

Soteriology: Salvation

by Greg Herrick

Greg Herrick's sermon on Soteriology explores the biblical doctrine of salvation, detailing the nature and process of atonement and God's redemptive plan for humanity.

Scripture: John 3:16, Romans 8:29-30, 1 Corinthians 6:11, 1 Corinthians 15:35, Galatians 4:7, Ephesians 1:4, Philippians 1:6, Hebrews 6:9

Topics: "Soteriology", "Atonement Theology"

Description

Greg Herrick delves into the term 'soteriology,' which focuses on the biblical doctrine of salvation, exploring various views on the nature of the atonement throughout church history. From the Recapitulation view to the Penal Substitution view, each theory offers unique insights into Christ's death and its significance. The sermon also covers the extent of the atonement, discussing the debate between general redemption and limited redemption, ultimately emphasizing Christ's sacrifice for the elect. Furthermore, the process of salvation is detailed, including Unconditional Election, Effectual Calling, Regeneration, Conversion, Union with Christ, Justification, Adoption, Sanctification, Perseverance, and Glorification, highlighting the intricate journey of believers from election to eternal glory.

Transcript

The term "soteriology" comes from two Greek terms, namely, *soter* meaning "savior" or "deliverer" and *logos* meaning "word," "matter," or "thing." In Christian systematic theology it is used to refer to the study of the biblical doctrine of salvation. It often includes such topics as the nature and extent of the atonement as well as the entire process of salvation, conceived as an eternal, divine plan designed to rescue lost and erring sinners and bring them back into eternal fellowship with God. Many regard it as the primary theme in Scripture with the glory of God as its goal.

The Nature of the Atonement

Throughout the history of the church a number of different views regarding the nature of the atonement (i.e., the theological significance of Christ's death) have been advanced. The Recapitulation view was advanced by Irenaeus (ca. 120-ca. 200). In this view Christ sums up all humanity in himself in that he went through all the stages of human life, without succumbing to temptation in any way, died, and then rose from the dead. The benefits of his life, death, and resurrection are then available to all who participate in Him through faith.

The Example or Moral Influence (or "subjective") view has been advanced by theologians such as Pelagius (ca. 400), Faustus and Laelius Socinus (sixteenth century), and Abelard (1079-1142/33). Though there are certainly different moral example views,³⁴ their essential agreement consists in arguing that the cross demonstrates how much God loves us and this, then, awakens a response of love in our hearts; we then live as Jesus himself lived. While there is biblical support for this idea (e.g., Phil 2: 6-11; 1 Pet 2:21), it is incomplete as it stands and fails to recognize the more crucial aspects of scriptural teaching on the issue.

Another theory of the atonement advanced in the early church--and really maintained as the standard view in the early church until Anselm--is the Ransom to Satan view. Origen (185-254) was one of the chief proponents of this understanding which asserts that Christ's death was a ransom paid to Satan to secure the release of his hostages, i.e., sinful men and women. While ransom language is used in Scripture to refer to the atonement (e.g., Mark 10:45), it is probably incorrect to include in this the idea that a "price" was paid to Satan, for nowhere in Scripture is such an idea suggested.

In his work *Christus Victor*, the Swedish theologian Gustav Aulén (1879-1977) argued for a Divine Triumph or Dramatic view of the atonement, similar to the ransom theories of Origen and the early church. In the dramatic view God overcame all the powers of hell and death through the cross and in doing so made visible his reconciling love to men. This too has some biblical support, but it is unlikely that it adequately summarizes all of scriptural revelation on this issue.

The Satisfaction or Commercial view of Anselm (1033-1109) argues that man has dishonored God by his sin and that through the death of the perfect, sinless God-man, Jesus Christ, that honor and more--including Satan's defeat--has been restored to God. This theory also finds support in scripture, but more than God's honor was restored through the death of his son.

