

What Is Salvation?

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Introduction

We often speak of concepts such as salvation, sin, justification or sanctification as if they were entities with an independent existence somewhere “out there,” which we take on (for good or ill) from some realm or region external to our own personhood or being. That is, we tend to treat these concepts as realities in themselves, substances or things a person *has*. For instance, we think of *salvation* as though it were an antidote administered for a poison in our system, i.e., sin, and which guarantees a heavenly destiny in the same manner as some pharmaceutical we might ingest to be relieved of the symptoms of an illness. Upon reflection it should be obvious that this is not a *biblical* way to speak of salvation. This study is a preliminary attempt to address the question, What is salvation? in biblical terms.

Biblical Terminology of Salvation

Both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek New Testament employ a variety of terms to refer to salvation, or being “saved” (delivered or rescued). The Appendix to this article presents many examples of the use of these words in the original languages. While not an exhaustive list (for that, consult a concordance that relates the English words to their Hebrew or Greek equivalents), it is a representative sampling of occurrences of the following terms.

Hebrew

Note: the open apostrophe (‘) stands for the Hebrew letter ‘*ayin* which is an abrupt stop, and has no sound of its own.

y-sh-’ — Hebrew trilateral root with the basic meaning of “make wide,” i.e. to open up something that is narrow and constricting

yasha’ — “deliver, release”; Hiph’il form *hoshia* “cause to be delivered, rescue, save,” Judges 7:7; Isaiah 35:4, 59:1; Jeremiah 4:14; Psalm 6:4, 18:3; 118:25; Nehemiah 9:27 etc. (“Hosanna” in the Greek New Testament is a transliteration of Psalm 118:25, *hoshia* ‘*na*’ “Save!”)

yeshu’*ah* — “deliverance,” Genesis 49:18; Exodus 15:2; Isaiah 49:6; Psalm 68:20, 118:14 etc. (Jesus’ name, *Yeshua*’, is derived from *yeshu*’*ah*, Matthew 1:21.)

yasha’ — “deliverance,” Psalm 27:1 etc.

teshu’*ah* — “deliverance,” Isaiah 46:13 etc.

moshia’ — “deliverer, savior,” 2 Kings 13:5; Isaiah 43:11 etc. (This is the same as the word *Messiah*.)

n-ts-l — Hebrew trilateral root with the basic meaning of “snatch, rescue, deliver”

natsal — “deliver,” Deuteronomy 23:14; 1 Samuel 30:18; Jeremiah 1:8; Job 10:7 etc.

Greek

sozo — “save, deliver, rescue,” Matthew 24:12-13; Mark 15:31, 16:15-16; Acts 2:40 (passive imperative, “save yourselves”), 47; Romans 5:9-10; 1 Corinthians 1:18-20, 9:22; 1 Timothy 1:15, 2:15; Hebrews 7:25, Hebrews 9:27-28; James 5:15, 20 etc.

soteria — “salvation, deliverance” (abstract noun) — Luke 1:70-71; John 4:22; Acts 4:12; Romans 13:11-12; Hebrews 9:27-28; Revelation 7:10 etc.

soter — “savior,” Acts 13:23; Philippians 3:20-21 etc.

hruomai — “rescue, deliver,” Matthew 6:13; Romans 7:24; 2 Corinthians 1:9-10; Colossians 1:13-14; 1 Thessalonians 1:10

hruomenos — “redeemer,” Romans 11:26 (translates Hebrew *goel*)

exaireo — “deliver, rescue,” Galatians 1:3-5

What is salvation a deliverance *from*?

