

THE CORNERSTONE OF OUR FAITH

JESUS CHRIST
THE CHIEF CORNERSTONE
EPHESIANS 2:20

A.D.

What Does It Mean to Be Saved?
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Published by 21st Century Christian

table of contents

1	Salvation—The Theme of Romans	7
2	Just What Is Salvation?	13
3	Justified by Faith.....	19
4	Enjoying Peace and Rejoicing in Hope.....	25
5	Our Salvation in Trials.....	31
6	Christ-Centered Salvation.....	37
7	New Life in the New Adam.....	43
8	What Shall We Say Then?	49
9	The Law of Sin and Death	54
10	Victory in Jesus	60
11	The Christian’s Hope	66
12	The Dilemma of Israel.....	72
13	Practical Christian Living.....	78

author's note

Among the major topics of importance and interest to the Bible believer is the matter of salvation. For nearly 20 centuries, people have wrestled with this subject. Debates over the how and when of salvation have continued throughout this time. Though these are vitally important dialogues to have, it is equally important that we know what salvation is.

Paul's letter to the saints at Rome provides a powerful explanation of salvation. He allows us to know this matter in an experiential way as opposed to mere intellectual assent. His treatise is a rich document from which we can know what has been freely granted to us through Christ Jesus.

It is my hope that this practical study will provide a solid understanding of the doctrine of salvation from the context of Paul's letter to the Romans. I also aim to foster an authentic, growing experience in our daily walk as a saved people. Finally, I am prayerful that this study will serve as a useful tool in leading someone else to the salvation given us through our Lord.

how to use this study

Each lesson in this *The Cornerstone of Our Faith* study has four major parts.

Every lesson begins with an introductory section called *The Foundation*. In this section, the author will give background material to help prepare your mind and heart for God's Word.

The second part of each lesson is called *The Cornerstone*. This section is always the heart of every lesson. The Bible is explored in detail to help us understand the text. Those who are accustomed to hearing African-American preaching can hear this section "preach." God's Word is powerfully presented so that all can understand.

The next section of each study is critical for the Word to fulfill its intended purpose. It is called *The Inscription*. Just as people take note of inscriptions on cornerstones or monuments, each lesson is written so as to drive home a point worth remembering and a principle worth following. It offers the encouragement to change attitudes or behaviors to align better with God's Word. To *know* the Bible is one thing; to *do* it is another.

Every lesson ends with a series of thought-provoking *Discussion Questions* that help you explore God's Word on a personal and a congregational level. These questions provide opportunities for group discussion and participation. Teachers can tell by the responses whether their students have really come to grips with the lesson.

introduction

This study is largely centered in the concepts Paul expressed in his letter to the Romans. This is a deeply theological letter, and certain sections of the letter will receive more emphasis than others. The lessons are designed to center our thoughts on what Paul teaches about salvation. The questions presented at the end of each lesson are designed to generate further thought concerning and practical experience of the salvific focus of the lesson.

Lesson 1

Salvation—The Theme of Romans

(*Romans 1:1-3:31*)

FOUNDATION

Context is always critical to our understanding of the Scriptures. Without context, we are without the grounding needed to understand what we are reading. This can leave us vulnerable to misunderstanding, misapplying, and misusing the Scriptures. Perhaps this is not more clearly seen than in our reading of the various New Testament letters.

Like other New Testament letters, Paul's letter to the Romans provides us with something akin to one side of a conversation. In this age of high-tech communication, we often encounter people standing or walking in public, while speaking on a smartphone. Some use hands-free devices while others have the phone held to their ears. Unless the person to whom they are talking is exceptionally loud, or we are close enough to hear the person on the other end, we have no easy way of knowing what that person is contributing to the conversation. We could easily misconstrue what is being discussed.

In like manner, context gives us the vital pieces of information that make for a clearer understanding of what we are reading.



Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Rome approximately 55 to 57 A.D. This would mean that Jesus' earthly ministry was completed approximately 20 to 30 years prior to the writing of this letter.

At Paul's writing, the Christians in Rome were of Jewish and Gentile ethnicity. The Jewish population of Rome at one time numbered between 40,000 to 50,000 persons. They likely originated from Pompey's conquering of Palestine in 62 B.C.

The Jewish population was a constant irritant to the Roman government. Many Jews had been expelled from Rome in 49 A.D. (Acts 18:2). One historian blames the expulsion on disturbances instigated by "Chrestus"...most likely a reference to "Christ."

A scholarly debate remains over whether Paul referred to converted Gentiles or simply Gentiles when he wrote of them possessing a sense of right and wrong (Romans 2:12-16). Seeing Paul as referring to Gentiles generically, as opposed to Gentile Christian converts, is in better keeping with his major theme that both Jews and Gentiles are guilty before God.

THINKING IT THROUGH

The Lost Gentile World

The opening of Paul's Roman letter launches a salvo of charges against fallen humanity (Romans 1:18-3:20). This portion of the letter concludes with the fact that all humanity stood exposed to God's righteous wrath. In his declaration, Paul focused on the state of the Gentile world (Romans 1:18-32). This term, *Gentile*, basically means "the nations." Generally, the Scriptures make use of this term to refer to those who are not among God's covenant people. Gentiles consist of all non-Jewish peoples.

The Gentile world was largely unaccustomed to divine behavioral standards. These standards are based in the

nature of God. He revealed Himself to the Old Testament patriarchs as a pure and moral being. He gave written law through Moses descriptive of His standard of righteousness. He was never to be compared to or in any way associated with the pagan gods. These had been derived from the depraved imaginations of corrupt humanity (Exodus 20:1-6; Deuteronomy 4:15-40). The Gentile world did not receive this divine revelation from God. Yet, this Gentile world was provided with some sense of a knowledge of God.