The Governmental view of the atonement, advanced by Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), places a high value on the justice of God and the demand of his holy law. In this view, the death of Christ upholds God's moral government in that it demonstrates His utter commitment to His holy law. He could have forgiven men, however, without the death of Christ, but this would have left men without the true knowledge of His commitment to His Law. The death of Christ, then, is not as a substitute for us, but rather God's statement about what he thinks about his moral government of the universe. This view has much to commend it, but as a global theory it simply cannot account for the tight connection between three important facts in Scripture: (1) the reconciliation of the believing sinner; (2) the forgiveness of sin; and (3) the death of Christ. Peter says that "Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring [us] to God" (1 Peter 3:18; cf. Rom 5:8).

The Penal Substitution view of the atonement³⁵--the view most often associated with the Reformers, in particular, Calvin--argues that Christ died in the sinner's place and appeased the wrath of God toward sin. Thus there are a cluster of ideas in this view including redemption (ransom), sacrifice, substitution, propitiation, and reconciliation. Though there are tensions in this view, and though the other views each contribute important insights to the idea of Christ's atonement in the NT, this one perhaps rests on the best scriptural support, and brings together the holiness and love of God, the nature and sacrifice of Christ, and the sinfulness of man in a way that all are properly maintained. It is important, however, that the valid insights from the other views not be lost or eclipsed by this model.

The Extent of the Atonement

The question is often asked, "For whom did Christ die?" Evangelicals generally give one of two answers to this question. Both answers appear to enjoy support from Scripture, tradition, and logic. They are: that "he died for all men" (the general redemption view) and that "he died only for the elect" (the limited or particular redemption view). No evangelical believes that Christ died to save the entire world in the sense that every last man will go to heaven on the basis of his death. This is universalism and rightly rejected by scripturally informed Christians. Therefore, every evangelical does limit the application of the atonement to some degree; this is important to note!

Both sides in this dispute agree that the gospel can and should be genuinely offered to all men, that it is sufficient for the salvation of every man, but that not all men will be saved. In the end, however, it seems that the most consistent summary of the Biblical evidence is that Christ died for the elect only. In this way, he paid the penalty for the sins of the elect only and all other people will pay for their own sins in eternal destruction. In this scheme there is unity in the workings of the Godhead in that the Father elects certain ones in eternity past, Christ dies for them in history (he does not die for all men, only for those the Father has chosen), and the Spirit applies that death to the elect and keeps them until the day of Christ. This is precisely the portrait we get in Ephesians 1:3-14 (see also John 17:9). In the case of particular or limited atonement, then, the term "world" in Scripture (e.g., John 3:16) does not mean all without exception, but all without distinction and the term "bought" in 2 Peter 2:1 does not ultimately mean actually "bought" in a salvific way, but only that God is the rightful owner of these men though they deny this by their teaching (cf. Deut 32:6).³⁶

The Process of Salvation

Unconditional Election

The term "election" refers to God's choice, before creation, of those individuals from the mass of humanity whom he would bless by delivering them from eternal condemnation and granting them eternal life. It is a choice that cannot be frustrated in any way as it is grounded in trinitarian resolve.

The term "unconditional" coupled with "election" means that God's choice had nothing to do with any foreseen merit of any kind in the objects of his choice. He chose them unconditionally; he freely chose unworthy sinners because of his love not because they in some way merited salvation.

Those who teach a "conditional election" often argue that God foresees a person's faith and on that basis chooses them. In this scheme God's foreknowledge is neutral with respect to the events of the future. But here again terms such as *yada'* in Hebrew and *progino,sko,* in Greek do not indicate neutrality, but a positive relationship to the thing known (cf. 1 Peter 1:20).³⁷ Further, conditional election is seriously flawed, since men are dead in sin and unable to believe or save themselves (Rom 3:9-11; Eph 2:1). Also, scripture nowhere teaches that because a man believes, God decides to choose him. Rather, it is the other way around: men believe because God has chosen them. From beginning to end, Scripture is clear that God saves men and they, left to themselves, would never turn to him; indeed, they are unable (John 6:65; Acts 13:48; Rom 9:15-16, 20-22). Neither is there any teaching whatsoever in Scripture regarding prevenient grace that renders all men able to believe. Those who believe in Christ, believe because of God's work in their hearts.

