Mid-America Conference on Preaching

Salvation in the Old Testament

Robert V. McCabe, Th.D.
Professor of Old Testament
Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary

This year’s Mid-America Conference on Preaching is entitled “The Mystery of Christ: God’s Glory among the Gentiles.” The emphasis is the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. In keeping with this overall theme, my workshop focuses on “Salvation in the Old Testament.” More precisely stated, my topic focuses on “A Dispensational Understanding of Salvation in the Old Testament.”

Having stated this subject more precisely, a few might think that I am advocating two ways of salvation: one in the OT and another in the NT. In fact, this has been a common charge made against dispensational thinkers. Daniel Fuller made this charge in the middle of the twentieth century: “Hence Dispensationalism, as expounded by one of its foremost systematizers [Scofield], teaches two ways of salvation: that during the era of law, obedience to it was a condition of salvation, where as during the age of grace, salvation comes simply through faith in Christ.”

However, with the publication of dispensational resources responding to the claim that it teaches two ways of salvation, especially Ryrie in 1965, this allegation has largely dissipated. For example, Fuller changed his earlier position and acknowledged this point when he concluded “that there is no longer any substantive difference between the two [dispensationalism and covenant theology] on the subject of the law and the gospel.” This has also been acknowledged by other Reformed sources.

Unfortunately, a few Reformed scholars still maintain that dispensationalism teaches two methods

---


I was disappointed to hear Sinclair Ferguson and R. C. Sproul make this same assertion. Because this indictment still surfaces, my workshop will revisit this subject. Dispensationalism affirms that there is one method of salvation in both testaments. The thesis of this paper is that salvation in the Old Testament is essentially the same as in the NT. Four arguments support this thesis.

**THE ELECTION OF SINNERS IN BOTH TESTAMENTS**

God’s election of individuals in both testaments for eternal salvation is a necessity because of humanity’s total depravity. According to this doctrine, every person since the Fall who is conceived through the normal procreation process is so pervasively polluted with his internal corruption “that every aspect of his being and personality is affected by it.” Humanity’s incurable condition began with Adam and Eve in the pristine glory of the Garden of Eden. When Adam ate from the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve lost their original state of unconfirmed creature holiness and were eternally condemned and internally changed into a state of total depravity. In keeping with the Pauline analogy in Romans 5:12–21, comparing the representative roles of Adam and Christ (1 Cor 15:21–22), God imputed to those whom Adam represented, the human race, both Adam’s guilt and his corruption. What this means is that Adam’s posterity is totally depraved, including their inability to please God (Rom 8:7–8). Because people are unable to do anything to save themselves, the only hope for anyone to be saved is divine election.

Romans 9:6–13 and Ephesians 1:3–6 develop the doctrine of divine election. In order to see the overall context of this passage in Romans, it is best to see the flow of thought in vv. 1–13:

1 I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—
2 that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. 4 They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. 5 To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, 7 and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” 8 This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. 9 For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will

---


8 For a list of verses dealing with total depravity, see “Total Depravity Verse List,” at [http://www.traviscarden.com/total-depravity-verse-list](http://www.traviscarden.com/total-depravity-verse-list) (accessed 2 October 2012).


return, and Sarah shall have a son.”  

And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

Verses 6–13 provide an answer to the issue Paul raises in vv. 1–5: If Israel is God’s covenant people, why are so few saved? Verse 6a negatively responds that God’s word has not failed and v. 11c positively states that God’s purpose of election might stand. The basis upon which vv. 6a and 11c rest is found in v. 6b: not all Israel is true Israel. As Storms maintains, “There is an Israel within Israel. There is a spiritually elect remnant within the physical nation. Paul’s point is that rampant unbelief among the latter does not jeopardize the redemptive purpose of God, for that promise applied only to the former, the elect remnant with the nation as a whole.”

The point is that not everyone in the covenant nation was personally chosen to obtain eternal life.

In establishing his point about God’s sovereign choice in election, Paul uses two examples: Abraham’s family and Isaac’s. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was a son of the flesh but Isaac the one of promise. Isaac had two sons, Esau and Jacob. Again, Esau was a son of the flesh and Jacob the son of promise. God unconditionally chose both Isaac and Jacob as his spiritual seed. My point is to establish that God elected sinners in the OT economy as spiritual recipients of his electing purposes.

The second text to examine about God’s election in the NT is Ephesians 1:3–6.

3Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

The believers described in Ephesians are described as being chosen “in him,” v. 4. The antecedent of “him” is “Christ” in v. 2. “This means that God chose ‘us’ in connection with Christ.” Further, the timing of this election was “before the foundation of the world.”

The profound doctrine of election is one of the motifs that Paul uses in Ephesians 1:3–11 to describe God’s saving work. According to vv. 5 & 11 chosen believers are “predestined” for this purpose. Election is further presented as being in accord with God’s saving purposes who works all things according to his own wise counsel, vv. 5, 9, 11.

In short, totally depraved sinners in both testaments had no hope of salvation unless God had ordained to regenerate them “before the foundation of the world.” It is impossible to be saved by keeping the law because totally depraved people are unable to do so. My point is using Ephesians 1:3–6 is that God elected sinners in the NT era as spiritual recipients of his electing purposes. Therefore, divine election is the determining cause for the eternal salvation of individuals in both

---

11 All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the 2001 ESV.
15 See ibid., 177.
THE BASIS OF SALVATION IN BOTH TESTAMENTS

The basis of salvation in all ages is the vicarious atonement of Christ. In order to save people, God works in an objective way through the death of his Son. “Because of this act,” Feinberg writes, “God can extend salvation to men at all times.”

In the OT economy God prepared the theocratic community for the death of Christ through the sacrificial system. The primary function of sacrifices was to make atonement within the temporal context of the covenant community. For example, Leviticus 1:4 describes the ritual for making a burnt offering: “He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him.” When the priest laid his hand on the head of the animal, this symbolized the transference of guilt of the one offering the sacrifice to the animal with its life serving as a substitute for him. Leviticus 17:11 is another text that refers to substitution: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.” Because the blood from the life of an animal was shed, that blood could make atonement for sin. “It is thus,” says Wenham, “the animal’s life united to its blood that makes atonement for human lives.” In that the life of the animal takes the place of a person’s life, this was an act of substitution.

The sacrificial system had one major problem, however: it could not bring redemptive forgiveness of sin. The OT believer had to bring repeated sacrifices because it was “impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb 10:4). Animal sacrifices could not provide the basis for eternal salvation in any dispensation, as Hebrew 9:25–28 states:

Nor was it to offer himself [Christ] repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Consequently, only Christ’s vicarious atonement could bring a full salvation. Further, “there is no indication,” according to Feinberg, “whatsoever in Scripture that the blood of a human being would atone for sin. Therefore, since God demands the shedding of blood for removing sin, and since no human or animal blood will suffice to atone for sin fully, the ultimate ground, or basis, upon which God can offer salvation at any time in history has to be the sacrifice of Christ.”

---

19Feinberg, 54.
However, this does not mean that the OT saint understood that Christ’s vicarious atonement was the basis of salvation. Though this was not a historical fact for OT believers, God had decreed his death before the foundation of the world (1 Pet 1:18–21, Rev 13:8). Not only did God ordain Christ’s death, he also sees all history at the same time. As a result, he can grant eternal salvation to his people at any time. Therefore, the ground of salvation in every age is the vicarious atonement of Christ.

THE INSTRUMENT FOR SALVATION IN BOTH TESTAMENTS

Scripture also affirms that faith is the instrument for salvation in both testaments. As the author of Hebrews states, “Without faith it is impossible to please him [God]” (11:6). Faith is not a meritorious work that a person can conjure up. Rather it is the result of God’s monogeristic work of regeneration.

In the OT justification by faith is taught in a number of passages (Gen 15:6, Pss 7:1, 11:1, 107:2, Isa 7:9, Joel 2:32, Hab 2:4). To prove his point about faith, Paul uses Abraham in Romans 4:1–3 and the author of Hebrews uses him in 11:8–10. Since both authors draw upon Genesis 15:6 in each of these NT texts, we need to examine this text.

According to Genesis 15:6 Abram “believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” Five items should be noted in this verse. First, the verb translated as “believed” is wēhe’ēḥāmīn. A basic form of this verb is ‘āman, to “be firm, lasting.” A cognate noun with ‘āman is ‘ōmēnā, “doorpost.” It is used in 2 Kings 18:16: “At that time Hezekiah stripped the gold from the doors of the temple of the LORD and from the doorposts [‘ōmēnā] that Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid and gave it to the king of Assyria.” The temple was dependent on the doorposts, as Abram was dependent on the LORD. In Genesis 15:6 ‘āman has the sense of having confidence in or a firm dependence on the LORD. In short, “Abram is standing steadfast in the promises of Yahweh.” Second, the object of Abram’s faith is “the LORD.” Further, this object of faith is the same in all ages.

