

THREE STAGES OF SALVATION EXPLANATION

The Problem and the Solution

Christians believe that God offers eternal life—immortality—to humans. Paul said in 2 Timothy 1:10 that "Jesus Christ has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel."

Immortality? How do we get it?

We will all die, and we will all face a judgment before God after we die (Heb. 9:7; Rev. 20:11-15). Those who have done good will inherit eternal life, and those who have done evil will perish in everlasting fire (Jn. 5:28-29; Matt. 25:31-46; Rom. 2:5-8). In other words, we will be rewarded for doing good and we will reap wrath and destruction for doing evil.

The problem is that we don't live up to God's standard. Paul argues that not one of us has lived well enough (Rom. 3:1-11, 23). Worse, we can't really expect that to change because we are born into slavery to sin (Rom. 7:14, Eph. 2:1-3).

How can we be delivered? I have heard three ways.

1. Change the judgment. While some people believe God did this, the Scriptures make it clear he did not (Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:5; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Pet. 1:17; Rev. 3:4-5).
2. Make atonement for all our sins so that either everyone or at least anyone who accepts Jesus' sacrifice will inherit eternal life whether they do good or not. Again, the Scriptures make it clear that this did not happen. The unrighteous still do not inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9).
3. Change people so that they do good rather than doing evil. God both said he was going to do this, and now he has done it.

In Jeremiah 31:31-34, God tells us about the new covenant, and there he implies that he will change us so we obey him. In Ezekiel 36:26-27, he says explicitly that this is what he is going to do: "I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will keep my judgments and do them."

Once it became obvious that in ourselves we were unable to enter the kingdom of God, the power of God could then make us able.

--Anonymous letter to Diognetes. AD 80-150.

The Method

I called this teaching the three stages of salvation because it helps explain how humans can be enabled to do good and thus receive eternal life. Salvation, the obtaining of eternal life in the everlasting Kingdom of God, is one simple plan, executed by God through the sacrifice of his Son.

The Son of God rescued us from slavery to sin. In a way that we will always wonder about, he became human, obeyed God perfectly, suffered and died. In the realm of death, he overthrew principalities and powers, broke the power of death and emerged triumphant over the powers of the devil. Somehow, he delivered us from slavery, purchasing us with his own blood, and if we become his, he transforms us.

That atonement can be hard to understand, and people have argued over the exact nature of the atonement for 2,000 years. What we need to do to inherit eternal life is much easier.

Eternal life is only in the Kingdom of God. To have immortality, we must enter that kingdom and receive all the benefits promised.

To enter that kingdom, we must believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God and Israel's promised Messiah. Once we believe this, Jesus tells us that we must deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him (Luke 9:23). In other words, we must leave everything behind and confess that he is our Lord (Luke 14:26-33 w/ Rom. 10:9-10).

When the Jews heard the Gospel, Peter put it more simply. "Repent," he said, "and be baptized into the name of Jesus the Messiah for the remission of sins, and you will receive the Holy Spirit."

Those who do this experience a transformation. Though they were once dead in their sins (Eph. 2:1-3), they are now made alive in King Jesus (Rom. 6:3). This is clearly stated in Scripture to happen in baptism, but it's confusing to evangelicals, most of whom have replaced baptism with something else, usually the sinner's prayer. With baptism taken out of its proper place, evangelicals tend to be very confused about the reason for baptism at all.

This transformation from death to life is spoken of in many terms in Scripture. It is called being born again in John 3:3-5. It is called becoming a new creation in Eph. 2:10 and 2 Cor. 5:17. It is called a transfer from the Kingdom of Darkness to the Kingdom of God's Beloved Son in Col. 1:13. It is called a spiritual circumcision in Col. 2:11-12. It is called the washing of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit in Titus 3:5.

This transformation happens by believing the Gospel. No works, no deeds, no religious activities are required. We hear the Gospel, then we believe it and respond to it by repenting and being baptized into Messiah, and we reap all the things we just read about.

This transforms us from those who are slaves to sin, unable to do good works, into people who can do good works. In fact, we are transformed into people that are zealous for good works and delighted with God's will.

This solves the problem I brought up at the beginning. Eternal life is given at the judgment to those who do good. We can now do good. Problem solved.

God, however, took it many steps further.

He gives us constant access to the throne room of God by the blood of Jesus. He has not only empowered us by the Holy Spirit, but he leads us by the Holy Spirit. Even more, if we live like Christians, if we walk in the light that he is given us, then he cleanses us of our sins.

Becoming a child of God in this way is an amazing event. It's a transformation from being children of the devil to being children of God. First John 3:1 expresses the feeling we should all have about this. "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us that we should be called the children of God!"

Our Part

The transformation happens automatically. It comes from God, not us. On a practical basis, however, it is not so simple. We live in a world that is full of temptations. We live in a world that is at the center of a spiritual war where God, his Son, the angels, and us are overthrowing the power of the devil and his messengers on this earth. We also live in a body that wars against our spirit (Gal. 5:17).

