



THE THREE TENSES OF SALVATION

By Dennis Rokser

Has anyone ever asked you, “Are you saved?” If you have trusted in Messiah Jesus and have received the gift of eternal life, you should be able to confidently reply with an emphatic “Yes” to this important question. But did you also realize that if you clearly understood the teaching of the Scriptures, you could answer this same question with the threefold answer: “*I have been saved; I am being saved; and I will be saved*”? Unfortunately, I regularly communicate with people who claim to be born again and yet are doctrinally confused or have never heard of the *three tenses of salvation*, which is one of the most critical and clarifying doctrines of the entire Bible.



What Does “Salvation” Mean?

The biblical words “saved,” “save,” and “salvation” are English translations from the Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) words that underscore the concepts of “deliverance, safety, rescue, help, preservation, release, and victory.” Thus, when asked, “Are you saved?” a legitimate question would be “What *kind* of salvation are you referring to?” The concept of salvation occurs over 600 times in the Bible, and the *context* determines the specific salvation targeted in each passage.

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

God wants you as a student of the Bible to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). Careful observation and interpretation are needed to arrive at the divinely intended meaning of each text of Scripture as desired by the original author of each biblical book. It is also important to remember that the Bible—when correctly understood—never contradicts itself. This is important to remember since the exact meaning of “salvation” varies from passage to passage.

Context & Usage

If you are going to arrive at the correct interpretation of the inspired Word of God, you must carefully study the *context* of the passage under examination. This involves studying the verses before and after the passage to ascertain the subject, flow of thought, meaning, and usage of the words being examined. In addition, the general context

looks at such things as *who* wrote the book being studied, *when* it was written, *who* is being addressed, and so forth. Recognizing the general and specific contexts of a verse is crucial to its proper interpretation. Furthermore, a word’s etymology and morphology may be significant in understanding the meaning of a word, though its *usage* in a particular *context* ultimately determines its exact meaning. A single word such as “trunk” may have a variety of meanings and usages, yet only a careful examination of its context clarifies which of those meanings is intended. This is true with the word “salvation.” Depending on the context, salvation may refer to either *physical*, *national*, or *spiritual* deliverance, with the latter being deliverance from either sin’s *penalty*, *power*, or *presence*.

Physical Salvation

When the principle of usage and context is correctly applied to the term “salvation,” several significant features about salvation begin to surface. Regarding the *nature* of salvation, you will observe that there is a distinction between *physical* and *spiritual* salvation in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, salvation primarily refers to deliverance from *physical* danger, such as deliverance from one’s physical enemies (Ps. 7:1; 17:7; 37:40; 44:6; 59:2; 138:7), physical troubles (Isa. 37:35; 46:7), or even physical death (Dan. 3:17). While this emphasis on physical salvation in the Old Testament does not remain the primary emphasis in the New Testament, it still employs this usage of physical salvation in certain passages (Mt. 8:24-25; 27:40; Mk. 3:4; Acts 27:20, 31, 42-43; Jas. 5:15).

National Salvation

Because of the covenantal promises of God to ethnic Israel via Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen. 12:1-3; 13:15-17; 15:18; 2 Sam. 7:12-16) that have never been abrogated or cancelled, there is predicted a future fulfillment of *national salvation* when the Messiah returns to set up His eternal kingdom on earth (Isa. 45:17; Jer. 23:6; Ezek. 36:28-20; Rom. 10:1; 11:25-27). In the meantime, God on numerous occasions has “saved” or delivered His chosen earthly people from their enemies and destruction (Gen. 45:7; 50:20; Josh. 10:6; Judg. 6:14; 7:7; 1 Sam. 7:8; 14:23). Israel’s future national salvation will involve incredible physical and spiritual blessings with divine deliverance (Jer. 31) when they call in faith upon the name of the Lord to save them (Joel 2:32; Rom. 10:13).

Spiritual Salvation

When examining the New Testament, the most common meaning and usage of “salvation” by far is that of *spiritual* deliverance. The reason for this change in emphasis from the Old Testament involves the coming of the Messiah, who came to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10).

