

God Saves Us

This series of talks/studies will look at what the Bible teaches about how God makes a person a 'Christian' – how he saves us. We'll focus not so much on what God planned for us before time began, or even what he accomplished for us when Jesus died and rose again, but on how what God planned and accomplished **is applied to us** in our present lives. In other words – we'll be exploring the different aspects of God's 'amazing grace... that saved a wretch like me'.

1. How would you (briefly) answer this question – When and how did you become a Christian? (It's quite OK to be honest and say – 'I haven't yet become a Christian', or 'I'm not sure'.)

2. Read Ephesians 1:1-14.
 - a. This is a complex, but magnificent passage. What repeated ideas/themes do you see?

 - b. Who is the subject of the verbs in this passage? (ie. Who is the "He" who does everything? Is there anything here attributable to us?)

 - c. What 'spiritual blessings' are listed? Can you explain each of these (in everyday language)?

 - d. What does it mean that we receive all these blessings "in Christ" / "in Him"?

 - e. How do we come to be included "in Him", and share in all these blessings?

 - f. What is God's purpose in blessing us in this way?

3. What is your response to these truths? How does thinking about them make you feel? What might help you to regularly and wholeheartedly praise God for his 'glorious grace' in Christ?

Why not stop now and turn what you have discussed so far into praise and thanks to God.

4. What potential errors in our thinking might the truths in this passage correct? (eg. Where else might we think that God's spiritual blessings are available?)

5. How does understanding these truths change how we live? (Think about how we relate to God, how we relate to others, how we conduct Christian ministry). If you need some help and time permits read Ephesians 4:17-32.

God brings us to Life

1. How is the phrase "born again" perceived in our community? How does hearing it make you feel?

Theologians use the term "regeneration" to summarise what the Bible teaches about how God brings people to new life in Christ (how people are 'born again'). Notice how the word is constructed – "re" (doing it again) and "generation" (genesis/birth/beginning). Regeneration is the work of God the Holy Spirit bringing people who are spiritually dead, into the new life that comes through union with Christ. As a result of regeneration, we become able and willing to repent of sin, believe the gospel and serve the Lord.

2. The place to start in thinking about regeneration is why we need it. How do these verses describe our 'natural' spiritual state, and our ability to turn to Jesus and be saved? (Look at them quickly to get the overall impression). Ephesians 2:1-3, Romans 8:7-8, 1 Corinthians 2:14, 1 Corinthians 12:3, John 6:44, Ephesians 4:18.
3. Read John 3:1-8. Nicodemus knows a lot about God (he is a Pharisee), and he has seen the supernatural works Jesus has been doing – yet he still needs to be born again (perhaps better translated per the HCSB footnote - or born "from above"). This is then further explained by Jesus in verses 5 & 6.
 - a) What does it mean to be born of "water" and "the Spirit" (v 5)? Hint - The same combination is found in Ezekiel 36:25-27 & Titus 3:3-7.
 - b) What does it mean to be born "of the flesh" compared to born "of the Spirit"?
 - c) What do verses 7 & 8 teach us about the nature of the work of the Spirit in bringing new birth?
 - d) Who is responsible for new birth? To what extent do we contribute to being born again (see also John 1:11-13)
4. How does regeneration happen? See Acts 16:13-15, 1 Peter 1:22-23 & James 1:18. What implications does this have for Christian ministry, and for what we can do if we long to see someone be born again?
5. Why do you think many cringe at the term "born again"? What is challenging and/or comforting about the doctrine?
6. What implications does knowing that you are born again have for Christian living? (If time permits return to Titus 3:1-10 and see what implications are drawn for God's people. You might also like to see how John presents the evidence that someone has been born again – 1 John 2:29, 3:9-10, 4:7, 5:1, 5:4 & 5:18.)
7. What might you pray in response to understanding the doctrine of 'regeneration' and its implications?

God changes us

1. In your experience (in your own life or in what you have seen in others) what is the main/biggest observable change that happens when God brings someone to new life in Christ?
2. The term "conversion" is what theologians use to describe the conscious act of a 'regenerate' person in which he/she responds to the call of God in the gospel. There are two elements of conversion – faith and repentance. One passage that describes conversion in some detail is 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10. Read this chapter together.
 - a. What response did the Thessalonians make to hearing the gospel message? How has this continued to be worked out in their lives?
 - b. To what extent can the response of the Thessalonians be summarized as faith and repentance?
 - c. From this chapter who is responsible for conversion – the Thessalonians, Paul or God? How is this indicated in the passage?
3. What is "faith" and what is "repentance"? How might you explain to someone unfamiliar with Christianity what these are? What is the connection between the two (ie. does one come before or lead to the other)? How do they flow logically from the gospel message about Jesus?
4. What are some common inadequate or incorrect understandings of "faith" and/or "repentance"?
5. According to these verses, who is responsible for faith and repentance?

