

Salvation



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 18:9–14; John 6:44; Luke 15:3–10; Matt. 20:28; John 8:34–36; John 6:35, 47–51.*

Memory Text: “ ‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life’ ” (*John 3:16, NKJV*).

Death,” we often say, “is just part of life.” No, death is the negation of life, not part of it. Yet, so used to death, we mislabel it, calling it the opposite of what it really is. However we understand it, one point is certain: without divine help, eternal death would be the fate of us all.

Fortunately, help has come. God, in His infinite love, offers us salvation through Christ. When the angel announced the birth of the Messiah, he named Him “Jesus” (from a Hebrew word that means “salvation”), “ ‘for He will save His people from their sins’ ” (*Matt. 1:21, NKJV*).

This week we will consider Jesus’ saving work. First, our attention will focus on the basis of our salvation and later on the results of it.

The Bible is clear. We have only two choices regarding our sins: either we pay for our sins in the lake of fire, or we accept Christ’s payment for them on the cross. As we review the generous gift of God’s grace through Christ, let us once again humbly renew our faith in Jesus as our personal Savior.

* *Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 26.*

Salvation Is a Gift From God

In John 3:16 two verbs are used to describe what God did for our salvation. How do these verbs relate to each other? What do they reveal regarding the origin of our salvation?

The English verb *to love*, especially the casual way it is often used today, is totally inadequate to express the depth of solicitous interest expressed by the Greek verb *agapaō*, “to love.” In the New Testament, this term and its related noun *agapē*, “love,” reveal God’s deep and constant love toward His creatures, who are completely unworthy of this love. Love is the preeminent attribute of God’s character. He not only loves us, but also He is love (*1 John 4:8*).

God’s love is not an impulse based on His feelings or preferences. His love is not selective, nor does it depend on what we do. God loves the world, that is, all human beings, including those who do not love Him.

True love is known by the actions it generates. Sometimes as human beings we may say we love someone, while our actions demonstrate the opposite (*1 John 3:17, 18*). The same does not occur with God. His love is reflected in His actions. Out of love, He gave His only begotten Son for our salvation. In so doing, God gave us all He had, which is Himself.

Read Luke 18:9–14. What does this story teach us about what our attitude toward God and His grace should be?

We have probably read this parable so many times that we are not surprised by Jesus’ verdict: “I tell you, this man [the tax collector] went down to his house justified rather than the other” (*Luke 18:14, NKJV*). However, those who heard Jesus when He pronounced the verdict must have been astonished. Wasn’t this an unjust outcome?

Yes, it was completely undeserved. That is the way salvation is. It is a gift from God. Gifts are not earned; they are simply accepted. We cannot buy salvation; we can only receive it. Although Jesus never used the term *grace*, He clearly taught that salvation is by grace, and grace is being given that you don’t deserve.

If God gave you what you deserved, what would it be, and why?

Salvation: God’s Initiative

A simple reading of the Gospels shows that we owe our salvation entirely to God. Jesus did not come to this world because we invited Him but because the Father, out of love for us, sent Him. The Father’s initiative is confirmed by Christ’s frequent use of the phrase “He who sent Me” and “the Father who sent Me” (NKJV). (Read John 7:28, 8:29, 12:49.)

What else does the Father do for our salvation, according to John 6:44?

In spite of the fact that we were sinners and did not love God, He loved us and provided the means for our sins to be forgiven through His Son (1 John 4:10). This wondrous love is what draws us toward Him.

Not only is the Father involved, but the Son also has a very active role in our salvation. He came with a definite mission. “ ‘The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost’ ” (Luke 19:10, NKJV). Whenever we contemplate Him lifted up from the earth, He draws us to Himself (John 12:32).

How far is the Lord willing to go in His efforts to save us? See Luke 15:3–10.

These twin parables show that God is not waiting passively for us to come to Him but actively seeks us out. We have a seeking God. It does not matter if we are astray, far away in a dangerous place or even lost at home; the Lord will seek us untiringly until He finds us.

“No sooner does the sheep go astray than the shepherd is filled with grief and anxiety. He counts and recounts the flock. When he is sure that one sheep is lost, he slumbers not. He leaves the ninety and nine within the fold, and goes in search of the straying sheep. The darker and more tempestuous the night and the more perilous the way, the greater is the shepherd’s anxiety and the more earnest his search. He makes every effort to find that one lost sheep.