For the Unbeliever, God’s Promise of Eternal Salvation Is Future until He Believes in Messiah Alone

For unbelievers without Messiah Jesus as their Savior, God offers eternal salvation from a hell they deserve to a heaven they don’t. This must be a *future* salvation since they have never before



been saved. This is how the term “saved” is used in Messiah’s conversation with a religious man named Nicodemus when He declared to this self-righteous sinner, “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3). Having explained that Nicodemus needed a spiritual birth from God the Holy Spirit (Jn. 3:4-8), Messiah explains to him the *means* to a new birth. Relating Messiah’s pending crucifixion to the lifted-up brazen serpent (Jn. 3:14; Num. 21:6-9), John 3:15 goes on to explain *that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life*. First, we observe the extent of the offer: “that

whoever.” Eternal life is available to all. Second, we consider the condition to receive the offer: “believes.” This refers to one’s willingness to rely on, depend on, or trust. Third, we examine the object of one’s faith: “in Him.” Your object of faith must be Messiah alone. Last, we observe the result of the offer: “should not perish but have eternal life.” The word “have” is a present tense verb, indicating a present possession, not a future attainment. Eternal life belongs to the believer now. The phrase “eternal life” occurs sixteen times in John, setting forth a right relationship with God that will last forever and can never be lost. To reinforce this truth, we read next in John 3:16:

For God so loved the world [God’s part] that He gave His only begotten Son [God’s provision], that whoever believes in Him [your part] should not perish [God’s promise] but have everlasting life [God’s promise].

To further emphasize God’s purpose in sending Messiah Jesus to earth, verse 17 says, *For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved*. The term “saved” refers to a spiritual and eternal deliverance from hell, since the terms “perish” and “everlasting life” both occur in verse 16.

As with physical birth, being “born again” (vv. 3, 7), receiving “eternal life” (vv. 15-16), and being “saved” (v. 17) all happen at one moment in time and are all one-time, non-repeatable, and unchangeable realities. Salvation is a work of God for man, not a work of man for God. Salvation is not an 80-percent God, 20-percent man proposition. Messiah’s finished work on the cross in payment for all your sins is not merely *needed* to save you; it is *enough* to save you! Now it is simply a matter of whether you as a helpless, hopeless, and hell-bound sinner will choose to rely on (“believe”) the finished cross-work of Messiah alone to save you. Does it really matter? Yes—eternally! For a failure to trust in Messiah alone means you will remain condemned before God (Jn. 3:18).

Other examples of a certain, future salvation from the *penalty of sin* offered to lost sinners are in Mark 10:24-26; Luke 8:12; 9:56; 18:26; John 3:17; 5:34; 10:9; 12:47; Acts 4:12; 11:14; 15:1, 11; 16:30-31; Romans 8:24; 11:14; 1 Corinthians 1:21; 9:22; 10:33; 1 Thessalo-





nians 2:16; 2 Thessalonians 2:10; 1 Timothy 1:15; 2:4; and 2 Timothy 3:15.

Salvation Past Tense — from the Penalty of Sin

While eternal salvation is always future for the unbeliever, the moment a sinner trusts in the all-sufficient work of Messiah to save him, he can then state with confidence, “I have been saved from sin’s penalty.” This is salvation from God’s righteous penalty for your sins, which is “death” (Mt. 25:46; Rom. 1:32; 6:23; Rev. 20:14-15). It was this *past* spiritual salvation that Paul had in mind when he wrote, *But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us* (Tit. 3:4-5). These believers in Messiah had been saved in the past by the undeserved kindness, love, and mercy of God when they had trusted in Messiah alone instead of their own works of

righteousness (e.g., repenting from one’s sins, water baptism, trying to keep the Ten Commandments, going to church, tithing, living a holy life).

The Apostle Paul also stated the same *past* reality and assurance about the Ephesian believers when he wrote, *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast* (Eph. 2:8-9). Note how salvation is a “gift” for the guilty, not a reward for the righteous.

It is also helpful to recognize that past-tense salvation from sin’s penalty is connected theologically with the biblical doctrine of *justification*, which means to be *declared righteous* before God in His courtroom in heaven (Rom. 3:23-25, 28; 4:4-5; 5:1; Gal. 2:16). Every ungodly sinner who believes in Messiah Jesus and His finished work alone has been justified before God, and based upon the authority of God’s Word, he can know and state with absolute certainty, “I have been saved from sin’s penalty!” Other examples of first-tense

(or past-tense) salvation for the believer can be found in such verses as Luke 13:23; Acts 2:47; Romans 6:17; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 10:33; 2 Corinthians 2:15; Ephesians 2:5; Colossians 1:13; and Jude 3.

Salvation Present Tense — from the Power of Sin

Having been saved from *sin’s penalty* forever by God’s grace, the child of God then enters the second phase of God’s salvation plan involving daily deliverance from *sin’s power*. This is needed because every believer has an internal foe (the sin nature), an external foe (the world system), and an infernal foe (the devil) that work in collusion to defeat him spiritually and thus hinder him from walking by faith (2 Cor. 5:7), growing in grace (2 Pet. 3:18), and impacting others for the Messiah (2 Cor. 5:17-21). The daily salvation that God now offers believers is from sin’s controlling power (Rom. 6:11-14) and its damaging effects in their walk and fellowship with Messiah (1 Jn. 1:5-7). This is needed because all believers still retain a sin nature (1 Jn. 1:8) and still *can* and *do* sin (1 Jn. 1:9-10), even though God does not desire this in their lives (1 Jn. 2:1).

