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Volume 3 – 2011

Salvation and the Nature of God

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Introduction

Salvation is a phenomenon that deals with the deepest human needs. It embraces the whole range of human concerns and it is complex in nature. Salvation is not just a Christian term. Other

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religions also use it and they usually mean something different from the Christian usage. The differences usually lay in their understanding of what we are to be saved from, to what we are to be saved for and to the means by which we are saved. There are also some Christian movements who use the term salvation to mean something different from orthodox Christianity. Salvation fulfills the aim of creation. The goal of creation was an eternal rest with God. With the fall of man, salvation becomes the only instrument to attain this goal and the achievement of this goal is itself the embodiment of the concept of salvation. The Bible presents us with a progressive understanding of salvation. This can be seen as we move from the Old Testament to the New Testament understanding of salvation. Looking at salvation from the Old Testament perspective, R.E.O. White writes, “the commonly Hebrew words for salvation, deriving ultimately from a root word meaning width, spaciousness, freedom from constraint, hence deliverance, obviously lend themselves to board development in application. Literally they cover salvation from any danger, distress, enemies, from bondage....”²

H. D. McDonald in a similar way says that the root meaning for salvation is to be roomy or board. “To save is to give space to; salvation is then, an enlargement.”³ Salvation takes place when the third party intervenes on the behalf of the oppressed. It has a sense of “to come to rescue and to experience rescue.”⁴ In the Old Testament, Salvation had to do with deliverance from all kinds of misfortunes—from enemies, famine, sickness, pestilence, and so forth. Deliverance from external acts was intimately tied with spiritual and moral conditions. In the Old Testament, “it is not, in fact, possible to draw a sharp dividing line between the material and the spiritual.”⁵ In the Old Testament salvation was linked with sin and in this context, the individual or the nation needed repentance from sin to be saved. In the New Testament, salvation was understood in the broader sense. As one move from the Gospels to the Epistles, more and more

² R.E.O. White, “Salvation” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 1049.

³ H.D. McDonald, *Salvation: A Comprehensive Exposition of the Foundational Christian Doctrine*, (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1982), 12.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 14.

constituent elements of salvation are included. Salvation then came to include or mean, healing, born again, forgiveness, wholeness, new life, justification, eternal life and was conceived as an act of the grace of God through Jesus Christ. There is more emphasis on eternal salvation.

White has also defined salvation in terms of what man is saved from. Man is saved from “sin and death; guilt and estrangement; ignorance of truth; bondage to habit and vice; fear of demons, of death, of life, of God, of hell; despair of self; alienation from pressures of the world; meaningless of life.”⁶

God created man to enjoy eternal fellowship with him and attain the highest good, but sin with its accompanying vices stop man from doing so. Salvation therefore “denotes the whole process by which man is delivered from all that would prevent his attaining to the highest good that God has prepared for him,”⁷ and that is eternal life.

The Bible teaches that the goal of salvation is peace-*shalom*, peace with God, self, others and the creation. It means wholeness, normal development, growth, and health. Michael Figura says, when the Bible speaks of *shalom* it means something more than peace. *Shalom* means integrity and it has to do with all aspects of life. “This integrity is shown in bodily and spiritual well-being, in happiness, life, blessing, reconciliation and fullness. Generally *shalom* means an increase in life or a good quality of life.”⁸ Salvation does not just mean freeing man from sin and granting him communion with God but also means freeing him from all forms of injustice.

I. Irrevocable Salvation

From the Old and New Testament’s understanding of salvation it is explicit that salvation is based on the nature of God. If salvation is peace, it is because God himself is peace. This paper is dealing with the orthodox and Reformed belief that eternal salvation obtained through Jesus Christ by grace is irrevocable. The paper will argue that the irrevocable nature of salvation presupposes God’s

⁶ Geoffery Bromiley 968.

⁷ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1915), 2665.

