

HOW ARE WE SAVED?**GEOS*****Old Testament Perspectives***

THEME

5

PART

1**NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR**

The word “salvation” is used so often in the church that it is easy for it to become simply a “buzz-word.” We use the term so frequently that we lose sight of its meanings. In this theme we will explore the variety of terms and images for salvation used in the Old and New Testaments as well as the ways by which Christian theologians have sought to understand salvation in relation to other dimensions of Christian doctrine. What we will find is that the biblical materials are deep and rich. What we will begin to realize is that we lose this depth and richness when we view salvation only from one angle or as having only one dimension. The broader biblical and theological expressions enhance both our understanding and our faith.

The God of Salvation

One striking element in all the Old Testament portrayals of salvation is that it is God who makes salvation possible. God is the one who offers divine help to enable salvation to happen. God is the deliverer, the liberator, the redeemer, the peacemaker, the one who forgives sin and, in short, provides the fullness of life which is salvation. The history of Israel shows that the nation itself was not capable of providing its own resources to deal with the results of its corporate unfaithfulness and transgressions—its sins. Nor were individuals within the nation able to provide the means for their own sins to be forgiven or their lives to be made whole once their relationship with God was broken. If salvation were to occur, it must be God who initiates the way. No “self-help” schemes could substitute for the work of the God who seeks to restore relationships. When salvation as deliverance, liberation, redemption, peace or forgiveness occurs, it is God to whom all praise is due. Throughout the Book of Psalms, for example, God is praised not only for being the creator, but also for providing the help that is needed—both physical and spiritual—for the people to receive the benefits of salvation.

The Nature of Salvation

What common dimensions do we find in Old Testament pictures of salvation? Our session highlights salvation and deliverance, freedom from slavery, liberation through ransom, salvation as peace, and forgiveness of sin. One very basic theme throughout is that the nature of salvation in the Old Testament is the restoration of relationships. It is God who acts to restore that which sin has broken or destroyed. God “comes to the rescue” in delivering people time and time again so they may be restored to safety. God frees the nation of Israel from slavery in Egypt and liberates individuals from their fears and troubles so that they may freely live and love God. God redeems the people and restores them by providing the means by which their relationships may be recovered. God seeks peace as well-being and completeness so that the blessings of the divine-human relationship may be enjoyed, as well as the relationship between creator and creation. God forgives sin, graciously, out of the depth of divine love so that covenant bonds might be honored and a forgiven people might serve their Lord faithfully. In all these ways, the goal is the unity, harmony, and loving relationship which God intended to have with humanity but which was ruptured by the presence of sin in the world and in human lives. In “salvation,” God seeks to mend the creation and to reestablish the divine image in humanity. God seeks to bring back the nation and the unfaithful ones into the covenant context. Against all that would disrupt and break relationships, God seeks restoration. The whole Old Testament story shows a gracious and loving God who acts within history to restore relationships.

The Fullness of Salvation

To gain further appreciation for the breadth and depth of the Old Testament portrayals of salvation, it is important to underscore the fact that God’s purposes for salvation embrace every aspect of human life. As our session indicates, Old Testament salvation includes both “secular” and “religious” dimensions, with the Old Testament making no distinction between the two. The vitality of faith to which God called Old Testament Israel was a faith which embraced life in its totality. The “good life” in Israel was a life lived in accordance with the will of God. God’s will encompassed every element of existence—political, economic, religious, familial. In all these, God was working to bring harmonious relationships, freedom from oppression, righteousness and justice, as well as a sense of communal well-being and love. God sought salvation for outward (physical) dimensions, as well as inward (spiritual) dimensions.

The ultimate vision of this fullness is captured by pictures of the coming reign of God. Then harmonious relationships will exist within nature (Isaiah 11:6-9) and among peoples (Isaiah 58:6-9). Life will be lived in all its fullness because the disruptive power of sin will be broken and the human community will share an earth *which will be full of the knowledge*

of the LORD as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9). So today, a full biblical understanding of salvation will embrace concerns for all dimensions of human life. A “disembodied” salvation runs counter to biblical directions. Instead, salvation is “fullness of life” lived in the praise of God!