The book of James was written to suffering believers who were clearly born again (Jas. 1:18) and were called “beloved” by God (Jas. 1:19) and members of the family of God (“brethren,” Jas. 1:19) regarding salvation from sin’s *power*.

So then, my **beloved brethren**, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not

3 TENSES OF SALVATION			
TENSE:	PAST	PRESENT	FUTURE
FROM WHAT:	PENALTY of sin (In Hell)	POWER of sin (In your life)	PRESENCE of sin (In Heaven)
DIAGRAM:			
SCRIPTURE:	Titus 3:5, Ephesians 2:8-10, 1 Corinthians 1:21, John 3:17	1 Timothy 4:16, James 1:21, Phil. 2:12-13, James 5:20	Romans 5:9-10, Romans 13:11, 1 Corinthians 3:15
THEOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION:	JUSTIFICATION	SANCTIFICATION	GLORIFICATION
TIME FACTOR:	POINT OF TIME (When you trust Messiah alone.)	PROCESS OF TIME (While you walk in the Spirit.)	POINT OF TIME (When you die or are raptured.)
CONDITION(S):	By God’s grace alone through faith alone in Messiah alone. (Acts 16:31)	By God’s grace through yielded and daily dependence on the Lord via the Holy Spirit. (Romans 6:1-14; 8:1-4)	By death (2 Cor. 5:10) or by Rapture (1 Thess. 4:13-18)

Above: The three tenses of salvation mean that the believer has been saved from sin, is being saved from the power of sin, and will be saved from the presence of sin.



produce the righteousness of God. Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to **save your souls**. (Jas. 1:19-21, emphasis added)

These early believers experienced the temptation to retaliate and do evil (Jas. 1:13-16), especially because they were persecuted, defrauded, and treated poorly by the rich (Jas. 1:2-11; 2:6; 5:1-6). But to avoid the damaging effects of sin in their lives, they needed to be *swift to hear God's Word, slow to speak, and slow to wrath* (Jas. 1:19). Instead of resorting to sin (*lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness* – Jas. 1:21), they needed to humbly welcome or *receive with meekness the implanted word which was able to save their souls*, or lives, from sin's damaging results. The entire book of James is written to believers ("brethren" – 1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9-10, 12, 19), exhorting them to be saved from sin's power and to grow spiritually. However, Satan also wants to use this time in the believer's life to tempt him to sin and hinder his spiritual progress and testimony for Messiah Jesus. A failure to rightly divide the Word regarding the three tenses of salvation would lead to utter confusion in interpreting James and other passages like it, such as what Paul writes to the already redeemed Timothy: *Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you* (1 Tim. 4:16).

Salvation from sin's power is connected theologically with the biblical doctrine of practical *sanctification*, which involves God progressively making righteous (not declaring

righteous, like at justification) the believer in his daily walk by reliance on the Lord and the provisions of God's grace (the Word of God and Spirit of God). Unfortunately, many believers do not enjoy ongoing spiritual growth and salvation from sin's power in their lives as believers. Instead, some are stuck in ongoing carnality by yielding to their sin natures (instead of yielding to Messiah via the Holy Spirit), and they operate daily under human wisdom (instead of the Word of God). This was true of the Corinthian believers (1 Cor. 3:1-4).

Other examples of the use of the word "salvation" in a phase-two sense can be found in Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; 17:33; and 1 Corinthians 15:2. In addition, there are numerous passages in the New Testament devoted to exhorting believers to live lives of victory over sin and fruitfulness to God as they walk worthy of their high and holy calling in Christ by His grace (Rom. 6-8; 12:1-2; Gal. 5-6; Eph. 4-6; Phil. 2:12-13; Col. 2:6-3:17; 1 Pet. 1:13-2:3).