⁸ Michael Figura, “Faith as the Beginning of Salvation.” *Communio* US 22 (Fall 1995): 396.

unchangeable nature. The irrevocable nature of salvation is consistent with the nature of God and God cannot deny himself of his character or nature. The nature of God is expressed in his attributes. Attributes of God are intrinsic qualities of God which constitute what he is; they are characteristics of his nature, - permanent qualities of God – objective characteristics – part of his very nature, his being, his essence. They are “essential and inherent dimensions of his very nature.”⁹ Attributes tell us who God is and how he relates to his creatures. Attributes tell us that God exists apart from humanity and the world. He has qualities that humans do not have and has freely chosen to share some of the qualities with human beings. It is basing on the attributes that the Westminster Catechism defines God by saying “God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” The Bible is clear that God does things according to nature. His actions are connected with his nature and in fact inseparable. Erickson notes, “the attributes are inseparable from the being or essence of God.” God does not sin because his nature is that of holiness.

However, this paper wants to avoid the exclusive sovereignty of God in anchoring salvation on the attributes of God. It also acknowledges human responsibility. The Bible teaches God’s sovereignty and human responsibility side by side. Too much emphasis on human responsibility leads to Pelagian, Papist and Ariminan soteriology. These groups teach that truly regenerate believer may totally and finally fall away from grace and lose salvation. For them, salvation is based on nature of man and not God so can be revoked.¹⁰ Some Baptists, in light of Hebrews 6:6, teach reconversion after one has fallen from grace.¹¹ It is important to mention that irrevocable salvation is not for Church goes. We must here distinguish between the visible and invisible Church and irrevocable salvation has to do with the invisible Church, the Church

⁹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 292.

¹⁰ R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Baker Book House, 1995), 136.

¹¹ R.L.Dabney, *Lecturers in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 689.

made of only true believers and not just those that make public confession.

The doctrine of irrevocable salvation is taught clearly in the Scriptures and there are numerous passages that support the concept. The following verses teach the irrevocable nature of salvation and God's unchanging nature. Num. 15:28; 1Sam. 15: 29; Ps.138: 8; John 10:27-30; Luke 22:31-32; John 5:24; 6:39; Rom. 8: 29-30; 11:1,29; Eph.1: 4; 4: 30; 2Cor.1:22; 2 Tim. 4: 18; Heb. 7: 23-24; 1 Pet. 1:3-5; James 1:17. These verses tell us that God will not reject his people and the work he has begun will be completed. Based on these verses Bavinck refers to God as a self consistent ruler over all things. He quotes Philo as calling him "unchangeable, self-consistent, invariable, steadfast, firm, fixed, and unalterable," and concludes that any change will diminish his being.¹²

II. Irrevocable Salvation and Perseverance of the Saints

Irrevocable salvation is clearly expressed in the Calvinistic doctrine of perseverance of the saints which is well captured in the Canons of Dort under the fifth article "perseverance of the saints." Perseverance of the saints means that "all those who are truly born again will be kept by God's power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevered until the end have been truly born again."¹³ This doctrine gives the assurance of comfort and reveals the goodness of God to those who believe in him. The Canons of Dort sees human and inadequacy and acknowledges that salvation is completely the work of God. Article three states "God is faithfully, mercifully strengthening in grace once conferred on them and powerfully preserving them on to the end." Article 6 is even more elaborate on the fact that the irrevocable nature of salvation is based on God's unchangeable nature. It says,

God who is rich in his mercy according to his unchangeable purpose of election does not take his Holy Spirit from his own completely, even when they fall grievously. Neither does he let them fall down so far that they forfeit the grace

¹² Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 153, 154.

¹³ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 336.

adoption and the state of justification, or commit the sin which leads to death, and plunge themselves, entirely forsaken by him, in eternal ruin.

Article 7 states that the salvation is based on the attribute of mercy and faithfulness. It reads,

So it is not by their own merits or strength but by God's undeserved mercy that they (true believers) neither forfeit faith and grace totally nor remain in their downfalls to the end and are lost. With respect to themselves this not only could happen, but also undoubtedly would happen; but with respect to God it cannot possibly happen, since his plan cannot be changed, his promise cannot fail, the calling to his purpose cannot be revoked, the merit of Christ as well as his interceding and preserving cannot be nullified, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit can neither be invalidated nor wiped out.