Effectual Calling

Generally speaking, there are two "callings" in Scripture.³⁸ There is a general call in which the good news is proclaimed to every creature under heaven. This includes the preaching of the pure gospel coupled with a summons to repent and believe. Jesus called everyone who was weary and heavy laden to come to him for rest (Matthew 11:28-30; Isaiah 45:22). Many did not come, but some did.

There is also what has been termed a special or effectual call wherein the Holy Spirit uses the preaching of the gospel to convict a sinner and bring him/her to faith. Those who are freely chosen (i.e., unconditional election) by God receive this special call. An unbeliever cannot thwart God's effectual call in their hearts, but this does not mean that people come into the kingdom "kicking and screaming" against their will. Rather, their choice is genuine,³⁹ but it is generated, carried along, and brought to fruition by the Spirit. We see this special call on the elect in Romans 1:7; 8:30; 11:29; 1 Cor 1:9; 2 Tim 1:9.

Regeneration

Regeneration is often referred to as the "new birth" (i.e., "born again") and is outlined for us in three principle texts, namely, John 1:12-13; 3:3, and Titus 3:5-6 (see also James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:3). It is a once-for-all (pace Calvin) act of God's Spirit (indeed, every member of the trinity is said to be involved in one way or another), not of human will or because of good deeds, whereby a person is renewed spiritually and made alive in Christ; they become a child of God and are "born" into his family and enjoy his special fatherhood. It is a gracious work of the Spirit in keeping with the promises of the New Covenant and is inscrutable from a human standpoint, though its effects are obvious: love for God that cries out "Abba" Father, prayer in dependence on God, hatred for sin, and love for other Christians as well as those without Christ. Regeneration logically precedes saving faith, for those who are dead in sin cannot believe. No one can enter the kingdom of God, Jesus said, unless he is born again (cf. John 3:5).

Conversion

If election, efficacious calling, and regeneration (cf. also justification and glorification) describe objective aspects of salvation, that is, God's work in salvation, then conversion describes the human or subjective response to God's gracious working. Conversion involves hearing the pure gospel and mixing it with saving faith and genuine repentance. Thus conversion has two closely related aspects to it: faith and repentance. Faith itself involves understanding the message of salvation through Christ, agreeing with it, and personally trusting him to save you. An essential element of that trust is repentance from known sin. This involves a turning from sin to Christ for forgiveness. Thus saving faith is penitent and genuine repentance is believing; it is not just worldly sorrow (Acts 20:21; Heb 6:1; 2 Cor 7:10). Faith is not just mental assent and neither is biblical repentance. We are not dealing simply with historical facts in the gospel, though it indeed rests on these, but we are dealing with a person, "a consuming fire" as one biblical writer put it (Heb 12:29).

When one or the other element, either faith or repentance, is not mentioned in the biblical text, we are not to infer from this that the author thinks the other element unessential to the gospel. Rather, the author may be emphasizing one element over another, but not to the exclusion of the other. In many passages just believing is mentioned (e.g., John 3:16; 5:24; Rom 3:22) and in many others only repentance is mentioned (e.g., Luke 24:46-47; Acts 3:19; 17:30; Rom 2:4). A genuine response to the gospel involves both elements. Someone has once said that repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin. Together they picture for us a genuine response to God's gracious offer of forgiveness in Christ.

Union with Christ

The expression "in Christ" (and its derivatives) is used in the NT to express our union with Christ as believers. It encompasses the whole spectrum of our salvation from its conception in the mind of God to its consummation in the new heavens and the new earth. Our election was "in Christ" (Eph 1:4) and so are all the ensuing benefits, namely, our calling, redemption regeneration, conversion, justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification (Rom 8:29-30, 38-39; 1 Cor 1:30; John 15:1-11; 1 John 2:5-6). Our entire present experience and future destiny is "in Christ."