Mark 1:14-15, John 3:16 & 3:36, Acts 2:38, 3:19 & 16:31, Romans 3:28 & 10:9, Ephesians 1:14, Hebrews 11:6.

Acts 11:18, 2 Timothy 2:24-25, 1 Corinthians 3:5-7 & 12:3, John 6:63-65, Philippians 1:6, Acts 13:48, 1 John 5:1.
6. What implications flow from understanding that conversion is a human response that is at the same time entirely due to the gracious work of God?
7. Both faith and repentance are responses that we make to begin the Christian life, but which also are required in an ongoing way throughout the Christian life. What specific steps of faith and repentance are currently needed in your life?
8. Give thanks and praise to God for the faith and repentance he has brought about in each other's lives, and for the changes that has brought to your lives? Pray for each other's ongoing response.

God justifies us

1. How do people use the word "justify" in our world?
2. In the Bible the word "justify" is a legal word that means to "declare righteous". Read Romans 3:19-4:8.
 - a. Why do we need to be 'justified'?
 - b. On what basis can a person be justified?
 - c. How can God be just and also declare guilty sinners to be righteous?
 - d. What works can we do to contribute to or earn being justified?
 - e. Is justification as one off event or a process?
3. In Romans 5:1-10 Paul begins to describe the blessings that flow from being justified.
 - a. What blessings are listed in verses 1-5? Which one strikes you as particularly precious?
 - b. In verses 9 Paul argues that since we have already been justified, we will certainly be saved "from wrath". What is the logic of this? How does this help us to live with hope (v 5)?
4. If the doctrine that God justifies us is so good, why do you think it might have come under such attack in religious circles over the centuries?
5. Some would say that knowing you are already justified is a 'license to sin'. How would you answer this challenge? (As time permits see how being justified impacts the apostle's life – Galatians 2:15-21 & Philippians 3:7-11)
6. Do you think we should be more conscious of being 'sinners' or of being 'justified'? Why?
7. What might you pray in response to what you have learned and discussed? Spend time praying together.

God sanctifies us

1. The Bible often calls Christians "saints" – a word that means 'holy ones' or 'sanctified ones' (eg. 1 Corinthians 1:2). Who does the world normally refer to as "saints"? How do you feel about being called a "saint"?
2. The Old Testament teaches us that God is "holy" (Isaiah 6:3). Anyone or anything that comes into contact with the holy God must first be made holy (through sacrifice). God's people were also to work at being holy in their daily living (Leviticus 19:1). This concept continues into the New Testament. Without 'holiness' it is impossible for us to see God (Hebrews 12:14), and we too are called to work at holy living (1 Peter 1:15).

The word "sanctify" means to make holy, or to set apart (or consecrate) to God. While 'justification' is a legal concept, where God deals with our guilt through a one-off declaration that we are "righteous" (having Christ's righteousness credited to us), sanctification is religious concept. God deals with our pollution/corruption due to sin. This involves both an initial consecration (purchasing and cleansing us by the sacrificial blood of Christ) and an ongoing process of renewal / transformation. This is all a further aspect of God's amazing grace.

- a) According to these verses, to what extent have we been sanctified?
1 Corinthians 1:2, 1:28-30 & 6:11; Hebrews 10:8-14.
 - b) How does God sanctify us?
John 17:16-19; Romans 15:15-16; 1 Peter 1:1-2 (note "set apart").
 - c) What implications flow from being sanctified by God?
2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8, 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15.
3. To what extent are you conscious that you have been sanctified, and are therefore working at living a holy life? Are there particular areas of your life you need to focus on changing? What could you do to actually change?

Stop and pray for each other about these things. (This is more important than finishing the rest of this study!).

4. To dig deeper - Theologians generally link sanctification to God's work of ongoing transformation. Classically expressed - in justification we are declared righteous (we are given the righteousness of Christ). In sanctification we are enabled to die to sin and live a righteous life. We are being transformed into the image of God (2 Corinthians 3:18), becoming increasingly 'Christlike' (Galatians 4:19) which is also the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-25). This process is always incomplete in this life, but when Jesus returns we will be completely transformed. As in conversion (faith and repentance), this is both God's work in us and something we are called to do.

(As time permits) read Philippians 2:12-13 & 3:10-14 and Romans 6. How does understanding God's work and ours in the ongoing Christian life motivate us to keep working at transformation?