Salvation cannot be revoke because of God's mercy and unchanging nature.

Further article 12 and 13 clearly states that irrevocable salvation has not place for careless living or moral laxity nor indolent but it is a promotion of godly living. It does not mean that such Christians are totally free from all dangers and temptations. It does not mean believers are to do what they like. It means the believer is preserved by God's power not by his power. God has created the enabling environment through his protective and upholding attributes to make salvation irrevocable. Murray puts it, "perseverance means the engagement of our persons in the most intensive and concentrated devotion to those means which God has ordained for the achievement of his salvation purposes." ¹⁴

Accordingly, perseverance of the saints is the work of the three members of the trinity who are infallible in their decision and will and not upon human will or initiative but upon the immutability of the decree of election flowing from the free and unchangeable love and counsel of the triune God. It is also upon the efficacy merits and intercession of Christ and the abiding of the Holy Spirit. Irrevocable salvation as a seed that God has planted in the believers arises from the certainty and infallibility of his nature. Man by his nature is characterized by weakness, imperfection and therefore liable to fall from salvation left on his own. Man alone has the tendency to willfully and heartily choose sin and destruction. Salvation is not

¹⁴Murray, Taken from Anthony Hokeoma, 236.

based on condition that we may lose it if not able to fulfill the condition. Our election to salvation is unconditional.

III. Salvation as the Total Work of God

In a more ordinary way G. I. Williamson looks at various things involved in the process of salvation and each of them is the work of God. He says, “those whom God hath accepted in his beloved, effectually called and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.”¹⁵ They may come to a stage of backsliding but before the end of their life, they will come back to the right path.

Salvation cannot fail because it is the work of unchanging God who stands at the beginning, middle point and the end point of salvation.¹⁶ Since salvation is the work of God, a clear understanding of God’s nature is pertinent to the understanding of the nature of salvation. Similarly, a wrong view of God will lead to a wrong view of the nature of salvation. Dabney says “the security from the fall is the attribute of none but God.”¹⁷ Believers are secured by the strength of the unchanging God working in them.

Anthony Hoekema advanced a number of reasons that makes salvation an irrevocable thing:

1. Salvation is irrevocable because it is not based on feeble human decision but on God’s attribute of grace.

2. Irrevocable salvation has roots in God’s eternal decrees which were done according to the counsel of his will and are based on his unchanging nature. Through the eternal decrees, people are chosen for eternal life not because of their merits but by God’s good pleasure.

3. The grace which saves is not universal but particular, it is only for the elect.

4. By his our nature, God has provided the spiritual security needed by the believers. The salvation given is both efficacious and irrevocable.

¹⁵ G.I. Williamson, *Westminster Confession of Faith: For Study Classes* (Grand Rapids: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1964), 1&2.

¹⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensive and Readable Theology* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1986), 519.

¹⁷ R. L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 688.

5. The application of salvation is the work of the Holy Spirit who is of the same essence with the Father.¹⁸ Just like the father he will never fail.

IV. Salvation and God's Attributes

A. Immutability of God

The claim of this work is that irrevocable salvation is based on God's nature which is expressed in his attributes so is penitent to discuss show attributes and show how these support irrevocable salvation. As we begin to talk about God's attributes it is important that we begin with immutability as one of God's attributes that guarantee the irrevocable nature of salvation. Immutability also means the constancy of God. Wayne Grudem defines immutability as "God is unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises, yet God does act and feel emotions, and he acts and feels differently in response to different situations."¹⁹ It is on the immutability of God that our unshaken faith stands. This attribute makes God worthy to be trusted. God is not different at one time in history and different at another time so that he will change his plan. God's major plan and dealing with humanity revolves around salvation. Salvation is primary in God's dealing with humanity. All other things are not major and done to support and safe guard the elect to obtain and keep salvation. Since salvation is major it is something that will agree with the nature of God and will not change.

