Understanding Salvation

No single interaction of God with us is more important than salvation. No other act of God has as large an impact on an individual than the gift of salvation. I don't think you can truly understand the Christian faith without first understanding the doctrine of salvation. It is the most important theological concept to study for the Christian. It is the reason for and the entire point of all of Scripture.

Salvation is also one of the articles of the Christian faith that set it apart from the others. It is unique in its claims and comprehensive in its application. The central thesis of salvation is that humanity is broken and incapable of being in touch with their Maker.

Despite the importance and significance there are still areas of disagreement among theologians as to salvation. Opinions are divided on its role through scripture and its current manifestation in the church. The question of permanence, whether the gospel allows for people to obtain and then lose salvation is a subject of some debate even now. The following is my own current understanding of salvation, what its purpose and mechanism are.

The Sin problem

We are cut off by the curse of sin from fellowship with the one who is the very reason for existence. Sin is an existential threat to our life, our purpose, and our proper place in the world.

> But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. Isaiah 59:2

There are no exceptions to the curse of sin. It falls on everyone regardless of their race, wealth, integrity, or compassion. It is just as much a problem for the most philanthropic, law-abiding person as it is for the worst that society has to offer. There is no escape or recourse for any of us. We are all caught in a trap that has no escape but one.

> For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; and are justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Romans 3:23

Our curse of sin results in death, an eternal separation from our Maker. We are doomed by our curse to never knowing our Maker or understanding our true place in the universe.

> For the wages of sin is death; Romans 6:23

Salvation's Foundation

If that were the end of it then Christianity would be a pretty sad religion. Doom and gloom with no hope is as unappealing to God as it is to us. He had a solution. It required that He sacrifice his only Son and temporarily break the perfect fellowship He and the Son had together. The Son being fully God himself was an infinite sacrifice that could atone for the sins of every person who has ever and will ever live.

> The Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." Gen 3:14-15

Salvation is based on a promise. A promise given at the very moment that the results of sin were realized. A promise that is built upon and expanded throughout all the rest of scripture, that God commits to fulfilling. We claim this promise by a faith that perseveres.

Heb 11 uses the refrain "by faith" over and over mentioning countless heroes of scripture whose faith moved them to obedience. That faith in a God who would rescue them was honored by God and counted to them as righteousness.

- Abel
- Enoch
- Noah
- Abraham
- Isaac
- Jacob
- Joseph
- Moses

Many of those mentioned were not perfect. God's promise was not to those who managed perfect obedience. The point of Heb 11 is that it was not the obedience that saved them. It was the faith that moved them to that obedience.

Salvation's mechanism

There is one remaining question. Given God's abhorrence of sin and the destructive nature of sin, how is it that God can honor our faith, forgive that sin, and restore us to a right relationship with Him?

> For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life – John 3:16

Faith is our part of the deal. A sacrifice is God's part. Jesus came down to earth and lived a fully human life without sin and then sacrificed that life on a cross to pay the required cost of our sin. You could write another entire essay on the qualities of Jesus as the Son of God and the Son of Man that made Him the only acceptable and suitable sacrifice for the sins of all mankind. Suffice it to say that God considered His sacrifice sufficient. Because of that sacrifice God is able to honor our faith and restore us to fellowship with Him.

> I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No man comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know Him and have seen Him – John 14:6-7

Salvation is initiated by God

Salvation through faith was shown multiple times throughout scripture. On every occasion it was always initiated by God. The Old Testament is filled with example after example where God declares a covenant with His people. The people in turn respond with faith that is demonstrated by their obedience. It is God who sets the terms and initiates an offer. The people respond in faith to that offer and receive salvation. Heb 11 again is our guide to understanding that pattern.

The terms that God offers to us are His to specify. There is no fundamental limitation in scripture to the terms that God sets. This is a wonderful comfort to hold on to when you consider those who have had no opportunity to be introduced to the Gospel that we know in the Church today. God is not limited in the offer he can make to another or the terms of that offer. Whether because they

were never in contact with someone who knew that Gospel or were just without the mental capacity to comprehend it, God is free to modify or give an alternative offer. The power of Jesus' sacrifice enables God to honor faith demonstrated through obedience in whatever fashion He wishes.

The Gospel requires total commitment

What of the terms of the Gospel covenant that we operate under through the Church though? How does a Christian demonstrate their faith via obedience? What offer has been made by God to His Church? We demonstrate our faith by a simple prayer as shown in Rom 10.

> If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the Dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. – Rom 10:9-10

What exactly does it mean to confess Jesus is Lord though? Why that prayer specifically? Matt 16 gives an explanation.

> For whosoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? Matt 16:25-27

Effectively the terms that God has tendered His church is to give everything up to God to do with as He sees fit. We must offer up our own life to Jesus as Lord. Total submission is what God asks.

Salvation is worked out by God

In return for that act of faith God works a miracle in us. We are changed forever by Him.

> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has passed away; behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. – 2 Cor 5:17-18

We become wholly transformed by God. A new creation with new possibilities and new responsibilities. 2 Cor speaks of an irreversible change, a complete replacement. Something new is gained and something else is lost. This miracle comes from God and is not under our control. We gave up that control in our act of obedience in surrendering lordship to Christ.

