

Examining Christian Doctrine

Lesson 27: The Doctrine of Salvation Part 4 – Salvation in the Old Testament

As we have been examining the creation and fall of man, along with the entrance of sin, and its effects on the humanity, we will now begin to look at the remedy to sin: Salvation. Before we get into the teaching of salvation, we will first explore the concept of salvation in the Old Testament. Beginning with the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 12, God begins his plan of redemption through the nation of Israel and their Covenant with Himself.

Defining Salvation

When using the terms 'salvation' or 'saved', what exactly are we talking about?

- The Hebrew word for salvation is 'yeshua', which means "to rescue," "to deliver," or "to save." Psalm 37:39, *"The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD";* Exodus 14:13, *"Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today."*
- The Greek word for salvation is *sōtēria*, which is related to the verb (*sōzō*), meaning "to save," "to deliver," or "to make whole." Romans 10:10, *"For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation"*

Salvation in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, salvation is not only about spiritual matters but also very much about *physical* rescue from immediate dangers. Salvation is not seen in the Old Testament as something that concerns issues *after life*, but rather issues *in this life* (safety/protection, health, blessings, long life). Salvation can then be understood as God's intervention in the lives of individuals or the nation at large to deliver them from peril. The Israelites were more concerned with national survival, deliverance from enemies, and preservation in the Promised Land than with the afterlife. This earthly focus shaped the way salvation was defined; primarily as the covenantal blessings largely experienced in the here and now.

Physical Deliverance: In the Old Testament, salvation often referred to literal, physical deliverance from enemies, oppression, or danger.

- The Exodus, where God raised up Moses and delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, is the defining event of salvation in the Old Testament. This event becomes the prototype for understanding God's saving work where God is portrayed as the Savior and Redeemer of Israel, rescuing them from their enemies and bringing them into a covenant relationship with Himself. Exodus 14:30, *"Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians"*
- Salvation is also seen through military victories, where God empowers Israel's leaders, like David, and other Judges to defeat their enemies (e.g., Goliath in 1 Samuel 17, battles with the Philistines). God would establish the Davidic Kingdom, in which God would establish a covenant with David that one of his sons would sit on the throne and rule in an eternal kingdom. This idea would bring about the idea and hope of a 'Messianic salvation' for Israel. Judges 3:9, *"But when the Israelites cried out to the LORD, He raised up for them a deliverer."*

Spiritual Deliverance and Restoration: Beyond physical deliverance, the Old Testament also speaks of spiritual salvation, such as forgiveness of sin and restoration to right relationship with God. Salvation includes the idea of being faithful to the covenant. God's covenant relationship with Israel meant that salvation was often tied to obedience to the Law and the preservation of the nation.

- **The Mosaic Covenant:** Outlined primarily in Exodus 19-24, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, this covenant set forth the terms of Israel's relationship with God. It provided a comprehensive set of laws governing religious, social, and moral life. In exchange for their obedience, God promised Israel blessings, protection, and favor, but warned of curses and judgment if they disobeyed (Deuteronomy 28).
 - Righteousness through the Law: The Law, as part of the covenant, defined righteousness and the standards by which Israel would maintain a right relationship with God. Spiritual restoration was directly related to how well Israel kept the Law. If Israel was faithful, they would enjoy shalom (peace, prosperity, and well-being). If they sinned, they would need to be restored through repentance and atonement.
 - Conditional Blessings and Curses: The covenant established blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (Deuteronomy 28). Spiritual restoration was necessary whenever Israel broke the covenant.

