

Allegiance

What Must I Do To Be Saved?

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This is Part 1 of a two-part essay.

I. Introduction

What exactly must I do in order to be accepted by God? What are the conditions for salvation? There is a tendency today for us to answer that question based more on the catch-phrases and metaphors we have accumulated over the years from sermons and Christian writings than on the inspired Scriptures themselves. The result is that we sometimes go beyond what the Bible teaches God requires of us for salvation, or miss the biblical focus entirely.

These misunderstandings of the biblical conditions for salvation can lead to any of several serious problems. In some cases, sincere believers struggle indefinitely to gain assurance of their salvation, because they are never quite sure that they fully meet God's requirements for salvation. In other cases, an imprecise understanding of scripture leads to just the opposite result: supposed "believers" presume that they possess salvation, when in fact they have not met the conditions laid down by God in Scripture. Finally, an inaccurate understanding of the conditions for salvation has at times led particular Christians to hold to an overly restrictive definition of what it means to be a Christian, so as to wrongly exclude some from the fellowship of faith who in fact meet the biblical conditions for saving faith.

The only way to avoid these problems is for us to have a precise, thoroughly biblical understanding of the conditions for salvation. Toward this end, I have summarized below the results of a search for New Testament verses in which an explicit condition for salvation is given, and in which it is clearly stated that salvation (stated variously as "eternal life," "forgiveness," etc.) results from meeting that condition (perhaps in concert with other conditions as well). After summarizing the biblical conditions for salvation identified in this survey, I will suggest that they can be unified under the concept of *allegiance* to Christ in two ways:

1. *allegiance* to the truth about Jesus (i.e., His identity and redemptive work), and
2. *allegiance* to Jesus as one's own Lord.

The first of these areas has traditionally been dealt with under the heading *faith* (or belief), and the second under the heading *repentance* (or following Christ, submission to His lordship). Though I will at times continue to use these terms for convenience, it is important to keep in mind that the traditional terms have lost some of their biblical focus for many contemporary Christians.

In the remainder of this essay I will focus on clarifying exactly what are the biblical conditions on salvation. Before proceeding further, however, I must first add a very important clarification. In this essay, I am addressing only the *human* aspect of conditions for salvation, not the divine aspect. By that I mean that I am examining exactly what it is that God requires *us* to do in order to take advantage of the offer of salvation that He has made available by His grace. This does not mean that the divine action in salvation is of lesser importance or interest than the human action. It only means that it is the human action that is the subject of *this* essay. God's role in salvation (which in an obvious sense is the more fundamental role) could be (and perhaps will one day be) the subject of another, probably longer essay.

I should also add here that my comments in this essay are not meant to favor either a Calvinist or Arminian perspective. It seems to me that whatever position one takes on that particular debate, the conditions on salvation as considered from the human side (essentially, faith and repentance) are very much the same either way. Calvinists, of course, will argue that these human actions

are grounded in God's prior action in a way that Arminians will likely wish to formulate differently, but the resultant human actions will be the same in both perspectives. It is on these resultant human actions that this essay focuses.

Having said this, it seems to me that caution is needed to avoid either of two extremes when focusing on the human side of this issue, as we will be doing here. On the one hand, some Arminians may be tempted to conclude that the human response to God's offer of salvation is accomplished without any divine enabling whatsoever. This is clearly not so, however, and does not represent the historical Arminian perspective. It is God's grace that He not only seeks us and woos us, but that He works in tandem with our feeble response so as to enable us to embrace Jesus in a loyal faith, and to continue embracing Him in this way (e.g., John 6:44; Philippians 1:6; 2:13). On the other hand, some Calvinists may feel uncomfortable with terms such as "conditions" or "requirements" for salvation (which I use freely below) when applied to the human response to God's offer, concluding that God's role in the process is so overwhelming that it is a mistake to speak of humans bearing such a clear, definite responsibility in their response to God. This position would be an equally serious error, however. No one can objectively consider the wide range of passages considered below without concluding that humans bear a genuine, full-fledged responsibility to yield loyalty to Christ through faith and repentance. There is no hint that this responsibility is diminished by God's participation in the process. Put differently, one cannot be absolved of this responsibility simply by appealing to God's grace. God is gracious, yes, and abundantly so. Without His gracious activity toward us in past, present, and future, we would have no hope of salvation. Yet, humans bear a real responsibility to volitionally respond to God's grace. Anyone who would suggest otherwise will be forced to do a great deal of mental gymnastics in order to filter human freedom and responsibility out of the various verses surveyed below.

