

Understanding Theology in 15 Minutes A Day for 40 Days

Day 29

How Does a Person Become Saved?

Even though the salvation of any individual happens instantaneously, there is a process that can be traced based on New Testament words and concepts. Theologians call this the *ordo salutis*, or order of salvation.

Conviction. This term refers to the act of showing someone their faults. It is used, for example, in **Matthew 18:15**: *“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you.”* With regard to salvation, this is the work of the Holy Spirit (**John 16:8–11**). Only the Spirit can effectively reveal the sinful state of any person, and apart from this no one will even feel the need for salvation.

Calling. The contexts in which this Greek word is used indicate two types of calling, or invitation. One, the “general call,” is the universal offer of the gospel to all people, the invitation to everyone to believe in Jesus and receive salvation. For example, Jesus said, *“Many are invited, but few are chosen”* (**Matthew 22:14**). **Luke 14:16–24** records the parable of the man who invited many to a dinner, but some offered excuses regarding why they could not come. These texts indicate that while the invitation to salvation goes to all, not all accept it. This type of divine invitation can be declined.

In other texts, those who receive the invitation do accept it. This second type is the “effectual call” or “effective call.” Paul addresses **1 Corinthians** to “saints by calling” (**1:2 NASB**) and refers to “those whom God has called” (**1:24**), expressions essentially equivalent to “Christians” or “the elect.” Paul also says, *“Those [God] predestined, he also called”* (**Romans 8:30**). This type of call goes only to the elect and does result in salvation.

Divine Grace. As we have seen, sinners are spiritually dead in their sin, totally helpless, unable to do anything spiritual, especially believe in order to be saved (**Romans 8:7–8**). Therefore, God must enable them to do this by his grace. Calvinists and Arminians agree on this but understand necessary grace in different ways.

Arminians refer to “prevenient grace,” that is, grace that precedes (comes before) saving faith. Sometimes called “enabling grace,” it enables spiritually dead people to do what they would otherwise not be able to do. Also, Arminians believe God gives this type of divine grace to *everyone* in order to overcome the effects of sin, but it is also resistible. That is, because of free will, not everyone exercises this God-given ability, and some decline the general call to be saved.

Calvinists prefer to speak of what has historically been called *irresistible grace*. The term unfortunately smacks of compulsion; it sounds like, through this kind of grace, God forces the elect to believe in the gospel. But this is *not* what Calvinists believe. Rather, they hold that this type of grace is given only to the elect (not to all people), and it does indeed result in the elect exercising saving faith, through compelling persuasion (not coercive pressure).

The conversion of Saul/Paul (**Acts 9**) is an illustration. As a loyal Jew, Saul hated Jesus Christ and his followers and was on his way to Damascus to arrest some of them. But when he was confronted by the resurrected, glorified Christ, it immediately became obvious that what he had believed to be a lie was undeniably true: Jesus was the promised Messiah, and he was very much alive. As a result, Paul believed. Jesus did not force him; he just opened Paul’s sin-blinded eyes to reality, and then Paul willingly and gladly believed. Paul himself describes this experience in **2 Corinthians 4:4–6**.

Calvinists say this is what Jesus meant when he said, “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them*” (**John 6:44**). **Acts 16:14** records of a woman named Lydia that “*the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.*”

Most important here is what Arminians and Calvinists both agree on: No one can be saved apart from the grace of God. Therefore, God gets all the glory and credit for the salvation of all who believe (**Ephesians 1:6–12; 2:8–9**).

Repentance. This concept is often misunderstood as an effort to clean up one’s spiritual and moral act, but this is *not* what the Bible means by *repentance*. Rather, the Greek word literally means “to change one’s mind” (or “thinking”) about something. In terms of being saved, then, it means someone now thinks differently about themselves as a sinner and their absolute need of God’s grace through Jesus the Savior. In this sense, repentance is really a

corollary of saving faith. **We can't truly repent without believing, and we can't truly believe without repenting.**

Saving faith. The last step to individual salvation is the exercise of *saving* faith. Scripture states this repeatedly and clearly: There is no salvation apart from faith (**John 3:15–16; Romans 10:9–10; Ephesians 2:8**). I add *saving* here because not all faith results in salvation, as the parable of the sower illustrates. Some of the seed (the gospel) falls on rocky soil—“*They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away*” (**Luke 8:13**).

Saving faith is made up of three components, and all are necessary.

First, there must be *knowledge*. This has to do with ideas or concepts generally, and specifically, knowledge of the gospel (**1 Corinthians 15:3–8**). No one can be saved apart from knowing the gospel.

Second, there must be *assent*. One must know what the gospel is and believe it is true (this is where repentance comes in). We all know certain concepts or stories to which we do not give assent (Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, the Easter bunny). Many people know what the gospel is yet don't believe it to be true. They are certainly not saved. But knowledge and assent alone are not enough. Even Satan and his demons know the gospel and believe that it is true; they are certainly not saved. So finally:

Three, there must be *trust* (reliance, dependence). We not only must know what the gospel is and believe that the gospel is true, we also must completely depend upon Jesus Christ and nothing else (only the gospel—not ourselves or anyone/anything else) to make us right with God.

That's why this kind of faith and our works are always mutually exclusive in Scripture (**Romans 3:21–28; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8–9**). Our works do not and cannot impress God. Rather, what pleases him is our trust in and dependence upon him (**Hebrews 11:6**). Only when we believe the gospel and depend upon Christ in this way are we truly saved.

INTERESTING FACT

Regeneration fits in here somewhere, but not all agree where. The Greek word translated *regeneration* (e.g., NASB) is found only in **Matthew 19:28** and **Titus 3:5**, but the concept is

that of being “reborn,” “born again,” or “born of God” (**John 3:3; 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18**). By the work of God through his Spirit (**John 3:5–8**) and his Word (**1 Peter 1:23**), those who were dead in sin are now spiritually and eternally alive. Arminians believe regeneration is a result of salvation—that a person is *first* saved by faith and *then* born again as a gift of God. Most Calvinists believe regeneration precedes saving faith because it is a means by which God enables spiritually dead people to believe—by giving them spiritual life first.