

## Three Theories of Individual Salvation

### *Biblical Evidence, and Discussion, Pro and Con*

*All scriptures quoted are from the NIV*

#### **Universalism:**

*Everyone will eventually be saved, regardless of whether they trust in Jesus on any level.*

**Assertion:** Jesus' sacrifice paid the price of sin for everyone in the world.

- ▶ He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 Jn 2:1)
- ▶ But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Heb 2:9)
  - ✓ Counter argument: Forgiveness and repentance are both required for reconciliation. While Jesus' sacrifice does atone for the sins of the whole world, only those who demonstrate repentance by trusting in his sacrifice can be reconciled to God.

**Assertion:** Just as Adam's original sin condemned everyone who ever lived, so Jesus sacrifice solved the problem for everyone.

- ▶ Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. (Rom 5:18)
  - ✓ Counter argument: The life mentioned here is "for" all men (God wants everyone to be saved—see below), but that is not the same as saying it is accepted by all men. Therefore, continuing the same "just as...so" logic used in this verse, it follows that just as not all will enter eternity condemned, so not all will enter eternity justified.
- ▶ For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. (1 Cor 15:22)
  - ✓ Counter argument: At the final judgment, all humanity will be "made alive" to stand before Jesus, those who believe and are saved, and those who deny Him, and are lost. (Ro 8:19-25; 1 Cor 15:20-26 and Rev 20:12-15)

**Assertion:** Everyone will acknowledge that Jesus is Lord.

- ▶ But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself. (John 12:32-33)
- ▶ 9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:9-11)
  - ✓ Counter argument: As mentioned above, just as all died physically through Adam's original sin, so all will be made physically alive through Jesus' sacrifice and will stand before Him to be judged.

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**Assertion:** God wants forgiveness for everyone.

- ▶ For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. (Rom 11:32)
  - ✓ Counter argument: “So that he may” means “to make it possible.” It does not mean God’s mercy is applied to all. The word “may” is also be translated as “might” by many scholars—see KJV & ASV.
- ▶ This is good, and pleases God our Savior, 4 who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. (1 Tim 2:3-4)
- ▶ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)
  - ✓ Counter argument: These verses state God’s preference for our choice regarding Him, not His choice regarding us.
  - ✓ Counter argument: For the sake of genuine love, God allows human freewill to exist in opposition to His own will, and for the sake of justice, God allows some to perish as the equitable punishment for the sinful exercise of their freewill.

**Assertion:** Everyone will be “reconciled” to God.

- ▶ 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col 1:19-20)
  - ✓ Counter argument: Due to Christ’s passion, everything in heaven and earth survives until the end times (see Col 1:17—the context for the verses above), rather than being destroyed and replaced immediately. That destruction and replacement of heaven and earth will come only after the final judgment. (Rev 21:1)
- ▶ ...God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. (2 Cor 5:19)
  - ✓ Counter argument: God is “not [yet] counting men’s sins against them,” but He will. (Rev 20:15) Two verses before this, Paul writes, “If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation...” (v. 17) and in the verse that follows this he writes, “We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.” The qualifying language before verse 19, and the impassioned entreaty after it, make no sense if Paul believed the entire world was literally reconciled to God forever.

**Inclusivism:**

*Only those who trust in Jesus are saved, but “trust” may not mean intellectual awareness of the Gospel. There are two branches of Inclusivism:*

**Inclusivism / Eschatological Evangelization** *(some are unable to hear, understand and trust the Gospel in this life, and will therefore get a chance to do so after death).*

**Assertion:** The Gospel will be preached to the dead.

- ▶ 25 I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. 26 For as the Father has life in himself, so he

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has granted the Son to have life in himself. 27 And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. 28 Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice 29 and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. (John 5:25-30)

- ✓ Counter argument: This is a reference to judging the dead, who will rise from their graves for that purpose. (Rev 20:13)
- ▶ 18 For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, 19 through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison 20 who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water. (1 Peter 3:18-20)
  - ✓ Counter argument: This means Jesus' Holy Spirit preached through Noah to the unbelievers of his time, who are now dead. (See Charles Ryrie's NIV commentary)
- ▶ For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit. (1 Peter 4:6)
  - ✓ "Those who are now dead" means Christians who had already died at the time this was written.

