

Salvation

Cedar Springs Baptist Church

What We Teach

The most important question we can ever ask is “what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). How can we be saved from Satan, sin, and death; from an “empty way of life” now (1 Pet 1:18) and an everlasting punishment in hell later?

We do not believe in universalism, that everyone will be saved in the end. We do not believe in pluralism, that more than one religion saves people. And we do not believe in inclusivism, that people are saved by Jesus without expressing faith in him. We believe in Paul and Silas’ answer to the question, “what must I do to be saved?” They answered, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). This section explains why and how we must believe in Jesus and what his salvation brings.

How We Believe in Jesus

By Grace alone. Grace is God’s unmerited favor which he freely lavishes upon sinners (Eph 1:8; 1 John 3:1). Salvation is from top to bottom, from beginning to end, the work of God. We are tempted to think that we contribute something to our salvation. Perhaps our natural goodness attracted God’s attention or our good choices merit his continued favor. We suspect that somehow we deserve to be saved, and that if we try hard enough we will keep our salvation. This widely held belief is our most dangerous temptation. It destroys the foundation of our salvation and blinds many people to “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor 4:4).

God urges everyone to submit to his rule and be reconciled to him. The Bible ends with his exhortation: “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come!’ Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life” (Rev 22:17). God calls everyone to return to him, but sinners will not repent and believe unless God acts first. God says we “were dead in...transgressions and sins” (Eph 2:1; cf. Col 2:13), wholly unable to merit any part of our salvation or make the first move towards God (Rom 4:2; 2 Tim 1:9).

So before the creation of the world, for reasons only God knows, he sovereignly chose some sinners to effectually draw to repentance and saving faith in Jesus (Eph 1:3-14; Rom 8:28-30; 9:7-24; 1 Thess 1:4-5; 2 Tim 1:9; Matt 22:14; John 6:44). Paul exclaims, “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:8-9). Whatever good we have comes solely from God, “who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Phil 2:13; cf. Heb 13:21; 1 Cor 15:10).

God's election and calling are a deep mystery that comforts us. When we feel our faith is weak, we remain safe in our Father's hand (John 10:30). God's election and calling also humble us. God says he chose the weakest people so he might receive the most glory (1 Cor 1:26-31). We must never think that we have done or can do anything to earn the smallest part of our salvation. The gospel is not something we achieve; it's a promise that we can only receive.

Through Faith alone. We receive the gospel through faith alone. Faith is not a human work, for "it is the gift of God" (Eph 2:8). It is not even a work. Faith is merely an open hand that receives the gift of salvation. We must reach out our hand to accept the gift of salvation, just as a child must take and unwrap a present. And like that child, we earn no credit for doing so (John 1:12-13).

Faith means to trust or rely on the promises of God (Rom 10:13-15; Heb 11:1, 8-19). Our faith brings salvation when we put all of our weight on the finished work of Christ (John 3:18, 36; Gal 2:16; Phil 3:9). We rest entirely in Jesus, and in him alone. We refuse to hedge our bets or diversify our trust but depend entirely and alone upon Christ's death and resurrection. If Jesus is not the Savior of the world we are doomed. We have no backup plan.

As we turn towards Christ in faith we must simultaneously turn away from sin in repentance. Jesus came to "save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21; 9:13), and we can hardly claim that Jesus is our Savior if we stubbornly cling to our sins. Jesus joined faith and repentance when he began his earthly ministry. "The kingdom of God is near," he announced, "Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15; cf. Luke 19:8-10).

In Christ alone. We are not saved by the strength of our faith but by the object of our faith. We are saved by faith because faith is the means that unites us to Christ (Gal 2:20; John 15:5; Col 1:27; 1 John 2:24; 5:20). Jesus lived a long time ago on the other side of the world. How does his life, death, and resurrection count for us? We do not join him merely by studying his teachings or following his example. We become one with him when we rest in him. Our faith unites us to Christ so that we receive his benefits. We are in Christ as a branch abides in a vine, a building rests on its foundation, and a body depends on its head (John 15:5; 1 Pet 2:4-5; Eph 4:15-16). In a mystical, indescribable manner our lives merge as his spiritual vitality flows through us. Jesus' story becomes ours. His life, death, resurrection, and ascension are now credited to us (Rom 6:3-6; Eph 2:6). Specifically, we who are in Christ receive the following benefits.

What Belief in Jesus Brings

Justification. This doctrine is central to our Christian faith because it explains how sinners are forgiven of their sins and accepted as righteous by a holy God. We cannot justify ourselves. We cannot take even a single step toward meeting God's righteous standard or making up for past sins. Any good that we might do is already owed him, so how could we possibly do

surplus good works to pay back our debt? Left to ourselves, we would surely go to hell, the fitting penalty for rejecting God's reign in our lives.