We can know that we are successfully transformed because it is not we who accomplish the transformation. It is God who accomplishes it.

> And I am sure of this that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. – Phil 3:6-7

Paul has confidence in the salvation of the Church in Philippians because it is God who works it out. He does not rely on their own strength of will or their capacity to hold firm. He relies on the grace of God to finish the work that was begun in them. Paul's confidence in salvation lies not with the individual but with the work that God has promised to complete.

We can know that we will have an inheritance because we are sealed by the Holy Spirit at the moment of conversion. As it says in Eph 1:

> In Him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of His glory. In Him you also when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it to the praise of His glory. – Eph 1:11-14

That seal is our guarantee of the inheritance promised as a part of the covenant of the Gospel of the Church. That guarantee promises that the Spirit will indwell us and take possession. When we surrender our life as part of our end of the deal we lose possession of that life. The Holy Spirit takes over that life and does whatever He needs to do in order to bring us to our promised inheritance.

Indeed, it is not even possible for us to accomplish the work of salvation. As it says in Eph 2:

> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. – Eph 2:8-10

In 1 Cor 12 we see that without the work of the Holy Spirit we are not even able to have this saving faith.

> No man can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Ghost – 1 Cor 12:3

We are saved by grace as a result of our faith. A faith that is demonstrated by obedience. After which, we become a "workmanship" of Christ, sealed by the Holy Spirit, transformed by the Father. The entire Trinity is involved in the work of Salvation for the Christian.

Permanence and the Hebrews 6 question

There is a spectrum of opinion on whether the salvation presented by God in the Gospel is permanent or not. On one end of the spectrum is the Arminian position that salvation is dependent on our own continued faith and obedience. On the other end is the Calvinist position that salvation is wholly a work of God and not of ourselves so, therefore, out of our control entirely.

Both extremes find it convenient to ignore sections of scripture that appear to contradict their position. I have never been satisfied by arguments that don't attempt to account properly for all of scripture. So, now it's time to take a look at the chapter most frequently at the center of this debate, Heb 6.

> And this we will do if God permits. For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. Heb 6:4-6

This passage makes some claims centered around a particular set of circumstances that indicate a loss. We will look first at the loss that is described and then at the circumstances that lead to that loss.

The devastating loss in Heb 6

There is no question that Heb 6 describes a devastating loss. The loss is described as an inability to repent. An irrevocable turning away from God and what he offers. Repentance is a critical part of salvation. Making Jesus Lord requires a turning away from sin and putting every aspect of your life under His rule. You are unable to obtain salvation if you are unable to repent. It is clear that the loss here is unquestionably a loss of salvation. It is also clear from the word "impossible" that the loss is final. There is no indication here that restoration is ever possible in this scenario. Those individuals are truly and totally lost. This is in keeping with what we know already about salvation. We know that salvation can be lost irrevocably at least in some situations. We know that if someone dies without obtaining salvation there is no hope for them. We know that it is possible to be exposed to the Gospel and never accept or take action on it. But to fully understand this passage we need to take a close look at the circumstances that lead to this loss.

The circumstances of loss in Heb 6

The circumstances described in Heb 6 are someone who

- was once enlightened
- has tasted of the heavenly gift
- was made partakers of the Holy Ghost
- has tasted the good word of God
- and the powers of the world to come

This person then subsequently falls away. These descriptions could be applied to someone who is saved, which perhaps explains why this passage is the source of so much confusion. It is true that a saved person is enlightened. They have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been partakers of the Holy Ghost. They have tasted of the good word of God and experienced the powers of the world to come. One thing to note however is that none of these describe what is necessary to be saved. So the question, then, is can anyone who is not saved also have these attributes?

It seems unlikely given the balance of scripture and terms of the Gospel whereby God works out salvation in our lives that Heb 6 could be speaking about someone gaining then subsequently losing salvation. The more probable explanation that best fits with the rest of scripture is one of two possibilities. Either the author of Hebrews is using proof by contradiction to establish the impossibility of losing one's salvation once one has gained it or the individual described has not in fact entered into the terms of the Gospel and therefore has not obtained salvation.

If we want to know whether Heb 6 is speaking to a saved person losing their salvation or to an unsaved person losing their chance at salvation we need to dig a little deeper into what this description can be applied to. We can draw on what we know about salvation to answer this question.

We know that before a person can be saved that the Holy Spirit must enable them to have a saving faith. It follows that the work of the Spirit in an unsaved person is to enlighten them, to show them the goodness of the Word of God to offer a taste of the heavenly gift and a small experience of the world to come. It is then the responsibility of the unsaved to be obedient and take a step of faith. If they are empowered by the Spirit to have a saving faith but reject that faith regardless then it is possible for someone to have an encounter with God and reject Him.

Indeed, the author expands on his point starting in v9.

> Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. Heb 6:9

He says that he is sure that his description in vv 4-6 does not apply to them. They instead fit the description of someone who is saved. Someone whose obedience through faith is evident.

I do not believe it is possible to form a definitive conclusion whether the author is using proof by contradiction or speaking to the event of someone losing their chance by refusing to act on the prompting of the Holy Spirit. However, it appears that one of those explanations is more consistent with the rest of Scripture.