

HOW HAS CHRIST ACHIEVED OUR SALVATION?

Introduction

The gift of salvation is the greatest gift any Christian can ever receive. God, in His abundant mercy and grace, bestows upon His creation many gifts, such as stability, time and free will, but specifically, for His elect, He bestows upon them the gift of salvation from His wrath as a just God. For many, however, this great gift is simply given after saying a quick prayer or raising one's hand. How salvation has actually been achieved, and therefore what it means for us as Christians, is, often, not fully understood, either by choice or complacency. This should not be so. The greatest gift, of eternal peace with God, is one which ought to be plumbed to the fullest for the riches it holds, yet too often we settle for surface level superficiality rather than gazing at the full wonder of what we have been given. Let us heed the warning of the author of Hebrews, who exhorts us to 'pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.'¹

Methodology

In this theological paper, I will present the way in which Christ has achieved salvation, firstly by noting our necessity for salvation. This will bring about a discussion of God's plan for salvation ranging from Genesis three to Genesis fifteen. Secondly, this paper will note that Christ is the new Israel and the true King, and arguing why these two aspects are important. Thirdly, but looking at Romans three and five, this paper will consider how Christ is the new head and second Adam. Fourth, an explanation of how Christ's substitutionary atonement and penal substitution required His death, before articulating the purpose of the resurrection. Finally this paper will consider the Trinitarian unity in salvation.

¹ Hebrews 2:1. Holy Bible, ESV, Crossway: Illinois, 2011. All Bible quotations from ESV unless otherwise noted.

Salvation: From What?

The Fall

God created the heavens, the earth, and everything in it, and saw that it was good. Such is the repeated refrain of the creation narrative in Genesis. It was *good*. In fact, the pinnacle of God's creation, mankind, was able to walk with God and talk with God in perfect obedience. There was no hint of rebellion, dissatisfaction or disbelief. Adam and Eve were perfect. So why salvation? In due course the rebellion in heaven spilled out from the throne room and the once-revered Angel of Light came to the world of matter, time and space with a purpose: destruction. And so it was that he caused Eve to eat the fruit and bring Adam into her disobedience, which in turn caused them to attempt to deceive God. With that act of disobedience and deceit sin had entered the world, introducing death, pain, evil and rebellion to the holy paradise. And God left. No longer were there walks with God in the cool breeze of the evening. Now, man, woman and serpent were cursed. Sin was in control of their nature, and death reigned.

The Promises

Sin permeated the created world. Yet God promised that, 'I will put enmity between you and woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.'² Even at the moment where creation 'broke,' God chose to commit to rescuing a people from the ravages of death, and this 'serpent-crusher' would come to be the redemption for that people. The rest of the Old Testament canon is filled with the unspoken question, 'Is *this* him?' One such man of whom the question could be asked was Abram. Yet in Genesis twelve God made clear that Abram would be a blessing to the nations, and *through* him, the nations would be blessed, clearly implying that although his progeny would be a blessing, he himself was not the serpent-crusher. However, in chapter fifteen God revealed the next stage in His redemptive plan by making a covenant with Abram, whereby God would swear an oath *upon His own self* that if the covenant is broken by *either* party, He would pay the punishment. This

² Genesis 3:15.

punishment was death. In the covenant terms, God tells Abram that his descendants would be sojourners in a land not their own for 400 years, but that He would, by His mighty hand, rescue them and bring them into a land which He promised to give them.³ This covenant is the key covenant in the Old Testament because what had already become clear, from the time of Adam to the time of Abram, is that humanity is unable to make amends for the sinful nature of their condition. Thus, God promised that He Himself would, somehow, take the punishment for humanity, by being killed as punishment instead of them.