5. Reflecting on what you have learned or been reminded of in this study, for what can you thank and praise God?

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24. Use this verse to inform your prayers for each other, and for our church as a whole.

God keeps us

1. On a scale of 1-10, to what extent are you confident that you will persevere in the Christian Faith to the end of your life? Are you content with how confident you are? Why or why not?
2. A key aspect of God's amazing grace is that he preserves every true Christian to the end. Already in this series we have seen that salvation is entirely God's work - he saves us by uniting us to Christ, brings us to new life, brings about the response of faith & repentance, justifies us and sanctifies us. Next week we will think about how all this is necessarily by God's choice of us. All of this already implies that God will keep us. However, God also gives us direct promises in the Bible. What specific assurances does God give us in these verses?

John 6:35-40

John 10:27-30

Romans 8:28-39

Philippians 1:3-6

1 Peter 1:3-5

3. Some Christians are afraid that illnesses like dementia will cause them to let go of Christ. Others wonder if they are strong enough to keep resisting sin. What can we say to encourage these people?
4. Many people do appear to start living as Christians, but later 'drift away' or 'fall away'. On what basis can we have confidence that we will be saved on the last day?
5. Although God sovereignly preserves us, we also have responsibility (always in God's strength) to persevere. How do these words of God function to keep us? What is our role in this?

Luke 8:11-15

John 8:30-31 & 15:5-8

Colossians 1:21-23

Hebrews 2:1-2 & 12:14-17

2 Peter 1:5-11

6. Some say "knowing that God keeps us encourages complacency about ongoing sin and a low priority on things like meeting with other Christians, Bible reading, etc". From what you've seen in this study, what would you say to that person? (As time allows see how Paul thought in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 & Philippians 4:12-16)
7. How do you personally work at perseverance in the Christian life? Are there any signs of complacency or presumption that you need to address? What specific actions can you take to address these issues?
8. To what extent and in what ways can we help one-another to persevere? (As time allows see Hebrews 3:12-14 & Jude 20-23)
9. To finish read Jude 1, 20 & 24-25. Praise the one who is able to keep us, and ask him to help you to keep yourself and each other. Ask for strength to do what you have seen needs to be done in your life.

God chooses us

1. The Bible (and theologians) use various words to describe the fact that God sovereignly chooses those to whom he graciously gives salvation in Christ (bringing us to life, changing us in conversion, justifying us, sanctifying us, keeping us, and ultimately glorifying us):
 - “Election” – God elects/chooses those to whom he will be gracious
 - “Foreknowledge” – God knows us (understood relationally) ahead of time
 - “Predestination” - God determines ahead of time that individuals will respond to the gospel and be saved. (This is far more than simply seeing the future, it is deciding what the future will be and making it happen!)

Article 17 of the “39 Articles” (the doctrinal standard of the Anglican Church) says “*The reverent consideration of this subject of predestination and of our election in Christ is full of **sweet, pleasant and inexpressible comfort to the godly...** and...establishes and confirms their belief in the eternal salvation to be enjoyed through Christ and kindles a fervent love towards God.*”

Why do you think so many Christians these days find the doctrine of predestination troubling rather than sweet, pleasant and comforting? What complaints or objections are commonly made?

2. The Bible consistently teaches that God chooses us: 1 Peter 1:1-2, 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17, Ephesians 1:3-6 & 11-12, 2 Timothy 1:8-10, Romans 8:28-30 & Romans 9:1-24. Read these and consider...
 - a) What do we learn about when or how or for what purpose we were chosen to be saved?
 - b) Is there any indication as to the basis of his choosing (eg. any merit or condition?).
 - c) Is God's election seen as a positive or negative thing? What “sweet, pleasant and inexpressible comfort” can you find?
 - d) What response to God's election is made by or commended in the text itself? Is there any sense that understanding election might lead to complacency?
 - e) Is there anything in the text that addresses the complaints or objections people might have?
3. What is lost or distorted if we reject or water down the truth that God chooses us?
4. (As time permits) Some Christians worry about whether they have been chosen. How does Paul recognize God's election in 1 Thessalonians 1:2-6? How does Peter say we can ‘confirm’ our election in 2 Peter 1:3-11?
5. At the end of this study you may still have questions. Often these come because we start our thinking in the wrong place. Election is not the starting point for thinking about salvation – Jesus is! If we ask the question – how can sinners like us come to share in the benefits of Christ – the answer is only ever because God has chosen to save us! Spend time praising God together, and pray that you will respond rightly to his amazing grace – with humility, confidence, joy, praise, faithfulness and holiness.