

God's Plan of Salvation, ESV Study Bible

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A troubled jailer in the first century once asked two Christian leaders, “what must I do to be saved?” ([Acts 16:30](#)). This in fact is the most important question that anyone can ask. We are troubled not only by the evils of our world but also by our own faults. We often feel guilty for those words and deeds that our own consciences tell us are wrong. We probably sense that we deserve God's judgment, not his favor. What can be done—or what has been done—to rescue us from our helpless situation? We begin our answer by offering an overview of God's plan and his work to bring salvation, followed by a more detailed unpacking of these truths.

An Overview

Creation

God made this world and all that is in it: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. . . . God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” ([Gen. 1:1, 27](#)). He created human beings to be like him and to have unhindered fellowship with him, and when his work of creation was finished he saw that it was “very good” ([Gen. 1:31](#)).

Rebellion

Although the first people God created, Adam and Eve, had complete freedom to live in friendship and trust with him, they chose to rebel ([Gen. 3:1–7](#)). Because God designed that Adam would represent the entire human race, his sin was catastrophic not only for him but for us: “one trespass led to condemnation for all men” ([Rom. 5:18](#)). Our fellowship with God was broken. Instead of enjoying his holy pleasure, we instead face his righteous wrath. Through this sin, we all died spiritually (see [Rom. 3:1–20](#); [Eph. 2:1–10](#)) and the entire world was affected. God also cursed the world over which humanity had been set to reign as his lieutenants (see [Gen. 3:17–19](#)). “The creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it” ([Rom. 8:20](#)). And we all individually sin against God in our own lives: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” ([Rom. 3:23](#)).

Redemption

God would have been perfectly just to leave matters there, with all human beings under his holy judgment, but he didn't. God instead set in motion his plan to save his people from sin and judgment and set free the entire creation from its subjugation to sin and the curse. How? By sending his Son as a true man who would bear the penalty for our sin and die in our place: “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” ([1 Cor. 15:3](#)).

The best-known verse in the Bible summarizes the required response to this good news: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that *whoever believes in him* should not perish but have eternal life” ([John 3:16](#)). To “believe in” Jesus includes both a wholehearted trust in him for forgiveness of sins and a decision to forsake one's sin or to “repent”: All who truly “repent [or turn from their sins] and believe [in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins]” will be redeemed ([Mark 1:15](#)) and restored to a right relationship with God. To “believe in” Jesus also requires relating to, and putting trust in, Jesus as he truly is—not just a man in ancient history but also a living Savior today who knows our hearts and hears our prayers.

Consummation

God not only rescues lost sinners but he restores all of creation. We read in [Romans 8:21](#): “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” The heavens and the earth will “pass away” and be radically transformed ([2 Pet. 3:7–13](#); [Rev. 21:1](#)). We read of the glorious culmination of this in the book of Revelation, where God's people, the redeemed, are brought into the presence of God to live ([Rev. 21:1–22:6](#)). This is life as it should be, literally as it was meant to be.

Filling in the Details

Let's now stop and review this more carefully and specifically, addressing the questions of God, man, Christ, the response, and the result.

God

The God of the Bible is the one and only true God. He is the greatest of all beings. He depends on no other being for his existence. He exists eternally as one God in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—a mystery beyond our understanding, but not a contradiction. He plans and acts according to his own good pleasure. He “works all things according to the counsel of his will” ([Eph. 1:11](#)). God created the world and acts in it today in accordance with his own perfect, holy, good, and loving plan, in accordance with his own good pleasure.

In the same way that this perfectly good God created everything according to his own purposes, so he has acted to save people who have rebelled against him. This action, too, is not because of anything external compelling him, but it is “according to his great mercy” that “he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” ([1 Pet. 1:3](#)).

Man

People are made *in the image of God* ([Gen. 1:27–28](#)). What does that mean? In part it means that we are privileged to act as God's representatives, as sub-rulers over God's creation, subduing the creatures of the earth, reflecting God's good rule over us. Our authority is derived from God's ([Eph. 3:14–15](#)) and is meant to reflect his own. But beyond function, being in God's image also means that we are *like God* in many ways. Like God, we are spiritual and rational beings. Like God, we communicate and establish relationships. Like God, our souls endure eternally.