Biblical references to salvation, unlike contemporary presentations of salvation in many Christian communities, rarely speak of *salvation from sin*. In the Scriptures, salvation is not deliverance from some condition in the believer’s internal state, but is deliverance or rescue from an outside threat:

- From enemies — Psalm 18:3 (*yasha* '); Luke 1:70-71 (*soteria*)
- From a perverse or distorted world view or life style, or from cultural darkness — John 3:17; 12:47; Acts 2:40 (*sozo*); Galatians 1:3-5 (*exaireo*); Philippians 2:12 (*soteria*); Colossians 1:13-14 (*hruomai*) (cf. 1 Peter 2:9-10, where the term is not “saved” but “called”)
- From illness — James 5:15 (*sozo*)
- From wrath or judgment — Romans 5:9-10 (*sozo*); 1 Thessalonians 1:10 (*hruomai*); Hebrews 9:27-28 (*sozo, soteria*)
- From testing in evil times — Matthew 6:13 (*hruomai*)
- From death or its effects — Psalm 68:20 (*moshia*'); Hebrews 5:7-9 (*sozo, soteria*); James 5:20 (*sozo*, where the one saving is the believer)
- From condemnation, symbolized as “death” — Romans 7:24 (*hruomai*)

“Sin” is the tendency to trespass into matters proper to God alone, to rebel against God’s authority, or to be estranged or alienated from God, and the behavior resulting from such a tendency. Typically in the New Testament, sin is the refusal to acknowledge and receive God’s action in Christ. In Scripture, a term equivalent to *salvation* is rarely used in connection with sin. Rather, sin is (1) forgiven or “covered” (Luke 24:46-47; Acts 2:38; Romans 4:6-7; Colossians 1:13-14); or it is (2) wiped away or washed away (“blotted out”), taken away, or cleansed (Isaiah 6:7; Psalm 51:2; Acts 3:19; 2 Peter 1:9). Hebrews 9:27-27 specifically differentiates Christ’s dealing with sin from the salvation he will bring.

To illustrate the difference between the way many New Testament passages deal with salvation and the way it is often taught in evangelical churches today, let us take the example of the first Christian preaching in the New Testament, Peter’s address to the bystanders gathered in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-40).

After making the point that “the last days” spoken of by the prophet Joel have arrived — as evidenced by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus’ disciples — Peter stresses that the arrival of the “last days” has been brought about by Jesus’ resurrection from the dead: “This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses” (2:32). His resurrection, Peter affirms, is the evidence that Jesus is the Messiah — “that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (2:36). Peter’s concluding appeal to his hearers is that they should repent — i.e., change their minds about who Jesus is — and be incorporated into the new Christian community by baptism. His final words to them are, “Save yourselves [*sothete*, a passive imperative form of *sozo*] from this crooked generation” (2:40).

We notice several salient features of Peter’s presentation of salvation. First, whatever the original Aramaic of his address, the Greek form of *sozo* is a command: “be saved, save yourselves.” Salvation, in this case, is not an action performed by God but is a step the hearers must take for themselves. Second, this salvation comes as the result of repentance, i.e. a change of mind or perspective (*metanoia*, in the Greek). Peter uses the verbal imperative form *metanoesate*, which must reflect the Hebrew root *shuv*, “turn, return,” which the Hebrew prophets used in urging their hearers to renew their faithfulness to the Lord and his covenant with Israel (e.g. Isaiah 6:10; Jeremiah 5:3; Hosea 3:5).

Thirdly, what Peter’s hearers must repent of in order to be saved is the *false perspective, or world view*, of their religious community that has rendered them blind to God’s action in the life and ministry of Jesus. In that defective world view the Messiah was to be a “savior,” or deliverer, of the Jewish people from domination by foreign powers. Deliverance would come — so the Pharisees believed — only when the Jews separated themselves from all other ethnic groups through complete obedience to the commandments of the Law of Moses; this was the motivation for the Pharisees’ strict observance of their traditions (not, as is often claimed, some program of “salvation by works”). This was a dangerous world view, for it contributed to a revolutionary mentality that encouraged rebellion against the heavy hand of Roman domination. Jesus, in his preaching of the kingdom of God (especially via parables), had summoned the people back to their original calling in Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3), to be a blessing to other nations rather than to exercise superiority over them. He warned his people of the need to change their paradigm of exclusion and elitist status, knowing that it could only lead to the destruction of the nation. Reminding them of recent events that had caused the violent death of members of the Jewish community,

