

## Who Saves?

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There are four basic views concerning who saves. First is *autosoterism* (*auto* = self + *soter* = savior) which is a belief that entrance into heaven is entirely by good works. Autosoterists don't feel they need salvation from an outside source. Their good works are enough. Second is *syntheosoterism* (*syn* = with + *theo* = God + *soter* = savior) which is a belief that people partner with God and contribute to their initial salvation by good works, or a promise to perform them. These frontload the gospel with some human requirement in addition to faith in Jesus (i.e., turn from all their sin, keep the Sabbath, water baptism, etc.). Third is *posttheosoterism* (*post* – after + *theo* = God + *soter* = savior) which is the belief that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, but later, after being saved, the Christians are persuaded they must perform good works to keep themselves saved (like the Christians in Galatia). Last is *solatheosoterism* (*sola* = alone + *theo* = God + *soter* = savior), which is the belief that salvation is entirely a work of God through Christ and is provided by grace alone, though faith alone, in Christ alone, plus nothing more. In this view, salvation is a gift from God, freely given and freely received with no requirement of good works before, during, or after receiving salvation. These understand that good works should follow salvation (Eph 2:10), but they are never the condition of it.

The *autosoterists* believe that, from beginning to end, they save themselves by adhering to a moral code that will secure their entrance into heaven. In this system of thought, the Bible becomes a moral guide to one's path to heaven (perhaps among other guides). I've personally heard people say, "I'll keep the Ten Commandments and hope God lets me into heaven", or "I'll love God and my neighbor and trust that He will let me into His kingdom when I die." Historically, this would be similar to Pelagianism, a teaching derived from a British monk named Pelagius who lived and preached in Rome circa A.D. 400. According to Ryrie, Pelagius "believed that since God would not command anything that was not possible, and that since He has commanded men to be holy, everyone therefore can live a life that is free from sin."<sup>1</sup> In this teaching, a person needs only follow God's laws to be saved from hell and accepted into heaven. From beginning to end, this is a works-salvation.

The problem with *autosoterism*—among several—is that those who think they can save themselves by works fail to grasp God's absolute standard of righteousness to

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 254.

gain entrance into heaven. The Bible reveals God is holy (Psa 99:9; Isa 6:3), which means He is perfectly righteous and completely set apart from sin (Psa 99:9; 1 Pet 1:14-16). Because God is holy, He cannot have anything to do with sin except to condemn it. The Scripture states, “Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You cannot look on wickedness with favor” (Hab 1:13), and “This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). Autosoterists also fail to understand the biblical teaching about sin and total depravity, in which sin permeates every aspect of our being—intellect, body, will, and sensibilities—and that we are helpless to correct our fallen position. The biblical teaching is that all mankind is sinful and separated from God (Rom 3:10-23). We are sinners in Adam (Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:21-22), sinners by nature (Rom 7:14-25; 13:12-14), sinners by choice (Isa 59:2; Jam 1:14-15), and completely helpless to solve the sin problem and save ourselves (Rom 5:6-10; Eph 2:1-3). Good works have no saving merit before God (Isa 64:6; Rom 4:4-5; Eph 2:8-9; Tit 3:5). Paul wrote, “we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law” (Rom 3:28), and “a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified” (Gal 2:16).

Furthermore, autosoterists are trapped in a vague system of rules-for-salvation that can never provide assurance of their salvation. No matter how much good they do, there is always that nagging question, “have I done enough?” The reason they can never have assurance of their salvation is because the Bible does not teach that salvation is by human works, either in total or in part. Those who approach God by their works are in want of any passage of Scripture that can provide them assurance they’ve done enough to secure their place in heaven. For if one performs a hundred good works during a lifetime, how do they know that God doesn’t require a hundred and one, or a hundred and two? They don’t, because the Bible does not teach salvation by works. Autosoterists are not saved, as they trust entirely in their good works to save them.

