

## The Doctrine of Salvation

### Key Terms

In order to understand the doctrine of salvation, we need to define nine key terms. Each of these terms also lay out the step by step process of God's plan of salvation for humanity.

The first term is depravity. Depravity means that all humans, with the exception of Jesus, are born with a sinful nature. This does not mean that all humans are equally sinful; some people choose to sin more than others. Depravity means that every human desires to sin and eventually commits sin.

The second term is calling. Calling means that God breaks through human depravity and draws a person to Himself. He starts the process of salvation by granting a person illumination and repentance.

The third term is illumination. Illumination refers to shining a light in a dark place. All humans are in spiritual darkness until the Holy Spirit removes spiritual blindness and enables a person to understand and believe God's Word.

The fourth term is repentance. Repentance is a complete turning away from sin toward God in every area of the mind, heart and will. It is a complete and total surrender to God.

The fifth term is justification. Justification is God's official verdict that a person is righteous in his sight and not guilty of sin.

The sixth term is regeneration. Regeneration means that God gives a person a new, spiritual life. After baptism, God places His Holy Spirit in a person and gives that person the ability to overcome human nature; when Jesus returns, God will resurrect Christians from the dead and give them immortal, spiritual bodies.

A seventh term is conversion. Conversion refers to the entire process from calling through regeneration. When a person receives God's Holy Spirit they become a converted Christian and a member of the Church, which is the Body of Christ.

The eighth term is sanctification. Sanctification is the gradual process of developing holy, righteous character and removing sin from the life of a Christian. Sanctification begins with repentance and continues throughout this life until a Christian receives a perfect, sinless nature in the resurrection of the dead.

The last term is salvation. In a general sense, salvation refers to any deliverance from danger or evil; in the Gospel, it means receiving eternal life in the resurrection rather than the second death in the lake of fire at the last judgment. Every step in the plan of salvation, from start to finish, is a miracle from God

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### Depravity

We will begin by looking at what the Bible says about depravity. In Ecclesiastes 7:20, Scripture tells us that “there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins” (NASB unless otherwise noted). In Romans 8:7, Paul explains why: “because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so.” The prophet Jeremiah also said, “The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it (Jer 17:9)?” Contrary to liberal ideas of secular humanism, human nature is basically evil and unable to reform itself; people don’t want to seek God, and they are unable to obey Him on their own power.

There is one exception to this general rule, our Savior Jesus Christ. In Hebrews 4:15, the Bible says, “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.” Jesus is fully human and fully divine; He demonstrated His divine nature to us by experiencing every aspect of human life with ever sinning.

### Calling

The next step in the plan of salvation is the divine calling. In John 6:44, Jesus said, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.” The apostle Peter told his fellow Israelites about the Gospel and concluded his sermon, saying, “For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself (Acts 2:39).” In these two passages, calling and drawing refer to the same thing; God uses His supernatural power to break through our depravity and give us a chance to be saved from eternal damnation.

Jesus gave us an important promise about this divine calling; He said, “And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself. He said this to indicate how he was going to die (John 12:32-33 NLT).” Jesus was lifted up from the earth when He was crucified; and since then, He has been drawing many people to Himself, but there are many who died in infancy or in distant lands without having a chance for salvation. Thus, the Bible indicates that those people will receive this calling in the future at the resurrection from the dead.

Clearly, God must start the process of salvation by breaking through human depravity with His supernatural power; from start to finish, salvation is a miracle from God. However, as we shall soon see, this divine calling is not predestination to salvation; people can still resist God’s calling and reject His offer of salvation.

### Illumination

The next step in God’s plan of salvation is Illumination. Most of the world is in complete spiritual darkness; in Revelation 12:9, John tells us why: “And the great dragon was thrown

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down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.” From the time of Adam and Eve, Satan has been manipulating and misleading humanity away from God.

Because of depravity, all humanity suffers from deep spiritual blindness. In 1Corinthians 2:14, Paul wrote, “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.”

In other words, even if people hear the Gospel, they can’t understand it or accept it unless God opens their minds. The apostle Paul said, “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2Cor 4:6).” So, illumination is another miracle from God.

The Bible predicts that God will remove this spiritual blindness from all nations; Isaiah wrote, “And on this mountain [which is Mount Zion in Jerusalem] He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, Even the veil which is stretched over all nations.” Isaiah describes this spiritual blindness as a veil covering people’s eyes. Paul used this same analogy concerning Israel when he said, “But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ” (2Cor 3:14).

