



HOW ARE WE SAVED?

THEME
5

PART
1

Old Testament Perspectives

SUMMARY

Salvation is a biblical term with rich meanings. Associated words and concepts make it a broad expression with uses in both secular and religious contexts. In the Old Testament Israel sees God's saving activities pervading many areas of life. Included in the meanings of salvation are deliverance, freedom from slavery, peace and forgiveness of sin. God is portrayed as providing the means by which salvation is made real to the people.

BASIC BIBLE REFERENCES

Exodus 18:9-11
Leviticus 26:6
Numbers 6:24-26
Deuteronomy 7:8-9
Psalms 7:1-2; 85:10; 86:5; 103:11-12
Isaiah 1:18-19; 32:16-18; 43:1-3; 53:4-6
Romans 3:23-24; 5:8
Ephesians 2:8

WORD LIST

Deliverance
Expiation
Forgiveness
Peace
Ransom
Salvation

Salvation and Deliverance

In Theme Four we discussed how the Bible and leaders in the early Church portray humankind. A striking feature of that discussion was the emphasis on the way sin breaks the relationship between God and humanity and destroys community. The Bible also describes how sin is overcome. It tells how humans are brought into right relationships with God and others. This is called "salvation," a rich term with many different meanings. We begin this theme by exploring the background of that term in the Old Testament.

The most common Old Testament concept of "salvation" is related to the Hebrew verb *yesha*, which means to "broaden," to "enlarge," or to create space for human life within the community. The corollary of this is removing whatever restricts such life.¹

God is the one who provides divine help to enable salvation to occur. This often takes place when people are surrounded by enemies or facing threatening adversaries. Thus the term has the sense of "to come to the rescue." It is often translated "to deliver," and this experience is referred to as "deliverance." Help is given to those who are weak or powerless by one who is able to intervene and bring protection. Read Exodus 14:30; **Psalms 7:1-2**. God saves from the troubles of life as well as from *uncleanness* and *apostasies*.

¹ This is the root from which the name "Jesus" derives (Hebrew Yeshuah-Joshua—"God saves" or "savior").

See Ezekiel 36:29; 37:23. God uses leaders to “save,” but it is ultimately “the God of Israel” who is “the Savior.” Read Judges 7:7; 1 Samuel 9:16; Isaiah 45:17.²

Salvation is associated with divine love. It is given in the midst of distress to restore spaciousness and well-being. See Psalms 72:4; 109:26. Israel worships the God of salvation to whom people cry to save, help, deliver, preserve, and rescue. See Psalms 71:2; 86:2. God will place the poor and needy in safety. Read Psalms 12:1-6. After the exile, Israel looked for a source of help for the future end-times, when history would be concluded and the divine reign established. See, for example, Isaiah 25:9, Zechariah 8:7-8.

Freedom from Slavery

The exodus of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt is central to Old Testament recognition that “God is help.” The Hebrew word *nasal* means to rescue something from that which holds it, thus to “deliver” or “save” from restraints—to “free” someone. Read **Exodus 18:9-11**. See also Psalms 34:4; Jeremiah 39:17. Another Hebrew word, *yasa*, means to rescue in the sense of “leading some out.” It is used in a technical way to describe the Exodus event. Read Exodus 13:3, 14; Deuteronomy 5:6.

These words can also refer to God’s “saving acts” on behalf of individuals from fears, troubles, death, and Sheol (2 Samuel 12:7; Psalms 34:17). God is the deliverer from sin and can rescue the weak and needy (Psalms 35:10; 79:9).

Liberation through Ransom

The image of obtaining freedom through ransom is related to God’s acting on behalf of people to “save” and “deliver” them from constraints. The background here is redemption of a slave through payment of a “purchase price” or “ransom.” This action relates to Israel’s slave law and, more generally, to the freeing of a poor person who cannot pay a debt. Read Exodus 21:7-11. Israel saw its liberation from slavery in Egypt as a redemption by God. Read **Deuteronomy 7:8-9**; 9:26. God “redeems” the people both in the past—from Egypt—and in the future. See Isaiah 35:4; Zechariah 10:8.