After Abram died, his descendants ended up in Egypt, first as invited guests but then as slaves to Pharaoh, and it was indeed 400 years later that God demonstrated His power and brought His people out from Egypt before making them into a theocratic nation. The terms of this nation's theocratic status were enshrined in the Mosaic covenant and relied upon obedience to the Law. If the Israelites were obedient, they would be able to keep the land and be blessed with security, wealth and prosperity. However, if they were disobedient to the covenant by worshipping other gods and leaving the Lord, they would not only lose His favour, but they would be exiled from the land. Which is exactly what happened, because a fallen humanity is incapable of obeying God's Law to the point of conforming to His holiness without His help. Thus it was that in 720 BC, the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians, and eventually the Southern Kingdom also fell by a foreign hand working as God's agent of judgement. However, at the highpoint of nationhood a king had lived in Jerusalem, and of whom the question was also asked, 'Is *he* the serpent-crusher?' This king was David, and God also made a covenant with him. This covenant added more detail to the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, promising that a descendant of David would 'establish his kingdom forever'⁴ and God would be 'to him a father,

³ Genesis 15.

⁴ 2 Samuel 7:16.

and he shall be to me a son.’⁵ This covenant is filled with the promise of rest from enemies, an eternal kingdom upon the throne of which will sit an eternal King.

During the exile of the disobedient Israel God sent prophets to speak of this coming King. Jeremiah made a prophecy whereby God’s King would, ‘put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.’⁶ Indeed, in this new covenant, ‘they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.’⁷ Jeremiah’s prophecy confirms what was long suspected: the coming serpent-crusher would not only destroy the devil, but would destroy the power of sin and death itself, somehow allowing God to forgive the iniquity of his people and indwelling them with the Law so that this people *will be able to obey* it.

Finally, in this brief overview, God spoke through Ezekiel to further elucidate the work of this coming King:

And I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. And one king shall be king over them all, and they shall be no longer be two nations, and no longer divided into two kingdoms. They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. But I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them and they shall be my people and I shall be their God. My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes....I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them...My dwelling place shall be with them and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.⁸

This prophecy provides the fullest explanation of what the serpent-crusher will do. He will restore the ‘nation’ that was destroyed by exile and disobedience by uniting them once more under one king. This king will rid them of idols and keep them from disobeying by cleansing this people. They shall walk in His rules by His power and his covenant with them will be

⁵ 2 Samuel 7:14.

⁶ Jeremiah 31:33.

⁷ Jeremiah 31:34.

⁸ Ezekiel 37:22-27.

everlasting, not temporary, and ultimately, somehow, God would dwell with them. The serpent-crusher would bring about a new humanity, capable of obedience and an eternal kingdom where He reigns.

Salvation: The Work of the Serpent-Crusher

Obedience

In Hebrews, the author speaks of Jesus' obedience as a necessity to destroy the power of sin:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery...therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted.⁹

Likewise, later, the author writes, 'For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.'¹⁰ Christ, as the true Israel had to become a human being and live under the law so that He could be an acceptable sacrifice and be eligible to be the head of a new people (Romans 5). His obedience meant that He was a suitable sacrifice, a worthy Son and a willing substitute. Not only, however, was Jesus called to be a servant of the Lord in obeying the Law, but at the moment of greatest trials, where other humans would have failed, He obeyed. When Satan tempted Him in the wilderness, He patterned how we are to overcome sin, and when Satan suggested there could be glory without the cross in Gethsemane, Christ humbly obeyed despite the pain and suffering He knew that decision would bring. Our salvation does indeed rest heavily upon the obedience of Christ. If there was any disobedience, He would not be able to stand in our stead as a substitutionary atonement. For our sakes, He *had* to obey.

⁹ Hebrews 2:14-18.

¹⁰ Hebrews 4:15.

Death

The critical point of obedience, however, was the cross. Everything in history centers around the cross. If Christ did not die on the cross, then there is no salvation. We need Him to be the suffering servant through whom we call out to God for mercy. He achieved salvation for us at the cross through the following means: Firstly, His own blood was shed. ‘He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.’¹¹ This sacrifice was suitable for all: ‘But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. Or by a single offering he has perfect for all time those who are being sanctified.’¹² The blood spilled was the suitable sacrifice for all who believe.

