

## Topic 2: Salvation in the Old Testament

### Introduction

As Christians, we understand that salvation is a free gift offered to sinners on the basis of Christ's substitutionary death on the cross. But what about people who lived before the time of Christ? How were they "saved"? Were they saved by keeping the Mosaic Law? If not, what did they need to do?

### God's Overall Plan of Salvation

Scripture is clear that it has always been God's intention to redeem mankind. God knew before the creation of the first couple that they would disobey, thereby becoming sinners. Their sin nature would also be passed on to their descendants. Mankind, being then sinners by nature, would simply be unable to live up to God's standard of holiness (Ps 14:3; Rom 3:10-12). Yet God, on account of His attribute of love, conceived a plan of redemption as a way of glorifying Himself. At Pentecost, Peter said to the Jews, "this Man [*i.e.*, *Jesus*] delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death" (Acts 2:23; cf. Acts 3:18; 4:27-28; Rev 13:8).

Since man was incapable of living up to God's standard of righteousness, there would have to be a way by which God—without compromising His holiness and justice—could accept sinners and allow them into His presence. The plan, then, would have to include payment for the penalty of sins committed, granting of forgiveness, and the imputation of righteousness. In God's infinite wisdom and unfathomable love, He conceived such a plan of salvation based on Christ's substitutionary death for all mankind on the cross. This plan, of course, was something man was undeserving of. In order for God to have all the glory, this plan of salvation would have to be based on *grace* . . . not on anything man could do to merit it or contribute to it. The only requirement—in keeping with grace—would be for man to receive this salvation as a gift from God on the basis of faith. The plan in every age, then, would be *salvation by grace through faith*. This is beautifully reflected in Ephesians 2:8-9, when the Apostle Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." If man could contribute anything to his salvation, then he would have something to boast about, but God eliminates that possibility, so that all the glory can go to Him (as it should!). This principle (salvation by grace through faith) is not only true for all of us living after the cross but for all those who lived prior to the cross as well.

### The Issue of Progressive Revelation

A crucial issue for this discussion is the matter of what a person needed to know in order to be saved. We can safely say that those in the Old Testament did not have as full an understanding that we do today about the person of Jesus and His work on the cross. Not even the apostles during the time Christ was on the earth fully understood this. This is clear from what we read in Luke 18:31-34:

<sup>31</sup> Then He took the twelve aside and said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things which are written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished. <sup>32</sup> "For He will be handed over to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and mistreated and spit upon, <sup>33</sup> and after they have scourged Him, they will kill Him; and the third day He will rise again." <sup>34</sup> But the disciples understood none of these things, and *the meaning of* this statement was hidden from them, and they did not comprehend the things that were said.

What we can discern from our study of Scripture is that as the Old Testament gradually unfolded, more and more of God’s plan of salvation became clearer. That is, those who lived closer to the time of the cross (when more of the Old Testament would have been available to them) could have had greater understanding than those who lived at the beginning of the Old Testament. With each passing generation, more was being revealed, so that more could potentially be known. Biblical scholars refer to this as *progressive revelation*. Feinberg remarks,

At the outset, it would seem to be crucially important to understand that though God always used the same method of saving men (the point which preserves unity of redemption and of the redeemed), what He reveals about that method is progressively amplified and necessitates changes in the way the believer expresses the fact that he has appropriated God’s one method of salvation (the points that allow for the diversity demanded by progressive revelation).<sup>1</sup>

This is not to say that those in the earliest part of human history had an insufficient understanding of salvation. It is more accurate to say that they had a limited amount of divine revelation, but what they had was sufficient for their salvation. The issue, then, was for them to respond by faith to God and His promises to which they had been exposed and to what had been revealed. Naturally, this revelation was cumulative for succeeding generations. Regardless of how much or how little a person knew in the Old Testament period, the principle remained true of salvation by grace through faith. This was the one and only method.

