

## **ASSURANCE OF SALVATION**

Assurance of one's salvation should not come from reflecting back on a past event (a "moment of salvation"). While every person is surely saved in a moment—at the instant when faith is exercised and rebirth is granted—the basis for assurance comes from one's present relationship with God. The one who is living in sin (rebellion against God) cannot be assured of his salvation on the basis of some perceived prior exercise of faith because that faith may not have been genuine. The test of genuine faith is how one lives, for Paul wrote that there are two kinds of people: those whose lives are controlled by the flesh and those whose lives are controlled by the Spirit (Rom 8:5-11). The former live to please the flesh and are under condemnation resulting in death. Those controlled by the Spirit live by the Spirit and fight against sin, with the result that they are sons of God who will inherit God's promises (Rom 8:12-17).

To put it bluntly, those who are living in sin (rebellion against God) can have no assurance of salvation. They may be saved, but they can have no confidence that they are saved while separated from God. They should not be assured that they are saved on the basis of some perceived past event. Sometimes these matters can be very difficult to decide; we may have known the person for years when they appeared to be walking with the Lord. Now we hope that their apostasy is temporary and they will soon return to the faith. We want to believe that "once saved, always saved," and therefore take comfort that they are saved despite present appearances. What we should do in this situation is not to attempt to determine whether they are saved but to call them to seek God in repentance. This call is the same regardless of the spiritual status of the person; whether saved and sinning or unsaved and sinning, the person is commanded to repent and turn to God. When one does repent, that is a work of the Spirit by which one can have assurance of salvation. The one who does not repent but persists in rebellion has no reason to believe that God is at work in his heart.

### **PREPARATION FOR THE NEXT STUDY**

In preparation for our study of the believer and the law, think about whether Christians are under the law (and if so, what law). Important passages include Matt 5:17-20, Rom 6-8, 9:30-10:4; Gal 2:15-21; 3:10-29; James 2:8.

## **THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL SALVATION**

### **PREPARATION FOR THIS STUDY**

What is salvation? Who is saved? What leads to salvation? How has our study of the Old Testament affected your view of salvation?

### **PREFACE**

This is a difficult issue, especially because of its application to family and friends. Our thinking may be guided by what we want to believe rather than what God's Word teaches. It is of utmost importance to not be deceived but to understand the full teaching of Scripture.

### **A NARROW VIEW OF SALVATION**

One concern is that we may define salvation too narrowly. We say that we are "saved" if we say a prayer, believe certain facts, participate in certain activities, and anticipate going to heaven after death. We think of salvation as deliverance from the penalty of sin but not the presence of sin. The goal is to escape hell, not to escape sin. Our focus is on ourselves, not on God. Our desire is for blissful living, not giving God the glory he is due.

### **SALVATION: MAKING THINGS RIGHT WITH GOD**

Some Christians define "being saved" as "going to heaven." Besides the fact that we were not created for heaven and will not spend much time there, this view gives too little significance to the seriousness of sin and the program of God. The priority in salvation is not making sure we have reservations for some sort of a (really long) future vacation, but making things right with God. It is recognizing a lifelong enmity with your Creator and being traumatized by how you have abused, ignored, and defamed him. It is crying out for mercy, asking God to forgive, and submitting all of yourself to him without restriction. It is a desire for order to be restored, for God to be put in his right place, and for things to be as the Creator intended. This is radically different than a rushed prayer of magical words that eternally secure a place on a list in heaven.

## GOD-CENTERED VS. MAN-CENTERED VIEWS

A God-centered view of salvation is radically different than a man-centered view of salvation. The first recognizes the eternal glory of God that deserves the worship of every creature. Thus it views sin as grievous treatment of a most worthy God and rightly deserving of eternal separation from his presence. A man-centered view of salvation focuses on future joy or pain without reference to God. God is more of a means to an end; we'll take him as long as we get the good stuff. A God-centered view of salvation crushes man's pride; a man-centered view of salvation is unconcerned with it. A God-centered view of salvation gives all credit to God; a man-centered view sees a helpless God as exuberant when an individual sovereignly chooses to follow God. Read Ephesians 1 in this light.

## IS IT HARD TO BE SAVED?

Should we ever discourage others from becoming a Christian? The very thought is anathema to many. But the tendency to rush people down the aisle to somehow "lock in" their salvation runs counter to Jesus' method. Jesus turned away those who were not fully committed to him (Luke 9:57-62). He told the crowds that they could not be his disciple if they did not hate their father, mother, wife, children, and own life (Luke 14:26-27). He gave parables on the need to count the cost and give up everything (Luke 14:28-33). One wonders if some modern evangelists would rebuke Jesus for making it so hard to be saved.

## IMPLICATION: CHILDREN AND SALVATION

The rush to assure young children of salvation may be related to a sub-biblical view of salvation. When salvation is turned into a prayer with heaven in the balance, it naturally follows that parents want their children to be saved as soon as they can articulate the desire. But if the child does not truly understand his sin and offense against a holy God, what is he seeking salvation from? If the child is not mature enough to be given responsibilities, is he mature enough to make a decision affecting his entire earthly existence? If a child does not have an independent sense of judgment apart from

his parents, can he be held accountable for his decision? How much do false childhood professions account for our confusion at teenagers and young adults abandoning the faith? What value is there in giving a young child assurance of salvation? Does it outweigh the risk of providing assurance to a nonbeliever?

## ONCE SAVED, ALWAYS SAVED?

Some biblical truths about salvation may seem contradictory. Jesus clearly taught that no one could lose their salvation (John 10:29), but he also said that the one who endures to the end will be saved (Matt 10:22; 24:13). Paul assured the Philippians that God would finish the work he began in them (Phil 1:6), but he also feared that the Thessalonians might have been tempted to reject the faith (1 Thess 3:5). The writer of Hebrews warned his readers against abandoning the faith and facing eternal punishment (Heb 6:1-12; 10:26-34). He wrote, "We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved" (Heb 10:39).

How can the truth of eternal security be reconciled with the strenuous exhortations for perseverance? The answer is that the commands to persevere is one *means* by which salvation is secured. God saves his people not apart from their personal perseverance in faith but *through* their perseverance in faith. This does not suggest that the individual saves himself through works done after initial salvation, for God is at work throughout the individual's life. One is saved by grace and one *stays saved* by grace. "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil 2:13). Yet this truth does not negate human responsibility, for in the previous verse Paul commanded the church, "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12). As you "work out your salvation" by living in obedience to God, you realize that it is only by God's gracious work in your life that you can do what he has commanded. Again, God secures the salvation of the individual *through* the person's persevering faith. As Peter wrote, one purpose of trials is to demonstrate the genuineness of faith (1 Pet 1:6-7). Without those trials, one would not have the same assurance that one's faith is true and enduring.