

# MYTH *1*

It's Always about  
Heaven or Hell



## HOLD FAST

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*For by grace you have been **saved** through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Ephesians 2:8-9

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*So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your **salvation** with fear and trembling.*

Philippians 2:12

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*Who [believers] are protected by the power of God through faith for a **salvation** ready to be revealed in the last time.*

1 Peter 1:5

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MYTH  
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TRUTH  
SALVATION IS PAST, PRESENT, & FUTURE

Words can convey a wide range of ideas. For example when considering a baseball player, there is a great deal of difference between the child who steps up to the plate the first time at a T-ball game and the professional player who has been in the major leagues for years. Look at employees in the corporate work environment. They vary from the new clerk in the mailroom to the senior vice president of sales in the office tower. The new father holding his baby for the first time is quite a contrast to the man who walks his daughter down the aisle at her wedding.

If players are players, employees are employees, and fathers are fathers, what is the difference in the above illustrations? Developed skills, increased responsibilities, and deepening intimacy are obvious. Each example is couched in a setting that brings understanding. For the father, the hospital nursery versus the church sanctuary provides perspective. For the employee, the mailroom versus the corporate office brings insight. The same is true for the baseball player; the ball standing still on a T-frame versus the ball pitched at a speed of one hundred miles per hour.

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Obviously words must be understood in their context in order to understand their meaning. Every employee isn't like every other employee, etc. You are saying to yourself, "OK, we got it. What's the point?" The point is that the church, unfortunately at times, does not make clear the distinctions in how the same word is used when it comes to the Scriptures.

### No Word Is an Island

Misunderstanding how a word is used can lead to frustration and confusion under normal circumstances. In reference to Scripture, however, that confusion can result in error to the highest degree. Let's

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not forget that only when the Word of God is understood or explained from its original intended context does it carry the actual authority of Scripture. In other words to misinterpret the Bible is to fail to see God's intended message to His

people. As such, it no longer is authoritative. Words may come from the Bible, but they may be so misused that they no longer are what God intended to communicate. To miss His intention, therefore, is to misunderstand His actual message. It can be claimed to be from the Bible, but it actually is not God's Word at all.

One of the words found in the New Testament that has caused much confusion by Bible teachers is "salvation." "Wait just one minute," someone might be saying. "Salvation means to be made alive in Jesus Christ by God's grace." And that is correctly understood from Ephesians 2:8. Many believe the word "salvation" *always* refers to the point of regeneration. But the word "salvation" has a much broader range of meaning. Biblically salvation means to be delivered from someone or something. As a result it can refer to physical as well as spiritual deliverance. What *kind* of deliverance is determined by the context in which the word "salvation" is found.

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Imprisoned in Rome, Paul wrote to the Philippians (Phil. 1:12). Confident that he would be acquitted (v. 25), he wrote, “I know that this shall turn out for my *deliverance*” (v. 19). The word translated *deliverance* is the same word used of *salvation* in other places in Scripture, indicating a physical deliverance rather than spiritual. Obviously the context concerns Paul’s expectation to be released from prison. Physical salvation or deliverance is obviously the issue here. For someone to infer that this context concerns eternal salvation would grossly miss the point of the text, ignoring the obvious meaning of the passage. Why would Paul write that his imprisonment resulted in his salvation from sin? That would be saying something the text doesn’t actually say. To teach that salvation in Philippians 1:19 concerns spiritual salvation would be incorrect.

### Salvation: Past, Present, Future

The meaning of words in their context is important, and the meaning of the term “salvation” in its context is extremely important. Physical salvation is to be distinguished from spiritual salvation. But also there are three distinctions within spiritual salvation: past, present, and future. *Initial salvation* is a past event. In Ephesians 2:8, Paul wrote us that a new believer has a newfound position in Christ. Based on God’s grace a person is made spiritually new. In addition Paul pointed out that initial salvation, which occurred in the past, should have an impact on present behavior. The brand new position presumes a new conduct, an obedient walk with Christ (v. 10). This new life lived out daily is the believer’s present salvation.

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*Present salvation* is seen in Philippians 2:12. “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed...work out your *salvation*

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with fear and trembling.” Here, Paul directed his instruction to those who are already saved (“my beloved”) and commanded them to be saved (“to work out your salvation”) by obedience. In the preceding context (vv. 5-11), Paul spoke of Christ’s obedience—“He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him” (vv. 8-9). Using Christ as the ultimate illustration of obedience, Paul introduced with the words “so then” (v. 12) an appeal to follow Christ in obedience. Since Paul was addressing believers, the command “to work out your salvation” obviously concerns *present* salvation or *present* sanctification. To work out salvation means to demonstrate or live out one’s salvation in his or her present life. Paul commanded these believers to continue in their obedience since God always and without fail will provide His influencing work in the believer’s life. Verse 13 says, “For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure.” The choice to obey is theirs, and God’s resources are always available to assist them. Just as Christ was “highly exalted” (v. 9) in return for obedience to the Father, this text strongly suggests that the responsibility to obey rests with each believer and that each will be held accountable and rewarded appropriately.

Notice the distinction made above between past salvation in Ephesians 2:8 and present salvation in Philippians 2:12. Other words also can be associated with both past and present salvation. Each word is not necessarily equivalent, but certainly a relationship between each is understood. *Past salvation* can be associated with regeneration, justification,<sup>1</sup> initial salvation, initial sanctification, position in Christ, and relationship with Christ. Terms that are frequently associated with *present salvation* are progressive salvation, progressive sanctification, experience with Christ, and fellowship with Christ. Whenever the past salvation words are used, they concern the new birth—deliverance from the penalty of sin. Words linked with present spiritual deliverance concern the *present*—deliverance from the power of sin in the Christian walk.

