

The Three Tenses of Salvation

As believers, we use the word “salvation” so frequently, yet what does this word actually mean? Most think that salvation simply relates to how someone becomes a Christian. We probably think this way since we are living in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. The reformers spent most of their energy defending and explaining what one must do in order to become a Christian. However, the biblical and Pauline use of the term “salvation” is much broader. Salvation actually has at least three phases.

First, there is justification. “Justification” is a legal term. It relates to a forensic declaration of righteousness quite similar to a modern jury’s announcement of a not guilty verdict upon acquitting the accused. Justification is simply the heavenly announcement of our righteousness. What actually makes us righteous is the righteousness of Christ transferred to us the moment we trust Christ (Philip 3:9). Such a transfer is sometimes referred to as imputation. Martin Luther called this “The Great Exchange.” In other words, our unrighteousness is exchanged for Christ’s righteousness the moment we trust in Christ. Once this exchange occurs, in the heavenly court announcement is given that we are righteous and God no longer holds our sins against us. Imputation and justification are instantaneous, taking place at a moment in time.

Second, there is practical sanctification. Unlike justification which is instantaneous, sanctification is a process. This process involves the believer learning to draw upon the divine resources, such as the Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and Christ’s body or the church, so that our daily lives gradually become more and more Christ-like. Here, our daily conduct begins to catch up with our heavenly identity that is given to us at the point of justification. Practical sanctification is a process that we all experience until our dying day or the rapture of the church, whichever comes first. While we often make progress and even at times lapse backward in the area of practical sanctification, none of us ever “fully arrives” this side of eternity.

Third, there is glorification. Glorification takes place when we are finally liberated from our present bodies, which still have a capacity for sin. At the moment of death or the rapture, whichever comes first, we are freed from our potential to sin and ushered into the very presence of God (2 Cor 5:8; Philip 1:21-23). Another way of saying it is justification frees us from sin’s penalty, sanctification frees us from sin’s power, and glorification frees us from sin’s presence. Justification is the past tense of salvation (Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:5), sanctification is the present tense of salvation (Philip 2:12), and glorification is the future tense of salvation (Rom 5:10b). In other words, I have been saved (justification), I am being saved (practical sanctification), and I will be saved (glorification).

What a wonderful salvation process that the Lord has us all on. So the next time we hear the word “salvation,” let us embrace the full dimensions and ramifications of this term, and consequently glorify God for all that He has done for us, is doing for us, and will do for us.