Third, the LORD “counted” his faith as righteousness. The Hebrew verb for “counted” is also used in a parallel text, Psalm 106:31: “And that was counted to him as righteousness.” This verse comments on Phinehas’ zeal for the Lord in Numbers 25. When Israel had committed apostasy at

20Regeneration is “the decisive impartation of the new nature to a spiritually dead man” (Mark A. Snoeberger, “The Logical Priority of Regeneration to Saving Faith in a Theological Ordo Salutis,” Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary 7 [Fall 2002]: 55; for an electronic copy, go to http://dbts.edu/journals/2002/Snoeberger.pdf). Also see Anthony A. Hoekema, Saved By Grace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 93–112.

21I am using faith as a short hand that also includes repentance. Both repentance and faith are the fruit of regeneration. As John Murray helpfully states, “Saving faith is permeated with repentance and repentance is permeated with faith” (Redemption—Accomplished and Applied (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 140. So also, Hoekema (123) and Storms (69–86).


24HALOT, 1:64.

25Currid, Genesis, 293.
Shittim along with its attendant immorality, a plague broke out in Israel. In this context an Israelite chief’s son defiantly brings a Midianite princess into the camp of Israel. Phinehas takes a spear and follows the two into a chamber. He then kills both of them with the spear. Phinehas’ act of faithful obedience is counted by the LORD as righteousness according to Psalm 106:31. The verb “counted” also has the sense of “imputed.” Thus, in Genesis 15:6 through the instrumentality of Abram’s faith God imputed to him righteousness. Fourth, “righteousness” is another key term. In this context, it refers to God’s gift of righteousness. As Currid correctly notes, “This doctrine of sola fides in Genesis 15:6 is supported and confirmed by the apostle Paul in Romans (in particular verses 23–25).” In brief, the righteousness in this text is not an earned righteousness but one that is imputed by means of faith.

Fifth, does Genesis 15:6 indicate that this was Abram’s initial act of saving faith? On the surface, this text seemingly sounds like Abram was saved at this point in his life. However, if this is the case, how do we harmonize this passage with Hebrews 11:8–10?

8By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. 10For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

The conjunction attached to the Hebrew verb w’he’ëmîn (“believed”) may provide some assistance with this issue. The conjunction, w’ (waw), attached to this verb is not a conjunction that would advance the narrative sequence from v. 5. If the author’s intention had been to advance the sequence, he would have attached the waw consecutive to “believed.” This consecutive conjunction is used three times in v. 5: “Next he brought him outside; next he said, ‘Look at the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Next he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be’” (my translation). For my illustrative purposes, I have translated each waw consecutive with “next” in order to illustrate the sequence. Each use of next shows how the sequence in v. 5 moves from one sequential verb to another. Rather than using the waw consecutive, Moses used a waw conjunctive. Thus, the author is not looking to advance the sequence in v. 6 from v. 5.

The waw attached to this verb seems to indicate that this is a transitional remark that serves as a summary about Abram’s faith. The Hebrew verb rendered as “believed” could be understood with a characteristic sense: Abram believed God and this has been the characteristic of his life

26HALOT, 1:360.
27Currid, Genesis, 293.
29The waw conjunctive is used in various ways in the Hebrew OT, with an adversative function, coordinating, parenthetical, etc. For more information, see Arnold & Choi (146–49) and Ronald J. Williams and John C. Beckman (Williams’ Hebrew Syntax. 3rd ed. [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007], 152–56.
31See Chisholm, 87–88.
since he initially believed when he left Ur (Heb 11:8). As Wenham has maintained, “faith was Abram’s normal response to the LORD’s words.” This suggests that Abram’s initial display of saving faith is not necessarily indicated in Genesis 15:6, but as early as when he left Ur of the Chaldeans by faith (Heb 11:8).

If v. 6 does not advance the sequence from v. 5, how should the placement of v. 6 in Genesis 15 be explained? In short, v. 6 is a conclusion to the dialogue between God and Abram in vv. 1–5. In vv. 7–21 God next ratifies his promissory covenant with Abram. So v. 6 concludes vv. 1–5 and also serves as a transition to the ratification of the Abrahamic Covenant in vv. 7–21. To briefly expand on vv. 1–6, God promised Abram in vv. 1–5 that he would give him a son who would have innumerable offspring. Though not intended to be part of the sequential development, Abram’s belief that God would give him a son serves as a concluding and transitional verse. Abram’s trust on this occasion reflects a characteristic of life. It is also on this occasion that Scripture first records that through the instrumentality of faith God imputes the gift of righteousness.