But God has not left us in our sin and misery. He sent his Son to save us from ourselves. Jesus Christ lived a sinless life, submitting to God where we did not, and then he offered his perfect life in our place on the cross (Gal 3:13; 1 Cor 15:3). God the Father accepted Jesus' sacrifice and raised him "to life for our justification" (Rom 4:25; cf. 1 Cor 15:17).

If we confess our sin and put our faith in Christ—resting in him alone for our salvation—we receive what the Reformers called the "joyous exchange" (2 Cor 5:19-21; Ps 32:2; Rom 4:3, 6, 8, 22; 5:9, 18-19; Gal 3:6). God the Father places our sin upon Jesus and credits Jesus' good life to us. He forgives our sin, which he imputes to Jesus, and he receives us as righteous on account of his Son. On our own we are sinners, but our Father sees us resting in his Son and declares that we are righteous for Jesus' sake (Rom 3:22-28; 1 Cor 1:30; Phil 3:9; 1 Pet 3:18).

New Birth. Union with Christ not only supplies a righteous standing before God, it also bestows new spiritual life to grow in that righteousness. This change is so radical that Scripture says it is being born again and raised from the dead (John 1:13; 3:3-8; Tit 3:5; Eph 2:1-10; Col 2:13). The Holy Spirit makes us alive in Christ so that we grow in our love and obedience to him. Paul exclaims: "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor 5:17; cf. Gal 6:15).

Adoption. Our new birth places us in the family of God. God doesn't merely want to help us, to save us. He also wants us, to include us in his family. God chose us "to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ" (Eph 1:5). We are not slaves who must earn the approval of God. We are sons, accepted by God because of our union with his dear Son. We possess "the full rights of sons," which means God is our Father and we will inherit with Christ all that belongs to him (Rom 8:15-17; Gal 4:5-7).

Sanctification. God accepts us just as we are, but he loves us too much to allow us to stay that way. He not only saves us from sin's penalty (justification), he also frees us from sin's power. Paul commands Christians to "not become weary in doing good" (Gal 6:9) but to "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling," knowing that "it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil 2:12-13). We must not rest on our spiritual accomplishments but continually "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet 3:18).

Indwelling and Sealing of the Holy Spirit. God sent his Holy Spirit to empower our spiritual growth. The Spirit indwells us. Paul explains, "if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you," then "we have an obligation" to "live by the Spirit" and produce

“the fruit of the Spirit” (Rom 8:11-13; Gal 5:16-26). The Spirit seals us, marking us as the children of God and guaranteeing that we will keep our faith to the end (Eph 1:13; 4:30).

Perseverance. Jesus said his true disciples “shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand” (John 10:28-29; cf. 6:39-40). Jude agrees that our almighty Father “is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy,” and Paul assures that those God justifies he also glorifies (Jude 24; Rom 8:30).

Hebrews warns us not to “deliberately keep on sinning” (10:26) so that we eventually “fall away” from our salvation (6:4-6). This is a helpful reminder that Christians who have been genuinely born again do not see how close to the edge they can get. God’s children must not abuse his forgiveness as a license to sin, but instead seek fresh ways to express their gratitude for his grace.

The Scriptures do not teach the perseverance of the saints to encourage sinful behavior but rather to assure our hearts that the God “who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6). Our salvation rests in God’s hands, and he will keep us.

Assurance. How can we know we are saved? Jesus said we can tell by our works, for “every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.... Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them” (Matt 7:17-20). Do you put God and others ahead of yourself? Are you committed to prayer and holiness? Does your life routinely produce the fruit of the Spirit? (Gal 5:22-26). If so, take these as tangible signs that you are in Christ.

Conversely, anyone who continues in unrepentant sin should be afraid, for their hardened heart and selfish behavior indicate they do not know our Savior. They should heed the warnings of Hebrews (6:4-12; 10:26-31), remembering that “The Lord will judge his people,” and “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:30-31).

These warnings are not directed at those tender consciences who know all too well that their best efforts bear the blemishes of sin. How can their bruised and spoiled fruit ever give them assurance? Only by placing their faith in Jesus, believing that their Father forgives their faults for Jesus’ sake.

But our faith in Christ is imperfect. How can a faulty faith gain assurance that Jesus forgives our faulty works? Our faith may be weak and imperfect, but as long as it looks to Jesus it is enough. The object of faith is more important than its strength. Our faith may be as small as a mustard seed, but if it rests in Jesus it can know that his righteousness forgives both our impure works and the imperfect faith that lays hold of him (Matt 17:20-21). Sensitive souls will always find serious flaws in their faith and works. But if they look to Jesus, they may have the assurance that his grace is sufficient to cover any and every sin (1 John 2:1-2; 5:13-15). So “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:2).

Membership in the Body of Christ. We are saved for something larger than ourselves. When we are united with Christ we are united with his body, for “we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Cor 12:13). Since “in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others,” we must use our “different gifts” to cheerfully serve each other and build up the body of Christ (Rom 12:4-8). We will continue to do this “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13).