For the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998).

⁴A helpful resource might be J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).