“With what relief he hears in the distance its first faint cry. Following the sound, he climbs the steepest heights, he goes to the very edge of the precipice, at the risk of his own life. Thus he searches, while the cry, growing fainter, tells him that his sheep is ready to die. At last his effort is rewarded; the lost is found.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 188.

The Required Death

John the Baptist described Jesus as “ ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ ” (*John 1:29, NKJV*). This image was easy for any Israelite familiar with the sacrifices offered in the temple and the sacred history recorded in the Old Testament to understand. Abraham had revealed his faith that “ ‘God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering’ ” (*NKJV*); and the Lord did provide the animal to be sacrificed in place of Isaac (*Gen. 22:8, 13*). In Egypt, a lamb was slain by the Israelites as a symbol of their divine deliverance from the bondage of sin (*Exod. 12:1–13*). Later, when the sanctuary service was established, two lambs were to be sacrificed on the altar each day, continuously: one in the morning and the other at twilight (*Exod. 29:38, 39*). All these sacrifices were symbols of the coming Messiah, who “was led as a lamb to the slaughter” because “the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (*Isa. 53:6, 7, NKJV*). Therefore, by introducing Jesus as “ ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ ” (*John 1:29, NKJV*), John the Baptist was revealing the vicarious nature of Christ’s atoning death.

During His ministry, Jesus repeatedly announced His death, even though it was hard for the disciples to understand why He had to die (*Matt. 16:22*). Gradually, Jesus explained the great purpose of His death.

What illustrations did Jesus use to indicate that He was going to die as a Substitute for us? See *Matt. 20:28, John 10:11*.

“ ‘Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends’ ” (*John 15:13, NKJV*); this holds true even if they do not understand or accept that sacrifice. On the cross, Jesus shed His blood “ ‘for many for the remission of sins’ ” (*Matt. 26:28, NKJV*).

It is important to notice that Jesus died voluntarily. As the Father gave His one and only Son, so the Son gave His own life to redeem the human race. Nobody forced Him to do so. “ ‘No one takes it [my life] from Me, but I lay it down of Myself,’ ” declared Jesus (*John 10:18, NKJV*).

Even Caiaphas, who openly rejected Jesus and led the plot to kill Him, involuntarily recognized Jesus’ substitutionary death (*John 11:49–51*).

Think of how much ingratitude humans have toward God and what He has given us in Christ. How can we make sure we don’t fall into that trap? Why is this so easy to do, especially when we are going through difficult times?

Free From Sin

Without Christ, we were slaves of sin, slaves to the evil impulses of our fallen human nature. We lived in a self-centered way, pleasing ourselves instead of living to the glory of God. The unavoidable result of this spiritual slavery was death, because the wages of sin is death.

But Jesus came “ ‘to proclaim liberty to the captives . . . , to set at liberty those who are oppressed’ ” (*Luke 4:18, NKJV*). These aren’t literal captives but spiritual prisoners of Satan (*see Mark 5:1–20; Luke 8:1, 2*). Jesus did not release John the Baptist from Herod’s prison, but He did release those who were bound by the chains of sinful lives and delivered them from the heavy burden of guilt and eternal condemnation.

What great promise is found in the following verses? *See John 8:34–36.*

The use of the word *indeed* in verse 36 shows that there is also a false kind of freedom, a pseudo-freedom that actually shackles human beings to further disobedience to God. Jesus’ hearers trusted in their ancestry of Abraham as their hope for freedom. We run the same risk. The enemy wants us to rely upon anything—for instance, our doctrinal knowledge, our personal godliness, or our record of service for God—anything except Christ for our salvation. But none of these, however important they may be, has the power to free us from sin and its condemnation. The only true Liberator is the Son, who was never enslaved by sin.

Jesus delighted in forgiving sins. When four men brought a paralyzed man to Him, He knew that this man was sick as a result of his dissolute living, but He also knew that the man had repented. In the pleading eyes of this man, the Lord saw the longing of his heart for forgiveness and his faith in Jesus as his only Helper. Tenderly, Jesus said to him: “ ‘Son, your sins are forgiven you’ ” (*Mark 2:5, NKJV*). Those were the sweetest words this man ever heard. The load of despair disappeared from his mind, and the peace of forgiveness filled his spirit. In Christ he found spiritual and physical healing.