**Assertion:** Those already dead will be made alive again and given new hope.

- ▶ 11 Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' 12 Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13 Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. 14 I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.'" (Ezek 37:11-14)
  - ✓ Counter argument: This is a prophecy of Israel's short term political destiny, and should not be taken as a literal end-times prophecy. "The *bones* represent hopeless and helpless Israel. The *graves* speak of her political demise. The *Spirit* is the Holy Spirit; who will effect the regeneration of the people." (Charles Ryrie, NIV Commentary)

**Inclusivism / Uninformed Evangelism** (*only those who trust in Jesus in this life are saved, but some do not know the name of Jesus, whom they trust, or understand how he saved them*).

**Assertion:** Because God loves us and wants to be reconciled with us, everyone who seeks Him with humility, love and sincere repentance will find Him, even if they never hear or understand the Gospel of Jesus.

- ▶ I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me. (Prov 8:17)
- ▶ 9 "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. 11 "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? 12 Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? 13 If you

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- ▶ then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:9-13)
- ▶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Heb 11:6)
  - ✓ Counter argument: These verses mean if we seek, we will find Jesus Christ, because He is the only way God can be found. (John 14:6)

**Assertion:** God is Jesus, and Jesus is God, so sincerely seeking the one is sincerely seeking the other.

- ▶ For to this end we labor and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, specially of them that believe. (1 Tim 4:10) ASV
  - ✓ I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.( John 5:24)
  - ✓ Counter argument: All Scripture must be understood in context with all other Scripture. Taken in isolation, these verses seem to indicate that faith and belief in God saves us, and although that is ultimately the case (since Jesus is fully God and bearing in mind that faith is merely acquiescence to God's grace), nevertheless many verses elsewhere clearly say salvation can only be found through Jesus (see verses quoted under "Exclusivism", below) so that is the ultimate meaning here.

**Assertion:** God reveals the essential truth about Himself (the core of the Gospel) to everyone, even if they never hear the historical details of the Gospel of Jesus.

- ▶ For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. (Titus 2:11)
  - ✓ Counter argument: This can mean either that the Gospel has been revealed to all races, nationalities and classes of humanity (see the preceding context of the verse) or that no person is specifically excluded from the Gospel. (Barnes)
- ▶ 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation- 23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant. (Col 1:22-23)
- ▶ 18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities-his eternal power and divine nature-have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Rom 1:18-22)
  - ✓ Counter argument: The first scripture above specifically refers to "Christ's physical body" as the means of reconciliation with God. Therefore, the "gospel that has been proclaimed to every creature" is that specific Gospel.
  - ✓ Counter argument: The second scripture above speaks of "God's invisible qualities," not the Gospel, and thus has no bearing on the assertion made above.

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**Assertion:** The scriptures include many people who enjoyed a relationship with God although they did not make (or had not yet made) “a public profession of faith in Jesus,” or were not observing the religion of Moses, including:

- ▶ Jethro, a (pagan) Midianite priest and Moses’ father-in-law. (Ex 18:9-12)
- ▶ Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses’ parents, Moses, the Israelites who crossed the Reed Sea, the Israelites who marched around Jericho, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets, and many Jewish martyrs. (all listed among the faithful in Hebrews 11)
- ▶ For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (Matt 13:17)
- ▶ 20 Yet he [Abraham] did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, 21 being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. 22 This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.” 23 The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, 24 but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. (Rom 4:20-24)
  - ✓ Counter argument: Jesus’ death and resurrection ushered in the “new covenant” made in Jesus’ blood (Jer 31:31 and Luke 22:20) The people mentioned above all lived under the old covenant (Gen 17) and were saved by grace through faith on that basis. Now we must be saved by grace through specific faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection. (See verses under “Exclusivism” below.)
- ▶ The prodigal son, who was received solely on the basis of his confession and repentance and desire to return home. (Luke 15)
- ▶ The Ethiopian eunuch, who worshipped God and searched the Bible before he heard the Gospel. (Acts 8:26-40)
- ▶ The centurion, Cornelius, whose prayers and charity were pleasing to God before he heard the Gospel. (Acts 10)
  - ✓ Counter argument: The prodigal son is a parable, not an actual person, and describes God’s great love for sinners, without including all the details of how we may avail ourselves of His grace and mercy.
  - ✓ God sent Philip and Peter to teach the Gospel to the Ethiopian and Cornelius, therefore they were saved on that basis, not on the basis of their worship, prayers or charity.

**Assertion:** Because all time is “now” for God, and because God never changes, the means of salvation has never changed, rather, all people throughout history have always been saved on the sole basis of God’s grace, through faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection, including those who were saved before the Second Person of the Trinity entered history as a Jewish carpenter, and thus did not know the historical facts of the Gospel intellectually.