Secondly, He cleanses us. This is critical in non-Western cultures, yet we often downplay it. Being unclean is a huge issue for a believer who comes from Jewish, Islamic or other Eastern traditions, because their culture so clearly identifies illness and disease with sin. So when they read in 1 John that, ‘everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure,’¹³ they are encouraged that the Gospel doesn’t merely take away our sin, but leaves us clean. We are, like the bleeding woman, not merely healed, but cleansed and declared clean. After all, ‘If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins *and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*’¹⁴ We not only are guilty of rebellion, but we are corrupted in our very natures. We need purifying and cleansing to be able to stand before a holy God. The blood of Christ, shed on the cross, has won for us the cleansing power that we can never do on our own.

Thirdly, we have been purchased by His blood. This is a transaction whereby Jesus takes our place, pays our debt, and therefore we have been obtained or purchased by Him, and

¹¹ Hebrews 9:12.

¹² Hebrews 10:12-14.

¹³ 1 John 3:3.

¹⁴ 1 John 1:9.

for Him. As Paul reminded the Ephesian elders, ‘Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you all overseers, to care for the church of God, *which he obtained with his own blood.*’¹⁵ The powerful message here is that we are no longer under the ownership of anyone, or anything else. Neither Satan, nor sin, nor death has any claim to us or our souls because Christ has purchased us with His sacrifice on the cross.

Finally, his death is an act into which we are baptized (Romans 6:3), and therefore our sinful nature is put to death on the cross. When we place our faith in Christ for salvation, we are not simply being passive. Our old sinful nature is being put to death, and therefore we can proclaim that we have been put to death with Christ, so that we can be raised to life with Him in the New Creation. His death was a requirement for us to be saved because we needed to die with Him in order that we could be raised to life with Him.

Resurrection

If the obedient death on the cross was a worthy sacrifice, we dare not forget the importance of the resurrection. If Christ died on the cross as a worthy sacrifice but then didn’t rise from the dead, we would have no hope of a future with Him. Granted it might mean we would have a different life here on earth, but there would be no eternal ramification because death itself would not have been defeated. Christ’s resurrection is essential for our salvation. As Paul makes clear to the Corinthians, ‘If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins...and we are of all people most to be pitied.’¹⁶ However, he goes on to explain the power of the resurrection for the Christian: death is defeated and new life is ours in Christ.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead...for as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.¹⁷

¹⁵ Acts 20:28.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:14 and 19.

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:20-22.

The hope from the resurrection is more than reconciliation with God and justification, it is the other side of the salvation coin: on one side there is the legal justification and purchasing of us by Christ's death, and on the other side is the hope of eternal life with Him:

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not sleep, but we shall be change...for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁸

The work of Christ at the cross is only half complete; when He was raised to New Life was when the salvific work of Christ was accomplished. By the death on the cross, He paid our penalty, and by His resurrection He defeated the enemy we most fear: death itself. Through both of these aspects of His work, we are able to be reconciled to God and brought into relationship with Him that will last for eternity, in His presence.

Salvation: The Achievement of the Serpent-Crusher

Propitiation

As has been noted, sin brought about a disharmony between man and God. When sin entered the world, mankind was no longer able to interact with God peaceably. Rather, we became enemies because our sin was repugnant in the sight of a holy God. What the serpent-crusher must do, therefore, is appease the wrath of God somehow, so that, rather than just judgement, God is able to be reconciled to his people. This is called *propitiation*. God's Messiah must enable us, sinful though we are, to come before God in humility and beseech forgiveness, and pledge our allegiance to Him above sin and ourselves. This has been achieved by a number of key ways, the most crucial of which is *substitutionary atonement*.

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:50-57.

Substitutionary Atonement

This doctrine relies upon the serpent-crusher being what other human beings could not be: innocent. The serpent-crusher must be one who is totally sinless, and therefore entirely obedient, to God so that he can stand in our place. He will be our substitute, but for that to be efficacious, he must be worthy, and the only way he can be worthy is to be sinless. Of course, the only way for a human being to be sinless is for that human being to, in some way, be part of the Divine. If this is the case, of course, that would satisfy the Abrahamic covenant of Genesis fifteen. What we see at the cross is exactly this. Jesus, the Son of God, was perfectly innocent as Hebrews 4:15 makes clear, for the author says that He was ‘tempted as we are, yet without sin.’¹⁹ He was therefore able to stand in our place (our substitute), and also take our punishment because of His innocence (an atonement). Paul, thus, could clearly say that Jesus was, ‘put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.’²⁰ The substitutionary atonement of Christ at the cross achieved for us the propitiation we so desperately need to avoid the wrath of God and instead be reconciled to Him. This leads, therefore, to an official declaration of our status.

