

Salvation and the Trinity



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Let us pray. I pray a prayer that is found in Calvin's commentary on Ezekiel with chapter 18, verses 1 through 4. Grant, Almighty God, since you have not only created us out of nothing, but have deigned to create us again in time in thine only begotten Son and have taken us from the lowest depths and deigned to raise us to the hope of your heavenly kingdom, grant that we may not be proud or puffed up with vain glory. May we embrace this favor with becoming humility and modestly submit ourselves to you until we become at length partakers of that glory, which your only begotten Son has secured for us. Amen.

The subject of the doctrine of salvation is very close to the heart of the Christian faith. The Christian faith is essentially a redemptive religion, and the whole purpose of redemption encompasses more than just the doctrine of salvation that we shall consider together in this course. For, indeed, salvation has its foundation in the being of God and His own plan in eternity. It has its implementation in the work of Jesus Christ, the Mediator, who came to provide the basis on which salvation could be secured for those whom God has chosen, and it includes also the way in which the benefits of the work of Christ are applied, first to the individual—this is the doctrine of salvation proper that we shall study—and then secondly to the church. Soteriology, as it is named in systemic theology, relates particularly to the application of salvation to the way in which salvation does provide for individuals the blessings which God has prepared for them.

In order to clarify this subject, I have thought wise to have a list of terms that are associated with the idea of salvation with the purpose to classify them so that we may have a better overview of the work of the holy Trinity in the pursuit of redemption for fallen humanity. In order to do this, I have given an alphabetical listing of terms that are associated with the doctrine of salvation. And if you do not have a syllabus that accompanies the record, I will give those words sufficiently slowly so that you can list them

on a piece of paper and proceed then later on to understand the discussion. These are then given in alphabetical order:

Adoption

Atonement

Calling

Cleansing

Conversion

Counsel

Decree

Effectual Calling

Election

Expiation

Faith

Foreknowledge

Foreordination

Forgiveness

Glorification

Healing

Imputation

Justification

Modification

Planning

Predestination

Propitiation

Reconciliation

Redemption

Regeneration

Remission

Repentance

Resurrection

Sacrifice

Salvation

Sanctification

Substitution

Union with Christ

Victory

Vivification

Here is a list that includes some thirty different terms, and now in order to clarify matters, I would like to relate some of them to each of the three persons of the Trinity and describe precisely what each of them entails.

First of all in the redemptive plan we recognize the Father, who has made the plan of redemption and has in His own wise and holy purpose eternally chosen those who would be saved. The terms that are involved here are, therefore, the term of “predestination,” which is really equivalent to “foreordination,” although in the Westminster Confession, the term “predestination” is given only for those who are predestined to salvation, while “foreordination” relates also to those who have been ordained to death and reprobation for their sins. In this particular word it is made plain that God has set a particular purpose for each creature. He has set certain limits. He has set a destiny in advance for those people whom He is pleased to save. This involves, of course, the planning for the future, and therefore the term “planning” can relate to the

Father. This also is expressed in the word *counsel*, which we find in the book of Acts, where God does things according to the counsel of His will. That term also is found in Ephesians 1. The term “counsel” involves a certain deliberation, and we can project that there has been deliberation in the Godhead between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in order to set forth not only who would be saved but also how salvation would be accomplished and then applied.

Another term that fits in this particular category is the term “foreknowledge.” Foreknowledge is not merely advance information in relationship to salvation, but an advance affection whereby God knows in the biblical sense of the word those who are His. Our tendency is to consider that knowledge is merely an intellectual operation by which we treasure or keep information concerning a particular subject, and it does not involve necessarily acts of the will or of the emotions. The biblical notion of knowledge, on the contrary, involves a special affection, and we find this term, for instance, in Romans 8:30, where we are told that “those whom God foreknew, them He also foreordained.” Obviously here the foreknowledge involves more than information since God has information about all members of the human race. But here we have a special group of people, those who are destined to salvation, and these are from the very start an object of the loving knowledge of God who has determined to redeem them in spite of their unworthiness.

Another term that applies to the Father in the list that I gave is the term “election,” and here we have a choosing of some out of a larger category, pretty much as we have an election in politics where one candidate is chosen out of a considerable number of citizens who would in principle be eligible for this function. In the election of God it must be noted that the choice of God is not grounded on something particularly worthy in the persons whom He chooses, so that they do not have any reason to boast about the choice that has been made by God, but this is of pure grace because grace is the mercy of God which applies in the whole subject of salvation.

