One Salvation, Three Tenses – The Short Version

Paper 1 in a 12 Part Series

by Escape the Mustard Tree

A plain-language companion to Paper 1. Everything here is worked out at length there, with the Greek, the objections, and the sources.

The question almost nobody asks

"Are you saved?"

Most of us have heard that question. Almost nobody asks the two that go with it: **saved from what?** And **saved when?**

Scripture answers both, and they aren't the same every time. Sometimes salvation is spoken of as something already finished. Sometimes as something happening right now. Sometimes as something still ahead.

> "For by grace you have been saved through faith." (Eph. 2:8) — **finished.**"The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Cor. 1:18) — **in progress.**"Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him." (Rom. 5:9) — **still ahead.**

Past, present, future. Same author. Same word.

Most teaching treats those three as one thing described from three angles. This paper says they are one salvation, but three real parts of it — because man himself is three parts, and each part had to be dealt with.

Man is three parts

> "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole **spirit, soul, and body** be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thess. 5:23)

Genesis shows the same thing. The animals are called living souls, just as man is. What makes man different is not the label but what God did: He "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life," and only then did the man become a living being (Gen. 2:7). Something was given to man that the animals never received.

You can see the three parts most clearly at the cross. When Jesus died, three things happened, and they happened separately:

- His **spirit** went to the Father — "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit" (Luke 23:46).
- His **soul** went to Hades — "You will not leave my soul in Hades" (Acts 2:27).
- His **body** went into the tomb (Luke 23:53).

Three parts, three destinations, one man.

What death actually did

In the beginning, God told Adam what disobedience would cost him:

> "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Gen. 2:17)

In the day. Not eventually — that day.

And yet when Adam ate, he didn't fall over. He went on living for centuries; Genesis says he lived nine hundred and thirty years (Gen. 5:5). So either the warning failed, or dying means something other than a heart stopping.

Death in Scripture is **separation**, not the end of existence. And the separation touched all three parts of him, in three different ways:

- **Spirit** — cut off from God immediately. That is why Adam hid (Gen. 3:8).
- **Soul** — corrupted, turned inward, pulled by desires that now ran against God (Gen. 6:5).
- **Body** — began to decay, and now falls short of the glory required to stand in God's presence (Rom. 3:23).

One sin. Three separations.

And here is the whole point: **if death hit three parts, salvation has to reach three parts.** That is not a clever framework laid over the Bible. It is what the damage requires.

Two judgments, not one

The word *justify* means to have a judgment rendered in your favor. A verdict. And because death reached more than one part of you, more than one verdict falls due: one for the spirit, and one for the soul, which carries the body with it.

They are not rendered at the same time.

The spirit — already settled

The moment a man believes, God renders a verdict on his spirit. He is made alive (Eph. 2:5), sealed, and joined to God. That verdict is finished, and nothing can reopen it.

> "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." (Rom. 11:29)

That rests on God's own character, not on the man's performance: "I am the LORD, I do not change" (Mal. 3:6). Paul says it another way, and shuts works out by name — God "has saved us and called us with a holy calling, **not according to our works**" (2 Tim. 1:9).

This part is not at risk. Ever. Everything else in this paper stands on top of that, and nothing in it takes it back.

We call this **initial justification** — where justification begins, not the whole of it.

The soul — being worked out now

This is where the Christian life actually happens.

> "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." (Phil. 2:12)

You can't work out something you don't have. Paul is writing to Christians about something in progress. James says the same: "receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to **save your souls**" (Jas. 1:21) — written to people who already have the word implanted.

Peter says where it lands:

> "...receiving the **end of your faith — the salvation of your souls**." (1 Pet. 1:9)

The end. The goal a thing is moving toward, at the far side of the walk rather than at the door. Peter has just spoken of a faith tested by fire and "found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:7). Tested along the way, received at the end.

The soul is where the fight is. It is what Jesus was talking about here:

> "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Matt. 16:25-26)

The word behind both "life" and "soul" is the same word. The man who spends his life protecting his own comfort keeps it — and keeps it exactly as he saved it. The man who pours it out for Jesus loses it now and finds it then.