Immutability of God is the implication of his aseity. It means God is absolute, he is not advised, and his decrees are ever established. There is no development to make him change, he does not grow or becomes, nothing in this world would cause him to change for he is the first cause and eternally and absolutely independent in his works. His is his own cause and no before and after with him. Immutability means that God is the fullness of being.²⁰ Everything around God changes but he remains the same, both his personality and nature. This is what his name I AM WHO I AM means. This name emphasizes the self-existence and the ontological

¹⁸ All these is taken from Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: William Erdermans Publishing Company, 1988), 2, 3, with some additions.

¹⁹ Wayne Grudem, 73.

²⁰ Herman Bavick, *Reformed Dogmatic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2004), 152.

nature of God. It set forth the faithfulness of God, his eternity and the unchangeableness of his being. The name exhibits the constancy and certainty of his nature, will and word. The certainty of the exodus of the Israelites depended on this name. The nature of God from this name saw them through the exodus. Their disobedience, failures, non-cooperative attitudes and the efforts of their enemies did not stop God from bringing them to the Promised Land. The unchanging God always remain faithful to his promises to save his people. Immutability set God apart from humanity in existence, being, thought, will, purpose, and corruption. Unlike man, God does not lie, repent, and fail.

Immutability does not mean immobility or sterility but God's stability. God's nature is such that he is active and dynamic but in such a way that his nature remains constant and dependable.

B. Infinity of God

The attribute of infinity complements immutability. Infinity simple means God is not subject to limitations. For God, one's life is not long that he may not be able to oversee it to its end. For he acts and sees in time and he knows when things will happen. The Bible tells us that we are saved because God loves us. His love is unlimited, eternal and unchanging. It transcends time and unconditional thus making salvation eternal. Related to this, are God's attributes of grace and mercy which are unlimited and able to cover every aspect of life.

C. Omnipresence

Omnipresence is one of the attributes that is useful to support and uphold the believer everywhere and all the time so that the believer does not fall into a grave sin and that salvation obtained is revoked. Through this attribute God sustains believers, protects them and since his presence is not limited to time or space, the believer cannot slip out of his hand. There is nothing in their way that he cannot see.

D. The Perfect Knowledge of God

Another attribute of God that support irrevocable salvation is omniscience also known as the perfect knowledge of God. His perfect knowledge means he knows all things actual and possible. Nothing is new to him nor can anything escape his memory. Because of his

unlimited knowledge there are no unforeseen developments nor surprising situations that will cause him to change. His knowledge is such that he knows totally. In relation to our discussion this means that God chooses only the right people for salvation. That is, his judgment about who to choose for salvation is perfect and without mistakes so that there is no change of mind for that salvation to be revoked. He makes wise and unfaulted judgments about human behavior and these judgments are done in their proper perspectives. By his nature God is without error or mistakes, therefore, if salvation is revoked it will be contradictory to his nature of perfect knowledge and wisdom. By his nature, God's decisions always bring the best result and finishes well. The process of salvation will only finish well when those predestined are called and those called are also justified and those justified are also glorified (Rom. 8:30). Job testified that with God are wisdom and might; he has counsel and understanding (Job 12:13). God has all the facts about each person from eternity and Ps, 104: 24 testifies that God does everything in his wisdom. Paul also reiterates, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways" (Rom. 11:33). We also talk about the perfection of God which has to do with the completeness of God in action and deed. It is about the excellence of his work, attributes, and the unfailingness of God.

E. Faithfulness and Truthfulness

Another important nature of God that makes salvation irrevocable is faithfulness and truthfulness. This attribute makes God reliable and dependable. Wayne Grudem defends faithfulness that "God will always do what he has said and fulfill what he has promised."²¹ There is no falsehood in him. The faithfulness of God does not take human action into consideration. No time is too long for him to fulfill his promises. The age of Abraham and Sarah did not stop him from giving them a child. Israel stayed in Egypt for four years and in captivity for seventy years before they were delivered.