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Become acquainted with each other and with the subject and process of the study.
2. Name and describe at least two Old Testament images of salvation.
3. Summarize God’s role in salvation in the Old Testament.
4. Compare the way “secular” and “sacred” were understood in ancient Israel with how they are viewed today and discuss the relationship of that understanding to salvation as “fullness of life.”

Resources You May Need

Newsprint and markers or chalkboard and chalk

Worksheets for Activity #1 in Exploring the Scripture

Index cards with Scripture passages for Activity #3 in Exploring the Scripture

Copies of Psalms 32:1-11 for Closing

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

1. Begin the session with a prayer inviting God’s presence and direction as you and the group begin this study.
2. On a chalkboard or a sheet of newsprint write the word “save.” Invite participants to give their names and a definition or synonym for “save.” (Make your own list beforehand, but use it only if the process falters.) As persons respond, record their contributions. When everyone has been introduced, ask for any additions to the list.

3. This session will be most effective if members of the group received their books in time to prepare for their study together. However, if they are not familiar with the *Resource Book*, guide them through its structure, pointing out:
 - the two themes, each with three chapters or parts
 - the section in the forward entitled “Preparing for the Group Sessions”
 - the Summary of the content, Basic Bible references, and Word List for each session
4. Introduce the study with a brief review of “The Plan of This Study” in the opening section of the Foreword of the *Resource Book* and the first paragraph in Notes from the Author for this session. Add: As we explore the theme of salvation in this session, take note of the words on the list we just made (in Activity #2) which also appear in the biblical material.
5. Encourage participants to raise any questions they have from their review of the *Resource Book*. Record these where they can be seen by the group and save them for future reference. Note for yourself as you write down the questions where in your session plans specific questions fit and attempt to incorporate them.

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. The word salvation, Dr. McKim writes, describes the way in which humans are brought into right relationship with God and with others, a relationship broken through sin. For Old Testament Israel salvation had a variety of meanings which grew out of their individual experiences and their life as a community.

Divide the group into five work groups and assign each of these groups one of the following sections of the *Resource Book*: Salvation and Deliverance, Freedom from Slavery, Liberation through Ransom, Salvation as Peace, and Forgiveness of Sin. (It may be helpful to have participants continue in the same work groups for the three sessions of this theme. This will provide continuity and encourage a safe atmosphere for discussion.)

Give each group several copies of a worksheet with the following directions:

- a. Review your section in the *Resource Book* and the Scripture references in that section.

- b. Choose one of the references in bold type and look at its context, reading verses before and after the particular reference.
- What was the situation in which salvation was needed?
 - What was the form in which salvation came?
 - What situations today might parallel that of the persons in this passage?
- c. Write a paraphrase of your chosen Scripture as if it were written to persons in one of the contemporary situations you identified.
- d. Choose a member of the work group to share a brief summary of your discussion and the paraphrase you have written.

Call the whole group together and introduce the reporting time by asking the participants to listen for the particular meanings each term or phrase holds. When all the groups have reported, ask: Why do you think there were so many different understandings of salvation in Old Testament Israel?

or

As a whole group, explore the Old Testament understanding of each of the following terms related to salvation: deliverance, freedom from slavery, ransom, peace, forgiveness of sin, using the following process.

- a. On newsprint or the chalkboard begin a chart with these headings:

BIBLICAL TERM

BIBLICAL SITUATION

CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

- b. Using the references in bold type in each section of the *Resource Book*, lead the group in exploring the circumstances in which salvation was experienced and the way in which salvation came. Record these on the chart. (Save the chart for use in Session 2.)
- c. Invite participants to suggest contemporary situations similar to those in the scriptures studied. Ask: In what form might salvation come?

- d. Give opportunity for each person to choose one of the contemporary situations and write a one-sentence prayer of intercession for the salvation needed or of thanksgiving for salvation received. Ask them to save the prayers to be used at the close of the session.
 - e. Call attention to the way in which salvation was related to specific situations in the lives of individuals and in the life of the community.
2. In the *Resource Book* on page 4 Dr. McKim writes, “A major way relationships with God are set right is through forgiveness of sins.” We need to look at this image more closely. Of the Old Testament meanings of salvation we are studying, this is probably the one used most frequently in churches today. The author identifies two main elements of forgiveness of sin as “expiation” and “forgiveness.”