Clearly, God must remove spiritual blindness so people can understand and accept His Word. People can read the Bible for years and still be spiritually blind if God hasn’t called them and opened their minds so they can understand the truth.

### Repentance

The next step in God’s plan of salvation is repentance. Just before His crucifixion, Jesus said to His disciples, “But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:7-8). The Helper is the Holy Spirit. When God opens a person’s mind, the Holy Spirit works to convince that person about the truth of the Gospel and the need for personal forgiveness.

People don’t want to admit that they are guilty or that they need to change, so God encourages them to repent. In Acts 11:18, the Bible says, “When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life’” (NIV).

Human nature is selfish and does not want to surrender, so people make up excuses for not believing or not obey God. Adults are often like large babies fighting against the will of a loving, heavenly Father who is trying to help them.

So, God uses His supernatural power to convince people that the Gospel is true and that they are sinners in need of forgiveness. Then, a person must make a free choice to surrender to God or to

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reject His offer of salvation. God will not force a person to accept salvation, but He can be very persuasive. As a result, both faith and repentance are a miracle from God.

### Justification

Next, we will examine the biblical teaching about justification. When God gave the Holy Spirit to the Church at Pentecost, Peter gave a powerful sermon to his countrymen; they accepted the Gospel and asked him what they should do. In Acts 2:38, Peter told them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Several years later, when Paul repented and accepted Jesus Christ, a Christian named Ananias said to him, “Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22:16).

God justifies (forgives) a person who confesses repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ; baptism is a covenant ratification ceremony, a tangible demonstration of faith that brings a person into a New Covenant relationship with God. A young couple can be very deeply in love, but until they exchange their wedding vows, they are not legally married.

In Romans 3:28, Paul explained it this way, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.” Paul used the term “faith” to denote a total commitment to Jesus Christ as both Lord and Savior. The “works of the Law” refer to the sin offerings that God gave to Israel under the Old Covenant; Paul’s point is that Christians don’t need to offer animal sacrifices to obtain forgiveness because faith in Christ is all that is needed.

However, Paul also said that “it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified (Rom 2:13). Justification involves more than just agreeing with a doctrinal statement or historical fact.

God forgives a person based on faith in Jesus Christ, but He will not forgive someone who is deliberately living in sin. So, obedience to God’s Law is necessary for justification, but it isn’t the means of justification.

### Regeneration

This brings us to God’s promise of new, spiritual life called regeneration. The Bible teaches that “the wages of sin is death...” (Rom 6:23a); at the end of the Millennium, God is going to judge the world and condemn sinners to the second death in the lake of fire because they rejected His offer of salvation and new spiritual life. But, this is not the fate of Christians.

In Titus 3:5, Paul wrote, “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.” When a person steps out of the baptismal water, his sins are washed away and the death penalty associated with those sins. So, baptism is a rebirth.

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God also gives a Christian the gift of the Holy Spirit to help eliminate sin at the source, in the mind. A Christian will begin to display the fruit of the Holy Spirit in his life and develop holy, righteous character. The Holy Spirit transforms the personality of a Christian to become like God; a Christian becomes a new creation in Christ Jesus.

The gift of the Holy Spirit also means the promise of eternal life. In Romans 8:11, Paul said, “But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.” When Jesus returns, God will change the physical bodies of every Christian into spiritual bodies that will live forever without any pain, sickness, aging or death.

So, the Bible teaches that God gives a Christian new, spiritual life by washing away his sins, by giving him the gift of the Holy Spirit to transform his mind and by giving him eternal life in the resurrection. Each one of these is a miracle; salvation is a miraculous work of God from start to finish. We must cooperate with His will, but He gets the credit for doing the impossible.

The Bible also teaches that God saves a person by His mercy, in other words, by His grace. A person can't earn God's grace, but he can refuse it or lose it through deliberate sin or neglect.

The next point is that God gives the Holy Spirit to a person through the ministers of His Church. For example, on one occasion, Paul explained the Gospel to several men in Ephesus, and the Bible says, “When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them...” (Acts 19:5-6). On another occasion, Peter and John visited a group of Samaritans that had been baptized in order to pray for them and lay their hands upon them to receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:4-17). The Bible says, “Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money” (Acts 8:18). So, God instructs the ministry to lay their hands on converts and pray for them to receive the Holy Spirit (1Tim 4:14, 2Tim 1:6).

The Bible also teaches that obedience is necessary for regeneration. In Acts 5:32, Peter and the apostles boldly declared the Gospel to the Jewish leaders of their day, saying, “And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.” Just as God will not forgive a person who is deliberately living in sin, He will not give His Holy Spirit to a person who refuses to obey His law.