The *syntheosoterists* are those who think good works are required in addition to their initial act of faith in Jesus. These teach faith in Christ, but then muddy the gospel by adding something we do, such as turning from sins, keeping the Sabbath, water baptism, promising to live a moral life, joining a church, receiving sacraments, etc. I don’t believe these persons are saved, as human activity is added to the gospel message from the beginning. We observe an example of this in the early church in which “Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’” (Acts

15:1). This teaching caused a huge reaction in Paul and Barnabas, who had “great dissension and debate with them” (Acts 15:2). The simple gospel message was: “we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 15:11). But some Judaizers from Judea were presenting a false gospel which frontloaded the message with a requirement to follow to the Law of Moses; specifically, circumcision. Concerning Acts 15:1, Arnold Fruchtenbaum states:

Verse 1 describes the issue that led to the debate: Gentile circumcision. After their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas gave a report to the church of Antioch and spent some time with the Believers there. Eventually, *certain men came down from Judea*. They were members of the “circumcision party,” mentioned earlier, in Acts 11:2, who had challenged Peter about going into the home of an uncircumcised Gentile. Acts 15:24 makes it clear that these men had not been sent by the church of Jerusalem, but that they simply came down to Antioch of their own accord. In Galatians 2:4, Paul made reference to this same Jerusalem Council and describe these men as *false brethren*. They came to Antioch to teach. The Greek tense of the verb “teach” means they began to teach, and they kept at it with determination. The false teachers picked on the brethren, meaning the Gentile believers, because they were not circumcised. To these Gentile believers, they said: *except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved*. This was the Judaizers dictum: Believing Gentiles are not saved until they are circumcised. Today certain groups teach another heresy, namely, that believers are not saved until they have been baptized. Both statements are equally wrong. Both involve salvation by works and salvation through ritual.<sup>2</sup>

If any human works or religious rituals are added to the simple gospel message, it is rendered null and void. A gospel message that includes human works is no gospel at all. Such a message saves no one. Warren Wiersbe states:

God pronounces a solemn anathema on anyone who preaches any other Gospel than the Gospel of the grace of God found in Jesus Christ His Son (Gal 1:1–9). When any religious leader says, “Unless you belong to our group, you cannot be saved!” or, “Unless you participate in our ceremonies and keep our rules, you cannot be saved!” he is adding to the Gospel and denying the finished work of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote his Epistle to the Galatians to make

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<sup>2</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts* (San Antonio, TX, Published by Ariel Ministries, 2022), 316.

it clear that salvation is wholly by God's grace, through faith in Christ, plus nothing!<sup>3</sup>

The *posttheosoterists* are those who believe they are saved initially by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, but then later adopt a works-system to continue to be saved. I think many in this camp were saved when they heard and responded positively to the simple gospel message (perhaps as a child), placing their faith in Christ alone for salvation, but then later were persuaded to accept a system of legalistic teaching that told them they must do good works to continue to be saved. These would be similar to the Christians Paul wrote to in Galatia, who said, "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel" (Gal 1:6). These were believers whom Paul called *brethren* (Gal 1:11; 3:15; 4:12, 28, 31; 5:11, 13; 6:1, 18), declaring they were "sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:26). The Christians in Galatia had trusted in Christ as their Savior; however, some "false brethren" (Gal 2:4) came among them and taught they must adhere to the Law of Moses to be saved. These were false teachers. According to Fruchtenbaum, "The problem that Paul was dealing with in his epistle to the Galatians concerns a group that has come to be known as 'the Judaizers.' These people felt that the Gentiles must obey the Law of Moses in order to be saved (Acts 15:1 and 5)."<sup>4</sup> Paul, in an effort to correct the false teaching, posed a few simple questions to the Galatian Christians, saying, "This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Gal 3:2-3). The Christians in Galatia had trusted in Christ as their Savior and had received the Holy Spirit. They were saved. Yet, the legalism of the Judaizers had corrupted the concept of faith alone in Christ alone. Fruchtenbaum notes, "Too many believers think they can and need to add to their salvation. By grace through faith alone does not seem to satisfy. People add the keeping of some of the laws of Moses to their salvation. Others believe their baptism plays a role in it. Again others throw what is commonly known as Lordship salvation into the mix."<sup>5</sup> I think posttheosoterism describes many Christians today, who truly trusted Christ as their Savior, but then later were led to believe they needed good

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<sup>3</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 461.