We overcome these temptations by remembering who we are and, to borrow the words of the apostle Paul, "putting on the new man who is created according to God in righteousness and true holiness" (Eph. 4:24). We set our minds on spiritual things (Rom. 8:5-6; Col. 3:1-4; 2 Cor. 3:16-17; Heb. 12:1-2; Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 10:5).

This is not always easy. The apostle Paul said he had to discipline himself every day so that he would not wind up disqualified (1 Cor. 9:27). In Philippians 3 he gives a somewhat long explanation of the efforts that he makes to keep his eye on the goal, and he calls us all to do the same, forgetting our old lives. The writer of Hebrews wrote a whole letter trying to keep Jewish Christians from forsaking this amazing salvation of God for their old Jewish life and religion.

For those who do this, though, there is the promise that God will not attribute sin to us at all. There is no way to walk through this life without the occasional sin, things that we didn't even know we did or know was wrong. Nonetheless, if we walk in the light, remaining exposed before God and man, he will continually cleanse us from sin by the blood of Jesus. Paul quotes David in saying that a person like this is blessed because God will not impute sin to him (Rom. 4:1-8).

This kind of life requires the help of others. Scripture warns us that if we are not being exhorted regularly, even daily, we are in danger of being hardened by sin's deceitfulness (Heb. 3:12-13). It is easy to be tricked and to think we are doing well and obeying God when we are not.

The help we need, the glorious salvation we share, and the power of the Holy Spirit draw us together. Following Jesus is not an individual matter. God is raising up a church that will one day, in some spiritual way, be the bride of our Master Jesus. The church is very important for our salvation, but discussing the church is a matter for another day and another lesson.

If we walk by the Spirit through this life, we can count on being constantly washed by the blood of Jesus and appearing at the judgment blameless and without spot. There we will be rewarded with eternal life.

That is the story as Scripture tells it. It resolves the problems that evangelicals run into trying to explain how works are not necessary when so many Scriptures say they are. There are some really terrific passages of Scripture that explain what I have explained above in a few short verses.

Second Peter 1:3-11 is a favorite of mine. It's worth reading, for it describes the whole path of salvation in the same way I just did. Another favorite of mine is Galatians 6:7-10. There we find that "sowing to the Spirit" involved doing good. If we don't grow weary in doing good (sowing to the Spirit) then we will reap eternal life. That matches what I have just explained exactly, but it is a heresy in most evangelical churches.

Ephesians 1:4-14 is another great passage. It explains that this whole process of salvation has been in God's mind from the beginning, thus explaining why Jesus is called the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world in the Revelation. The end of that chapter explains that even greater than this planned salvation is the exaltation of Jesus, the worker of that salvation, to a throne above all other things, seated not just as Son of God and Lord of all, but as head of the church.

Once you see that this is the process of salvation it is all over Scripture. Once we are delivered from our fear that we are trying to earn our salvation, we can see this plan in Scripture and see that we must labor to attain salvation—in fact, we must labor even to enter the rest that is part of salvation (Heb. 4:11). Nonetheless, we are not confused into thinking that we can boast because everything we have was given to us. We were redeemed from slavery to sin by nothing but the blood of Jesus. We were empowered to overcome sin and the lusts of this world by nothing but the power of the Holy Spirit and the direct help of our brothers and sisters in Jesus.

As Psalm 24:5 says, "We shall receive the blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of our salvation." Psalm 37:39 says, "The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; he is their strength in time of trouble."

This is truly "so great salvation."

Let me close with Psalm 40:16:

Let those that seek you rejoice and be glad in you
Let such as love your salvation say continually
"The Lord be magnified."

Note that I never got to 1 John and the Greek past tense, but if there in any book that fits only with the way of salvation we have described, it is 1 John.

THREE STAGES OF SALVATION OUTLINE AND SCRIPTURES

THE PLAN

1. Humans live forever in fellowship with God. (Gen. 3:8-9, 16-17)
2. The original plan was corrupted (Gen. 3:22-24)
3. The old plan remains the same, but now involves redemption (Matt. 25:34; Eph. 1:4-14; Rev. 2-3)

THE PROBLEM

- A. Man was disobedient, lost opportunity for eternal life (Gen. 3:22)
- B. After we die, there is a judgment (Heb. 9:27)
- C. Mankind is too disobedient to face that judgment; we will be condemned (Rom. 3:23)
- D. Mankind is a slave to sin and to the devil (Rom. 7:14; Eph. 2:1-3)