Finally there is the word *decree*, which involves a wider sense than just salvation, for whatever happens has been decreed, that is, prepared and planned by God. The decree of salvation, specifically, is called “predestination,” and so we revert to the terms that have already been described.

All of these terms relate to the choosing and purposing by God as the expression of His gracious nature toward sinners who do not deserve anything but His wrath, but who have been chosen by God to be appointed unto salvation in all the means and developments of it.

In the second place, there is a group of terms which relate to the work of the Son, particularly the work of Jesus Christ as God incarnate, as the Mediator between God and humans, a Mediator whose task specifically is to establish the basis which would permit a just and holy God to resume a relationship of love and friendship with human beings that are besmirched by their sin. In the terms that related to the work of Christ we note first of all the terms “salvation” and “redemption.” These are in some respect more terms that are used in a more general sense than some of the others which are more specific. In fact, we are dealing with the doctrine of salvation, and here what is meant is the appropriation of salvation by the work of the Holy Spirit acting in the lives of individuals. The term “salvation,” however, in general, covers the whole divine purpose in its origination, in its implementation, and in its application, and the same can be said about the term “redemption.” So these are found in a very general sense in Scripture and in our common language.

More specifically, we talk also of “salvation” and “redemption” as the specific work of Jesus Christ who is the Savior, that is, one of the titles by which we recognize Jesus Christ in a very frequent manner. He’s also called the Redeemer because He is the one who has redeemed us and purchased us. Salvation implies deliverance from a severe plight, from a situation that is desperate. Redemption is drawn from the language of the marketplace, where a purchase is made, and here we find that the Scripture uses this kind of language in imagery to give us an understanding of what it is that Christ has done. He has purchased us at the cost of His own blood, as 1 Peter states, in order that we may be rescued from the plight of the slavery of Satan and be established in the liberty of the children of God.

There are other terms which are used in my list and which relate particularly to the work of Christ, and one of them, which is far-reaching, is the term “atonement,” which is found some eighty times in the King James Version, mostly in relationship to the Old Testament sacrifices. Atonement veils by the pronunciation that we give to it, the origin of the word, but here in a strange manner, etymology is reflected directly by the spelling. Atonement is the

action whereby two parties, which are severed from a friendly relationship, are brought back together at one. It is “at onement” really. The word that parallels this most closely in the language of the Scripture is the word *reconciliation*. Reconciliation is an action whereby two parties that are estranged from a normal position of friendship are brought back into that position, perhaps by the interposition of a friend or someone who brings them back together in their appropriate relationship. And, indeed, Jesus Christ is the reconciler, and in 2 Corinthians 5, we have the term “reconciliation” used five times in three verses, for this is a fundamental message of the Scripture concerning the work of Christ: that as Mediator, He brought us back into a proper relationship with the triune God and this has been done by virtue of His sacrifice.

Here we have another term that is listed. The term “sacrifice” is used in many religions, but particularly it was used in the Jewish system of worship, which God Himself had revealed to Moses and had established in the nation of Israel. There people who had a sense of their own inadequacy in the presence of God could bring forward an animal which would be then slaughtered, and the death of the animal represented the destiny which the sinner could well have expected, but by a substitution the death struck the animal and the sinner could be rejoicing in a sense of a renewal of the appropriate relationship with God. The epistle to the Hebrews makes it plain that the blood of bulls and goats cannot really atone for sin, but that a life that is infinitely more precious must be given if the sinner is to be in fellowship with God, and this is precisely what Jesus Christ has come to accomplish. He has given Himself as a sacrifice of infinite value so that the sins of human beings may be forgiven and the impact of them upon their relationship with God be erased and so that we who are under the blessing of the sacrifice might be in fellowship with the triune God.

Another term that we use often is the term “expiation.” This term comes from a Latin root which involves a payment with a completeness that is marked by the prefix “ex.” The payment has been made in full by the work of Jesus Christ, and therefore the sinner is not indebted any longer to God because of his or her sins but has now the freedom that comes from a completely satisfactory restitution or covering which expiation involves.