An important related word *ga’al* comes from family law. It means “redeemer.” Israel’s law for the Year of Jubilee provided that possessions were to be restored to their previous owners

² Isaiah 45 is a rich chapter in ascribing salvation solely to God. No idols can save. See Isaiah 45:17-22. Note the parallel below between Isaiah 45:23 and a New Testament Christ hymn proclaiming salvation:

“To me every knee shall bow,
every tongue shall swear ...”

(Isaiah 45:23)

“so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend ...
and every tongue should confess ...”

(Philippians 2:10-11)

during this time. Scan Leviticus 25:8-55. These directives include restoring land to its prior owners. A redeemer is a family member who “buys back” the family possession. Read Jeremiah 32:6-15. Theologically, God is the redeemer who acts as a protector of the weak and who advocates and intercedes. See Job 19:25; Jeremiah 50:34. In the Exodus event, God restores a “lost possession” in the sense of regaining the nation of Israel. The liberation of the people to return home after the exile is a redeeming of the people of God to their proper owner. God is Israel’s redeemer. Read **Isaiah 43:1-3**; 59:20.

Salvation as Peace

A very rich Hebrew word, *shalom*, is one of Scripture’s most significant theological terms. It has a wide range of connotations relating to its most basic meaning of wholeness, completeness, and well-being. It is often translated “peace.” But among dimensions of its scriptural usages are fulfillment, completion, maturity, soundness, wholeness (individual and communal), community, harmony, tranquillity, security, welfare, friendship, agreement, success, and prosperity.³

Shalom denotes well-being in the widest sense. It can refer to prosperity, bodily health, being content when one departs or goes to sleep or at death. The communal dimensions of peace refer to good relations between nations and people and are bound up with righteousness and justice. See Genesis 15:15; 26:28-29; 1 Kings 5:12; Psalms 122:6-8. Without a righteous life, no peace is possible.

God is the giver of peace. Read **Leviticus 26:6**; 2 Chronicles 14:6. God’s presence brings peace. A person is blessed when life is guarded and treated graciously by God. Read **Numbers 6:24-26**. In this respect, peace is wished for others in a greeting or a blessing. See, for example, Exodus 4:18; 1 Samuel 1:17.

Peace as community is harmony between God and creation and among all creatures. See Job 5:23. Peace is possible when people treat others with care and love, not by hatred or war. Read Psalms 120:6-7. Peace includes the absence of war and is thus a goal for nations. When a community has shalom, its members can experience peace because they trust God (Isaiah 26:3). It is *good to seek peace, and pursue it* (Psalms 34:14).

Peace is primarily relational in the Old Testament, representing the fullness and wholeness of right relationships with God and in communities. God’s peace accompanies covenant

³ For a more complete discussion of shalom, see the Kerygma publication entitled *Shalom: A Study of the Biblical Concept of Peace*.

promises to Israel and is also a blessing in future times. Isaiah presents the coming messiah, the deliverer and bearer of salvation, as the “Prince of Peace.” Read Isaiah 9:6, 7.

Forgiveness of Sin

A major way relationships with God are set right in the Old Testament is through forgiveness of sin. Hebrew words relating to the concept of forgiveness have roots meaning “send away” or “take away,” “cover,” “remove” or “wipe away.” These are associated with many other words in our English Bible indicating the forgiveness of sin such as: atonement, expiation, justification, pardon, propitiation, repentance, reconciliation, and redemption. Many of these words have richer New Testament meanings. Yet they are also basically related to forgiveness as well.

In the Old Testament, two main elements of the forgiveness of sin can be distinguished. They are both associated with restoring the relationship between God and people. One is redemption through a sin offering in “expiation” or “satisfaction” for the sin of the people. The other is redemption as forgiveness of sin. Expiation looks at the object causing the rupture in the relationship: sin. Forgiveness looks at the subject who initiates and sustains a covenant relationship and in faithfulness to that relationship forgives sin: God.

Expiation

In Israel’s worship life, sin was a reality that damaged the community’s relationship with its Lord. As covenant people who were bound to serve God in loving obedience, Israel’s sin marked a rebellious transgression against the covenant and the people’s failure to be the covenant community God intended. God, however, remained faithful to the covenant. Read Deuteronomy 7:9 again. Through priests, two types of offerings were made for the expiation or pardon of the people’s sin. These were the sin offerings and the guilt offerings. Skim Leviticus 4:1-6:7; 6:24-7:1, noting the subheadings in your Bible. Sin offerings were for offenses against the ceremonial law; guilt offerings for offenses among people, such as broken pledges, property violations, etc. Through these offerings, sin was atoned for and reconciliation was accomplished between God and the sinful people.