At a Pharisee’s house, a sinful woman washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and anointed them with perfume (*Luke 7:37, 38*). Perceiving the Pharisee’s disapproval, Jesus explained to him that “ ‘her sins, which are many, are forgiven’ ” (*vs. 47, NKJV*). Then He said to her: “ ‘Your sins are forgiven’ ” (*vs. 48, NKJV*).

“ ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ ” Why are these the best words any of us will ever hear?

Christ Gives Us Eternal Life

Because of our sins, we deserve to die. But Christ took our place on the cross and paid the death penalty that, otherwise, rested on us. He, being innocent, took on our guilt and received our punishment so that we, being sinful, could be declared innocent. Through Him, instead of perishing we receive eternal life. John 3:15 makes this amazing promise to us. It says that “ ‘whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life’ ” (NKJV), a promise repeated at the end of John 3:16.

Some think that, even after accepting Christ as Savior, the promise of everlasting life will be real only after His second coming. However, the promise of salvation is expressed in the present tense: “ ‘He who believes in the Son has everlasting life’ ” (John 3:36, NKJV). Whoever believes in Christ “ ‘has everlasting life’ ” now, “ ‘and shall not come into judgment’ ” in the final day, “ ‘but has passed from death into life’ ” (John 5:24, NKJV). Thus, even if we die and sleep in the grave, this temporary rest doesn’t take away from the reality of eternal life.

When Jesus becomes our Savior, our life acquires a whole new meaning, and we can enjoy a richer and a fuller existence. “ ‘I have come,’ ” stated Jesus, “ ‘that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly’ ” (John 10:10, NKJV). Instead of transitory worldly pleasures, which fill us up without really satisfying us, He offers us a life lived in a completely different way, full of inexhaustible satisfaction in Him. This new abundant life includes our whole being. Jesus performed numerous miracles to restore the physical life of many people. But above all, He wanted to give them a renewed spiritual life, clean from sin, filled with faith in Him and the certainty of salvation.

What metaphor did Jesus use to express the results of accepting Him? What does that mean in our practical daily living? See John 6:35, 47–51.

Meditate on the concept of eternal life. It is not only an imperishable existence but above all a blessed, satisfying, and happy life in loving communion with God in the new earth. Although we are still living in this world, how can we start to enjoy, even partially, what it means to have eternal life?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “The Sinner’s Need of Christ,” pp. 17–22, in *Steps to Christ*; “The Subject Presented in 1883,” pp. 350–354, in *Selected Messages*, book 1.

“Looking upon the crucified Redeemer, we more fully comprehend the magnitude and meaning of the sacrifice made by the Majesty of heaven. The plan of salvation is glorified before us, and the thought of Calvary awakens living and sacred emotions in our hearts. Praise to God and the Lamb will be in our hearts and on our lips; for pride and self-worship cannot flourish in the soul that keeps fresh in memory the scenes of Calvary.

“He who beholds the Saviour’s matchless love will be elevated in thought, purified in heart, transformed in character. He will go forth to be a light to the world, to reflect in some degree this mysterious love. The more we contemplate the cross of Christ, the more fully shall we adopt the language of the apostle when he said, ‘God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.’ Gal. 6:14.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 661.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Salvation is a gift, which means that it’s free. At the same time, does it not cost something? What does it cost to accept this gift, and why—whatever that cost—is it more than worth it?
- 2 On Monday we read texts showing that salvation is the result of God’s initiative. He makes every effort to save us. Yet, Jesus also said that we need to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness (*Matt. 6:33*). His words “‘Strive to enter through the narrow gate’ ” (*Luke 13:24, NKJV*) imply that we need to seek our salvation. How do we explain this?
- 3 How does Christ’s death on the cross reveal God’s justice? How does it also reveal God’s mercy?
- 4 If we could work our way to eternal life, through our own efforts and good deeds, and even our own law-keeping, what would that say about the seriousness of sin? Instead, think about just how bad sin must be that only the death of Jesus could atone for it.
- 5 Religious Jews see in the Sabbath a foretaste of what eternal life will be like. In what ways does that idea—eternal life prefigured in the Sabbath—make good sense?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *John 3:16*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Comprehend God's offer of eternal life as the only alternative to the universal problem of death.