Our experience of death to sin and resurrection to new life is in light of our union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Thus, not only are we "in Christ" but he (as well as the Father and the Spirit) is also in us (John 14:23) and through His indwelling Spirit we are sanctified in Christ and increasingly conformed/transformed to his image (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18). And, all believers are "one body" in Christ Jesus which itself is a spiritual reality that should give rise to zealous efforts to develop unity (not disunity or uniformity) among true believers (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 10:17; Eph 4:4).

Justification

The doctrine of justification is crucial to a proper view of the gospel and is not simply a doctrine developed in the heat of the battle in Galatians.⁴¹ Several things should be noted briefly about this doctrine. First, justification refers to a legal declaration by God that our sins--past, present, and future--are forgiven through Christ and Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. Second, it is a once-for-all decision to declare (not make) us righteous in his sight so that there remains no longer any legal recourse or accusation against us. This is the meaning Paul intends when he asks in Romans 8:33-34: "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? God is the One who justifies." Third, since justification involves forgiveness of sin and dealing with actual condemnation, it ultimately settles the question of our guilt; we are no longer in a state of guilt. Fourth, we possess, in God's sight, the righteousness of Christ, and since God views it this way, this is indeed reality. It is not fiction as some have argued, but real, though the doctrine of justification does not deal directly with practice, but standing before God's holy law. Our standing has been forever changed and we are no longer guilty; the law no longer has recourse against us. Fifth, justification comes through faith and not by works as Paul makes clear in Romans 3:26-28; 4:4-5. We do not earn this standing, but rather it is credited to our account through faith in Christ. Sixth, it is dangerous to the purity of the gospel of God's grace to introduce ideas of moral improvement into the doctrine of justification. While justification is related inextricably to sanctification, they are not the same reality and should not be confused. Justification does not mean that God infuses righteousness into us in order to prepare us to receive his grace (which is really not NT grace at all). Again, justification deals with our legal standing and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us; it does not refer directly to our day to day growth in the Lord. Seventh, there is an eschatology to justification. As N. T Wright says, "The verdict issued in the present on the basis of faith (Rom 3:21-26) correctly anticipates the verdict to be issued in the final judgment on the basis of the total life."⁴²

Adoption

Adoption refers to God's decision to make us members of his family and to offer us all the benefits and (ethical) standards involved in living "under his roof." If justification deals with my legal standing before God as a sinner, then adoption deals with my familial relationship to the judge; I am now one of his own children through adoption (Gal 3:26) and he has become my Father. In many different texts--many more than one finds in the Old Testament--the New Testament claims that God is our special Father through the gospel and that we are his children. It is in the context of this new relationship that we receive many, great

blessings. First, God is our Father, the one who cares for us and all our needs. He is the one Jesus enjoined us to pray to, for our "heavenly Father knows what we need even before we ask" (Matt 6:25-34). Second, He forgives us when we confess our sin, for he is both a Father who is holy but who also understands our weaknesses and draws alongside to help in time of need (Matt 6:12-14). Third, He disciplines us and chastens us for our sin so that we might share in his holiness (Heb 12:10). He loves us so much that he will not let us wander forever, but will draw us back to his side. Indeed, by His Spirit he leads us into greater experiences of his holiness and this is essentially what it means to be a son or daughter of God (Rom 8:14). Finally, it is through our sonship that we become heirs of Christ, and of God, and of all that eternal life has in store for us, including suffering in the present life (Gal 4:7; Rom 8:17).

We note also that sonship or adoption leads to a new kind of life in God's family.⁴³ We are to imitate our Father who loved us with such a great love. We are to love others according to the example he set for us (Eph 5:1; 1 Pet 1:15-16). Through regeneration we are transformed morally and spiritually so that we can live like sons of God and not like slaves who do not know their masters.

Sanctification

The doctrine of sanctification can be spoken of in three tenses. With respect to the past, we have been set apart, both to belong to God, positionally speaking, and to serve him, practically speaking. We were sanctified at the moment of conversion and were declared legally holy and belonging to the Lord (1 Cor 6:11). With respect to the future, we will be totally sanctified someday in our glorified bodies. At that time our practice will completely match our position or standing before God. At the present time we are being sanctified, that is, increasingly being transformed into the image of the Lord (2 Cor 3:18). Thus the nature of sanctification is transformation; we are being progressively conformed into the image of the Son who died for us. This is God's decreed purpose (Rom 8:29).