I will now proceed to examine exactly what are the biblical conditions on salvation, in the sense outlined above. But as I have suggested earlier, a proper understanding of these biblical conditions for salvation has important implications for one's own personal assurance of salvation, as well as for one's view of who else may be considered a fellow believer. I will explore some of these implications briefly in the Summary and Implications section below, and in also in the separate essay "Assurance: How Can I Know that I Am Saved?"

II. Survey of Verses Giving Conditions for Salvation

In the table below I have presented each scriptural reference identified in this survey, and just that word or phrase that describes the condition for salvation mentioned in the verse(s). I have classified the verses within the two main groupings *faith* and *repentance*. Within these two main groups I have further divided the verses into natural subgroups. Notice that each subgroup of verses contributes something slightly different to our understanding of the conditions of salvation.

1. Faith

The group of verses immediately below describes the faith response in the broadest, most nonspecific terms, as simply to have "faith" or to "believe." Just what "faith" and "believe" mean will need to be clarified by other biblical passages.

Luke 7:48-50	faith
Romans 3:28	faith
Ephesians 2:8-9	faith
1 Peter 1:9	faith

John 3:15	believe
John 6:47	believe
Romans 3:22	believe
Galatians 3:22	believe

The verses immediately below characterize our faith response somewhat more specifically as believing the message of or about Jesus. The content of that message, however, may still need further clarification from other passages.

Luke 8:12	believe [the word]
John 5:47	believe My words
John 12:48	[not] reject Me, and . . . receive My sayings
Acts 2:41	receive his [Peter's] word
Acts 13:48	believe [the word of the Lord]
Mark 1:15	believe in the gospel
Romans 1:16	believe [the gospel]
1 Corinthians 1:21	believe [the message preached]
Ephesians 1:13	believe [the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation]
1 John 5:10	believe in the witness that God has borne concerning His Son
2 Thess 1:10	believe [Paul's testimony concerning Jesus]
2 Thess 2:13	faith in the truth
2 Thess 2:10	receive the love of the truth

The verses in the subgroup below characterize our response as believing the messenger (either the Father or the Son). This is essentially the same as the previous group of verses: If I believe the message about Jesus, then it can be said that I believe the messenger who brings that message.

John 5:24	believe Him [the Father] who sent Me [the Son]
John 5:38	believe Him [the Son] whom He [the Father] sent
John 5:46	believe Me [Jesus]

The verses in the next subgroup give the most common characterization of the faith response: to believe in Jesus (or "into" Jesus, in the case of John's unique use of the dative). This emphasizes that it is Jesus, and no other, who is the basis for salvation, and that He alone is the object of our hope. Some of these verses also include references to aspects of Jesus' identity which we are to embrace by faith (e.g., that He is the "Christ").

John 3:16	believe in Him [Jesus]
John 3:18	believe in Him [Jesus]
John 6:40	believe in Him [Jesus]
John 11:25	believe in Him [Jesus]
John 11:26	believe in Him [Jesus]
Acts 10:42-43	believe in Him [Jesus]
1 Timothy 1:16	believe in Him [Jesus]
John 3:36	believe in the Son
1 John 5:10	believe in the Son of God
John 12:36	believe in the light [Jesus]
Acts 16:31	believe in the Lord Jesus
Galatians 2:16	believe in Christ Jesus
John 6:29	believe in Him whom He [God] has sent
Romans 4:5	believe in Him who justifies the ungodly
Acts 20:21	faith in our Lord Jesus Christ
Romans 3:22	faith in Jesus Christ
Galatians 2:16	faith in Christ Jesus
Galatians 2:16	faith in Christ
Galatians 3:22	faith in Jesus Christ
2 Timothy 3:15	faith which is in Christ Jesus

The next group of verses characterizes our response as believing *in the "name" of Jesus*. This emphasizes even more strongly that it is He, and no other, who is the source of salvation. Again, though, this characterization may be further clarified by other passages as to the content of belief.

John 1:12	believe in His name
John 3:18	believe in the name of the only begotten Son of God
1 John 5:13	believe in the name of the Son of God
Romans 10:14	call upon the name of the Lord

The group of verses below provides the most specific content of any of the groups in regard to what must be believed for salvation. This is the *"believe that . . ."* group. These verses can be further divided into two basic groups: Those verses that say we must believe something about Jesus's *identity*, and those that say we must believe the facts of *His redemptive work*. The

verses in the latter sub-grouping are related to the condition for salvation given in Romans 4:5, in that they state what are the specific means by which God "justifies the ungodly."