Many people today have been deceived by a false gospel of easy believe-ism; no repentance or obedience required for salvation. There is no talk of sin and repentance in these churches, but God does not bless rebellion. These people think that they are Christians, but in fact, they haven't taken the first step toward salvation. They have been conned into a false conversion experience through hysterical emotionalism.

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### Sanctification

The next topic is the biblical teaching about living a holy Christian life called sanctification. In Heb 12:14, the Bible says, “Work at living in peace with everyone, and work at living a holy life, for those who are not holy will not see the Lord” (NLT). Jesus also warned His disciples, “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20). The context of this passage clearly says that Jesus expects His followers to obey God’s laws better than the Jewish leaders of His day if they want to be saved and enter God’s kingdom.

Normally, humans don’t want to obey God, but God makes this possible by the gift of the Holy Spirit. In Galatians 5:22, Paul wrote, “But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things” (Galatians 5:22-23 NLT).

So, God gives Christians the ability to develop holy, righteous character by the power of the Holy Spirit living inside of them. Christians must use this supernatural power to overcome sin or they will not enter God’s kingdom.

God is very serious about getting rid of sin from His people. In Revelation 3:19, Jesus said, “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent” (ESV). The discipline of the Lord can be very painful; in Hebrews 12:6, the Bible says, “FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES” (cf. Prov 3:12).

Satan has deceived many people into thinking that they can sin as much as they want, and they will still be saved. “Once saved, always saved”, they claim.

But, this is a deadly mistake. Scripture says that “if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES.” (Heb 10:26-27). Clearly, Christians can lose salvation through deliberate sin or spiritual neglect; there are many examples of this in the Old and New Testament. God wants to save sinners, but He will not give eternal life to someone who continues to live in sin and rebellion.

### The Relationship of Faith and Works

Some might wonder, “If grace can’t be earned, what is the relationship of faith and works in God’s plan of salvation?” In Matthew 7:17, Jesus explained, “So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.” The fruit on the tree is the evidence that identifies the nature of the tree. We can’t see the DNA of a tree, so we judge a tree by its fruit.

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Anyone can say that they faith in Jesus, so God wants to see if people walk the walk and not just talk the talk. As James wrote, “But someone may well say, ‘You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works’” (James 2:18).

This is confirmed throughout the Bible. For example, John saw a vision of a great resurrection at the end of the Millennium, where the dead were gathered before a great white throne, and “they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds” (Rev 20:13).

So, the answer is that our works are the visible evidence of faith or unbelief; therefore, Christians will be judged by their works but justified by their faith. Faith and works are not mutually exclusive; they actually complement each other in God’s plan of salvation.

### When Are Christians Saved?

Someone also might ask, “When is a person actually saved?” For example, Paul spoke about salvation in the past tense when he said, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:8-9). But, in 1Corinthians 15:1-2, he referred to salvation as a present reality, when he said, “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain” (ESV). Yet, he also wrote about a future salvation when he said, “Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him” (Rom 5:9).

The answer is that Christians (1) have been forgiven of their past sins, and (2) they are being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit now, and (3) they will be saved from the second death in the lake of fire in the future. Salvation isn’t a once and done affair; it is a complete work that saves us from every evil – past, present and future.

### Summary

In this study, we have seen that all humans are deceived and sinful, lacking faith & spiritual understanding (depravity). As a result, God must call a person and begin the process of illumination and repentance. As a result, God enables a person to understand and believe His Word; He convicts a person of his sinfulness and encourages repentance. At this point, the sinner must make a free choice to accept or reject God’s offer of salvation.

If a person chooses to repent and seek God, a minister will teach and baptize the disciple; at that point, a person is forgiven (justified). Then, the minister lays his hands on the disciple and prays for the gift Holy Spirit; the disciple is now a converted Christian in the body of Christ.

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A Christian spends a lifetime removing sin and building holy character through the power of the Holy Spirit. When Christ returns, all Christians receive eternal life and a sinless nature in the resurrection from the dead.

At each step, God uses His supernatural power to do the impossible to save humans in their helpless state, but once He acts, humans have a free choice to accept or reject His offer. Thus, God gets all the glory because salvation is a miracle from start to finish.

### Conclusion

The Bible teaches that Christians are saved by grace, justified by faith and judged according to their works. Salvation can't be earned through human effort but can be lost through deliberate sin because our works are the visible evidence of faith or unbelief. Thus, faith and repentance are necessary for salvation.