Sanctification in the present time, then, is the process of transformation into the image of Christ and the efficient cause of this glorious change is the Spirit living in us (2 Cor 3:18). He mediates the presence of Christ to us and unfolds the moral will of God to us (John 16:13-14; 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19-20). The Spirit uses the people of God (Col 3:16), the word of God (2 Tim 3:16-17), circumstances God ordains to mold and shape us (Rom 8:28), and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper (Matt 28:19-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26). We are on his potter's wheel, not a treadmill; relationship, transformation, and holiness are the goals, not exhaustion.

Therefore, the purpose for which the Spirit is aiming in our lives is Christlikeness and the degree to which we are conformed to him is the degree to which we are sanctified. The fruit that should characterize our lives, then, ought to be love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-24). The root of this transformation lies in our co-crucifixion and co-resurrection with Christ (Rom 6:3-4), and the process is never completed in this life (Phil 3:12-13). Nonetheless, we shoot for perfection (1 Peter 1:15-16), knowing that such will not be the case until the Savior comes from heaven to transform our lowly bodies (Phil 3:20). Until then, the process is colored by struggle against the world (1 John 2:15-16), the flesh (Rom 8:6-7; Gal 5:17), and the devil (Eph 6:12).

Our role in the process of sanctification relates directly only to the present time. It involves mortifying the deeds of the body, that is, putting to death those things that belong to our earthly (carnal) natures (Col 3:5) and conversely, putting on Christ (Rom 13:14). If, by the Spirit, we put to death the misdeeds of the body, we will certainly enjoy all the power, comforts, and joys of the spiritual life (cf. Rom 8:13). We must

remember in our struggle against sin (and, for righteousness), however, that we live in relationship with God on the solid foundation of justification. Though we strive to please him, it is not so that he will become our Father and take us in, rather it is because he has already declared his Fatherhood over us and because he is the One who works in us to this end. Again, our responsibility can be summed up in the word: "cooperation." God is the one who works in us both "the willing and the doing" (Phil 2:12-13).

Perseverance

The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is really the idea of sanctification taken through the whole of a person's life. If God is the author of their salvation, he is also the finisher of it. As Paul says, he will bring to completion the good work he has begun in Christ (Phil 1:6). Since faith itself is a gift of God (Eph 2:8-9), God enables believers by the power of the Spirit to persevere in their trust and to continually move toward Christlikeness, even if for a long while they err in sin. God does not revoke his call, nor annul the justification he has put in place (Rom 11:32). Those whom he has called...he also glorified (Rom 8:30). He will never let his own perish (John 10:28-30).

Passages such as Hebrews 6:4-6 have often been used to deny the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. But these passages do not teach that people can lose their salvation (cf. Heb 6:9). Rather, the writer is drawing inferences based on the evidence (i.e., behavior of his audience) he sees. Like a good pastor he is warning people of the real consequences for those who live with knowing or unknowing contempt for Christ's sacrifice. He does not know whether each and every one is saved, only that if they are going to withdraw from Christianity/persecution into the politically safe-haven of Judaism, then one may certainly question whether such a person knows Christ. Thus the writer warns them of the eternal consequences of life apart from Christ. The important point that these so-called warning passages demonstrate is that one of the means God uses to protect his saints and enable them to persevere is powerful preaching and his word of rebuke.