However, the Bible also teaches that there has been an enduring effect of the sin of Adam and Eve recorded in [Genesis 3](#). Because of that sin, we are born morally *fallen*. We are naturally turned away from God and toward sin in every area of life. We are not as bad as we possibly could be, but we are at no point as good as we ought to be. We are now all sinners, and we sin in all areas of life ([Rom. 3:23](#)). We are corrupted and make the wrong choices. We are not holy, and are in fact inclined to evil; we do not love God, and therefore we are under just condemnation to eternal ruin, without defense or excuse. We are guilty of sinning against God, fallen from his favor, and under the curse of [Genesis 3](#), and the promise of his right and just judgment of us in the future and forever is guaranteed to us (“the wages of sin is death,” [Rom. 6:23](#)). This is the state from which we need to be saved.

Jesus Christ

It was, then, when all human beings were desperate and helpless, that God “loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” ([1 John 4:10](#)).

Fully God. The Son of God, who has eternally existed with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and who has eternally possessed all the attributes of God, became a man. He was born as Jesus, son of the virgin Mary. The Son entered this world with a purpose: he came “to give his life as a ransom for many” ([Mark 10:45](#)), which means he came to redeem us

from sin and guilt. He was not an unwitting or unwilling sacrifice. He, following his Father, chose to love the world in this way. Though now fully human, he was also fully God throughout the time of his life on earth (and remains fully God to this day). Jesus himself clearly taught his deity in the way he fulfilled prophecy, which was associated with the coming of God himself ([Mark 14:61–62](#)). Jesus forgave sins ([Mark 2:5](#)), he accepted worship ([John 20:28](#); [Revelation 5](#)), and he taught, “I and the Father are one” ([John 10:30](#)).

Fully man. Jesus Christ was also fully man. He was not a deity pretending to be human when he was not. Jesus was fully human (and remains fully human to this day). He was born and lived in submission to his earthly parents. He had a fully human body. He “grew and became strong, filled with wisdom” ([Luke 2:40](#)). He learned the carpentry trade ([Mark 6:3](#)). He experienced hunger, felt thirst and tiredness, faced temptation, and eventually suffered even death itself. Jesus Christ was, and is, fully God and fully man. The eternal Son of God became a man in order to save sinners.

Perfect life. Jesus Christ lived a perfect life. Indeed, all his actions were as they should be. His words were perfect. He said only what the Father commanded. “What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me” ([John 12:50](#)). He did only what the Father willed ([John 5:19](#); e.g., [Luke 22:42](#)). So, the writer to the Hebrews concludes, “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” ([Heb. 4:15](#)). Jesus lived the life of consistent, wholehearted love to the Father that Adam and Eve and Israel—and all of us—should have lived. He deserved no punishment from God because he was never disobedient.

Teaching. Jesus came to teach God's truth, especially about himself ([Mark 1:38](#); [10:45](#); [Luke 20:42](#); [24:44](#)). He taught the truth about God, about his relationship with God the Father ([John 14](#)), about our sin, about what he had come to do, and about what we must do in response. He explained that the Scriptures of the OT were about him ([Luke 24:44](#)).

Crucifixion. But God sent his Son especially to die for us ([Mark 10:45](#); [John 3:16–18](#)). This is how God has shown his love for us ([Rom. 5:8](#); [1 John 4:9–10](#)). Christ gave his life as a ransom for us ([Mark 10:45](#); [1 Tim. 2:6](#)). By his death he paid the penalty for our sin. Jesus Christ's crucifixion was a horrible act of violence by the people who rejected, sentenced, mocked, tortured, and crucified him. And yet it was also a display of the self-giving love of God, as the Son of God bore the penalty of God's wrath against us for our sin ([Deut. 21:23](#); [Isa. 53:5](#); [Rom. 3:25–26](#); [4:25](#); [5:19](#); [8:3](#); [2 Cor. 5:21](#); [Phil. 2:8](#); [Heb. 9:28](#)).

Resurrection, ascension, return. On the third day after his crucifixion, Jesus was raised from the dead by God. This demonstrated an acceptance of Christ's service in his ministry and specifically showed God's acceptance of his sacrifice for all those who would repent and believe ([Rom. 1:4](#); [4:25](#)). He ascended to heaven and “will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” ([Acts 1:11](#)). Christ's return will bring God's plan of salvation to completion.