Feel: Experience freedom from both the punishment and the power of sin, including the natural consequence of death.

Do: Accept the offer of eternal life so expensively purchased yet so generously proffered.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: God Offers the Only Credible Alternative to Death.

A Why do you suppose that John 3:16 has become the most widely known verse in Scripture?

B Which yearnings of the human soul are addressed through the promise of eternal life? How so?

C In non-Christian religions, humans seek to find and satisfy God. In Christianity, God takes the initiative to find us. How do you explain the difference?

II. Feel: Salvation Releases Us From the Punishment and Power of Sin.

A How do feelings of guilt and shame prepare us to seek the salvation that God freely offers?

B How do theologies that emphasize freedom from sin's punishment, but not freedom from its power, shortchange their adherents' experiences?

C How might believers face the terror of death once they have experienced the gift of salvation?

III. Do: The Offer of Eternal Life Is Useless Apart From Its Acceptance.

A What obstacles do people allow to stand in the way of accepting Christ's generous offer of eternal life?

B How might people be encouraged to accept Christ's offer of eternal life?

► **Summary:** God's salvation offers complete release from sin and its consequences.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *John 3:16*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God offers humanity complete restoration, providing salvation from sin’s punishment, its power, and eventually its very presence.

Opening Activity: Before leaving home, place a single-serving cup of ice cream in a container that will subsequently be gift-wrapped. During the class, circulate the carton, offering class members the opportunity of guessing its contents. Inquire, “Who enjoys receiving presents? Who enjoys giving gifts? What’s in the box? How many think it should be opened immediately?” (Vote.) “How many prefer to postpone the opening until the conclusion?” (Vote.) (Voting notwithstanding, the carton remains sealed until the conclusion of class. See the application to be made at the end of the lesson time in Step 3.)

Substitute Opening Activity: Imagine that you are preparing a gift of food for your friends. Is the food better served hot or cold? Imagine that the delivery of your cooking is unexpectedly delayed. Heated foods become cold, and cold foods become warm, thus losing their preferred tastes. How might this unexpected delay and the resulting change in food quality affect how your friends evaluate your prepared food gifts? How might timely delivery and reception of the gifts change their perception and appreciation of the gifts?

Consider This: Why does God enjoy offering us His gift of salvation? What does this reveal about the nature of divine love?

►STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. Salvation Freely Provided (*Review John 3:16, 6:44, and Luke 18:9–14 with your class.*)

Parents who bury their children experience incomparable agony. Our heavenly Father willingly sacrificed His only Child, watching, seemingly helpless, as Christ collapsed beneath the weight of humanity’s accumulated transgressions and that splintered cross. God witnessed that thorny crown driven through

weathered flesh until blood, gushing downward, painted Christ's body crimson. Ridiculing soldiers—crude, unworthy, uncouth specimens—mocked their Savior mercilessly. Self-righteous religious leaders shouted, “Crucify Him!” Compliant governmental officials, milquetoasts, abandoned Jesus. Earthly disciples scattered everywhere. When Christ petitioned His Father, silence enshrouded Him. Could despair have pierced with greater fierceness? Thousands of weeping angels waited anxiously, prepared to obliterate heaven's enemies. Overwrought with grief, they stared elsewhere, unable to understand why Jesus, their esteemed Commander, could not receive their assistance. Abandonment by fickle politicians, jaded religionists, and weak-willed disciples was one thing; but His Father, too, asleep when greatly needed? Why should Jesus die for these rebellious priests, these unappreciative followers, these cowardly politicians, and those ignorant masses beyond? Sunset approached, marking the completion of Jesus' agonizing final minutes. Momentarily His naked corpse would be wrestled away from the cross, ripping His flesh, furthering His disfigurement. Only Joseph, from Arimathea, and Nicodemus, from Jerusalem, spared Christ the indignity of an unmarked criminal burial. Such was the redemptive price for our transgressions.