Finally, this doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, or as it is commonly called, the eternal security of believers (not exactly the same thing), does not lead to sluggish behavior or a lack of zeal in the Christian life. First of all, it includes severe warnings in this regard; we saw this above. Second, perseverance means that the Spirit is persevering with us in order to bring about the fruit of the Spirit in us. He has been doing this from the beginning since we were at one time dead in sin when he breathed regenerating life into us. Why would he stop after we're saved? We are no more sinful now, than we were then. Third, our election is unto holiness and glorification and the Trinitarian plan cannot be thwarted (Eph 1:4; Rom 8:30). Fourth, to argue that believers can lose their salvation is to misunderstand many Biblical passages and to position the work of sanctification ultimately in the human will. This is unscriptural and contrary chiefly to the principle of grace. Finally, those who want to argue from Hebrews 6:4-6 that believers can lose their salvation if they don't live properly, must also accept the truth that, once lost, it cannot be regained--as the passage clearly says. On the contrary, however, the Bible emphatically teaches the eternal security of the believer (Rom 8:38-39).

We must also note that not every one who claims to be a believer is a believer, and therefore to be saved. Thus the warnings by several scriptural writers. Many will say to Him on that day, "Lord, Lord," and he will say to them, "Depart from me, for I never knew you" (Matt 7:21-23). Therefore, just because a person claims to believe in Jesus does not mean that they do. The doctrine of eternal security refers only to those who are truly born-again and who therefore persevere to the end.

Glorification

Glorification is the moment at which the life of God is strikingly manifested in us when we receive our resurrected bodies and are perfectly fitted for existence in the eternal state. There will be some similarity between our mortal bodies and our glorified bodies, as the example of Jesus after his resurrection demonstrates (e.g., John 21:4ff), but there will be great differences between that which was sown in dishonor and that which will be raised in honor (1 Cor 15:35-49). It will be a body similar to its predecessor, as a seed is to the plant into which it grows. But it will not be marked by dishonor, decay, weakness, and the absence of spiritual life. On the contrary, it will be a material body, specially fitted for spiritual existence and clothed with dignity, power, and glory. It will be patterned after Christ's own resurrection body (1 Cor 15:49). In these glorified bodies there will be perfect concord between desire and fulfillment in terms of our obedience and service to our great King. Our experience of God will be one of complete fulfillment as well. At that time we will be truly human and able to worship and praise God in a way he rightfully deserves (see the section under "Personal Eschatology" below).

33 It is difficult to say for sure whether this was Abelard's view or whether he simply wanted to emphasize it alongside more orthodox views.

34 The Socinian view emphasized Christ's human nature in order to present him as an example of the kind of love we are to show to God. The moral influence theory, as advocated by Abelard, and later by Horace Bushnell in the US, regards the death of Christ as a demonstration of divine love and Jesus' divine dimension is emphasized. See Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 785.

35 We are here envisioning the atonement to include such important ideas as substitution, sacrifice, reconciliation, and propitiation.

36 See Grudem, *Theology*, 594-603. For a more modified Calvinistic view, see Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 825-35. Also, the language of "bought" (agorazo,) in 2 Peter 2:1 might come from the OT, as we pointed out, but it might be the specific language of Peter's opponents, that is, it might be their estimation of themselves. Peter thus uses it in a sarcastic way. Also, when John says that Christ died not only for our sins, but also for (peri + gen) the sins of the entire world (1 John 2:2), he may simply be responding to an incipient form of Gnosticism which confined initiation to a select few. John says, "no, this gospel is equally for all men." For a thorough discussion of this issue, the reader is encouraged to study John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 10 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967).

37 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 926; see also BDB, 394.

38 We are not concerned here with the "call" to a particular vocation.

39 Here we are talking about a choice that involves understanding, agreement, and an embracing of the work of Christ on the cross.

40 Regeneration seems to be associated in the early church with baptism, but it must be said up front that Scripture nowhere sanctions the belief that regeneration is materially related to anything other than Spirit sponsored, saving faith. The rite of baptism is the Christian symbol for salvation, and is often associated with faith, but of itself it contributes nothing.

41 Paul lists it as integral to the process of salvation in Romans 8:30. There it is linked with other important truths such as God's predestination of the elect, his calling them to salvation in history, and his commitment to bring them safely to glorification in the future. Justification is also important a doctrine for marking out the people of God who know they are saved not by works which they have done, but by the grace of God.

42 N. T. Wright, "Justification," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 360.

43 This, of course, directly relates to regeneration and sanctification.

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