Justification

Because the wrath of God has been satisfied, God in His great mercy, looks upon us and declares, legally, that we are forgiven, and are no more under His wrath. Rather, we are declared righteous. Paul again makes this clear, ‘It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.’²¹ As we are justified by Christ, therefore, we are no longer in condemnation for our sin, but rather forgiven, just as the covenant to Abraham promised. This justification leads to peace: ‘Therefore, since we

¹⁹ Hebrews 4:15.

²⁰ Romans 3:25.

²¹ Romans 3:26.

have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.’²² However, there must be more, surely? After all, it’s all well and good that our punishment has been taken away and that God declares us righteous, but we aren’t righteous because we remain sinful human beings. The promise of a serpent-crusher was fulfilled, but the prophecies of Ezekiel and Jeremiah also must be fulfilled: we need to actually *be* righteous not only declared so. How does Christ achieve this for us?

Imputation and Union

Imputation is the answer to our ongoing conundrum about how we can stand before God innocent yet also clothed in corrupted flesh. Paul is helpful on this point. He writes to the Romans that,

No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was ‘counted to him as righteousness.’ But the words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.²³

The doctrine of imputation, as articulated here, demonstrates what it means to be righteous. Elsewhere Paul’s arguments for imputation vary in the breadth but never the scope of the doctrine. To be a Christian means to stand before God and be, in essence, *wearing* the righteousness of Christ. His perfect sinlessness that enabled Him to be the substitutionary atonement for our propitiation is given to us *as we are grafted into Him* (John 15 and 17), so that when the Father looks at us, He sees the perfect obedience of Jesus and, as it were, allows our sinful natures and acts to adorn Christ on the cross where justice was meted out for it. The divine exchange is essential: Christ wore our sin on the cross, where God punished Him for it (though He was innocent) and gave to us His righteousness (though we are sinful) so that we can wear it, sheltered by Him. Thus, even though we still sin, the power of the cross has covered all sins

²² Romans 5:1.

²³ Romans 4:20-25.

(past, present and future) and the righteousness we wear now is what the Father sees because the sin we committed has been paid for, and the sinlessness of Christ is given to us through our union with Him.

Sanctification

Nevertheless, there is an expectation that we are in some way ‘improving’. Upon conversion, Ezekiel made clear that our idols and sins would be taken away, yet as we still sin, we must ask what happens.

The answer is *sanctification*. Biblically, sanctification is where we are made to conform to the image of Christ by undergoing the surgery of having our sin revealed to us by the Word and the Spirit of God, and beginning to fight it. However, unlike the work of the Law in the Old Covenant, we are now *indwelt* with the Spirit of God to enable us to obey and therefore to mortify our sin. In Romans 8, Paul speaks of this clearly: ‘For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.’²⁴ Therefore, as Jeremiah promised, the Law is written upon our hearts because the Spirit is within us, gently correcting us and challenging us to live a life worthy of Christ, and to inexorably transform us into the image of Christ. This sanctification is *progressive*. However, there is a sense, due to the doctrine of imputation, whereby we are also sanctified by being declared righteous: God allows the work of the cross to stand over all of time so that even when we sin *after* repentance and conversion, we are still *covered* by the work of Christ.²⁵

Headship

All of these actions (noticeably all done *to* or *for* us) have brought about our salvation by dealing with our problem of sin, and our broken nature. The act of salvation through faith in Christ relies upon the principle of two kingdoms. One is the kingdom of sin, death and rebellion,

²⁴ Romans 8:2.

²⁵ Consider Hebrews 10:10.

into which every human is born and is destined to remain unless God saves them. The second is the kingdom of Christ. Paul, in Romans 5, speaks of this dichotomy, when he says, ‘But the free gift (salvation) is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.’²⁶ Upon salvation we enter into a new kingdom, servants of a new master, and thus we can say that we are no longer slaves to sin but slaves to righteousness: ‘But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.’²⁷ Thus the Christian no longer fears the wrath of God because he is a citizen of God’s kingdom, wearing the robes of God’s son, declared legally innocent and given the indwelling Spirit to transform him into the likeness of Christ.