So what does a Christian do about the sin he still commits? The penalty was settled at the cross, and that is not reopened. But sin along the walk has to be dealt with as it comes, and John tells Christians how: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). The word behind "confess" means to say the same thing — to agree. It's agreeing with God about what He already says is true, not talking Him into something. And notice who John is writing to. He says "we" and "us" all the way through.

That's also why Jesus serves right now as a High Priest, one who was "in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin," and why Christians are told to come boldly to the throne of grace, "that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:15-16). The spirit's verdict needs no priest. The walk does.

There is a picture of this on the first page of the Bible. On day one God said, "Let there be light," and light shone into the darkness — but the darkness wasn't abolished. It was named Night, and it is still there every evening (Gen. 1:3-5). Paul uses that exact image for the moment of initial salvation: God "commanded light to shine out of darkness" and has "shone in our hearts" (2 Cor. 4:6). Light arrives. The dark doesn't vanish that day. The work of the days that follow is what the rest of a Christian's life is for, and the seventh day's rest is what is still ahead.

The body — still ahead

This is the part most often misunderstood, so it has to be said in two steps.

Everyone is raised. Every Christian is resurrected into a body, and it's in that body that he stands before Jesus to be judged (2 Cor. 5:10). That proceeding has a name: the Judgment Seat of Christ. Picture the raised platform at the games, where the judge sat and the winners came up to receive

their prizes — that is the word Paul reaches for. Every Christian appears there, and what's weighed is the life he lived. Whether he belongs to God was settled long before he arrived. Resurrection is not the reward. It's what puts a man on his feet to be judged.

Not everyone is raised out. Paul uses a word here he uses nowhere else in the New Testament — a raising *out* from among the raised:

> "if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead." (Phil. 3:11)

Notice how Paul talks about it. "If, by any means, I may attain" is not how a man describes something he already holds. He says so himself in the next breath: "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on" (Phil. 3:12).

Paul — decades in, apostle, writer of half the New Testament — is still pressing toward something.

What is given to those raised out is a **covering of glory**. Paul states the difference before he states the raising:

> "There is one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory. **So also is the resurrection of the dead.**" (1 Cor. 15:41-42)

One star differs from another star in glory — *so also* is the resurrection. The differing comes first.

That is why Scripture always speaks of glory as something **hoped for**, not held:

- "Christ in you, the **hope** of glory." (Col. 1:27)
- "We were saved in this hope... we eagerly wait for it **with perseverance**." (Rom. 8:24-25)
- "Walk **worthy** of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory." (1 Thess. 2:12)

Hoped for. Waited for. Walked worthy of. Nobody talks that way about something already in his pocket.

And the glory is not decoration. It's what a man must be covered with in order to stand in the presence of the One whose glory it is, and to reign alongside Him — because there is a reign coming, part of it in the heavens and part of it on the earth, and Scripture puts a number on how long it lasts: six times in six verses, John says a thousand years (Rev. 20:2-7).

A thousand years. An age with a beginning and an end. That is the span everything conditional in this paper is measured against.

The pattern Israel already walked

God has already walked a whole nation through these same three tenses, and the New Testament points at it on purpose.

Every household in Egypt that contained a firstborn son was under a death sentence, including Israel, God's firstborn son (Ex. 4:22). But Israel was given the means of protection: on the night of judgment a lamb was killed and its blood was put on the doorposts, and the judgment passed over that house. Nothing else the family did that night made them any safer than the blood did, and the matter was never revisited afterward (Exod. 12:12-13).

Then came forty years in the wilderness. Same people, same redemption, and a long walk in which most of them failed. They came to the edge of the land, refused to go in, and died outside it (Num. 14:22-23).

Then Canaan — the inheritance itself. Out of that whole generation, two men went in.