Response

So if God has done this in Christ, what are we to do to be saved? We must turn to God in Christ, which entails turning back from sin. If we *repent* of (decide to forsake and turn from) our sin (as best we understand it) and *trust* in Christ as a living person, we will be saved from God's righteous wrath against our sins. This response of repentance and faith (or trust) can be explained in more detail as follows:

Turn to God. In the OT, God commands people to turn or return to him, and so be saved (e.g., [Isa. 6:10](#); [Jer. 18:8](#)). In the NT, Christ preached that people should turn to God, and Paul summarized his account of his preaching with that phrase: “that they [everyone] should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance” ([Acts 26:20](#); cf. [Acts 26:18](#)). Thus, as Paul said earlier, he preached “testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” ([Acts 20:21](#)). To repent means to turn. And the turning that we are called to do in order to be saved is fundamentally a turning to God. James could refer to the Gentiles who “turn to God” ([Acts 15:19](#)). To “turn to,” in this sense in the Bible, is to orient your life toward someone. As God's people—those who are being saved—we are to play the part of the Prodigal Son who, though conscious of sin, guilt, and folly, flees to the Father ([Luke 15:20](#)). Paul at Lystra calls the people to turn to the living God ([Acts 14:15](#)). Paul refers to the Galatian Christians as

those who had come to “know God” ([Gal. 4:9](#)); this is what we do in repentance: we repent *to*, we turn *to* God, and henceforth know him as the God who forgives our sins and accepts us for Christ's sake.

Turn away from sin. Turning to God necessarily implies our turning away from sin. The whole Bible—OT and NT—clearly teaches that to repent is to “acknowledge [God's] name and turn from [our] sins” ([1 Kings 8:35](#); cf. 2 Chron. 7:14; Jer. 36:3; Ezek. 14:6; 18:30; Acts 3:19; 8:22; 26:18; Rev. 2:21–22; 9:20–21; 16:11). We cannot start to pursue God and sin at the same time. First John makes it clear that our basic way of life will either be oriented toward God and his light, or toward the darkness of sin. Christians in this life still sin, but against our deepest desires and better judgment; our lives are not guided and directed by sin as before. We are no longer enslaved to sin. Though we still struggle with it ([Gal. 5:17](#)), God has given us the gift of repentance ([Acts 11:18](#)), and we have been freed from sin's dominating power.

Believe and trust. Put another way, our response is to believe and trust God's promises in Christ, and to commit ourselves to Christ, the living Lord, as his disciples. Among Jesus' first words in Mark's Gospel are “repent and believe in the gospel” ([Mark 1:15](#)). The obedience that typifies God's people, beginning with repentance, is to result from the faith and trust we have in him and his word (e.g., [Josh. 22:16](#); [Acts 27:25](#)). Thus sins are sometimes called “breaking faith with God” (e.g., [Ezra 10:2, 10](#)). Having faith in Christ, which seals our union with him through the Holy Spirit, is the means by which God accounts Christ's righteousness as our own ([Rom. 3:21–26](#); [5:17–21](#); [Gal. 2:16](#); [Eph. 2:8–9](#); [Phil. 3:9](#)). Paul could refer to “salvation through faith in Christ” ([2 Tim. 3:15](#)). Frequently this initial repentance and faith can be simply expressed to God himself in prayer.

Grow in godliness and battle for holiness. Such saving faith is something that we exercise, but even so it is a gift from God. Paul writes, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” ([Eph. 2:8–9](#)). At the same time, Paul explained that Christians know an internal battle: “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” ([Gal. 5:17](#)). God's *gift* of salvation has been given to Christians, but the evidence of that salvation is *lived out* in the continual work of God's Spirit. We can deceive ourselves, and so Paul encourages his readers to “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves” ([2 Cor. 13:5](#)). Peter encourages Christians to grow in godliness and so become more confident of their election ([2 Peter 1](#)). We don't create our own salvation by our actions, but we reflect and express it and so grow in our certainty of it. Because we Christians are liable to deceive ourselves, we should give ourselves to the study of God's Word to be instructed and encouraged in our salvation, and to learn what is inconsistent with it. Jesus' descriptions of his followers (see [Matthew 5–7](#)), or Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit's work in us (see [Gal. 5:22–23](#)), act as spiritual maps that help us locate ourselves to see if we are on the path of salvation.

Result

God's plan is to save his people from their sins—and to bring his people fully and finally to himself ([Matt. 1:21](#); [2 Tim. 2:10](#)). Christians experience salvation in this life in both a past and present sense, and we anticipate salvation in a future sense. Christians have been saved from the *penalty* of our sins; we are currently being saved from the *power* of sin; and one day, when God's plan of salvation is completed and we are with Christ, we shall be like him, and we shall be saved even from the very *presence* of sin. This is God's plan of salvation.¹

¹Mark Dever, Ph.D., “God's Plan of Salvation,” *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 2008) 2501-2503.