

The Salvation Process

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Spiritual salvation is a two-phase process that begins with the spiritual phenomenon of conversion and continues through a life-long process of transformation (or “spiritual formation”) related to Christian discipleship.

Conversion is both the starting point and the core of what it means to be a Christian. In our natural state we are separated from God by sin. Sin takes on many forms and expressions, but fundamentally it is an egoistic orientation whereby we lack both the desire and the power to live a God-honoring life.

A personal relationship with God comes through a spiritual phenomenon analogous to a rebirth – or as Jesus informed Nicodemus, “You must be born again.” That is, just as we begin to live physically through the birthing process, so our spiritual life must begin with a spiritual rebirth.

The New Testament is clear that a Christian is not someone who is merely born into a particular nation, culture, family, or religious tradition, and that inclusion in the family of God has nothing to do with one’s religious heritage, church affiliation, or adherence to certain rituals. Spiritual life begins when we acknowledge and accept the following realities:

- We are sinners, and our sin separates us from God and prevents us from having a spiritual relationship with him;
- There is nothing we can do to save ourselves or to earn, merit, or deserve God’s saving grace;
- Jesus Christ is the spiritual Savior of humanity, and his death on the cross was a sacrificial atonement for our sins; and

- We must accept God’s saving grace through faith in Jesus Christ and consciously surrender our life to God and turn away from all know sin.

The particular circumstances surrounding the conversion experience is unique to every individual. It may be virtually instantaneous or the result of a gradual process over time, and it may come as a result of a supernatural revelation, an existential crisis, or a conscious and conscientious spiritual search. But until this process occurs, we are separated from God’s saving grace and essentially spiritually dead in our sins.

(In his classic, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis distinguishes between two kinds of life – *Bios* and *Zoe*. Biological life comes through nature, and it always follows the law of entropy – i.e., it runs down and deteriorates and eventually dies. *Zoe*, on the other hand, is spiritual life which exists in God from all eternity. Lewis notes that *Bios* is a mere shadow of *Zoe* and is qualitatively different to the point that “A man who changed from having *Bios* to having *Zoe* would have gone through as big a change as a statue which changed from being a carved stone to being a real man.” According to Lewis, that is precisely what Christianity is about: This world is a workshop of the Great Sculptor, and we are the statues; and some of us – by the grace and power of God – come to life.)

Several theological concepts are incorporated into the phenomenon of spiritual conversion:

- **Justification:** Based on the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross, God declares those who receive Christ's sacrifice on their behalf to be righteous. We are justified – or made right in God's eyes – by divine grace through faith in Jesus Christ. This righteousness is imputed, not innate – i.e., it is not the result of our own goodness but due solely to the indwelling presence of God via the Holy Spirit
- **Reconciliation:** Whereas formerly we were passively indifferent or actively rebellious toward God and separated from God by our sin, we are now reconciled to God and enjoy a harmonious relationship with him as a result of his saving grace.
- **Redemption:** Whereas formerly we were part of Satan's dominion, Christ has purchased our soul and liberated us from the bondage of sin.
- **Regeneration:** God implants a new spiritual nature within us in the person of the Holy Spirit. As noted parenthetically above, *Bios* is transformed into *Zoe* – new and eternal spiritual life.

Conversion is the gateway to spiritual life, but the salvation process continues throughout our life here on earth. The nihilist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote, "I will believe in the [Christian] Redeemer when the Christian looks a little more redeemed." Nietzsche understood what many professing Christians apparently do not – i.e., that Christian faith, if authentic, should produce a changed life.

A genuine spiritual conversion should be wholistic, and it should affect every aspect of life. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, those who have been converted are spiritually transformed through a process of discipleship in which their heart and mind become progressively Christ-like – a process theologians refer to as **sanctification**.

Like conversion, the process of sanctification is unique to each individual, but traditionally Christians have generally practiced 12 spiritual disciplines that work both symbiotically and synergistically to transform our heart and mind according to God's will and purpose for our life.

- (1) Solitude;
- (2) Silence;
- (3) Prayer and meditation;
- (4) Confession of sins and repentance;
- (5) Diet and exercise;
- (6) Fasting;
- (7) Study;
- (8) Worship;
- (9) Fellowship;
- (10) Stewardship;
- (11) Service; and
- (12) Witnessing.

Christian discipleship purifies our soul and, in the process, fundamentally changes our values, beliefs, priorities, and goals in life, as well as our lifestyle and our interpersonal relationships. As Christians we are called to live a simple, honest, and moral life marked by humility, gentleness, and peace. We are also exhorted to be bold witnesses for the truth of God, but to speak the truth in love and in a spirit of grace and humility.

God is the initiator of our salvation and the one who empowers us to live a life that honors him. The process begins with an authentic spiritual conversion, and over time as we cooperate with the Spirit of God at work in our life we experience an amazing transformation that affects the way we relate to all of life.

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Some Selected Verses on Conversion and Discipleship

Jesus to Pilate: “For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” [John 18:37]

Jesus: I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to God the Father except through me. [John 14:6]

Apostle Peter: Salvation is found in no one else [but Jesus Christ], for there is no other name under heaven given... by which we must be saved. [Acts 4:12]

Jesus to Nicodemus: “For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world would be saved. [John 3:16-17]

Apostle Paul: If you will confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” [Rom. 10:9]

Then the jailer brought Paul and Silas out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” [Acts 16:30-31]

When the people heard [Peter’s words], they were convicted in their heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sin. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” [Acts 2:37-38]

Apostle Paul: For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith – and this is not of yourself, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. [Eph. 2:8-9]

Apostle Paul: Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices.... Do not conform any longer to the [thought-patterns and lifestyles] of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to know God’s good and perfect will. [Rom. 12:1-2]

Apostle Paul: And now, in light of all that God has done in our lives and promises us, let us purify ourselves of everything that contaminates body, mind and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God. [II Cor. 7:1]