The term “propitiation” comes here also and particularly relates to that part of reconciliation which involves the renewal of God’s attitude of fatherly care and love over against the wrath of God which justly would hit the sinner if there had not been the intermission and intervention of Jesus Christ. We recognize that reconciliation involves also a change of attitude on the part of humans so that they also need to have their attitude to God changed. Instead of viewing Him as a threat and as a judge, which would inevitably bring condemnation upon the head of whoever has sinned, the sinner can now recognize that by the intervention of Christ there is a loving heavenly Father who not only is willing to receive the prodigal children but who is opening His house and His heart to those who come to Him through Jesus Christ.

Another word that comes into a discussion at this point is the word *victory*, for in representing the work of Christ, there is an element in which it is made plain that Christ has come forward as the champion of fallen humanity in the struggle against the powers of darkness and the powers of Satan. And in this struggle, the Lord Jesus Christ has taken the lead, He has defeated the powers of evil, and this defeat of them achieves a great victory for those whom God has chosen to be His own children.

The term “substitution” is used. It is not found in Scripture per se, but you have a preposition which connotes substitution which is used, and quite often the preposition “for” which may mean “merely for the benefit of,” is used in Scripture in a stronger sense for the idea of “in the place of.” And indeed the work of Jesus Christ is substitutionary. He as the Mediator of the new covenant has taken the place of sinners in order to accomplish in His own life and body, by His death and resurrection, that which the sinner could not have accomplished by himself or herself. We find then that our Lord Jesus Christ as our substitute has taken upon Himself the guilt of our sins and accepted to suffer the penalty which the righteousness of God required in the presence of sin, and this is by a substitution which is really analogous to the substitution by which Adam, our forefather, was acting in the place of and on behalf of his whole descendants by natural generation. The substitution of Christ is really of the same order as the substitution of Adam for his descendants. One of those, of course, works the painful effects of lostness and estrangement from God, but God in His mercy has provided Jesus Christ as our substitute to bring us back unto Himself and to reverse the whole effect of sin, the sin of Adam and our own sins, in our lives.

The term “satisfaction,” which I’ve not given in the list but which is often used theologically also fits at this point, for the work of Christ is a satisfaction of the demands which a righteous and holy God inevitably must place upon members of humanity. The emphasis in this word is that nothing that God rightly demands has been neglected, but His requirements have been met to the full and God, in that sense, is satisfied. Here we need to have a proper understanding of the importance of the Law and of the righteousness of God. In fact, God is so earnestly desiring that the full measure of righteousness be fulfilled that He was willing to send Jesus Christ and to permit Christ to be put to death on the cross of Calvary in the place of sinners who He is to bring back into fellowship with God.

Now then we have a group of words which relates to the work of the Holy Spirit, or the application of the benefits secured by Christ to individual life, some of it below the level of consciousness and some other parts of it in our conscious life as the children of God. Here we need to recognize that there are two basic directions for the work of the Holy Spirit, and these correspond to the double entail of sin in the life of humanity. When we examined the doctrine of sin, we saw that the entail moves in two directions. There is, first of all, an obscuring of the relationship that as His creatures we ought to have toward God. And then, secondly, there is a deterioration of the functioning of our nature because sin as a wicked spiritual cancer extends its nefarious influence in all the directions and activities of our lives.

The work of salvation reverses these two damaging effects. With respect to the problem of guilt, we have, by contrast, the renewal of a proper relationship with God. This is a matter of our standing before God. Here we are not dealing with the condition of our nature, but we are dealing with the position that we have before God by virtue of the intervention of Jesus Christ. And then, secondly, we have a renewal of nature that does take place which begins when the Christian life begins, which is developed in the course of our life as Christians and which finally is brought to completion at death and at the second coming of Jesus Christ. Following this scheme, we have the proper relationship and understanding of a number of the terms that have not yet been considered. Therefore, I begin with the work of the Holy Spirit, whereby the benefits of the work of Christ are applied to the sinner in the sense that now the sinner is not viewed by God in terms of his or her sins but is viewed by God in terms of what Jesus Christ has secured for him or her, and here the fundamental

term is “justification.” Justification is the act of God whereby, by virtue of the work of Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven and the righteousness of Jesus Christ is laid to our account. We see here, therefore, a double direction. First of all, there is a remedial direction. Instead of being charged with the guilt of our sins, we find that this guilt has been assumed by Jesus Christ in His work on the cross and, therefore, we escape the effect of the righteous wrath of God against us as sinners. This is related to the term “forgiveness” or “remission” that we find, for instance, in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

