

Understanding Salvation: A Definition of Key Gospel Terms

by Jeremy James



The Bible uses many terms to describe salvation. An accurate interpretation of these is essential for a proper understanding of the Gospel message.

It is a sign of how confused even sincere, well-meaning Christians are today that so many of them are unable to define salvation in a clear, Scriptural manner. A "fuzzy" definition can greatly weaken the power of the Gospel, or even lose it entirely. Alas, many churches have drifted so far from the Bible as the bedrock of their faith that their Gospel message is often poorly expressed and many new converts are making professions that do not lead to the new birth.

The power of the Gospel lies in its truth, and its truth is impaired if it is not expressed clearly and accurately. We are not all called to be evangelists, but we ARE all called to evangelize. And to do that we need to be **crystal clear** in our own minds about the true meaning of salvation.

A definition of each of the main terms is given below. [They should be considered as a "set" since their content is interconnected. Otherwise each definition would need to be greatly expanded.]

Taken together these terms define Christian salvation.

1. Propitiation: This is the English translation of the Greek word *hilasterion*, which in turn is a translation of the Hebrew word *kapporeth*, meaning "mercy seat." The mercy seat, which covered the Ark, was made of a single piece of pure gold. It represented Christ as the perfect protective covering (*kapporeth*) that shielded fallen man from the righteous wrath of God. The shed blood of Christ covers the sin of all mankind, and does so completely and perfectly. It is thus the *kapporeth* or propitiation for that sin, making full and final payment for it. In a single sacrifice, never to be repeated, his shed blood satisfied in full, once and for all, the unalterable demand by a holy and righteous God that every sin be punished, without exception. Propitiation in a Biblical sense is entirely a work of mercy and grace which both vindicates the righteousness of God and reconciles man with God. Through it the Father is saying, This is what your sin cost me, and I bore that cost in full in my Son. [Some Bible translations use the word 'expiation' instead of propitiation, but this is wrong. The word propitiation necessarily implies the objective settling of an account, while expiation does not.]



Mount of Olives

2. Grace: Webster's Dictionary (1828) defines grace as "...the free unmerited love and favor of God, the spring and source of all the benefits men receive from him... The application of Christ's righteousness to the sinner..." There is nothing that any man can do to earn his salvation, even in part, no matter how "good" he may seem in his own eyes. Salvation comes entirely by grace – "by grace ye are saved" (Ephesians 2:5). This means it is a free gift which God in his infinite mercy bestows on all who believe in his Son.

3. Justification: This marks a legal transition from one state to another, where the guilty individual is declared righteous solely on the basis of his belief in what Christ did for him on Calvary. Not only has the penalty for his crime been paid in full, but the crime itself has been expunged from the record. Legally he is now covered by the shed blood of Christ and stands before a righteous God as though he had never sinned. The crime and its penalty have been imputed to Christ and settled in full. Once the sinner is born again, he is justified or declared righteous before God and can never again come into condemnation. Justification occurs at the moment of salvation when we are born again in Christ.



Sea of Galilee

4. Sanctification: To sanctify means to separate from the world and consecrate to God. Anything that is sanctified is made holy and belongs to God. The word "saint" comes from the same root, meaning "a sanctified one," a person who belongs to God. One who is sanctified thereafter stands in a privileged relationship to God. While justification is legal and instantaneous, sanctification is practical and progressive, taking place over a long period of time. From the moment he is born again the believer is indwelt continuously by the Holy Spirit. Through his daily submission to the will of God and his willingness to serve Him in all things, the believer is led by the Holy Spirit into a progressively more sanctified state. This too is a work of grace, a gift that comes to all who live in Christ and await his return.

5. Atonement: The word 'atonement' is closely related to the word 'propitiation,' and is derived from the same Hebrew root, *kaphar*, which means to cover over, to purge, to reconcile. Atonement in the Bible is always substitutionary or vicarious since it is only by the blood of Christ, who suffered and died in our place, that atonement is possible. Christ voluntarily substituted himself for each one of us on the cross, making perfect atonement for our sins and thereby reconciled us with God. We find salvation only when we see that Christ died in our place and paid our sin debt for us. He did for each of us individually what we could never do for ourselves. Atonement is thus the core doctrine of Christianity. [Some Bible commentators maintain that the English word 'atonement' means 'at-one-ment' since it leads to reconciliation, but this is highly misleading since reconciliation is the fruit of atonement, not atonement itself. Furthermore, even the word *reconciliation* does not mean 'at-one-ment' but rather the removal of condemnation and the restoration of the original harmonious relationship between man and God. Hinduism teaches that man can become 'one' with god, but Christianity does not. Man is not divine in *any* sense and can never be.]



River Jordan

6. Redemption: To redeem something means to pay the price required to buy it back. Christ paid that price or ransom on Calvary for each one of us. Man was completely enslaved by sin but Christ redeemed him and set him free. This freedom comes in three stages: (a) justification, which removes the individual permanently from all condemnation before God; (b) sanctification, which redeems him permanently from the power of sin at the moment he is saved and enables him thereafter to grow in Christ; and (c) glorification, which will free him completely from his sin nature after physical death when, at the Second Coming, he will receive a glorified physical body ("...even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body." – Romans 8:23).

7. Faith: Biblical faith means to believe the promises of God, in particular that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah and that, through his death and resurrection, he set us free. This is why a Christian is often called "a believer." Faith means trusting completely, with our whole heart, in the person of Christ, the truth of his teaching, and his redemptive work on Calvary. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God. The Bible states that anything that is not of faith is sin, and that without faith it is impossible to please Him (Romans 14:23 and Hebrews 11:6).



Mount Carmel

8. Adoption: Christ our Redeemer restored the believer to a living relationship with God. He did this perfectly, so that our heavenly Father looks upon each one of us as He does upon His Son. As such every believer is an adopted child of God: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together." (Romans 8:16-17).

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