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

- A. Change the judgment
The Scriptures say God didn't do this (Matt. 25:31-46; Jn. 5:28-29; Rom. 2:5-8—cf. Gal. 6:7-9 & Rom. 8:12-13—2 Cor. 5:10-11; Heb. 10:26-30; 1 Pet. 1:17; Rev. 3:4-5; Rev. 20:11-15).
- B. Pay for sins with a sacrifice, then remove the judgment.
 1. God didn't do this, either, based on the same Scriptures we just looked at.
 2. God specifically said his answer was to get people to repent and that this is fair. (Ezek. 18:20-32; Ezek. 33:11-20)
 3. Sacrifices only remove sins of the repentant. (Ps. 51:16-17, 19; Gen. 4:1-7 w/ 1 Jn. 3:12; Isa. 1:11-20)
- C. Change humans
 1. God said this is what the New Covenant would do (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:25-27; Joel 2:28-29)
 2. It would do this for everyone who enters into the covenant.
 3. Description of change:
 - a. 2 Cor. 5:11-21
 - b. Rom. 14:8-10
 - c. Tit. 2:11-3:8 (cf. Tit. 3:5 w/ Eph. 2:8-10)
 - d. Romans 7:8-9; 14-15; 24-25; 8:1-4

THREE STAGES OF SALVATION/TRANSFORMATION

- A. There are Stages
 1. Romans 5:9-10

2. Eph. 2:8-9 w/ 5:19-21
 3. Romans 3:28 w/ Rom. 8:12-13; Gal. 6:7-9
 4. Romans 6:4-12
- B. First stage: Transformation into new creatures (sons of God)
1. Response to the Gospel: Acts 2:38-29
 2. Born again: John 3:3-8
 3. New creations: 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:8-10
 4. Alive from the dead: Rom. 6:3-11
 5. Forgiveness of sins: Ezek. 18:20-32 (already read); 2 Cor. 5:17
 6. Reconciliation: Rom. 5:9-10; 2 Cor. 5:18-21
 7. Emphasis on Jesus' death and his blood: Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14
 8. His blood forgives and purchases us: Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23; 1 Pet. 1:19
- C. Second stage: Living the transformed life
1. Grace
 - a. Is the word for Holy Spirit's work in us (Rom. 6:14; Tit. 2:11-12; 1 Pet. 4:10-11)
 - b. Great description of what's happening: Rom. 5:1-2
 - c. Difference between grace and mercy
 2. Emphasis on Jesus' resurrection life (Rom. 5:9-10; 6:4-12 covered already; Gal. 2:20; 1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 3:1-4)
 3. Walking by the Spirit (Rom. 8:4-14; Gal. 5:16-25; 6:6-9)
 4. Synergy (1 Cor. 9:27; Php. 2:12-13; 3:7-17; Col. 1:29; 2 Pet. 1:3-11)
 5. But constant cleansing (1 Jn. 1:6-9; Rom. 4:1-8)
 6. No doctrine is true if it teaches that Christians can live like the world (1 Jn. 3:7-10)

Important note on 1 John:

1 John should never be read by anyone not knowing Greek present tense. All those difficult verses, like "whoever is born of God does not sin" are in the Greek present tense.

From *NTGreek.org*:

"In English, and in most other languages, the tense of the verb mainly refers to the 'time' of the action of the verb (present, past, or future time). In Greek, however, although time does bear upon the meaning of tense, the primary consideration of the tense of the verb is not time, but rather the 'kind of action' that the verb portrays. The most important element in Greek tense is kind of action; time is regarded as a secondary element. ...

"The present tense usually denotes continuous kind of action. It shows 'action in progress' or 'a state of persistence.' When used in the indicative mood, the present tense denotes action taking place or going on in the present time."

D. Third stage: Judgment and Resurrection

1. We've already listed these Scriptures, but here they are again: (Matt. 25:31-46; Jn. 5:28-29; Rom. 2:5-8—cf. Gal. 6:7-9 & Rom. 8:12-13—2 Cor. 5:10-11; Heb. 10:26-30; 1 Pet. 1:17; Rev. 3:4-5; Rev. 20:11-15)

2. Let's emphasize certain ones that bring the point home well:
 - a. Matt. 25:31-46: For some reason people usually get it when they read this
 - b. If the reader will acknowledge the obvious context of Hebrews, that formerly Jewish believers should not return to Judaism, then this passage is clear: Heb. 10:26-30
 - c. A warning to Christians: 1 Pet. 1:17
 - d. A very similar warning to Christians, but longer: 1 Cor. 10:1-12

DISTINCTIONS OF EACH STAGE

- A. If a passage is talking about faith apart from works, it is talking about stage one, being transformed into a new creature. (Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:8-10)
- B. If a passage is talking about works without mentioning faith, then
 1. It is talking about stage three, the judgment and qualifying for the Resurrection of Life.
 2. It is exhorting us on how to live in stage two, living the transformed life, so we are ready for judgment (stage three)
- C. Passages that talk about faith and works together are talking about all three stages at once.
 1. James 2:14-26
 2. 2 Peter 1:3-11