Paul runs this comparison himself and applies it to Christians. Our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea, he says, "but with most of them God was not well pleased." Then he says why he brought it up: "Now these things became our examples," and they "were written for our admonition" (1 Cor. 10:1-11). Hebrews does the same and warns its readers not to repeat it (Heb. 3:16-4:2). Redeemed out of Egypt, and still able to miss Canaan, their inheritance. That's the three tenses told as a story.

Paul lays this out himself, twice

None of the above is assembled out of scattered verses. Paul sets the whole thing down in order, in two different letters to two different churches, and the order is the same both times.

Galatians. It starts with the walk: "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16). It lists what the flesh produces. It ends on what that costs: those who practice such things "will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:21). The walk comes first in that letter, and the inheritance hangs off it.

Romans 8. Same order. The walk first: those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the flesh, those who live according to the Spirit on the Spirit (Rom. 8:5). Then the stakes, said to brethren — "if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Rom. 8:13). Then sonship — "as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Rom. 8:14). Then the inheritance, and Paul attaches a condition to it in the same breath — Christians are "joint heirs with Christ, **if indeed** we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together" (Rom. 8:17).

Two letters, two churches. Same sequence, same condition, same thing to lose. The inheritance sits at the end of the walk, and Paul is the one who put it there.

Child, son, and something later

The New Testament uses two different words that both come into English as "children of God," and there are actually three conditions in view, not two. Flattening the three into one is where confusion starts, and why verses a few lines apart can look like they contradict each other.

A child. Every Christian without exception is a child of God from the moment he's made alive. That is not graded, not earned, and never lost (Eph. 2:5; Rom. 8:16).

A son, now. This word is used more narrowly:

> "For as many as are **led by the Spirit of God**, these are sons of God." (Rom. 8:14)"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall **be called** sons of God." (Matt. 5:9)"God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?" (Heb. 12:7)

Being led. Making peace. Taking correction. These describe what a man is doing, not a status handed to everyone at the door. And Paul names what makes the difference in the very next verse after the first one: "you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father'" (Rom. 8:15). That is a Christian's inner man being reordered so he thinks and behaves as a son *now*. It is a choice, made and remade.

Placed as a firstborn son, later. Paul speaks of Christians "eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body" (Rom. 8:23). Waiting for it — so it isn't something already in hand. The word behind "adoption" means *son-placing*: being placed into the position and given the title a firstborn son holds in a household.

Why that, rather than some other reward? Because rule is what man was made for, and he has never exercised it. God's first recorded words about man are about dominion — "let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth" (Gen. 1:26). That is what man is for. It hasn't happened yet, and the writer of Hebrews says so outright: all things were put in subjection under man's feet, "But now we do not yet see all things put under him" (Heb. 2:8).

Rule runs through sons, and firstborn sons in particular. Children do not rule. Living as a son now is what qualifies a man for the placement later. It is not the placement itself.

So here is the whole thing in a sentence:

> **Adoption, son-placement, the covering of glory, and the redemption of the body are one event under four names**, given at the Judgment Seat of Christ to those whose souls are saved there.

They are not four separate prizes. They come together, or they do not come.

Why should the body's glory follow the soul's verdict? Because Scripture ties the two together in the way a man is made. "For the life of the flesh is in the blood... for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul" (Lev. 17:11) — and a single Hebrew word stands behind "life" there and behind "soul," occurring three times in that one verse. Moses says it again a few chapters later: "the blood is the life" (Deut. 12:23). The soul is connected to the blood, and the blood is in the body, so the two don't get separate verdicts. One verdict falls, and it has two effects.

What happens to the Christian who does not receive them?

He is not lost. His spirit was settled at initial justification and cannot be unsettled.

But he is not raised out. He receives no covering of glory. And without that glory there is no standing with Jesus and no reigning with Him in His kingdom.

Scripture describes what follows for such a man in language this paper does not try to define — the darkness outside, weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 22:13; 25:30). Those terms are taken up

one at a time in the companion paper on the vocabulary of the afterlife, and this paper leaves them there rather than settling them in passing.