The work of Christ, whereby His righteousness is placed upon our account, is called “imputation.” In fact, imputation begins with the imputation of our sins to Christ, that is, our sins are placed upon the account of Christ Himself so that He may endure the penal consequences of them, but there is also a reverse imputation in which the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ is placed upon our account for us who believe in Him. Therefore, instead of appearing with our own performance which would lead only to disaster, or even without any positive adornment, which would leave us as it were naked before God, we appear before God covered with the righteousness of Jesus Christ presented as a resplendent white garment, which equips us for the life in heaven. There is a beautiful illustration of this principle in the book of Zechariah, where we find that Joshua, the high priest, was under the accusation of Satan. In chapter 3 of Zechariah we read, “Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Take off his filthy clothes.’ Then he said to Joshua, ‘See, I have taken away your sin and I will put [rich] garments on you.’ Then I said, ‘Put a clean turban on his head.’ So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the LORD stood by” [vv. 3–4]. And Joshua does represent, in fact, what happens spiritually to the believer. The standing of that person before God is radically transformed by the fact that Jesus Christ has taken his place in punishment and has clothed him or her by His righteousness.

Another term that relates to the change of our relationship with God is the term “adoption.” In justification the sinner who has forfeited the good pleasure of God by his or her sin is now restored to the proper position of citizenship, as it were, in the kingdom of heaven. In adoption, we have a further development in that not only are we recognized as appropriate citizens, but also we are admitted to the fellowship of the family of God. Adoption is a marvelous process wherein someone who is without parents,

without protections, without the benefits of a true family, is received at the table and in the fellowship and under the special parental affection of someone, and this is precisely what God has done. In His mercy, He has adopted us, and by the Spirit of God, we say, “Abba, Father.” The term “Abba” resembles somewhat the kind of babbling that very small children who do not yet have words and concepts are pronouncing and which may be addressed to a father, and God recognizes us as little children and has received us in the blessings of His family.

Here we may think of the situation of Mephibosheth mentioned in the second book of Samuel in chapter 9. Mephibosheth was a grandson of Saul, and one could have expected in terms of what Saul had done to David that when David finally came to the full possession of the kingdom, he would eliminate any members of the family of Saul, lest there should be other claimants to the throne. This was often done in eastern lands that when a new dynasty started; an effort was made to put to death all the members of the previous reigning family in order to make sure that no claimants should be there. Furthermore, since Saul had acted as a ferocious enemy of David, one could have expected that David would take his vengeance upon those who were left as descendants of Saul, and this is how Mephibosheth appears in the situation. David said, “Is there anyone left of the family of Saul?” And it was thought now if anybody remains from this particular family, it’s bound to be a day of disaster for them, for David is going to seek them out and to cause them to perish. This is what Mephibosheth undoubtedly thought because he had taken refuge at some distance and was in hiding, but David was informed about his place of refuge and there were soldiers who were sent to pick him up and bring him to David. Invariably Mephibosheth thought that his last day had arrived, and he was groveling in the presence of David, fearing the worst for his own life. But instead of approaching Mephibosheth as an enemy, David spoke to him with kindness. He said, “Mephibosheth, you are the son of my best friend and in your face I still recognize some traits of the beautiful figure of Jonathan, my best friend, and, therefore, I would want you to be a part of my household. You will sit at my table. You will eat bread with me. I want you here in spite of your infirmities, and I want you to be treated as if you were my own child.” That is a moving representation of what God is doing to us in adoption. He receives those who have been estranged from Him, who have forfeited their title to being the children and the daughters of God, and now by virtue of the work of Jesus Christ, He restores us in that condition. Therefore, we can approach God with that

glorious and intimate term “Father,” which is found already in the Old Testament but which Jesus puts in evidence so markedly.

Now we pass on to the words that relate to the recreative action of the Holy Spirit, that is, the way in which the Holy Spirit renews our nature from within in order to cause us once again to have an existence that is centered in the will of God and the service of God instead of being centered in the path of disobedience and the self-will of sinners in the service of our own passions and aberrant conditions whereby we displease God.

We will discuss here this under three phases: first the beginning of the work of transformation, and then its development, and finally its culmination, and this will be the subject of our second lecture.