

STUDY 8 Salvation (Soteriology)

Four main points

1. Grace
2. Atonement
3. Justification
4. Sanctification and Perseverance

1. Grace

Reading:

1 Cor. 1:23-24; Eph. 2:1-10; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:23
H & W 136-141 (cf STUDY 5)

2. Atonement

Reading:

Mk. 10:45; Rom. 3:25; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 10:14; 1 Pet. 2:24
KTT 189–204, 205–214
H & W 115-127 (limited section - read quickly)

3. Justification

Reading:

Ps 32:1, 2; Ezek. 18:31-32; Rom. 3:20-31, 5:1; Gal. 2:20
KTT 227–238
H & W 141-145 (cf. STUDY 5)

4. Sanctification and Perseverance

Reading:

1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Tim. 1:12; Heb. 6: 4-6; Mt. 13: 20, 21;
KTT 238–253
H & W 145-152 (cf. STUDY 5)

1. Grace

The initiative in human salvation rests with God. The very fact that any are to be saved from the consequences of their unbelief and disobedience is only by the grace of God.

It is important to recognise that God seeks after men and women before they ever seek after God. The emphasis is always that of God coming to seek after and to save the lost. Human beings have a bias toward sin and away from God. It is God's prevenient grace that enables a person with a bias to sin to turn to God. Through the operation of God's grace the Holy Spirit creates a desire in the hearts of men and women to be reconciled to God.

God invites all people everywhere to repent, to believe in Jesus Christ, and to accept the salvation that is offered through the Gospel. The basis of this salvation is the death of Christ. The cross is therefore absolutely critical. The resurrection is proof that Christ's death was truly effective.

By the grace of God a person is brought to a position of repentance and the Bible speaks of conversion to a new life, which is expressed both as the new birth and adoption into a new family. The new birth is not a human accomplishment but a supernatural work of God. A distinction is sometimes made between the external calling to all who hear and the inward or effectual calling to those who actually repent and believe the Gospel.

Justice, mercy and grace are helpfully distinguished in this way. Justice is getting what one deserves. Mercy is not getting something unwelcome that one would otherwise deserve. Grace is getting something welcome that one does not deserve. God's grace is free and unmerited. We cannot earn it but we can respond to it and choose to receive all its benefits. Grace is not without cost, it is God's Riches At Christ's Expense.

2. Atonement

Just as there are many effects of sin, so there are many aspects to the atonement. Atonement literally means cover. In the Old Testament the ritual of the Temple, or of the Tabernacle in the wilderness, had its high point in the Day of Atonement (*yom kippur*). On this day Aaron, and his successors in the office of High Priest, took the blood of the sacrificial animal into the Holy of Holies (NIV most holy place) to make atonement for the sins of the people. The blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled on the mercy seat (NIV atonement cover). The sinner could therefore be reconciled to God because sins had been covered.

Atonement now embraces the whole theme of redemption through the blood of Christ. The sacrificial death that the Temple ritual anticipated is fulfilled in Christ's death on the cross. He is the perfect sacrifice, the Lamb of God. The sinner may therefore be covered by the blood of Christ and acquitted of charges that would otherwise lead to judgment. In his obedience Christ achieved victory over sin and death. Jesus Christ is therefore a great example to us all that we may follow in his steps. He is a new representative head of the human race 'a second Adam'.

An important theme in the atonement has also been the idea of Christ as ransom or redeemer. There is the notion here that one pays the price for others. There is a danger in pushing any of these illustrations too far. Ransom is not quite the same as our modern notion of a payment to kidnappers for this would force us into the dead-end of wondering to whom the ransom was paid. Rather it carries the sense of compensation so that the requirements of justice in putting right a wrong are met.

Two difficult words are sometimes used in relation to the atonement. 'Propitiation' means that which is offered in order to meet the demands of justice and the wrath of God. 'Expiation' carries the idea of wiping the slate clean.

3. Justification

Justification is clearly a legal word relating to justice. Our Bible translations need to translate a family of Greek words that are related (justice - justify - righteous). The idea is that of judicial acquittal or remission of sins.

Remission of sins is based wholly on the Lord's atoning sacrifice. The benefits of this are appropriated by faith. What is often called justification by faith is more accurately described as justification by grace through faith. That is by faith the Christian receives the work of Christ and comes under its benefits. This is sometimes called the Covenant of Grace.

Justification is entirely a work of grace. It is unmerited and not by works which an individual might have done. Good works, pleading, self-sacrifice, giving all one's goods are of no use. There is also the hidden danger of making faith a human work, that is thinking that one is saved because one has faith - but even this faith is not of ourselves but a gift from God.

Justification is a one off event. It is to do with our legal status. The sinner is in a wrong standing before God. Justification brings the sinner into a right standing before God. That is an act of God, the judge, alone. The sinner does not cease to be a sinner but is no longer counted as one. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to the sinner.

Justification may helpfully be distinguished from forgiveness even though initially they are the same. A believer is moved from a wrong standing before God to a right standing before God. At that moment a believer is both justified and forgiven and experiences the benefits and peace with God that come from forgiveness. However, even in that new standing before God one can fall into sin. One does not need to be re-justified but one, sadly, needs to be forgiven over and over again.

4. Sanctification and Perseverance

The Christian is called to a life of holiness, of good works and preparing for life in the eternal Kingdom of God. The question of whether a Christian can be made holy in this life has perplexed theologians throughout the years. Sanctification means setting apart by the Holy Spirit for God. God expects a life of personal holiness from every Christian person. The believer is set apart from sin through repentance and receives an initial sanctification by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. A Christian who is in close fellowship with God through Christ is more acutely aware of the cross and of personal sin and consequently is more mindful of these in daily living.

Much has been made of the various theories of sanctification (eradication - rooting out the evil principle; suppression - crucifying the old nature; counteraction - rendering the old nature helpless) but these need neither be pressed too hard nor rendered as alternatives.

Wesley and consequently Methodism teaches that entire sanctification / Scriptural holiness / perfect love is possible in this life, and can come about in an instant by faith. Wesley did not teach sinless perfection but that it was possible, at least in theory, for a Christian to know freedom from the habitual practice of sin. But the exact relationship between life in the Spirit and life in the flesh is a problem. In short the Methodist belief is that the righteousness of Christ may also be imparted and known by faith in this life and not only imputed in a judicial sense.

The doctrine sometimes called the perseverance of the saints is probably better called the preservation of the saints. The question needing to be answered is whether a person who has been saved can lose that salvation? The traditional Methodist view that it is possible is not now very popular.