How tragically ironic that many believers consider salvation an entitlement. Such heady overconfidence! They reason that because God promised salvation, they *deserve* salvation. How this attitude betrays the shallowness of cheap grace. Unworthy sinful mortals mortgaging the universe's Creator! Heaven's balance sheet states otherwise. Humankind stands eternally indebted, completely without merit, and helplessly diseased apart from God. Christ owes nothing. Sinful humanity owes everything.

Consider This: The narrative of Luke 18:9–14 describes two worshipers. Which one emulates authentic Christian experience? What characteristic attitudes illustrate that experience?

II. Freed From Sin (*Review Luke 4:18 with your class.*)

Christ stooped intentionally until His merciful gaze gained her attention. Barely dressed, violently wrestled away from some bedroom, disrespectfully exposed, she hardly expected this compassionate countenance. Men gazed upon her lustfully but never lovingly. Her past was checkered. A social outcast, she was a pawn in the hands of scheming, legalistic Pharisees, who wished to use her for political reasons. Looking for opportunities to entrap Christ, they scheduled an immoral rendezvous, then, coincidentally discovered her indiscretion in progress. They shuttled her into Christ's presence. Piously quoting Moses' writings, they solicit Jesus' opinion. Should He condemn her, in accordance with Mosaic practices,

His reputation with the masses would be compromised. Should He exonerate her, these hypocritical Pharisees would accuse Jesus of lawlessness. Momentarily, Jesus spoke. He didn't excuse her immoral proclivity nor did He make exacting retribution easy. He simply offered forgiveness and encouragement that ended with this loving admonition, "Stop sinning."

Every Pharisee present was likewise a sinner. They departed condemned sinners. One woman, however, departed forgiven, empowered against temptation, liberated from her sordid history. Thus, believers glimpse Christ's modus operandi. Jesus first disallows Satan's condemnation, liberating repentant sinners from their haunting yesterdays through divine forgiveness. Second, Christ liberates these penitents from Lucifer's powerful temptations, enabling them to walk godly lives. First justified, then sanctified, God's people are thereby prepared for heaven.

Consider This: What usually happens when salvation is skewed toward forgiveness only? Overcoming only? How can believers maintain the balance between the two?

►STEP 3—Apply

Activity/Questions:

Remember that wrapped present that has been melting for the last hour? The time has arrived for opening it. Conduct a Christian "lottery" or accept the first volunteer in deciding who opens the package. Utilize the following questions to unpack the illustration.

- 1 Would it have been better, tastier, and timelier had the package been opened at the beginning?
- 2 Does our dessert still contain essential nutrients, and might the body still be blessed by eating (or slurping, as the case may be)?
- 3 When is the best time to "open" God's gift of salvation? When does the gift taste best?
- 4 If people squander earlier opportunities to receive salvation, should they despair and likewise bypass later ones? Is heavenly nourishment still available although squandered opportunities may have allowed Satan to create bitter experiences?

Substitute Activity/Questions:

Remember our opening discussion regarding prepared foodstuffs? Think about the outcome of delivering these meals whenever the food could be served at

optimal temperatures. Next, utilize the following discussion questions to compare serving these delicacies at less-than-ideal temperatures.

- ❶ Would it have been better, tastier, and timelier had the food been eaten in the proper condition?
- ❷ Even if not eaten when it tasted best, does the food still contain essential nutrients that the body might be blessed by eating?
- ❸ When is the best time to “open” God’s gift of salvation? When does the gift taste best?
- ❹ If people squander earlier opportunities to receive salvation, should they despair and likewise bypass later ones? Is heavenly nourishment still available although squandered opportunities may have allowed Satan to create bitter experiences?

Consider This: Should local church etiquette allow, share a meal together, with food at optimal temperatures. Divine wisdom linked spiritual experiences with physical experiences (e.g., eating the Passover). Why should modern believers not do the same?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Scripture offers believers three primary reasons for worshipping God: (1) Creation, (2) daily sustenance, and (3) redemption. This week’s investigation focused on the third. Challenge your class members to creatively respond to their salvation.

Activity: The contours of this activity will be shaped by your class’s unique abilities and spiritual gifts. The primary theme is to create something in response to the salvation so generously provided. Some classes might compose fresh music or write new lyrics to accompany well-known tunes. Others might produce poetry or create a mosaic or painting. Still others might author some dramatic sketches, performing them for some future class event. Others may be challenged to express their appreciation for God’s gift by sharing it through witnessing.