he stated, “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3, 5). The world view of the “crooked generation” persisted, however, leading to a war of rebellion and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in AD 70. Peter’s appeal, on the Day of Pentecost, was that his hearers might acknowledge Jesus as the Christ, throw off their dangerous paradigm, and be rescued from its eventual consequences through incorporation into a new community, centered in Jesus, that would return to Israel’s original mission. This would be their salvation.

The preceding example is not a complete description of salvation, as understood in New Testament terms, but simply an illustration of how salvation may be outlined somewhat differently from the manner in which it is typically presented in evangelical preaching. It suggests that, in following the biblical pattern, salvation is offered as deliverance from an enslaving or oppressing world view that affects a person’s existence and future possibilities within a particular, concrete cultural and historical setting. The individual who responds to the Christian gospel is “saved,” not from some internal state of being *as such*, but from the false paradigm that has hitherto prevented that person from recognizing Jesus Christ as the risen Lord and Authority in life, and which has therefore held the person in a pattern of alienation from the purposes of God as revealed in Scripture. Today millions are trapped in the bondage of such false paradigms — whether they be imposed by media, the educational establishment, political ideologies, non-Christian religions, dysfunctional behavior patterns or destructive habits. These are the external enemies from which people need to be rescued, or “saved,” so that they can enjoy the life for which God has created them.

Salvation and Heaven

It is evident from the above that, in Scripture, salvation is usually mentioned in connection with a person’s rescue from forces or conditions that affect his life in the “here and now” It is rarely presented in a form that could be understood as an action by God that affects the state of a person after death, or his eternal destiny. No single verse or passage relates salvation to “going to heaven,” a phrase not in the Bible. Where “heaven” and words relating to salvation appear in the same context, the reference to heaven is not to the goal of the believer’s salvation but to the abode of God. The believer’s “heavenly” destiny is an inference from other passages that state the matter quite differently.

Without going into an extended discussion here, the New Testament makes it clear that salvation is “salvation by incorporation.” The believer has already entered into his or her future destiny through incorporation into the life of the risen Christ (John 3:36; Romans 6:3-5; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Colossians 3:1-3; 1 John 3:14, 5:12). Since the believer, in dying to self, has already died the “first death” (a phrase not in Scripture), he has no fear of the “second death” as do those who are not in Christ (Revelation 20:6).

Conclusion

Salvation is not an entity or state that exists somewhere by itself. “Salvation” is only a word that identifies an action that occurs in a relationship between two persons. A savior delivers or rescues another person, so that the other person is “saved” — or, indeed, a person “saves himself” through laying aside a false paradigm or world view that prevents him from recognizing the work of God in his life or that of his cultural context. Salvation is not a trait that describes one person as distinct from other persons, but is a name for the *action* that has rescued that person from the oppression that affects him or her.

In the New Testament, that rescuing action takes the form of being incorporated into the body of the risen Christ. One who is “in Christ” has been delivered from a corrupted “age” (cultural “world”), and lives a life that anticipates God’s new, or restored, creation (e.g., Acts 3:19-21; Romans 8:19-21). Thus terms relating to salvation, in Scripture, usually describe a concrete, down-to-earth experience of being set free from threatening or destructive conditions of ordinary human life.

In common Christian parlance “salvation” is a religious-sounding word that has been “spiritualized,” removed from its concrete biblical associations and related to some inward condition in an individual, or in the “soul.” To restore biblical understanding it might be better to speak, not of “salvation,” but of rescuing people or helping them break free of dysfunctional relationships, harmful values, false world views, oppressing conditions, or other factors that constrict and diminish life and keep people bound in “sin” (as defined above) and away from Christ. On this understanding, people are not “saved” when they assent to certain doctrines or say a prayer, but *when their life changes*.