His identity:

John 8:24	believe that I [Jesus] am He
John 11:27	believe that He is the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world
John 16:27	believe that He came forth from the Father
John 20:30-31	believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God
1 John 5:1	believe that Jesus is the Christ
1 John 5:4-5	believe that Jesus is the Son of God
Romans 10:9	confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord
1 John 4:2	confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh

His redemptive work:

Romans 10:9	believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead
1 Corinthians 1:21	believe [the message preached that Christ was crucified
1 Corinthians 15:1-7	hold fast the word . . . preached [that Christ died for our sins . . . that He was buried . . . that He was raised . . . that He appeared]

The subgroup of verses below includes various *metaphors* used for belief. In each case, the larger context makes it clear that the literal meaning of the metaphor is belief in Jesus.

John 3:36	obey the Son
John 5:40	come to [Jesus]
John 1:12	receive [Jesus]
John 5:43	receive [Jesus]
John 6:47	eat of this bread
John 6:54, 56	eat His flesh and drink His blood
John 6:57	eat Him
John 6:58	eat this bread
John 10:9	enter through Him [Jesus, the door of the sheep]

2. Repentance

The second major grouping of verses includes references to repentance or its synonyms as a condition for salvation.

Matthew 16:24	deny [your]self, and take up [your] cross , and follow Him
Matthew 16:25	lose [your] life for His sake
Acts 20:21	repent toward God
Mark 1:15	repent
Luke 13:3	repent
Luke 13:5	repent
Acts 2:38	repent
2 Corinthians 7:10	repent
Heb 7:25	draw near to God through Him [Jesus]

Finally, the following two verses refer to baptism as an expression of faith and repentance. 1 Peter 3:21 makes clear that it is not the outward act of water baptism that itself brings salvation, but rather what the act symbolizes and expresses: the appeal to God for a good conscience. (I have omitted Mark 16:16 here because it is not attested by the more reliable manuscripts.)

Acts 2:38	be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins
1 Peter 3:21	baptism . . . an appeal to God for a good conscience

III. Summary of Survey

What does this above survey of verses show us? It shows that what is necessary for us to do in order to be saved can be boiled down to two main requirements, both of which can be characterized in terms of *allegiance*:

Allegiance to the Truth About Jesus (faith)

This is captured in the faith/belief verses, and involves *mental assent and loyalty* to the truth of the claims that Jesus made about Himself. When I have such assent and loyalty, the truths believed become fundamentally important to me, and any risk that they may be false becomes irrelevant to me. The claims about Jesus that I embrace by faith include the central claims about His *identity* (i.e., that He is God's Son, the promised Messiah, the Lord) and His *redemptive work* (i.e., that He died on the cross as our substitutionary sacrifice, and that He rose again as the living Lord). Allegiance to the truth about Jesus also includes the idea that I completely *trust in* or *depend upon* Jesus as the sole agent of my salvation. This is reflected in the Greek term *pistis*, the word most commonly used in the New Testament for "belief" or "faith." The word *pistis* implies a reliance upon what is believed and can readily be translated as "trust." Thus, when we "believe" in Christ for salvation, we trust in (or rely upon) Him to be the agent of our salvation. This becomes important when we contrast salvation by faith to salvation attempted by works (e.g., Romans 3:19-4:8; Galatians 5:4-5).

Allegiance to Jesus as one's own Lord (repentance)

This is captured in the verses which condition salvation on our repentance and choice to follow Christ in obedience. This allegiance involves a fundamental change in my *orientation* toward God. Whereas previously my fundamental loyalty was to myself or my own needs/desires (or something other than God), now my deepest desire is to please and serve God, by following Jesus as Lord. The Bible calls this change of orientation "repentance," or more specifically "repentance toward God" (Acts 20:21). This latter terminology emphasizes that whereas I was before moving away from God in rebellion, I now turn and draw toward God in an attitude of submission.

Sometimes these two basic thrusts of what God requires of us for salvation, faith and repentance, are included in the same verse, as in the following two verses:

". . . if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord [i.e., submission to His identity as Lord and His claim of Lordship over you], and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead [i.e., assent to the truth of His redemptive work], you shall be saved." (Rom 10:9)

". . . testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." (Acts 20:21)

Sometimes only one or the other of these elements is mentioned, as in Rom 3:22 and 3:28, where the focus is on belief/faith:

". . . the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe . . . for we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law." (Rom 3:22, 28)

Sometimes both elements are blended into a single requirement, as with the apostle John's unique dative use of "believe (into)," which possibly indicates a commitment of allegiance to follow Jesus, in addition to a mental assent and loyalty to his being the Son of God (I owe this observation to my associate pastor, Vernon Bauer):

". . . He who believes [into] the Son has eternal life" (Jn 3:36)

"For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes [into] Him, may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day." (Jn 6:40)

In Part 2 I will take a closer look at each of these two basic elements of our response to God (allegiance to the truth about Jesus, and allegiance to Jesus as one's own Lord), considering both what they are and what they are not in the biblical view.