- ▶ 56 Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." 57 "You are not yet fifty years old," the Jews said to him, "and you have seen Abraham!" 58 "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:56-58)

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- ✓ Counter argument: It means Abraham “saw” Jesus’ day prophetically only (Gen 12:3; 18:18, and especially Gal 3:16) and through the experience of his near-sacrifice of Isaac he “saw” a picture of Jesus’ atoning death on the cross (Heb 11:17-19). This does not mean Abraham was saved on the basis of the new covenant in Jesus’ blood.
- ▶ 13 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. 14 People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. 15 If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Heb 11:13-16)
- ✓ Counter argument: The “things promised” are not the Gospel, but the Holy Spirit (compare Acts 1:4, 2:39, Gal 3:14).

### **Exclusivism:**

*Only those who consciously trust in the historical facts of Jesus’ atoning death and resurrection in this life will be saved.*

**Assertion:** Salvation is through faith in Jesus’ historical death and resurrection only.

- ▶ Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)
- ▶ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 3:11)
- ▶ 11 And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 John 5:11-12)
- ✓ Counter argument: These verses say we can only be saved through Jesus; they do not say we must consciously trust in the historical facts about Jesus to be saved, or preclude the possibility of being saved by Him through a “heart-trust” offered sincerely albeit in ignorance of the historical facts of his Passion.
- ✓ Counter argument: If it is true now that no one comes except through Jesus, then it was also true for the saints listed in Hebrews 11 who did not know the historical facts of His Passion, and may therefore also be true for those in our time who do not know or understand those facts.

**Assertion:** Salvation is found only by believing in the specific “name” of Jesus, not by a generic belief in God.

- ▶ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. (James 2:19)
- ✓ Counter argument: This means simple belief in the facts about God is not enough, rather, belief must include humble trust, expressed in obedient actions (see the context of this verse, and Micah 6:8). It is therefore not an argument for the idea that salvation hinges on belief in the historical facts of Jesus’ Passion.

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- ▶ That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Rom 10:9)
  - ✓ Counter argument: It says you will be saved if you confess "Jesus is Lord" with your mouth. It does not say that is the only way to express faith in Jesus.
- ▶ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (John 3:18)
- ▶ Salvation is found in no one else [but Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)
  - ✓ Counter argument: The "name" referred to here is not Jesus' literal name, "Jesus," which was neither his only name (see Mt 1:23 for example), nor in fact is it even his actual personal name (which was *Yeshua*), rather, "name" is an idiomatic expression meaning Jesus "reputation," or "divine essence," which is how the Bible uses the term "name" in many other places. (Ex 23:21; 1 Kings 5:5; Acts 9:13-14; Rev 2:3 & 13), thus these two verses mean we must trust in the Second Person of the Trinity, not the historical name of "Jesus."
  - ✓ Counter argument: Even if this is a reference to Jesus' literal "name," those who call upon the Mighty God without a knowledge or understanding of Jesus' Passion are indeed calling upon one of the names of Jesus (Isa 9:6).

**Assertion:** Rejection of Jesus means condemnation before God.

- ▶ 15 He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. 16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. (Mark 16:15-16)
- ▶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." (John 3:36)
  - ✓ Counter argument: One must first hear and truly understand the historical facts of the Passion in order to be able to disbelieve or reject those facts, therefore those who have not heard or have not understood will not be condemned or rejected for that reason. (John 9:41; 15:22)
  - ✓ Counter argument: Also, "Belief" as used in these two Scriptures cannot mean mere assent to the historical facts of the Passion since even Satan believes (James 3:18), rather "belief" here represents humble trust in the Second Person of the Trinity (however imperfectly He may be known) as expressed in obedient actions (Ge 15:6).
- ▶ No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also. (1 John 2:23)
  - ✓ Counter argument: If the Son and the Father are "one" (John 10:30), then the above statement is equally true in reverse: "Whoever denies the Father denies the Son; whoever acknowledges the Father has the Son also." Everything depends upon the definition of "acknowledge," and it is not defined here as the conscious acceptance of the historical facts of the Passion.

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**Assertion:** Salvation is given only to a select few.

- ▶ 13 Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. 14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matt 7:13-14)
- ▶ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Matt 19:24)
- ▶ 23 Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" He said to them, 24 "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to." (Luke 13:23-25)
  - ✓ Counter argument: These verses say only that few will be saved, and many will not. They do not say this is true because of a failure to know or understand the historical facts of Jesus' Passion.