<sup>4</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Faith Alone: The Condition of Our Salvation: An Exposition of the Book of Galatians and Other Relevant Topics*, ed. Christiane Jurik, Second Edition. (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2016), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Faith Alone: The Condition of Our Salvation: An Exposition of the Book of Galatians and Other Relevant Topics*, ed. Christiane Jurik, Second Edition. (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2016), 1.

works to keep themselves saved. Chafer states, “True salvation is wholly a work of God. It is said to be both a finished work and a gift, and, therefore, it lays no obligation upon the saved one to complete it himself, or to make after payments of service for it.”<sup>6</sup>

I personally trusted Christ as my Savior at age eight; however, shortly afterwards I was taught I needed to keep myself saved by ceasing to sin and also by doing good works. Though I did not lose my salvation (which is impossible), the joy I had when I trusted Christ as my Savior was lost, as I became trapped in a vicious system of trying to keep my salvation by good works. Subsequently, I believed I lost my salvation every time I sinned (which was daily), and felt I needed to come groveling back to God as a failure, and trusting Christ over and over again in order to be saved. Eventually, exhaustion took its toll, and after several years I walked away from God, thinking the Christian life was impossible. It was not until roughly fifteen years later that my assurance of salvation rested in Christ alone, and the joy of my salvation was restored.

Because pride is the default setting of the human heart; it’s our natural proclivity to think we can fix the problem of sin and righteousness and either earn God’s approval by our own efforts, or at least participate in the effort. Pride must die for salvation to occur, as we come to God with the empty hands of faith, offering nothing, but only receiving the salvation which He offers to us by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Human efforts to save are useless. Lewis Chafer notes, “No one under any circumstances could forgive his own sin, impart eternal life to himself, clothe himself in the righteousness of God, or write his name in heaven.”<sup>7</sup>

*Solatheosoterism* is the correct biblical view. This teaches that our spiritual salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, plus nothing more. No good works are required for our salvation before, during, or after we trust in Christ. As stated before, good works should follow salvation (Eph 2:10), but they are never the condition of it. This is the record of Scripture in the OT, as “Salvation belongs to the LORD” (Psa 3:8), and “Our God is a God of salvation” (Psa 68:20 CSB), and “Salvation is from the LORD” (Jon 2:9). In the NT we read about Jesus, and that “He will save His people from their sins” (Matt 1:21), and “He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Col 1:13a), and “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Satan* (New York: Gospel Publishing House, 1909), 111.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993), 7.

righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit” (Tit 3:5), and it is “God who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity” (2 Tim 1:8b-9). In these verses, salvation is always in one direction, from God to us.

Scripture reveals we are *helpless, ungodly, sinners, and enemies of God* (Rom 5:6-10), and prior to our salvation, we were dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1). Salvation is never what we do for God; rather, it’s what He’s done for us through the death of His Son, who paid the full penalty for all our sins on the cross at Calvary. Having paid the full price for our sins, there is nothing that remains for us to pay. Christ paid it all, and our spiritual salvation was completed at the cross, where Jesus said, “It is finished” (John 19:30). According to Francis Schaeffer, “Salvation is the whole process that results from the finished work of Jesus Christ as He died in space and time upon the cross.”<sup>8</sup> And Lewis Chafer notes, “As for revelation, it is the testimony of the Scriptures, without exception, that every feature of man’s salvation from its inception to the final perfection in heaven is a work of God for man and not a work of man for God.”<sup>9</sup>

No one has the means to redeem his own soul, nor the soul of another. Jesus asked, “what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matt 16:26). The answer is nothing! If Jesus had not paid our sin-debt to God, there would be no hope of ever being liberated from spiritual slavery, for “no man can by any means redeem his brother or give to God a ransom for him—for the redemption of his soul is costly, and he should cease trying forever” (Psa 49:7-8). However, Paul writes of the “redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:24b), and this speaks to the payment He made on behalf of sinners. The word *redemption* translates the Greek *apolutrosis* which means to “release from a captive condition.”<sup>10</sup> Redemption refers to the payment of a debt that one gives in order to liberate another from slavery. Jesus declared “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45), and the apostle Paul tells us that Jesus “gave Himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim 2:6). When we turn to Christ as our only Savior “we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (Eph 1:7; cf. Col 1:13-14). Because Jesus died in our place, He is able to set us free from our

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<sup>8</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *Death in the City* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 100.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 117.

spiritual bondage and give us eternal life, but it is only because of His shed blood on the cross that He can do this, for we “were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold...but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (1 Pet 1:18-19). The blood of Christ is necessary, for “without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb 9:22). And the blood of Christ is the coin of the heavenly realm that paid our sin debt. He paid it all, and there’s nothing more for us to pay. Salvation is a gift from God. If we have to pay for it, it ceases to be a gift.