

# Grace Notes

Number 82

## How Were People Saved before Christ's Death and Resurrection?

A question often heard is “How were people eternally saved in Old Testament days?” For a more comprehensive perspective, it might be better to ask, “How were people eternally saved before the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?” This question would apply to people who lived before the Mosaic Law, during the Law, and in the lifetime of Jesus Christ. We know that the words for *save/salvation* in both Hebrew and Greek basically mean to be delivered from some danger and are used many times in the Bible for a temporal deliverance (in this life). We are using the term to mean *deliver from eternal condemnation or the Lake of Fire* or in the sense of justification before God.

### People were saved before Christ's death and resurrection

To be clear, there have always been people accepted by God. Adam and Eve were made acceptable when God clothed them. Abel's offering was found acceptable implying that he was also. Abraham was credited with righteousness before God (Gen. 15:5). David had his sins forgiven and enjoyed God's blessing (Rom. 4:6-8 citing Ps. 32:1-2). The prophets who wrote the Scriptures were obviously saved. In the time of Jesus Christ, His own disciples knew they had eternal life before He died and rose from the dead (John 6:68-69).

### No one was saved by works

No one at any time was ever saved by works, self-effort, or by keeping the Mosaic Law. Works-righteousness could never attain to God's perfect standard, but were as useless as “filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6). In the New Testament, Paul also explains that no one is justified by keeping the Law (Rom. 3:20;). Though the Law was powerless to save, it led people to Jesus, who does save (Gal. 3:19-24). Paul refers three times to Abraham as the consummate example of justification by grace through faith (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3: 6; James 2:23; for James' perspective on Abraham's justification see *GraceNotes no. 2 “Faith and Works in James 2:14”*). Abraham was saved before circumcision and the Law were instituted, so he could not have been saved by keeping them (Rom. 4:9-12; Gal. 3:16-18). Obedience to the Law and its sacrificial system allowed fellowship with God and prefigured the final necessary sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Mosaic animal sacrifices were only provisional, never sufficient for salvation (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 10:1-4).

### People were saved by grace

Grace is the free gift of God's undeserved provision. In the case of Abraham, grace came to him through the unconditional promise of future blessings that would come to the world through His Descendant, or Seed, the Lord Jesus Christ (Gen. 12:2-3; 17:1-8, 22:18; Gal. 3:16). Since this future deliverance is God's promise, the fulfillment depends on God's performance, not Abraham's. Paul also cites David as one to whom God imputed righteousness apart from works, that is, by grace (Rom. 4:6-8). David was saved by grace in spite of his infamous sins. Abraham and David were saved on the basis and in anticipation of God's gracious gift of a coming Savior. God has always preserved a believing remnant of Israel by His grace (Rom. 11:1-6).

### People were saved through faith

Since salvation by grace cannot be earned or deserved, then it can only be received through faith: “Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure...” (Rom. 4:16; cf. 4:4-5). Abraham was justified because he believed God's promise of a Descendant, who would be the Deliverer (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3-5). Since Abraham's salvation occurred while he was uncircumcised, he serves as a model for all people, both Gentiles and Jews, who are imputed righteousness through faith (Rom. 4:9-11; Gal 3:26-29). The principle of salvation by grace through faith apart from works pervades the New Testament (John 3:16; 4:10; 20:31; Rom. 3:21-24; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:4-5; Rev. 22:17).

## The transitional time of Christ

Jesus' twelve disciples knew that they were eternally saved, but one might ask how they could be saved if they did not believe that Jesus Christ would die or rise again. (Matt. 18:21-22; Mark 8:31-32; Luke 18:31-34; John 2:19-20; 20:8-9). They were saved because they believed that their salvation would come through Jesus as the promised Messiah, the Christ, the Savior. They understood Jesus was the divine Son of God sent to deliver them from the condemnation of sin (John 5:24; 8:24). They heard Him teach that salvation was a gift received through faith, not works (John 6:27-29; 35-54; 7:37-39). They did not understand exactly how that gift would be given, though we might argue that they should have based on the testimonies of the prophets, the many types (prefigurements) of Christ in the Law, and Jesus Himself who spoke of the Messiah's suffering and resurrection. After His death and resurrection, Jesus challenges Thomas to believe in Him as the crucified and risen Lord (John 20:26-29). Only after this encounter does John state the purpose of His Gospel: "*but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name*" (John 20:31). So within the time of the disciples' association with Jesus, the message of eternal salvation expanded from Jesus is the Son of God the Savior to Jesus is the crucified and risen Son of God the Savior. That is the message confirmed later by the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 1:17-18; 2:2; 15:1-4). The gospel message had not changed, only expanded.

## The progress of revelation

Consider how the content of the good news of God's Deliverer expanded through time. We can't be sure what early Bible characters knew, because truth was also transmitted orally. We know that Adam must have known that God was going to provide a Deliverer, a Seed of the woman, who would destroy Satan (Gen. 3: 15). Abraham also anticipated the saving Seed and had a special revelation of Him (John 8:56). Moses knew something about the suffering of the coming Savior and spoke of Him (John 5:46; Heb. 11:26). David understood the Seed would be His Descendant. Prophets described the Messiah's divinity, His kingdom, His power, His death, and His resurrection. Isaiah especially linked the suffering of the Messiah with salvation (Isa. 53:3-11; Acts 8:26-35; 10:43). Jesus declared that the Scriptures, from Moses and all the prophets, testified that the Messiah would suffer before He entered His glory (Luke 24:25-27). Still there is no evidence that anyone knew His name is Jesus or that He would die on a cross, though Jesus is merely a transliteration of the Hebrew word for Savior, Yeshua. At the time of His birth, Jesus' name is announced (Matt. 1:21) and today, no one is saved apart from the name Jesus (Acts 4:12). After His resurrection, Jesus presents Himself as crucified on the cross and risen from the dead. This is the object of faith that Jesus wants Thomas to see (John 20:26-29), which became the message of salvation the apostles preached after Christ's ascension into heaven (Acts 2:22-24; 3:18-25; 4:2, 10; 5:29-31; 10:39-41; 13:29-32; 17:3; 26:22-23; 1 Cor. 1:17-18; 15:1-5). In God's eternal plan, Jesus was "slain before the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8; cf. 1 Peter 1:18-20), but the details of how this would happen were expanded as revelation progressed through the ages.

## Conclusion

Salvation has always been by grace through faith in God's promised Savior. The essential content of the gospel has not changed, but it has been expanded as more information became known in the progress of revelation. In Old Testament times, people were saved by believing in God's provision of a coming divine Savior. In Christ's day, it was believing in Jesus as the living divine Savior. After Christ's death and resurrection we are saved by believing in Jesus Christ as the crucified and risen Savior who delivers us from condemnation and gives us eternal salvation. Some were saved by looking forward to this good news; today we are saved by looking back to its accomplishment. In that sense, we can say that salvation at any time has always been by grace through faith in God's promised Savior, Jesus Christ the Son of God, who died for our sins and rose again.