Finally, what about the question of “eternal security,” or whether or not a person can “lose his salvation?” Obviously, where salvation is understood in the way the Scriptures present it this is a pointless issue. If salvation is not a thing that a person “has” or possesses, but rather a deliverance or rescue accomplished by the gospel of Christ (which Paul calls “the power of God for salvation”, Romans 1:16), how could a person *lose* his salvation? One cannot lose what he does not possess. Therefore, discussion of the “security of the believer” needs to focus not on some state or condition within the believer, but on the question of how the believer’s ongoing relationship to the Savior or Deliverer is being maintained and preserved. A relevant passage in this connection is 2 Timothy 2:11-13: “The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we shall also live with him; if we endure, we shall also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful — for he cannot deny himself.”

Appendix

Selected Scriptural Passages Relating to Salvation (Revised Standard Version unless noted)

Genesis 49:18 — I wait for thy **salvation** (*yeshu'ah*), O LORD.

Exodus 15:2 — The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my **salvation** (*yeshu'ah*); this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him.

Deuteronomy 23:14 — Because the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp, to **save** (*natsal*) you and to give up your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy, that he may not see anything indecent among you, and turn away from you.

Judges 7:7 — And the LORD said to Gideon, “With the three hundred men that lapped I will **deliver** (*yasha*) you, and give the Midianites into your hand; and let all the others go every man to his home.”

1 Samuel 30:18 — David recovered all that the Amalekites had taken; and David **rescued** (*natsal*) his two wives.

2 Kings 13:5 — Therefore the LORD gave Israel a **savior** (*moshia*), so that they escaped from the hand of the Syrians; and the people of Israel dwelt in their homes as formerly.

Isaiah 6:7 — And he touched my mouth, and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; *your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven.*”

Isaiah 35:4 — Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and **save** (*yasha*) you.”

Isaiah 43:11 — I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no **savior** (*moshia*).

Isaiah 46:13 — I bring near my deliverance (*tsedeq*, “righteousness”), it is not far off, and my **salvation** (*teshu'ah*) will not tarry; I will put **salvation** (*teshu'ah*) in Zion, for Israel my glory.

Isaiah 49:6 — He says: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my **salvation** (*yeshu'ah*) may reach to the end of the earth.”

Isaiah 59:1 — Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot **save** (*yasha*), or his ear dull, that it cannot hear.

Jeremiah 1:8 — Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to **deliver** (*natsal*) you, says the LORD.

Jeremiah 4:14 — O Jerusalem, wash your heart from wickedness, that you may be **saved** (*yasha*). How long shall your evil thoughts lodge within you?

Job 10:7 — . . . although thou knowest that I am not guilty, and there is none to **deliver** (*natsal*) out of thy hand?

Psalms 6:4 — Turn, O LORD, **save** (*chalatz*, “rescue”) my life; **deliver** (*yasha*) me for the sake of thy steadfast love.

Psalms 18:3 — I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, and I am **saved** (*yasha*) from my enemies.

Psalms 27:1 — The LORD is my light and my **salvation** (*yasha*); whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

Psalms 51:2 — Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and *cleanse me from my sin!*

Psalms 68:20 — Our God is a God of **salvation** (*yeshu'ah*); and to GOD [*Yahweh*], the Lord, belongs escape from death.

Psalms 118:14 — The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my **salvation** (*yeshu'ah*).

Psalms 118:25 — **Save** (*yasha*) us, we beseech thee, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech thee, give us success!

Matthew 6:13 — And lead us not into temptation [*peirasmos*, “testing”], but **deliver** (*hruomai*) us from evil.

Matthew 24:12-13 — “And because wickedness is multiplied, most men's love will grow cold. But he who endures to the end will be **saved** (*sozo*).”