Fallen humanity still retained some sense of a moral standard (Romans 1:18-19). The fall of man did not make all humans totally depraved and therefore incapable of knowing some sense of right. We are not born as lost souls incapable of knowing the good. On the contrary, Paul indicated that some things of God were readily available to know. Humanity could know that God could not be what He Himself had made, so idols would be foolish (Romans 1:22-23). Humanity could also have a sense of the moral nature of God—which would be against the unnatural cravings of a truth-restraining mind (Romans 1:26-32). Paul wrote of an innate moral code that comes by birth (Romans 2:12-16). In all of this, Paul declared the Gentile world to be willfully trapped in sin and headed for a righteously declared eternal condemnation.

The pagan practices of immoral, barbarous behavior were based in the gods they worship. It remains true that what a person thinks about God determines how that person will live. Caught up in the bowels of depravity, the Gentile world developed religious systems that sanctioned the immoral behavior that their flesh craved.

The condemnation of the Gentiles falls upon all non-Jewish people today. We need not look far to find expressions of this ungodly behavior around us. Truth really being told, we need only examine ourselves to see these condemned characteristics with us. When it comes to the matter of

standing as righteous and therefore acceptable in the sight of the Holy One based in our own merit, we Gentiles must hang our head in shame and accept our just condemnation.

The Lost Jewish World

If the Gentile world stood condemned before God without having the Mosaic Law (God's standard of righteousness), the Jewish world shared the same condemnation even while having God's law. When the fall of mankind occurred, God ushered in His divine plan to redeem His fallen creation. The first mention of the coming Savior was declared in the midst of this human calamity (Genesis 3:15). The apostles would later declare that all of this was in God's plan before the world began (Acts 2:22-24; 1 Peter 1:17-21).

God's plan to save humanity continued with the saving of Noah, the call of Abram, the promise to Abraham, the formation of Israel, and the call of Moses. It was through Moses that God gave the written code expressive of His righteous ways. This law was inclusive of man's responsibility before God and toward one another.

Israel repeatedly broke God's law...spurning God's love by chasing after the idol gods of the people whose land God had given to them as an inheritance. Prophet after prophet was sent to warn the nation and call the people to repentance. The nation, weakened by civil war and cycles of corrupt leadership, was eventually given over to Assyrian and then Babylonian captivity. Only a remnant was saved.

In the time of Jesus, the Jewish nation had largely become fastened to religious tradition and ritual. Much of the religious leadership had become insensitive to the need to have a pure heart before God. Jesus openly condemned this hypocrisy (Matthew 23:1-39). He also taught the need to observe the true meaning of God's law. As Paul confronted the condition of the Jewish world before God, he boldly claimed it to be as lost as was the Gentile world. Circumcision, the

sign of the covenant between God and Israel, had no bearing on the standing of the people before God (Romans 2:1-29). All have sinned. All stood condemned (Romans 3:23).

The One Divine Solution

Since the Jewish and Gentile world stood condemned before the Holy One, and since neither could do anything to change from this condemned condition, both stood in need of divine intervention. It is this realization of being helplessly lost that leads one to look and long for escape, for deliverance, for rescue from the coming wrath of the holy and just God. Thankfully, His love for us, in spite of our corruption, moved Him to provide a common solution for our sin problem. It is not based in the merits of being Jewish or Gentile. Neither group of people has anything to offer to the Lord. Rather, God came into the world in the person of Jesus to earn salvation for all of us. Christ Jesus came into this world to live a sinless human life and to offer Himself as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of all humanity (Galatians 4:4-7). His perfect obedience to the law of God (Mosaic Law) earned Him a righteous standing before the Father. Placing faith in who He is and what He came to do for us is the only means of our salvation. When we surrender in faith to Him—submitting to water baptism—what Christ Jesus has done is applied to us as if we had done it. This is the only way in which we can be made right, declared righteous in God's sight (Romans 3:21-26).

When we consider what God has done for us, humility with thanksgiving should become our mantra. No Christian can ever look with pride upon another Christian, because our salvation cannot be earned (Romans 3:27-30). No Christian can boast in biological advantage because this, too, has no place in our salvation. As Paul would write to the Christians in Galatia, we are all one in Christ because we have all come to God's salvation through Christ (Galatians 3:26-28).



Truly the wonder of salvation is that it is offered at all! God the Father was under no obligation to grant pardon for humanity's sin. He would have been completely justified in completely destroying humanity at the point of our sin.

God has revealed Himself as love (1 John 4:8). The provision of God's salvation is based in this love (John 3:16). Yet, God is also just. Therefore, salvation could not have been granted without justice being meted out. Justice was meted out in the work of Christ Jesus for the entire world. Praise God for combining love, justice, grace, and mercy in offering eternal salvation for the world.

Discussion Questions

1. What do the names *Abram* and *Abraham* mean?
2. Who are the Gentiles?
3. What is *depravity*?
4. What is the difference between depravity and hereditary total depravity?
5. What are some instances of Israel breaking God's law?
6. In what sense did Jesus earn salvation for us?
7. Why can God be called both just and the justifier (Romans 3:26)?
8. Why is our salvation something that cannot be boasted about?

Just for Further Thought

1. Discuss the connection of love, justice, grace, and mercy.
2. Discuss examples of how we can fall into Israel's trap of disobedience.