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The Bible presents a third facet of salvation—*future salvation*. Correlating terms (e.g., glorification, future sanctification, and heirship with Christ) are used of future salvation, that is, spiritual deliverance in the *future*—deliverance from the presence of sin when we are in the company of the Lord. First Peter 1:5b refers to this aspect of salvation—“a *salvation* ready to be revealed in the last time.” Salvation yet to come occurs when the believer meets God in heaven.

### Let's Make It Clear

Even though the Scriptures segment and distinguish the three aspects of salvation, teachers in the church have mixed them into a confusing brew. This is especially true with past and present salvation. Rather than distinguished as a *point-in-time* for past salvation and a *timeline* for present salvation, both are intertwined, one meaning the same as the other—past is present and present is past. For these teachers, the point in the past, when saving faith occurred, and the timeline of one's life in the present are inseparable.

From *one perspective* (Roman Catholic theology), past salvation or justification is so intertwined with present salvation or progressive sanctification that eternal life is gained through a merit system.<sup>2</sup> The initial point of saving faith is stretched and pulled, as you would a rubber band, to include the totality of one's life. As a result the point becomes the line. Only as good works are consistently maintained is *eternal life achieved*. This view is summed up by the axiom *justification is by faith, but not by faith alone*.<sup>3</sup> Faith and works are required for eternal life. No works mean no eternal life! Whether heaven or hell is the end

#### Perspective #1

*Justification is  
by faith, but not  
by faith alone.*

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result is never known in one's life because eternity is conditioned on continually doing good works.

From a *second viewpoint* (Reformed theology), past salvation or justification is combined with present salvation or present sanctification.<sup>4</sup> They again become one as the initial point of saving

### Perspective #2

*Justification is  
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faith is elongated to become the line. However, there is a unique twist in this view. Here the defining motto is that *justification is by faith, but not by faith **that is alone***.<sup>5</sup>

The wording is similar to that of the first position, but with a slight variation. With this reasoning, saving faith results in eternal life, but only if good works are continually present. Only as good works are consistently evidenced does *proof exist of eternal life*. Faith and works are needed for eternal life. No works mean no eternal life! Faith plus works equals eternal life or faith that works equals eternal life. Do you see a similar pattern in these first two approaches? Are these two views actually any different?

A *third point of view* (Free Grace theology) does not combine justification or past salvation and progressive sanctification or present salvation.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the two

### Perspective #3

*Justification is  
by faith alone,  
really alone.*

are separated. The point of initial salvation is not engulfed in one's life. Free grace means *justification is by faith alone, really alone*. No works are required to gain or prove eternal life. Eternal life is assured when initial faith in Christ takes place. Ephesians 2:6 stated that the

new believer is already seated with Christ in heaven. The believer is spiritually an actual citizen of heaven, but continues to live out his



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life on earth. The journey or the lifeline of present salvation should be lived in obedience to God's Word. Obedience is not the litmus test to gain or prove eternal life, but it is necessary to experience intimacy with Christ. Initial salvation is settled when simple faith is placed in Christ; but fellowship or present salvation is experienced in a step-by-step walk of faith—a faith-after-faith, step-after-step progression that leads to spiritual maturity.

### Point-In-Time and the Lifetime

In business a new employee just out of school does not assume he will be the president of a corporation on his very first day of employment. He needs to develop leadership skills and perform increasing responsibilities. The process takes time. The new father is not the same person twenty years later. He became *a* father on day one, but he becomes *the* father over a lifetime, maturing and developing his intimacy with his child. Likewise the Christian life is a progression, a process of growth in intimacy and maturity with Christ. This is called fellowship or present salvation. However, there was a starting point. On the first day the person is a new employee, a new father, or a new believer. The first day is not like any other. This is the establishment of a relationship or initial salvation.

In any secular or religious bookstore you will find numerous “How to” books—how to do this and how to do that. They claim to be able to explain how to become a better employee, a better father, or a better Christian. In each case the position as an employee, a father, or a believer is established, but what is lacking is experience. Each book assures you that you can become a better employee, father, or Christian. These books address our desire to improve, to make positive changes in our work, our home, or our walk with Christ. Excelling in our experience at what we already are positionally should be the desire for every employee and father, but most definitely for believers in Jesus Christ. Our experience must never be confused with our position.

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It is essential that salvation be understood both as a firmly fixed position in Christ that is established once and for all at initial faith as well as something that can be experienced during the believer's lifetime. The important distinction between position and experience must be made in order to understand how salvation is used in the various contexts of Scripture.

TRUTH  
SALVATION IS PAST, PRESENT, & FUTURE

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### Myth 1, NOTES

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1. Justification is usually understood to refer to justification by faith at initial salvation. Romans 4 discusses the biblical concept of justification by faith. Once, and only once, James 2 addresses the biblical concept of justification by works. While Romans 4 concerns initial salvation, regeneration, James 2 concerns present salvation, present sanctification.
2. Faith and works are the requirements to obtain eternal life by the Roman Church as discussed in the *First View* of justification in *Myth 11: Works Required*.
3. R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), p. 160.
4. Faith and works are the requirements necessary to prove the possession of eternal life by Reformed theology as discussed in the *Second View* of justification in *Myth 11: Works Required*.
5. Sproul, *Faith Alone*, p. 167.
6. Works are not required to gain or prove possession of eternal life by Free Grace theology as discussed in the *Third View* of justification in *Myth 11: Works Required*.