- **Spiritual Decline and the Need for Restoration:** Israel frequently fell short of the covenantal demands, engaging in idolatry, injustice, and other forms of disobedience. This led to periods of spiritual decline, where Israel turned away from God and faced the consequences outlined in the Mosaic Covenant.
 - Idolatry and Apostasy: A recurring theme in the Old Testament is Israel’s tendency to worship foreign gods and adopt pagan practices. This violation of the covenant was seen as spiritual adultery, leading to the removal of God’s protective hand (Judges 2:11-15, 1 Kings 11:1-13).
 - Consequences for Sin and Breaking the Covenant: Breaking the covenant had both individual and corporate (national) consequences and punishment. Sin is described as the ‘transgression of the law’ and violating the law was also an affront to the holiness of God.
 - Individual Consequences: These consequences can include:
 - **Loss of Fellowship** with God in which the sinner would become unclean and would need to make atonement to approach God in worship.
 - **Legal and Social Consequences** within Israel’s community for sins such as breaking the Sabbath, committing adultery, or engaging in idolatry could include and ultimately result in being exiled from the community or death.
 - **Physical consequences** such as disease or suffering, including leprosy, were seen as a consequence of personal disobedience. Illnesses or barrenness were often associated with divine judgment for sin (Deuteronomy 28:27).
 - Corporate Consequences: These consequences can include:
 - **Defeat by Enemies:** Disobedience would lead to military defeat. There are examples of Israel being oppressed by foreign powers due to their idolatry and sin (Judges 2:11-15). Their defeats served as a reminder of the covenant they had broken.
 - **Famine and Economic Hardship:** The Mosaic Law made it clear that if the nation sinned, God would withhold rain, leading to famine and drought (Leviticus 26:19-20, Deut. 28:23-24). The failure of crops and livestock was a sign of God’s displeasure and a call for the people to repent.
 - **Exile from the Promised Land:** The most severe consequence of corporate sin was exile from the land of Canaan. These exiles were seen as the ultimate punishment for breaking the covenant (Leviticus 26:33-35).
 - **Loss of Identity and Covenant Privileges:** Exile meant more than just geographical displacement. It symbolized the loss of Israel’s identity as God’s chosen people. They lost the land, the temple, and their sovereignty—key symbols of their covenant relationship with God. This punishment reflected the gravity of their national disobedience.
 - Prophetic Call to Repentance: Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea frequently called the nation back to covenant faithfulness. They warned of impending judgment but also offered hope for spiritual restoration if the people would repent (Isaiah 1:18, Hosea 6:1-2). Spiritual restoration was thus tied to Israel’s willingness to return to the covenant and their relationship with God.
- **Atonement and Spiritual Restoration in the Mosaic Covenant:** A key aspect of spiritual restoration under the Mosaic Covenant was atonement—the process by which Israel could be cleansed of sin and restored to fellowship with God. The Law provided specific rituals and sacrifices that facilitated this process of restoration.
 - Sacrificial System: The Mosaic Law established a detailed sacrificial system, which was central to spiritual restoration. The shedding of blood in sacrifices, particularly on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), was a means by which sin could be covered, and the people could be reconciled to God.
 - Burnt Offerings and Sin Offerings: Specific offerings were prescribed for individual sins (Leviticus 1-5), emphasizing the need for personal restoration. Everytime someone sinned, they had to bring a sacrificial offering to atone for their wrongdoing.
 - The Day of Atonement: This annual event (Leviticus 16) is where the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the sins of the nation. The ritual involved the scapegoat, symbolizing the removal of sin from the community, and sacrificial offerings that covered the people’s sins for the year.
 - Repentance and Forgiveness: Spiritual restoration was not merely mechanical; it required repentance—a heartfelt turning away from sin and back to God. The prophets emphasized the internal dimension of repentance, calling for Israel to “rend your hearts and not your garments” (Joel 2:13). God’s forgiveness and restoration were promised to those who sincerely repented and returned to Him (Isaiah 55:7).

Further Salvation as a Hope

While the Mosaic Covenant outlined the immediate terms for Israel's relationship with God, the Old Testament also points toward a greater hope for salvation that would go beyond the temporal deliverance and blessings Israel experienced. This hope would be rooted in the **Abrahamic Covenant** and the prophetic **Messianic Promises**. These pointed to something much bigger: a global means of salvation and reconciliation with God provided for all people.

The Abrahamic Covenant established a theological framework where salvation was tied not only to Israel's national relationship with God but to the redemption of the entire world ('through you all nations of the earth would be blessed').

The Old Testament prophets expanded on the Abrahamic promise by introducing the concept of a Messiah—a divinely appointed king and savior who would bring about ultimate salvation for Israel and the nations. As Israel continued to struggle with sin and faced exile, the prophets began to speak of a coming future restoration through this anointed one.

- The prophets described the Messiah as a king from the line of David (the Davidic Covenant) who would deliver Israel and establish a kingdom of peace and righteousness (Isaiah 9:6-7; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Micah 5:2). This figure would not only restore Israel politically but also spiritually. He would deal with the nation's sin and provide a path for them to return to God in a lasting way.
- One of the most significant aspects of the prophetic hope is found in the Suffering Servant passages of Isaiah (Isaiah 52:13–53:12). The Servant, while suffering on behalf of the people, would bear their sins and bring healing and peace through His sacrifice. This Servant was often interpreted as the coming Messiah, who would offer atonement for the sins of Israel and even the whole world (Isaiah 53:5-6). This idea laid the groundwork for understanding how salvation could be achieved not only through obedience to the law but also through a vicarious sacrifice.
- The prophets also spoke of a new covenant that would surpass the Mosaic Covenant. Jeremiah prophesied that God would write His law on the hearts of His people and forgive their iniquity, ushering in a new era of spiritual renewal and intimacy with God (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Ezekiel added to this hope by describing a future when God would give His people a new heart and put His Spirit within them, enabling them to follow His commands (Ezekiel 36:25-27). This new covenant hinted at a deeper, more internalized relationship with God, preparing the way for the transformation that would come through Christ.

The promises of salvation found in the Abrahamic Covenant and the Messianic prophecies created a theological expectation that paved the way for the New Testament revelation of salvation through Christ. Israel's temporary deliverances in the Old Testament pointed to a greater and eternal deliverance that would come through the Messiah—Jesus Christ.

- **Fulfillment in Christ:** Jesus Christ, as the Son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1) and Son of David, fulfilled the prophetic hopes of Israel. His life, death, and resurrection brought about the spiritual deliverance that the prophets had foretold. By bearing the sins of the world, Christ fulfilled the role of the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53), and by establishing a new covenant through His blood (Luke 22:20), He inaugurated the ultimate salvation promised in the Old Testament.
- **The Kingdom of God:** Jesus proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God, the very kingdom foretold by the prophets. This kingdom was not only a future hope but also a present reality, as Christ offered forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all who believed in Him, both Jew and Gentile.
- **Salvation for All Nations:** The inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation, as foretold by the prophets, became a reality through the ministry of Christ and the apostles. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) to make disciples of all nations showed that the Abrahamic promise of blessing for all peoples was being fulfilled in Jesus.

In our next lesson, we will look at the New Testament revelation of salvation as it relates to Jesus, the New Covenant, and his atoning work on the cross for sin.