Expiation was always made *on behalf of* or *for* someone by the priest who offered sacrifices. See Leviticus 16:30-34. Israel knew that only God could forgive sins and restore the relationship. Sacrifices were the means for redemption to occur. Sacrifices were offered so the people—not God—could be moved into a reconciliation. Often the formula ran: “The priest shall make atonement *on your behalf* for the sin that you have committed, and *you shall be forgiven*” (Leviticus 4:31; 5:6; 19:22).

Forgiveness

Throughout the Old Testament it is God who forgives sin. Forgiveness means covering sin, atonement for sin, or purification (in the worshipping community) for sin. The greatness of this forgiveness is often expressed metaphorically. Read **Psalms 103:11-12**; see Isaiah 38:17.

Forgiveness becomes possible through the expiatory sacrifice. Yet with the sacrifice there must be a genuine attitude of repentance or turning away from sin. Read **Isaiah 1:18-19**; Joel 2:13. To “repent” in Hebrew literally means to “re-turn,” to “turn around,” “to walk in a new direction.” Theologically it means to return to God’s will, ways, or law. A radical change in one’s attitude toward sin and toward God is required. Desire to obey the will of God and remorse over sin is what God seeks. At its best, the sacrifice signifies this disposition to know God and heed God in these ways. Read 1 Samuel 15:22; Hosea 6:6. Sinners whose transgressions against God’s law are forgiven, whose iniquities and sins are atoned for and forgiven, those whose guilt is expiated and whose sin is removed (Isaiah 27:9) are sinners accepted by God. Acceptance by God is at the heart of redemption by forgiveness of sins. See Psalms 32:1-2; 79:9.

Old Testament Salvation

The breadth of Old Testament images for salvation is seen in the variety of words discussed above. There are both very “secular” and very “religious” dimensions to their uses. But in ancient Israel, sacred and secular were not distinguished.

The idea of safety is strong. People are delivered by the power of their God, who has entered into a covenant relationship with them. It is only this God who is the ultimate source of security (Psalms 46:1). God preserves the people and keeps them safe in the face of all dangers; God keeps their lives, giving both health and healing (Psalms 121:3-8).

Salvation is also freedom and liberation. Just as the people of Israel were held in slavery in Egypt, so they are also captive to sin. Just as God acted to liberate the people in the Exodus, so God has also acted to deliver them from the bondage of their sinfulness. Both outward (physical) and inward (spiritual) dimensions of salvation are present.

The Lord is also active in the lives of individuals to deliver them from pursuers (Psalms 7:1), the sword (22:20), enemies (59:1), evildoers (140:1) and much else. Appeal to divine saving power is based on God’s steadfast love. Deliverance, liberation or salvation, is given in the many ways by which the Lord acts as “redeemer.” See Isaiah 41:14; Jeremiah 50:33-34.

Salvation is well-being. It is peace (*shalom*). In the widest possible way, God desires peace. This peace denotes the fullness of right relationships in nature and among peoples. See Isaiah. 11:6-9; Hosea 2:18. It is peace accompanied by God's concern for righteousness, justice and mercy. Read **Psalms 85:10**. Obedience to God's law brings peace and ensures the establishment of right relationships (righteousness) and the harmony God intends for all within the created order. The intrusion of evil and wickedness into the world (sin) leads to a shattering of righteousness, so ultimately the wicked have no peace. But peace is found with justice and righteousness. Read **Isaiah 32:16-18**.

Sin that constricts, that brings evil and danger and disrupts the harmony intended by God the creator, is countered by God's redemptive activities. In expiation and forgiveness of sin, God provides restoration for ruptured relationships. To Israel as a whole and to individual sinners in the nation, God grants forgiveness. Read **Psalms 86:5**. God also restores people to salvation and supplies both the means and opportunities for sin to be forgiven (Psalms 85:4). God enables people to repent and walk in the ways of obedience God requires (Deuteronomy 28:9), and God enables them to live according to the righteousness the Lord expects and demands from the people's covenant relationship (Isaiah 42:6-7). God is thoroughly involved in providing salvation through forgiveness. God initiates the ways forgiveness occurs. See Isaiah 55:6-7; Hosea 6:1; Joel 2:12-13.