Adoption

The doctrine of adoption is a beautiful climax to the salvific process whereby we our union with Christ is fully realized, for, rather than simply being raised from the death of sin to serve as slaves in the King’s kitchen, as it were, which is still much more than any of us could ever hope to deserve, we are raised rather to be heirs with Christ as sons and daughters of God. Paul makes this abundantly clear in Galatians 4:

In the same way [as slaves in bondage] we also, when we were children were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.²⁸

As adopted sons and daughters we share in the rights of a child of the King and not a servant. Ours are the promises made to Christ, because we are one with Christ. Therefore we

²⁶ Romans 5:15.

²⁷ Romans 6:17-18.

²⁸ Galatians 4:1-7.

come to Christ and receive rest, forgiveness, the promise of new bodies and eternal life. Our inheritance is both Him and His.

Salvation: A Trinitarian Endeavour

Salvation is often considered to be the work of the Son, however in reality the Triune Godhead acts together in everything and in every decision, and so it must be understood that salvation is no different. The Father, the Son and the Spirit are all active participants in the salvation of a people for the Son.

The Father's Will

As was shown above, the Father had willed salvation for His creation from the moment He cursed the serpent, who was Satan. He wanted to preserve His own holy name, and sin must be destroyed for it cannot be in His presence, so He therefore willed that there would be one who would come, in time to destroy the power of death and sin. This serpent-crusher was Christ, who was the God-man. However, we must not neglect the importance of Christ in Gethsemane: Christ sought the Father to find another way, but the Father willed that salvation would come by His own Son being torn apart at the cross, in fulfillment of Genesis 15.

Furthermore, specifically at the cross, the Father willingly places all of the wrath for sin and man's rebellion upon His Son. He actively judges Christ as guilty on our behalf that we might be saved. The Father's action is an acceptance of Christ's sacrifice and the subsequent required judgement for our sin. Without the Father's judgement of the Son, our sin is not forgiven.

The Son's Work

This paper has largely addressed the work of the Son, but suffice it to reiterate that the work of the Son at Calvary is essential for our salvation. His work, from His obedience to His death and resurrection are the means by which salvation is secured for us.

The Spirit's Application

The work of the Spirit however, is the application of the work Christ secured for us, at the will of the Father. The Spirit awakens our souls to the gravity of our spiritual condition, He applies the work of Christ to us when we cry out for mercy and grace, He imputes Christ's righteousness on us and then indwells us so that we can henceforth fight the power of sin that remains inside of us so that we are conformed to the image of Christ. The application of the work of Christ is also an essential aspect of salvation for us; without the Spirit we are unable to cry for God's grace, and so we would never realize our need for Christ's mercy and forgiveness.

Together, the Triune God has worked from the dawn of the Fall to bring about the salvation of a remnant for the Son. Not all will be saved, and the just damnation of those who refuse to repent will bring glory to the Trinity, just as the salvation of a remnant will do the same. This deliberate and unified action in salvation means that we can be confident when we approach the throne of grace as believers. We are heirs with Christ, predestined by the Father and indwelt by the Spirit. Despite our continued failures, God chooses to see Christ's sacrifice and righteousness imputed upon us. Salvation has been achieved by the work of Christ, but at the will of the Father, and through the application of that work by the Spirit.

Conclusion

This essay has shown that Christ, by His obedient life was worthy to present His substitutionary atoning death as the penal sacrifice for our sins, thereby purchasing us by the price of His blood in fulfilment of the promises of the Old Covenants, enabling us to be declared righteous and thus to be imputed with His righteousness as we are united with Him under His headship and adopted into Him to be heirs with Him. By the ongoing application of His work to our hearts in sanctification we are able and exhorted to obey as Christ obeyed because we have His power in us to do so. We are thereby cleansed from our sin, and can rejoice that though this mortal flesh will eventually fail, we will be with Him forevermore, reigning beside Him in the New Creation.

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