The parable of the talents ends with two servants hearing their master say, "Well done, good and faithful servant... Enter into the joy of your lord," and with a third man standing in the room while it's said to them (Matt. 25:21, 23, 24-30). That describes the loss. He hears the words he was made to hear, spoken to someone else.

And one more thing has to be said, because it's the thing most easily missed. **What is at stake is scoped to the age it concerns.** The reign has a beginning and an end – 1000 years, and the inheritance is measured against it. What lies past that age Scripture says comparatively little about, and this paper claims no more than the text gives. What is lost is real, and it is enormous. What was never on the table is the man's standing before God.

"Eternal life" is not what most people think

Here is the piece that unlocks the rest.

The Greek word behind "eternal" is *aionios*. It comes from *aion*, which means an **age** — a bounded period of time. *Aionios* means *pertaining to an age*.

So "eternal life" reads, more literally, as **age-lasting life** — the life of the coming age, the thousand years when Jesus reigns and His own reign with Him.

Once you see that, a lot of verses stop being confusing:

> "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and **inherit eternal life**." (Matt. 19:29)

Inherit. For leaving things. That is reward language, and it always was.

> "He who sows to the flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit **reap** everlasting life." (Gal. 6:8)

Reaped, from sowing. Nobody reaps a gift.

Watch a whole conversation run on those terms. A rich young man comes to Jesus and asks, "What good thing shall I **do** that I may have [inherit, see Matt. 19:29] eternal life?" (Matt. 19:16). Notice his question — he assumes there is something he must *do* in order to *inherit*, and Jesus never corrects that assumption. Mark adds that Jesus, looking at him, loved him (Mark 10:21). When the man walks away sorrowful because he does not want to do what is asked of him, Peter asks the follow-up that gives the game away: "we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?" (Matt. 19:27). Jesus answers with a description of thrones and ruling (Matt. 19:28), and then with *inheriting eternal life* for those who left everything behind and followed him (Matt. 19:29). A question about doing, an answer about reward. Nobody in that scene is discussing how a man gets into God's family.

But doesn't that make God age-bounded? Romans 16:26 calls Him "the eternal God." Fair question, and English answers it for us every day.

A *musical evening* is an evening full of music. A *musical director* is not a director who is musical — he is the director set **over** the music. A *criminal act* is an act that is criminal; a *criminal lawyer* is not a criminal. Same adjective, one meaning, and what decides the relationship is the noun it lands on.

So it is here. Eternal life is life belonging to an age. The eternal God is the God **over** the ages — the God of the ages, who made them. And in the very same sentence, Paul uses the same word for the long silent centuries before the mystery was revealed (Rom. 16:25).

None of that makes God a creature of time. He made the very clocks we tell time by — the lights were set in the heavens "for signs and seasons, and for days and years" (Gen. 1:14). The One who hung the clock is not governed by it.

What this is not

This is not losing your salvation. Nothing here puts a man's standing before God at risk. What is at risk is what he does with a life inside a family he already belongs to.

This is not works-salvation. Paul says both of these things, and never once acts as if they conflict:

> "For by grace you have been saved through faith... not of works, lest anyone should boast." (Eph. 2:8-9)"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." (2 Cor. 5:10)

And in Galatians — the letter people reach for to shut this down — Paul forbids adding circumcision, then forty verses later commands strenuous effort: walk in the Spirit, put off the works of the flesh, and know that those who practice them "will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:16-21). He even calls it "faith **working** through love" (Gal. 5:6).

Galatians is not choosing between working and not working. It's choosing between the **Spirit** and the **flesh** — and law-keeping is flesh, whichever end of the Christian life you attach it to.

Why any of it matters

If salvation is one thing that happens once, then how a Christian lives is a matter of gratitude and little else. Nothing is really at stake.

If salvation is one work of God touching three parts of a man across three tenses, then how he lives is a matter of real consequence — not for whether he belongs to God, which was settled the day he believed, but for what he will be given to do, and how close he will stand, when the King comes to reign.

> "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work." (Rev. 22:12)

You are secure. You are not finished.

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.