In short, the Old Testament perspective on "how we are saved" or "salvation" may be simply stated: Receive fullness of life! The covenant God who has created, called, and formed a nation to be the "covenant people of God" has now saved, delivered, freed, ransomed, and given peace and forgiveness. These dimensions encompass all life. They show what *the way of life* God sets before the people can be (Jeremiah 21:8). The salvation granted by God to Israel was a gift, totally unmerited by people who by their propensity to sin, continued to choose *the way of death*. Yet God did not give up on them. God provided a way of redemption.

Salvation takes shape in history. The story of Israel is God's continuing work in human history to bring all life and all peoples into God's reign and rule. The divine work of salvation took place in Israel's past—in establishing the covenant, in liberating the people from slavery, and in providing the sacrificial means for reconciliation and forgiveness to be received.

God's work of salvation continued to take shape in Israel's ongoing history. The people sought to understand God's will and ways while living in obedience to the covenant and the law. Whenever transgression or rebellion against God occurred, the people experienced saving power and love from the Lord, who continued to be faithful to the covenant promises to be their God.

Israel also looked for God's salvation in the future, especially with the Messiah. Many images for salvation surround the "coming one" who breaks the yoke of burdens and the rod of oppressors to bring freedom. He is the *Prince of Peace* and through him *there shall be endless peace* (Isaiah 9:4-7). He liberates "prisoners" and through him God's salvation may reach to the end of the earth. This salvation is accomplished by bearing the sins of the people. Read **Isaiah 53:4-6**. In the messianic age, God's salvation and deliverance will be revealed and will last forever (Isaiah 51:6).

Transition to the New Testament

In common with the Old Testament, the New Testament proclaims that God's actions to bring salvation are acts of pure grace. In the Old Testament the Lord is often shown as being gracious, showing compassionate mercy to humans. This graciousness is purely a free gift. See Exodus 33:19.

Closely related to this is the understanding of God's covenant love and faithfulness (Hebrew *hesed*).⁴ Here is the language of relationships. This word conveys the fundamental attitude of devoted, abundant love which overcomes all that would divert, divide, or break an established relationship. The Lord who is *merciful and gracious*, abounds in *steadfast love* (Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17). Since God loves like this, God is determined to forgive iniquity and transgression. Here is eternal, abundant grace.

These Old Testament backgrounds form the basis for the New Testament conviction that God's salvation now given in Jesus Christ is a gift of God's pure, loving grace. The Greek word for grace is *charis*. In secular Greek it means a quality of benevolence that gives favor to those who are inferior. More broadly, it means a "gift," freely given. The apostle Paul used *charis* as the central term for describing God's saving act in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God's act of divine love. Read **Romans 5:8**. Grace describes God's ways with sinful people. For Paul, this grace is centered directly on Jesus Christ, who in his death and resurrection is God's unique and unmerited action to save sinners. See **Romans 3:23-24; 5:15-17**. Salvation is wholly the work of God in Christ. It is solely God's work of grace. Read **Ephesians 2:8**.

⁴ Of the 237 Old Testament passages where *hesed* is mentioned, 127 occur in the Psalms. The KJV often translates the term as "loving kindness."

FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION

Memory Bank

1. The God who delivers (Psalms 7:1)
2. The God who gives peace (Leviticus 26:6)
3. The God who redeems (Deuteronomy 7:8)
4. The God who forgives (Psalms 103:12)

Research

1. Do further research in a Bible dictionary or Bible encyclopedia on Old Testament perspectives of salvation by reviewing the articles on Salvation, Deliverance, Ransom, and Expiation.
2. Examine the social and communal dimensions of the concept of *shalom* (peace) by using a Bible dictionary or Bible encyclopedia.
3. On the basis of the fact that Old Testament expressions for salvation include both “secular” and “religious” terms, with no distinctions made between them, construct an argument for the Christian church’s full involvement in current issues of social justice.

Reflection

1. In what ways has this study of Old Testament perspectives on salvation broadened and deepened your understanding and faith?
2. Describe how the experience of forgiveness of sins can be an experience of “salvation.”
3. What elements in the Old Testament views of salvation does your church emphasize more than others? Which elements do you think it should emphasize?