



The Semantics of Salvation

by Jeremy Cagle

It probably goes without saying that a shallow understanding of Christian salvation will always produce a shallow Christian. John MacArthur once said, “Not knowing what you believe (especially on a matter as essential to Christianity as the Gospel) is by definition a kind of unbelief.”¹ If you do not know what to *believe*, then by default you are an *unbeliever*. If you do not know what salvation *means*, you will not know how to become a Christian, let alone live like one. Ignorance may be blissful in some areas of life, but ignorance is cancerous here. If you do not comprehend what Jesus did on the cross, then you cannot be saved and you cannot be a Christian.²

So the task we have before us in this edition of /jtst/ is a big one. To explain all that the Bible teaches about salvation in several articles would be like swallowing an elephant and spitting out the tail. But that is what these articles will be: only the tail of an elephant. We know that you live busy lives and there are many demands on your schedules. So here is one concise way (among several) to describe a believer’s salvation in Jesus Christ.

Webster’s Dictionary defines semantics as “the study of the meaning of words.”³ The “Semantics of Salvation” then,

would be the study of the meaning of words that pertain to salvation. The following is a brief description of the words the Bible uses to describe how Christians are delivered from the consequences of their sins.

I. ATONEMENT

Atonement could be defined as “how amends are made between God and man.” This is seen in the Old Testament word for atonement: *kepher*. *Kepher* means “to appease” or “to make amends.” God hates sin (Ps 5:4–6) and, because of that, He cannot ignore the behavior of sinful

people. Atonement must be made for sinners to have a peaceful relationship with a Holy God.

This is seen very clearly in the Old Testament. The Israelites had one day of their calendar year set aside to make amends for their sin. Leviticus 16:29–30 describe this day:

This shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you; for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you will be clean from all your sins before the Lord.

On this Day of Atonement, through the sacrifices of animals, the sins of the nation of Israel were atoned for and God's anger at their sin was appeased.

In a similar way, Jesus' death on the cross has provided atonement for every Christian. Hebrews 9:26 says Jesus "has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself." The Son of God was crucified on the cross to remove God's hostility towards sin. He died to offer us atonement. Through His punishment, God's hatred towards sin is appeased and we can have a relationship with our Heavenly Father.

II. COVENANT

A covenant "refers to the act of God in freely establishing a mutually binding relationship with humankind."⁴ An Old Testament example of a covenant is found in Genesis 12:1–3, where God tells Abram,

Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father's house,
To the land which I will show you;

And I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And so you shall be a blessing;

And I will bless those who bless you,
And the one who curses you I will curse.
And in you all the families of the earth
will be blessed.

In this covenant, God established a binding relationship with Abram where God would bless those who blessed Abram and He would curse those who cursed Abram.

God has also entered into a covenant with every New Testament Christian. Luke 22:19–20 says,

And when [Jesus] had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying,

"This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood."

Through Jesus' work on the cross, believers have now entered into a new covenant with Him, where He takes their sins on Himself and He gives them His reward. This covenant is a "binding relationship" ensuring our salvation.⁵

III. REDEMPTION

Wayne Grudem defines redemption as "Christ's saving work viewed as an act of 'buying back' sinners out of their bondage to sin."⁶ In Bible times, slavery was a form of bankruptcy. If you could not pay your bills, you would sell yourself or your family into slavery until payment could be made. If you did this, it would be the responsibility of your nearest family member to buy you back from your new owner. This process of buying something back was called "redemption" and the person who bought you back was your "kinsman redeemer."⁷

Titus 2:14 says Jesus came to "redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds." The Bible teaches that every human being is a slave to sin (Jn 8:34) but God, in His mercy, became a

human being and suffered and died to buy us back from this slavery. Titus says Jesus Christ brought salvation to us that He might make us His own possession.⁸

IV. JUSTIFICATION

In his book, *The Cross and Salvation*, Bruce Demarest writes that, "The biblical doctrine of justification deals with the fundamental issue of how guilty sinners can be acquitted and restored to favor with an infinitely righteous and just God."⁹ To be justified is "to be made just / right." As a result of our sin against God, we have all been made unjust and unrighteous. God has every right to punish us as lawbreakers because we have broken His law. James 2:10–11 says,

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not commit murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

If you break one law, you break the entire law. Because of that, all of us have broken all of God's law. All of us, that is, except Jesus. Hebrews 4:15 says, "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with

our weaknesses, but One Who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.”

Jesus Christ never sinned once. He kept all of God’s perfect law. Because of that, He was perfectly just in God’s eyes. Yet in His love for mankind, God sacrificed this perfectly just Man for the sins of every one who would ever believe in Him. God killed His own Son to punish our sin and give us His reward. Romans 3:26 says He did this “so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” God justified us through the cross.