### Four Distinguishable Periods Prior to Christ’s Death on the Cross

When we consider Old Testament history as a whole, we must first recognize that for most of this long period, people were not under the Mosaic Law. Since the Law was not given until 1446 BC, there were many centuries prior to this that people lived without any knowledge of the Mosaic Law. Furthermore, even when the Mosaic Law was given, it was not imposed on all people but only upon the people of Israel. God never indicated that Gentile nations were obligated to live by the Law. In considering salvation prior to the time of the cross, it may be helpful to distinguish four different periods of early human history. In the chart below, 2091 BC was the time that Abraham left Harran for the land of Canaan at age 75, and 1446 BC was the time when Moses received the Law at Mt. Sinai.

Pre-Abrahamic Period		Period of Abraham Until the Law		Period of the Mosaic Law	
Creation ?	2091 BC	2091 BC	1446 BC	1446 BC	AD 29
					AD 29-33



### Salvation in the Pre-Abrahamic Period (Gen 1:1–11:26)

This period covers the time from the creation of the first couple until Abraham was called by God to leave Ur of the Chaldees in order to form a new nation. Since we know that some people were considered “righteous” in this period, they must have come into a saving relationship with God. Enoch, for example, is said to have “walked with God” and was “taken” by God without seeing death (Gen 5:21-24). Genesis

<sup>1</sup> John S. Feinberg, “Salvation in the Old Testament,” in *Tradition and Testament; Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1981), 53.

6:9 says that “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God.” Undoubtedly there were others like these two men. They had to have experienced God’s salvation.

Adam and Eve, being created directly by God, did not initially need salvation. After their disobedience and fall, however, they did. We should begin by considering their need and understanding of salvation. For instance, they did know that there would be an ultimate victory over the evil one that had deceived them, and this “Victor” would come through the seed of the woman. God told the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel” (Gen 3:15). [See Lesson 12, Topic 4, for further discussion of this verse]. Even though they did not know the exact identity of this “seed of the woman” (from our perspective, we know it is Jesus Christ), they could have faith in the promised seed. In Genesis 3, we are also given a hint of their personal experience of salvation. Prior to their being expelled from the garden, we read, “The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them” (Gen 3:21). Prior to this (but after they had sinned) the first couple attempted to provide coverings for themselves from fig leaves (Gen 3:7). A spiritual principle can be extracted from these verses: human attempts to cover one’s guilt and the shame of sin are never acceptable in God’s sight; rather, man needs to be clothed by God in a more fitting way that meets God’s approval. Although verse 21 does not state it directly, we can infer that God also taught the first couple about animal sacrifice for sin and being clothed in an acceptable way before God. The New Testament will build upon this foundational principle to clarify that accepting the perfect sacrifice of Christ results in being clothed with the righteousness of Christ.

Even though the Mosaic Law would not come for many more years, the concept of sacrifices and offerings is well-attested in the book of Genesis.<sup>2</sup> We read of Cain and Abel bringing offerings, and of Noah making burnt offerings. All this attests to the fact that there were Old Testament believers prior to Abraham whose faith in God was evidenced by their making sacrifices to Him (though the sacrifice in and of itself is not what saved them). Their faith was in the person of God and His promise that would come by the seed of the woman.

### **Salvation in the Period from Abraham Until the Law (Gen 11:27–Exod 18:27)**

In light of the promises made to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, he knew that God’s ultimate plan was to bless all the families of the earth, and this would come from someone in his line. His faith was in the person of God and the certainty he had that this future seed that would come forth from his line. In response to God assuring Abraham of this future seed, we read, “Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6). This verse is significant for multiple reasons. First, it clarifies that Abraham gained a right standing with God based on faith alone, not by any sacrifice or merit of his own. Abraham exercised faith, and God *credited it to him* as righteousness. In Romans 4:1-5, the Apostle Paul expounds on the significance of this verse, pointing out that faith is not a meritorious work:

<sup>1</sup> What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? <sup>2</sup> For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. <sup>3</sup> For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

<sup>4</sup> Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. <sup>5</sup> But to the one

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<sup>2</sup> Offerings and sacrifices are mentioned in Genesis 4:3, 4, 5; 22:2, 3, 6, 7, 8,13; 31:54; and 35:14. Also, prior to the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai, we read of the Hebrews who asked Pharaoh for permission to journey to the wilderness to sacrifice to the LORD (e.g., Exod 3:18; 5:3; and 10:25). They were also instructed about the Passover sacrifice lamb (Exod 12:27). Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law—a non-Hebrew—also offered burnt offerings and sacrifices to God (Exod 18:12).

who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.

Second, this took place long before the Mosaic Law was given. This is rather significant, since Abraham—the father of the Jewish people—was not saved or reckoned “righteous” on the basis of obedience to the Law. Third, this also took place before Abraham was circumcised. Circumcision was looked upon by Jews in the time of Jesus as the hallmark of being righteous, and yet Abraham’s circumcision did not take place until later (see Genesis 17:24). Again, the Apostle Paul writes,

<sup>9</sup> Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, “Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness.” <sup>10</sup> How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; <sup>11</sup> and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, <sup>12</sup> and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised (Rom 4:9-12; cf. 4:18-25)

The example of Abraham in Genesis 15:6 is not limited to himself alone. In light of Galatians 3:6-9, this becomes the paradigm for all others in history . . . both Jews and Gentiles. The Apostle Paul writes,

<sup>6</sup> Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. <sup>7</sup> Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. <sup>8</sup> The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, *saying*, “All the nations will be blessed in you.” <sup>9</sup> So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.

The question might be raised: “But what did Abraham know of the sacrificial work of Christ?” Interestingly, we read of what Jesus said in John 8:56 when confronting unbelieving Jews, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.” This should not be understood to mean that Abraham knew that the Messiah would come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. I suggest that Jesus was probably alluding to what Abraham experienced when tested to offer his son Isaac “on the wood” (Gen 22). God stopped Abraham from offering his “only son,” and in the aftermath Abraham named the place, “The LORD will provide” (Gen 22:14). God pointed out a connection between Abraham’s obedient act of sacrificing Isaac and the fulfillment of blessing that would come in Abraham’s future seed:

<sup>16</sup> “By Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, <sup>17</sup> indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. <sup>18</sup> “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice” (Gen 22:16-18).

By this, Abraham looked by faith to another “only son” who would one day become the source of divine blessing for the entire world . . . even though he did not know His name would be Jesus of Nazareth.

### **Salvation in the Period of the Mosaic Law (Exodus 19 until the Cross)**

After coming out of Egypt in 1446 BC, the Hebrews came to Mt. Sinai where Moses received the Law from God. The people agreed to keep God’s Law which consisted of 613 commandments, and so entered into the Old Covenant. Simply stated, however, the Law of Moses was never intended as a method of personal salvation, for this would have resulted in salvation by works. The basis of salvation was still “by grace through faith” in keeping with Abraham’s example in Genesis 15:6 (cf. Gal 3:17). The Law had numerous other purposes than providing salvation, one of which was to inform the people how they were

to live in order to be blessed by God in the land as participants of the Abrahamic covenant. But it had no salvific value. The New Testament makes this clear.

<sup>16</sup> nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we [*i.e., Jewish Christians like Paul*] have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified (Gal 2:16).

The Apostle Paul went on to say, “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness *comes* through the Law, then Christ died needlessly” (Gal 2:21). So, the gift of righteousness (like that which Abraham received) was never given on the basis of one’s effort to live up to the demands of the Law.

A second purpose of the Law is that it condemned the person who failed to keep it. Being justified by God (pronounced “righteous”) could only come by faith, not by keeping the Law.

