

Salvation

Salvation in the Orthodox Church

Salvation is a large topic, and it is therefore one that should not be condensed into a single paradigm or a short sentence. If we look throughout the Scriptures, we see that Christ is given numerous titles, all related to His work as Savior. (I am indebted to Fr. Josiah Trenham and his audio series, "An Orthodox Christian Catechism," for this list.):

In the Scriptures, then, Jesus is called: the Light of the World, the One Who exists/the "I AM," the Savior of the World, the Christ, the Son of God, the Lord, the Great God, the Wonderful Counselor, the Prince of Peace, the Word of the Father, the Immaculate Icon of God, the Wisdom of God, God's Power, the Righteous One, our Righteousness, the Man (the True Human Being), the Last Adam, the Teacher, the Prophet par excellence, the Great High Priest, the King of Kings, the Good Shepherd, the Lamb of God, the Servant of the Lord, the Suffering Servant of God, the Judge of all, the Light of the World, the Way, the Truth, the Life, the Son of Righteousness, the Bread of Life, the Resurrection, the Door, the True Vine, our Peace, the Comforter Who sends the Comforter, the Redeemer, the Firstborn, the Bridegroom, the Heir of all things, the Friend, the older Brother, the true and faithful Witness, the Alpha and the Omega/the Beginning and the End, the Holy Temple, the One Mediator between God and Man, the Intercessor, the Pioneer and Perfector of our Faith, the Heavenly Physician.

We can see, then, that trying to explain the whole of salvation in just a sentence or two would be unwise since no paradigm could encompass each of these titles of Christ and the implications of these titles on the topic of salvation. Still, when seeking to understand the topic of salvation in a particular church, one is usually asking two things in particular: how do you understand the history of salvation and do you believe that you are saved by faith or works? In this article, then, we'll look at both of these questions and try to offer some clarity concerning how the Orthodox Church approaches them.

Some Aspects of the History of Salvation

As we have said, no single paradigm can comprehensively describe what Christ did for us as Savior of the World. Whether one is familiar or not with the various theories of salvation – the "satisfaction/debt theory," the "bargain/ransom theory," the "penal/substitutionary theory," etc... – each has its particular problems and the more general problem of attempting to fit in a nice, small box something far grander than any single theory could contain. While one can search the Fathers of the Church and find language that seems to support one theory or the other, ultimately, what the Fathers provide are images of certain aspects of salvation or glimpses of salvation from particular viewpoints; what they do not provide are systematic explanations that hope to encompass all about Who Christ is and what He did for us.

Knowing this, what we will explore herein is not an attempt at what the Fathers did not try to do themselves. Instead, we will offer a particular perspective of salvation, adding another viewpoint while understanding that it is far from comprehensive. In this, we will aim to correct some common misconceptions found when exploring this topic.

We will begin with the truth that God did not create death. Death was not a punishment enacted by an angry God, bent on penalizing Adam and Eve for the great offense they gave to God. This is not compatible with the Orthodox view of an ever-merciful and all-loving God. We see this when God, in Genesis 2:17, tells Adam and Eve that, if they disobey Him and eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, “you will surely die.” Notice that He did not say, “I will kill you.” This is not a threat but a statement of fact. “The natural result of your disobedience,” God seems to say, “will be death.”

For the Orthodox Church, then, the consequences of Adam’s and Eve’s disobedience –corruption, sickness, death, an inclination toward sin, and the reign of the devil – were the natural results of man turning away from God. Sin, then, affects man, not the impassible God.

An image we could use to describe this is a flower. If you take a flower away from its sources of life – earth, water, and light – it will naturally wither and die. The Source of Life for man is God; thus, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they turned away from Him. In turning away from Him – again, their Source for Life – corruption and death naturally entered into them. It was as if they constructed a wall between them – the creatures – and the Uncreated God. While some could peer over that wall, such as with the Prophets, eventually death overtook all men, and they remained separated from God.

For the Orthodox Church, then, sin and death are seen first and foremost as illnesses... diseases in need of a physician. They afflict man – body, soul, and spirit –and because all of the created world looked to man to find its communion with God, all of creation also became “ill” with corruption and death when man fell. This entire world became subject to corruption and decay and the reign of the devil. When the Son of God became incarnate, then, healing had already begun to occur, for in a single Person – Jesus Christ – created man and the Uncreated God were again united. When this Godman died on the cross, death could not contain Him, for He is Life (John 14:6). Death, then, shattered for all, and Christ broke the chains of Hades. In His resurrection, Christ destroyed death once and for all. Now, we can unite with Christ – the Great Physician – and find healing from all of those terrible consequences of the Fall.