V. SUBSTITUTION

“Substitution occurs when one takes the place of another. Christ took the place of sinners, suffering the penalty of sin that was due them.”¹⁰ To be a substitute for someone else is to be their replacement. To substitute one thing for another is to offer an exchange. God did that for us with Jesus Christ on the cross. Second Corinthians 5:21 says, “[God] made Him Who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”¹¹

Jesus’ life was worthy of Heaven. Our lives are worthy of Hell. But on the cross and through the resurrection,

Jesus’ holy life was substituted for our unholy one. God took our punishment and gave us Jesus’ reward. On the cross, God treated Jesus as if He had committed every sin by every Christian who ever lived. Through the cross, God treats us as if we had never sinned at all. As the hymn writer says, “I owed a debt I could not pay; He paid a debt He did not owe.”

The doctrine of substitution states that God gave Himself in the person of His Son to suffer instead of us the death, punishment and curse due to fallen humanity as the penalty for sin.

This understanding of the cross stands at the very heart of the Gospel. There is a captivating beauty in the sacrificial love of a God who gave Himself for His people. It is this that first draws many believers to the Lord Jesus Christ, and it is this that will draw us to Him when He returns on the last day to vindicate His name and welcome His people into His eternal kingdom. That the Lord Jesus Christ died for us – a shameful death, bearing our curse, enduring our pain, suffering the wrath of His own Father in our place – has been the wellspring of the hope of countless Christians throughout the ages.¹²

VI. PROPITIATION

Charles Ryrie writes that propitiation is “The turning away of the wrath of God because of the offering of Christ.”¹³ The Bible is very clear on

the fact that sin – disobedience to God’s law – makes God angry. In fact, it makes Him full of wrath. “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom 1:18). “But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself” (Rom 2:5).

While the wrath of God is not a comfortable topic for most Christians today, it is a vital part of Biblical salvation. Leon Morris explains why in his book, *The Atonement*:

We must not think that “the wrath of God” is no more than a figure of speech which we may safely ignore. God hates every evil thing. But we are not comfortable with the New Testament teaching on the consequences of our sin. Partly at least this is because we have so well learnt that God is love. It is accepted today as axiomatic that God’s attitude to us is one of love and that it always will be. I wish to affirm this in the strongest of terms.

But it is love and not sentimentality that is in question. And what we do not see is that love is capable of very strong action. Real love will always be resolutely opposed to evil in the beloved. More than a century ago E. H. Gifford wrote, “Human love here offers a true analogy: the more a father loves his son, the more he hates in *him* the drunkard, the liar, or the traitor.”¹⁴

The process whereby God’s wrath is pacified and we are saved from its dreadful consequences is propitiation. Romans 3:25 says, “God displayed [Jesus] publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.” Jesus was crucified to satisfy God’s wrath towards sin. On the cross, God poured out His full fury towards sin and killed His beloved Son, that every Christian would not have to bear God’s anger alone (Eph 2:1–7). The Son was offered as a propitiation.

CONCLUSION

It is my prayer that this material will help you grow as a Christian. The more you understand of Christian salvation, the more you will understand what it means to follow Jesus Christ. And the more you will grow closer to Him.

If you are not a Christian and this material (or anything else we write) has made you aware of that, please feel free to contact us here at /jtst/. No matter what your position in life, salvation is available to you now.¹⁵

End Notes

¹ *The Truth War: Fighting for Certainty in an Age of Deception* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2007) xi.

² This does not mean that every Christian must understand everything about Jesus’

crucifixion and resurrection to be saved. But if a professing Christian understands *nothing* about Jesus dying and rising again for his sins, it is safe to say that his profession is artificial (Rom 10:13–14).

³ *Webster's New World Dictionary*, ed. by Michael Agnes (New York: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2003) 583.

⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, & Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999) 32.

⁵ For more passages on our this new covenant, see 2 Corinthians 3:5–6; Hebrews 7:20–22; 12:22–24.

⁶ *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 1253.

⁷ For a Biblical example of a kinsman redeemer, see Ruth 4.

⁸ For another insightful passage on redemption, see 1 Peter 1:18.

⁹ *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1997) 345.

¹⁰ Thomas Oden, *Systematic Theology*, Volume Two (Peabody, Mass.: Hendricksen Publishers, Inc., 2006) 380.

¹¹ For another helpful verse on substitution, see Isaiah 53:5–6.

¹² Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2007) 21.

¹³ *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1999 ed.) 630.

¹⁴ Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning & Significance* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1983) 147.

¹⁵ Rom 10:9–10; 1 Cor 1:22–31.