Mark 15:31 — So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes, saying, “He **saved** (*sozo*) others; he cannot save himself.”

Mark 16:15-16 — And he said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be **saved** (*sozo*); but he who does not believe will be condemned.”

Luke 1:70-71 — . . . as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that **we should be saved** (*soteria*) from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us.

Luke 24:46-47 — And said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and *forgiveness of sins* should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”

John 3:17 — For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might **be saved** (*sozo*) through him.

John 3:36 — He who believes in the Son *has eternal life*; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him.

John 12:47 — If any one hears my sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but **to save** (*sozo*) the world.

John 4:22 — You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for **salvation** (*soteria*) is from the Jews.

Acts 2:38 — And Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ *for the forgiveness of your sins*; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Acts 2:40 — And he testified with many other words and exhorted them, saying, “**Save yourselves** (*sozo*) from this crooked generation.”

Acts 2:47 — And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being **saved** (*sozo*).

Acts 3:19-21 — Repent therefore and return, *that your sins may be wiped away*, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the *period of restoration of all things* about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time. [NASB]

Acts 4:12 — And there is **salvation** (*soteria*) in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must **be saved** (*sozo*).

Acts 13:23 — Of this man’s posterity God has brought to Israel a **Savior** (*soter*), Jesus, as he promised.

Romans 4:6-7 — So also David pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are those *whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.*”

Romans 5:9-10 — Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be **saved** (*sozo*) by his life.

Romans 6:3-5 — Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might *walk in newness of life*. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be *united with him in a resurrection like his*.

Romans 7:24 — Wretched man that I am! Who will **deliver** (*hruomai*) me from this body of death?

Romans 8:19-21 — For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because *the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay* and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.

Romans 11:26 — . . . and so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, “The **Deliverer** (*hruomenos*) will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.”

Romans 13:11-12 — Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For **salvation** (*soteria*) is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand.

1 Corinthians 1:18-20 — For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being **saved** (*sozo*) it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.” Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

1 Corinthians 9:22 — To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means **save** (*sozo*) some.

2 Corinthians 1:9-10 — Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead; he **delivered** (*hruomai*) us from so deadly a peril, and he will **deliver** (*hruomai*) us; on him we have set our hope that he will **deliver** (*hruomai*) us again.

2 Corinthians 5:17 — Therefore, if any one is in Christ, [there is] *a new creation*; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.

Galatians 1:3-5 — Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins **to deliver** (*exaireo*) us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father; to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Philippians 2:12 — Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own **salvation** (*soteria*) with fear and trembling.

Philippians 3:20-21 — But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a **Savior** (*soter*), the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Colossians 1:13-14 — He has **delivered** (*hruomai*) us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, *the forgiveness of sins*.

Colossians 3:1-3 — If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. *For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God.*

1 Timothy 1:15 — The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to **save** (*sozo*) sinners.

1 Timothy 2:15 — Yet woman will be **saved** (*sozo*) through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

1 Thessalonians 1:10 — . . . and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who **delivers** (*hruomai*) us from the wrath to come.

Hebrews 7:25 — Consequently he is able for all time **to save** (*sozo*) those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

Hebrews 9:27-28 — And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but **to save** (*sozo*) those who are eagerly waiting for him [unto salvation (*soteria*)].

James 5:15 — “. . . and the prayer of faith will **save** (*sozo*) the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.”

James 5:20 — Let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will **save** (*sozo*) his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

1 Peter 2:9-10 — But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you *out of darkness into his marvelous light*. Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.

2 Peter 1:9 — For whoever lacks these things is blind and shortsighted and has forgotten that he was *cleansed from his old sins*.

1 John 3:14 — We know that we have *passed out of death into life*, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death.

1 John 5:12 — He who has the Son *has life*; he who has not the Son of God has not life.

Revelation 7:10 — . . . and crying out with a loud voice, “**Salvation** (*soteria*) belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!”

Revelation 20:6 — Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years.

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