

Salvation According to Peter

A half-truth is a lie still. If you were to ask the people of the Northern Kingdom, they would say with a straight face, “We worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” And yes, that they did. Yet they would be lying, because the whole truth is, they were also worshipping the pagan god, Baal. They were violating the first and chief of the Ten Commandments, thus nullifying the Mosaic Covenant.

The people of the Southern Kingdom were no better. Jeremiah Chapter 2 indicts the people of Judah. We read, **“My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their won cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water”** (2:13). The Lord castigated His elect, His chosen people, His “bride,” “His son,” remarking how evil they were forsaking Him and having no fear of Him (v.19b). God called the Nation of Israel to be His “treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5,6) to serve Him by revealing Him to the nations of earth that Gentiles too might honor the Creator God, the God of Israel. But, as Jeremiah continues, **“Long ago you broke off your yoke and tore off your bonds; you said, ‘I will not serve you’”** (2:20a). This was rebellion!

What Jeremiah wrote about the Nation of Israel could be just as true of today’s American Church. This is a serious matter because it involves the essence of salvation. Let me explain.

Salvation in the synoptic Gospels is, according to Jesus, discipleship. We are to know Jesus and His teachings, and then imitate Him and do as He did. A disciple is to be an identical replica, a clone, of the Master and so fulfill the Master’s purpose or mission. Discipleship is work; it demands great effort and sacrifice, and it necessitates deep commitment. That’s why love and obedience are so critically important for a believer. Discipleship is to prepare believers for the future Messianic Kingdom. Discipleship entails doing works of righteousness and mission as well as Christ-likeness. Without love for Jesus, gratitude for what He did for us, and trusting obedience, there’s no discipleship. And so no salvation. We ignore discipleship in today’s churches. It doesn’t exist.

Salvation in the Pauline letters is mainly positional truth. It’s theology. That appeals immensely to us because we love things intellectual. So salvation is a mental construct, an idea, a series of propositions and doctrines. Salvation is justification, regeneration, sanctification and glorification. It’s imputed righteousness. It’s being *in Christ*, and being adopted as children of God. And it’s having sins forgiven. This is all positional truth, ours by grace thru faith, based on the atonement that Jesus effected.

So, what many—too many—of us think salvation is, in today’s American churches, is this: We don’t have to do anything but believe. All the blessings of salvation are then ours automatically. So we can live as we please. “I’ve placed my faith in Christ, and so I’m saved. My sins are forgiven and I have the assurance of being in heaven. Don’t tell me I have to do anything or be any different than I am, because—don’t you get it?—I’m saved no matter what. Salvation is by grace. Anything else is works salvation. It’s my life and I can live it the way I want to.” This notion of salvation is a half-truth, in other words, it’s a lie.

Let’s examine what Peter says salvation is. The word, **“elect,”** is at the very beginning, the end, and the middle (2:9) of 1 Peter. It must therefore be very important. To be “elect” is immensely privileging, so it has deep moral meaning. It means we’re under obligation to God. Salvation entails responsibilities. Israel was “elect” (or chosen) to serve God. So election is for service. Election also makes us aliens, sojourners, in this life, **“strangers in this world”** (1:1). In other words, this world is not our home; we’re on our way to our ultimate destiny, our salvation. **“Foreknowledge”** doesn’t mean merely knowing certain facts before-hand. It’s a relational word, implying a love relationship. The Father loved us and entered into a relationship with us even before creation. The **“sanctifying work”** of the Spirit means salvation has a compelling moral aspect. To Peter,

there's nothing passive about salvation; it's inescapably something for us to work at. **"By the obedience of Jesus Christ"** implies that we need also to be obedient.

Now, let's observe carefully what Peter says: **"until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time"** (1:5) means that —get this!—salvation is future. Salvation is not something that occurs and is completed when we "make a decision for Christ." No way! Peter is saying that we must persevere, for example, thru suffering, and that God's power enables it. Then, **"for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls"** (1:9). Our response of faith is purposeful, it results in a future salvation.

Salvation is something that we grow up into, **"you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth"** (1:22). We are not to be passive waiting for an eschatological reward to come. No, rather, we're to be actively pursuing maturity by obedience to the Word of God. And we will **"grow up in our salvation"** if we understand **"the goodness of the Lord"** (2:3). So salvation is a process. We're to live in the here-and-now in view of its future realization or fulfillment. This present life, in other words, is preparation for a future salvation. It may entail suffering. It certainly entails trusting in God.

Salvation involves serving God as Israel was to serve. **"You're a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you . . ."** (2:9). Peter refers to the Church with the same language as God did of Israel. Why? Because the Church is to fulfill what Israel failed to do: reveal God to the nations. Missions. Evangelism.

Peter acknowledges, **"with difficulty"** we are saved (4:17-18). Huh? The Christian life is demanding. And we're going to be held accountable for our response to salvation's demands. If we're serving Christ, suffering in some way will result. Good works will result. Growing in the Word will result. A life of growth in faith culminates in salvation.

To Peter, salvation is not forensic justification, a legal status before God that's credited to a believer when first trusting in Christ; that is Paul's positional righteousness. To Peter, salvation is final deliverance from this evil, condemned world at the Return of the exalted Christ to reign. It's future. And we'll then share in His glory. But in this life, we're pursuing righteousness and Christ-likeness and mission in the expectation of that glory. We must be faithful in this life now so that we attain to final perfect salvation. Of course Peter understands grace and the role of faith. He is certainly not promoting "works salvation." This is Scripture. What Peter has written is God-breathed, exactly what the Holy Spirit intends for us to know and respond to.

Peter's understanding of salvation builds upon that of Jesus, although without discipleship. And Peter is not contradicting Paul. Peter has a different view of the same salvation as Paul. Except for Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul everywhere in his letters also understands salvation as a future reality. And what we too easily miss in Paul is that, in view of all the wonderful positional truths he teaches, we are obligated to live in a way that glorifies God, according to the demands of love and righteousness. There's no trace of antinomianism in Paul.

Salvation is not something merely positional that leaves us at liberty to live as we please, although I suspect that this is the popular, perhaps even universal understanding of Christianity today. What Peter makes fully clear for us is, salvation is something for us to experience, that is, to live out. It's *this* that we don't get.

Dear reader: Don't trust in half-truths. Positional truth is only one aspect of salvation, it is not the fullness of it. Our eternal destiny hangs on understanding and responding to God's Word, that is, to its whole truth. We dare not be indifferent to the responsibilities and expectations of Scripture because of an incomplete or false understanding of salvation. Trusting in a popular religion that enables a licentious, self-centered life-style, regardless how biblical it may seem, is idolatry still.