Faith or works?

So what is our role in this process? How can we take the gift of salvation offered to all by Christ and make it our own? Is it a matter of simple belief in Jesus Christ? Or do we earn our salvation through works? As you will see, the answers to these questions are not as simple as “yes” or “no.”

In Ephesians 2:8, St. Paul tells us that we are saved “by grace through faith.” In order to understand this verse, let’s break it down a few of the elements. Firstly, let’s look at the term “faith.”

In the Epistle of St. James, we are given a good explanation of what faith is not. Faith is not, according to St. James, merely a mental assent to an idea. After all, even the demons believe in one God, he says, yet they have not found salvation (James 2:19). Faith, then, goes well beyond just a mental acceptance of an idea. Throughout the New Testament, we see that faith, in fact, is not a static thing at all; faith can be small or great. This means that faith can grow or wane. When we speak of faith, then, we mean not just belief but trust. Faith is a sure reliance on God. This means that faith is active. One priest commented to me once that when we see the word “faith,” we could many times put instead the word “faithfulness.” It is a dedication to God, performed in love because of all that God has done for us through Jesus Christ, that causes us to live in full trust of our Lord. This is also a great description of “humility,” so we see that love, humility, and faith are all necessary parts of one another. This is why St. James, in the 2nd chapter of his Epistle, writes, “You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only... For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (24,26). Faith without works is dead because it’s not true faith... It is only the first step in something that we take and grow throughout our lives.

But what are the works that James speaks of? In the Orthodox Church, works of faith are what we call “repentance.” Matthew 3 and 4 show us that repentance was central to the teachings of both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. So what is repentance?

Repentance, like faith, is not merely a mental concept; it takes place first in action. Repentance, then, will at times be accompanied by a spirit of contrition, but sometimes, that feeling is absent. When this occurs, repentance is still possible. Repentance literally means to “turn around.” That is, it is to turn away from a life separated from God and from all sin that pushes us further from Him. In repentance, we begin by seeking, with the aid of God, to cease actively sinning. As sin takes less of hold on us and we “put off the old man” (Colossians 3:9), we seek instead a life of perfection (Matthew 5:48). Of course, perfection can never be achieved by man alone, and this is where Grace becomes necessary. Again, we are saved “by grace through faith.” So living out our faith in active repentance – through prayer, fasting, attending the services of the Church, and receiving the Holy Mysteries in the Sacraments – we seek to constantly increase in Grace. Grace is part of God. It is the Energies of God. To increase in Grace, then, means to unite with God; it means that, as our hearts are filled less and less with sin, the room made by the departure of sin is filled with God. One who is so filled with Grace that God works and speaks through them can then say, with St. Paul, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). When Christ dwells in us, then, so does His victory over death and the devil. The Life that is Christ becomes our own life and our own victory over death. This is why it is not uncommon for Orthodox Christians, when asked “Are you saved?”, to respond, “I was saved in baptism, I am being saved through repentance, and I hope for salvation in the age to come.” When people ask if Orthodox Christians are

certain of their salvation, they can say, "I am certain of one thing: the mercy and love of God. If I seek that mercy and love with my whole heart, then I can have nothing but hope for my salvation." We don't want to be too certain of our salvation from the start since – and perhaps you know people like this – it can cause us to stop striving for God... to live prideful of our salvation and unloving toward our neighbor.

If an openly spiteful, judgmental, and unloving person can be certain of a salvation which seems to everyone else to be in question, then I, who am probably just as spiteful, judgmental, and unloving without realizing it, better not put my guard down. We want to always be moving forward in salvation, as salvation is a process (cf. Phillipians 2:12 or 2 Timothy 4:7).

When we take all that has been written here, we see that the process of salvation is a process of departing from sin and a constant acquisition of Grace in our lives. It means that we seek Christ more and more in our hearts, but we know that Christ will not dwell in an impure place. So we seek, with the aid of God, to purify our hearts and to invite Christ to make our heart His throne. We are saved "by grace through faith." In other words, we work together with God, and God with us: God's efforts for man's salvation and man's efforts to love God and neighbor. Thus, when someone asks if we are saved by "faith or works," our answer is "yes," since for the Orthodox Christian, faith and works are the same thing. We live an active faith which seeks to drive sin from our hearts and invite Grace in its place.

May we all engage wholeheartedly in this process and find union with our Lord, Jesus Christ!