F. Omnipotence

This also implies the sovereignty of God and it connotes the unlimited power of God and his rulership over all things. There is

²¹ Grudem Wayne, 90.

nothing to stop him from doing what he has proposed, nothing too hard for him to accomplish, no obstacles or hindrances that he cannot remove and so Jeremiah sings “Ah Lord God! Thou who hast made the heavens and the earth by thy great power and by thy outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for thee” (Jer.32:17). This is what Matthew means by saying nothing is impossible with God (Matt.19:26). It also means that God is never frustrated and has the ability to do what he has chosen to do. The nature of God covers knowing what is to be done, having the will to do it, and the ability to do it perfectly. His power makes him free from any compulsion or bound by any external factors and actions. His actions and decisions do not depend on anything outside himself but on his free choice.

G. The Love of God

The attribute of love is the foundation of salvation (John 3:16). Erickson calls love the primary and basic quality of God and that love is the definition and the very nature of God.²² It is through this attribute that God relates to humanity. This love is expressed in his benevolence whereby he shows concern for the total welfare for his people and for the elect, that concern will be total and ultimate only if their salvation is irrevocable. God’s love is unselfish and not for what he can get from them but for the interest of their salvation.

Grace is another expression of God’s love. The Bible teaches our salvation is based on the grace of God and it means the unmerited favor of God. Paul says, “it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith, and not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one should boast” (Eph. 2:7-9). Grace is the ground of salvation. “And by grace is meant that, without any compulsion from outside or any necessity, but purely out of the impulse of love, God seeks to save those whom there is no reason to save.”²³ It is by grace that God works with sinners. The covenant God had with Israel was based on grace. The Christian message is the Gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24). Grace is the source of God’s love to pardon sinners and of peace to perfect reconciliation. Works and keeping the law are only aftermath of salvation and not the ground of salvation. It is because of this that Paul brings into picture the doctrine of

²² Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 318.

²³ H.D.McDonald, *Salvation*, (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1982), 11.

justification by faith, hence making grace the basis of justification. “He begins his exposition of justification after ruling out the law as having any part in it, with the declaration, ‘they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 3:24).”²⁴ It is in order to say that grace is the totality of salvation from its beginning to its end. Grace is the source of every spiritual blessings (Eph.1:3; 2:7). It is grace that sustains us in our Christian journey (2Cor. 12:9).

Another important aspect of God’s love is mercy. Through this attribute, God takes care of the need of his people and the greatest human need is irrevocable salvation. Lastly, the love of God is persistence. God’s nature is such that he never gives up on the elect. He forgives them time without number and continually upholds them.

Conclusion

The doctrine of irrevocable salvation does not make salvation anything easier. God did not promise a temptation free society or life for the elect. The elect too will be confronted with temptations and difficult life issues but the Bible only says that God will help them to overcome them through his faithfulness. “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13). The elect who enjoy irrevocable salvation also go through the stages of salvation (order of salvation or *ordo salutis*). This involves things that humanly speaking one must go through to be saved. This includes call which has to do with the presentation of the gospel message, regeneration, conversion (repentance and faith), justification, adoption, sanctification, and finally glorification. It is God who enables one to go through these stages. These may not take place in the same way everyone.

The Israelites completely acknowledged salvation as divine initiative. This not new, one of the creeds of the Israelites was that *Yahweh saves* (Exod.14:13; Ps. 3:8; 62:1).²⁵ Israel called God Savior, his is the salvation of her people (Ps. 25:5; 79:9; Isa.12:2; 45:21;

²⁴ Ibid., 44

²⁵ Ibid., 11.

Hos.13:4). Without him, Israel would not conceive that salvation is possible. Salvation was for them an expression of God's righteousness, faithfulness, love, and mercy. This again shows how salvation depends on the nature of God.

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