Salvation Future Tense — from the Presence of Sin

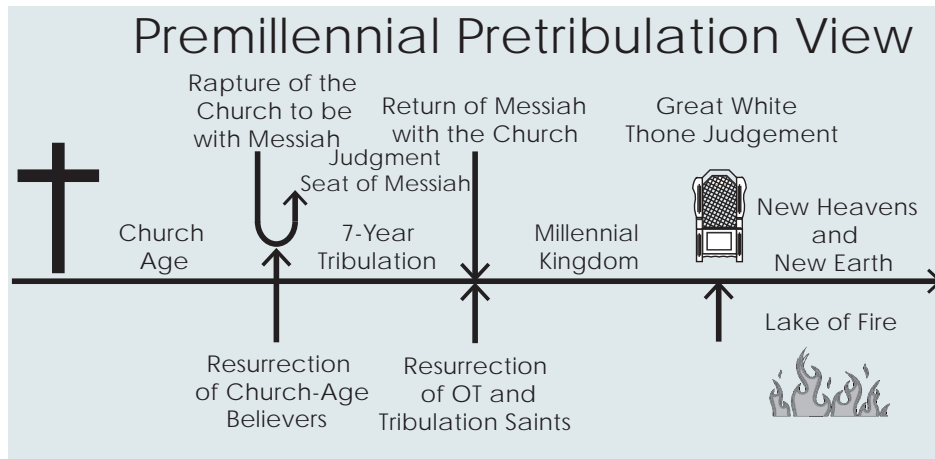
Having been saved forever from sin's penalty and having entered into the second phase in God's plan of salvation from sin's power, believers can also look forward to being delivered from *sin's presence* in the future. This third stage of salvation is needed because every believer still lives in a physical body that is under the curse of disease and death (Gen. 3) and lives in a world that has been corrupted by Adam's original sin (Rom. 5:12; 8:18-23).

Messiah Jesus not only came to save us from the *penalty* of sin (Rom. 6:23) and to deliver us from the legal reign

and *power* of the sin nature in our bodies (Rom. 6:6), but He also came to save us from the very *presence* of sin one day in the future. He will accomplish this future salvation in phases by first of all taking believers in Messiah to heaven either at the moment of physical death (2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23) or at the resurrection/rapture event (1 Thess. 4:13-18), when believers in Messiah will receive their glorified bodies (1 Cor. 15:50-52). Later, He will return to earth to reign and ultimately create new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21-22).

In light of God's sure promises and grace, believers in Messiah can look forward with certain "hope" that one day they will be saved (future tense) from the very presence of sin: *And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed* (Rom. 13:11, emphasis added).

If the believer has already been saved in the past, how could his salvation be nearer than when he first believed? This would be very confusing if one did not rightly divide the three tenses of salvation. For the believer, there is coming a future salvation from sin's presence that is nearer with each passing day. This divine guarantee of future glory is promised to all believers (whether spiritual or carnal) and should cause believers not to waste their earthly lives in a spiritual slumber (Rom. 13:11 – *wake out of sleep*) or lustful living (Rom. 13:12-14) but to live pure and holy lives that honor their coming Savior (1 Jn. 3:1-3). This future salvation is also what Paul had in mind when he confidently promised, *having now been justified by His blood, we*



Above: This chart shows the chronology of eschatology according to the dispensational, pretribulation perspective.

shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we **shall be saved by His life** (Rom. 5:9-10, emphasis added).

Salvation from sin's presence is connected theologically with the biblical doctrine of *glorification*. Believers should now eagerly anticipate this future hope or divine guarantee of glorification: *For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance* (Rom. 8:24-25).

Other examples of third-tense (or future-tense) salvation from sin's presence can be found in Romans 8:21; 1 Corinthians 3:15; 5:5; 2 Corinthians 1:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:8; and Hebrews 7:25 and 9:27-28.

Can you see the utter confusion that results when a person fails to understand these three tenses of salvation? The painful result has been much false teaching that has either blinded the unsaved from believing the gospel of Messiah by mixing faith alone with works (2 Cor. 4:3-5) or has robbed the

believer of the absolute assurance of eternal salvation (1 Jn. 5:9-13) by making his final destiny depend upon his daily walk, fruit, faithfulness, or personal holiness.

I was reminded of this tragedy a while ago when a believer approached me at a Bible conference and sadly told me, "I have been a believer in Messiah for many years, but I had never heard of the three tenses of salvation until today. Why didn't someone teach me this earlier?"

Observing All Three Stages of Salvation in One Passage

Now that we have derived from the Scriptures this important biblical distinction of the three stages of salva-



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tion, we can sometimes observe all three tenses in the same passage.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared [in the past] to all men, teaching us [believers in the present] that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for [in the future] the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Messiah Jesus. (Tit. 2:11-13)

This can also be observed in Romans 5:1-2; 13:10-11; Philippians 3:7-11; Colossians 3:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 1:8-10; and 1 John 2:28 and 3:1-3.

So how
would you
answer if
someone
now asked
you, "Are
you saved?"