Refer the participants to the *Resource Book* and ask half of them to read the section on “expiation” and the other half the section on “forgiveness.” They are to look for key words and phrases that describe and explain the concepts. After ten or fifteen minutes, call for responses, and list them on newsprint or the chalkboard under the appropriate headings. Encourage the group to refer to the list as they discuss the following questions.

- What was necessary on the part of each, God and humans, for relationships to be set right?
 - In ancient times sacrifices were seen as a way to win favor with the gods. What reflections of this do we see today?
 - What is the place of expiation in our lives as Christians? In our life as a congregation?
 - How do these understandings of expiation and forgiveness relate to the prayer of confession and the assurance of pardon that are included in many services of worship?
 - How can the experience of forgiveness—both forgiveness by God and forgiveness by others—be an experience of salvation today?
3. In the Bible and the *Resource Book* emphasis is placed on God’s role in salvation, “God’s redemptive activities.” Copy the following passages on index cards and assign one to each participant (or in a large group to pairs of participants).

Exodus 18:9-11

Numbers 6:24-26

Psalms 7:1-2

Psalms 86:5

Isaiah 1:18-19

Isaiah 43:1-3

Psalms 34:17

Leviticus 26:6

Deuteronomy 7:8-9

Psalms 85:10

Psalms 103:11-12

Isaiah 32:16-18

Hosea 6:1

Jeremiah 50:33-34

Ask them to scan the assigned passages to identify specific activities of God (for example, *I will save you from all uncleanness*, Ezekiel 36:29).

Allow only a few minutes for individual searching, before asking for responses. As persons report, write their contributions on newsprint or a chalkboard on which at the top you have written, "God ..." When all have reported, ask: In the light of what the Scripture passages say about God and God's activities, how would you summarize God's role and the role of humans in the act of salvation?

4. Lead the group in discussing the following questions.

- How would you define the terms "sacred" and "secular" as they are used today?
- The author of the *Resource Book* says that in ancient Israel there was no such distinction. Why do you think that was so? What effect did that have on their views of salvation?
- How has dividing life into the sacred and the secular affected the ministry of the Christian church?
- What changes might be made in the life of your congregation if there were no distinction between sacred and secular?
- Dr. McKim concludes that the Old Testament perspectives of salvation may be summarized as "fullness of life." What from our study supports or challenges that conclusion?

CLOSING

- 1.** Ask the participants to listen for and write down words and ideas that for them link the Old Testament ideas of salvation with the New Testament, as you read selected

passages. Choose from Isaiah 53:4-6, Romans 5:8, Romans 3:24, and Ephesians 2:8, pausing briefly between passages. Suggest that they review what they have written after they have read Part 2 in the *Resource Book* in preparation for the next session.

2. If you chose the alternative activity in #1, Exploring the Scripture, invite participants to read their prayers to conclude the session.

or

Invite participants to reflect silently on how this study of the Old Testament perspectives on salvation is deepening their own understanding and faith. Then read together Psalm 32.

Supplementary Reading

Theological Turning Points, by Donald McKim (Atlanta:Westminster/John Knox Press, 1988), Introduction and Chapter 5, "Soteriological Controversy: How Are We Saved?" See especially pages 74-78.

Articles on salvation, deliverance, redemption (ransom), peace, expiation and forgiveness in a Bible dictionary or a theological word book.

Looking Ahead

1. If you choose to use the first suggestion in Activity #4 in Setting the Stage in the next session, give to each participant one of the following words to research and to write a definition: grace, faith, adoption, redemption, forgiveness, reconciliation, justification.
2. For Activity #1 in Exploring the Scripture, ask two persons to prepare from biblical commentaries brief reports about the role of grace and faith in salvation, using Romans 5:1-11 and Galatians 3:10-14. Or, you may choose to prepare and present the information as a mini-lecture.
3. Invite two participants to prepare to read 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 and Ephesians 2:11-22, for Activity #4 in Exploring the Scripture.
4. Ask for one or two volunteers who will search the church hymnal for selections which refer to salvation, as suggested in "Research" on page 14 in the *Resource Book*.