Consequently, since Romans 4:1–3 and Hebrews 11:8–10 use Abraham’s example of faith in Genesis 15:6, he serves as a biblical model that the instrument for salvation in all ages is faith.

**THE CONTENT OF SALVATION AND PROGRESSIVE REVELATION**

So far we have examined three arguments demonstrating that there is continuity between OT and NT revelation on the doctrine of salvation. We are ready to look at an area where there is a difference: progressive revelation. The concept of progressive revelation relates to God gradually parceling out his special revelation to man in progressive stages with it ultimately culminating in NT revelation. With each new stage of revelation, God expands on previously given revelation. J. Barton Payne defines this concept in this manner: “By progressive revelation we mean that the Bible sets forth a movement of God, with the initiative coming from God and not man, in which God brings man up through the theological infancy of the Old Testament to the maturity of the New Testament.” As this relates to salvation in the OT, two points need to be made.

First, in each stage of revelation the ultimate content is God. In saying that the ultimate content is God, I am saying that a person living in the OT believed God and this included the content of revelation that God communicated about himself at that point in revelatory history. For example, when Adam and Eve put their faith in God after the Fall, we can deduce from Genesis 3 that they accepted four necessary truths about God for personal salvation. They would have believed that

---

34 Rather than using the expression discontinuity, it is better to say there is a difference in the content of faith (Ross, “The Biblical Method of Salvation,” 172).
God was the only sovereign Lord, creator, holy judge, and made provisions for sin. They had a good understanding of who God is and what he expected of them. For Adam and Eve to have been redeemed, they believed the content of this revelation.

Second, progressive revelation is cumulative. While the revelatory content expanded through the ages, with this expansion it was always in continuity with previous revelation. Feinberg illustrates,

The persons responding in faith for salvation under the Mosaic law is also responding to the God of the promises to Abraham, the God of the Exodus, the God of the Noahic covenant. Consequently, the believer living in the time of the Mosaic law is not to ignore that a reason for believing in God is that he has given certain promises to Abraham that are also applicable to the one under law.

Further, with each era of revelation, there was a message about God and his provisions for salvation. To illustrate further by returning to Abram, the expansion of revelation for him not only included prior revelation but also the promises that God gave him in Genesis 12 that form the core of the Abrahamic Covenant. When he believed God, he put his faith in God and his promises that relate to salvation. God’s imparting progressive revelation would continue beyond Abram until the culmination of it in the NT era. What the OT pointed to, Christ fulfilled. When a person in the church age commits himself to Jesus Christ, he commits himself to what God has accomplished in Christ. Though this person may not be cognizant of the OT revelation that undergirds the message of the gospel, he is committing himself to the Christ who is the culmination of what God had already revealed in the past. Feinberg helpfully explains,

The gospel message may not even include a comment about what God had done for Israel in the past. However, since what God has done through Christ is the culmination of what He had done and said previously, the believer during the age of grace is committing himself to the God of promises, the God of the Exodus, the God of the Mosaic law, and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, even if the believer, when he responds, does not understand that, since the emphasis of the message is Christ.

Therefore, while there are differences in the various eras of revelation, there is an undergirding unity to the message about God and his provisions to save his people.

**SUMMARY**

- The thesis of this paper has been that salvation in the Old Testament is essentially the same as the New Testament. This thesis had four supporting arguments. Initially, I argued that God’s unconditional election of individuals in both testaments is a necessity because total depravity permeates every child of Adam born through procreation. In addition, the basis of salvation in all ages is the vicarious atonement of Christ. Though the OT saint did not have a complete knowledge of Christ’s death, God did. Because God decreed the vicarious death of Christ and sees all history at the same time, he is able to view the sinner in light of Christ’s atonement. The third sustaining argument was that faith is the instrument for eternal salvation in both

---

38See Feinberg, 57; also see Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 115.
40Feinberg, 58.
41Ibid., 57.
42Ibid., 58.
testaments. As Hebrews 11:6 states it is impossible to please God without faith. With these first three arguments, there is continuity between the OT and NT. The fourth argument focused on progressive revelation. This is an area where there is some disagreement between the testaments. While there is an element of continuity in that people in all ages must believe in God, the difference relates to the content that God revealed about himself. While this revelation of God progressively increased in each dispensation, the new revelation always had continuity with previous revelation. May God be pleased with us as we seek to precisely interpret his word that makes us wise unto salvation.