<sup>10</sup> For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.” <sup>11</sup> Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, “The righteous man shall live by faith.” <sup>12</sup> However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, “He who practices them shall live by them” (Gal 3:10-12).

During the period of the Mosaic Law, if a person sinned, he could be forgiven and restored to communion with God by offering the appropriate sacrifice. These were the “non-sweet savor” offerings of the *sin offering* (Lev 4:1–5:13) and the *guilt offering* (Lev 5:14–6:7). This type of forgiveness, however, was not for eternal salvation from the penalty of sin; rather, it was for temporal forgiveness so that one might be restored to fellowship with God and accepted in the community of worshipers. [This would be parallel to confession that Christians do today on the basis of 1 John 1:9]. Along with a blood sacrifice, it would be assumed that the one seeking restoration with God would come in faith, sincerely, and with a repentant heart. Yet this temporal forgiveness must not be confused with the way of eternal salvation. According to Hebrews 10:4, “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” The animal sacrifices merely pointed to the greater sacrifice that would come as a result of Christ shedding His own blood. David, who reigned as king during the time of the Law, addresses the matter of eternal forgiveness of sins when he writes,

<sup>1</sup> How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! <sup>2</sup> How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit! (Ps 32:1-2).

The word translated “impute” is the same verb that was used in Genesis 15:6 of Abraham. The Lord “imputed” (or “credited”) righteousness to him. So, this verse in Psalm 32:2 is the flip side and implies that instead of imputing iniquity, God imputes righteousness (cf. Rom 4:6-8). In doing so, the person’s sin is eternally forgiven. But if—while living under the Law—he commits some sin, then he is expected to bring the appropriate sacrifice to receive temporal forgiveness and restoration of fellowship with God as described above.

The Mosaic Law was in effect for nearly 1500 years (1446 BC – AD 33). During this period, there continued to be *progressive revelation* about the coming Messiah, so that more and more was able to be known (for those discerning enough). Isaiah 53, for example, was an example of Messiah’s expected suffering (though it seems this was not clearly understood at the time). But we are told that the Old Testament prophets expected Messiah’s coming and sought to understand more of His ministry:

<sup>10</sup> As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that *would come* to you made careful searches and inquiries, <sup>11</sup> seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. <sup>12</sup> It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look (1 Peter 1:10-12).

During the time of Christ's earthly ministry, the Law was still in effect, and the disciples were obligated to obey the Law. Prior to this time, there was a general expectation of Messiah's coming but not a certain knowledge of when He would come or who exactly He would be. To the disciples of Jesus, however, it was revealed to them that He, Jesus, was the Messiah, and salvation was to be on the basis of faith in Him. Nevertheless, as pointed out earlier, they lacked the understanding of His death and resurrection. Yet Jesus made it clear that the "salvation by grace through faith" that had been clearly illustrated with Abraham was now to be specifically through faith in Him. John 3:36, for example, testifies to this: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them" (NIV2011; cf. Jn 3:16; 6:40; 11:25).

### **Concluding Remarks about Salvation in the Old Testament**

The basis or ground of salvation in every age is the shed blood of Christ. Even though this might not have always been clear to mankind, from God's perspective it was. The nature of salvation is *grace*, in which man gains a most precious gift he does not deserve. The requirement of salvation is always faith. One's own merit (human righteousness) and good works are insufficient to save. Scripture teaches that "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy" (Titus 3:5). Simply put, salvation cannot be merited; it can only be received as a gift from God. The "content" of faith changes as time progresses, although there was sufficient revelation from the beginning of what one needed to do to be saved. Salvation would have to be secured by sacrifice (ultimately by Messiah Himself), and as a result of one's faith in what God had revealed, "righteousness" would be credited to that person's account—meaning they would stand "justified" before God. The content of faith was also cumulative, amplified, and supplemented from one age to another. In doing so, the picture became more clear, pointing to the coming Messiah, and eventually fully revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth through His death and resurrection.