

Introduction

Day 1

The God Who Saves: The Order of Salvation



Think of a time you were lost.

I remember leading my isolated platoon deep in a maze of side streets in the Iraqi city of Amarah. Night was falling and we knew insurgents were close, intent on a kill or, possibly worse, a capture. I'll never forget the rising fear as it dawned on me that I had lost track of our exact location. I'll also never forget the relief when my map made sense again. We completed the patrol without casualties.

Or to change contexts wildly (bear with me – I was reading this story to my children just this morning), imagine what it was like for the Minotaur's victims, summoned to Crete every nine years by King Minos. I can see them creeping around the dark corridors of the disorienting Labyrinth, hearts pounding and ears straining for the terrifying man-bull stalking them.

One year that group included Theseus. In the Greek myth, King Minos' love-struck daughter slips him a ball of magic string as he enters the maze. The string unravels in front of him, leading him to where he can slay the monster before guiding him safely out again.

Our world can sometimes feel like a maze of side streets in enemy territory. Or the Labyrinth, with monsters lurking in shadowy corners, ready to pounce as we pass. As Jesus promised, 'In this world you will have trouble.'¹ In fact, sometimes the abuse, the death of a child, the

1. John 16:33 (NIV).

cancer, the debt, the state of the marriage, the loneliness, the depression, can make us wonder if Theseus had it easy with just a Minotaur.

And so we do our best. Side-streets, labyrinth – pick your analogy – but we try to navigate a world in which we may be ambushed at any turn, whether by our own self-destructive sin, the sin of others against us, Satan and his malevolent demons, or the tragedy-triggering fallenness of creation in general.

Of course, this portrayal of life isn't the full picture. Life can be full of laughter and happiness. In fact, for the person whose identity is in Christ, there is deep confidence and joy available in *all* circumstances. 'I have learned in *whatever* situation I am to be content' said the Apostle Paul.² But as a pastor, I look out over my congregation each Sunday and am reminded of the myriads of suffering and trouble that are part of the human condition. Joy and tears are not mutually exclusive. (Younger readers, if in doubt give it a few more years. You'll see what I mean.)

So what is to be our roadmap through the side streets, the string to guide us through the labyrinth, our source of direction in life?

The Bible's answer for us is a stage-by-stage roadmap from eternity past to eternity future. It's a pathway marked out for us by God consisting of multiple steps, some sequential and some simultaneous. No matter how wild or random life may seem, this is the trail along which He is leading us. It will ultimately guide us home to unimaginable joy.

In this devotional, we've selected thirty of the stages on this pathway. Think of them as aid stations lining the route of a marathon, or pitons hammered into a mountainside leading to the summit. They reassure us that we're on the right path and secure us along the way.

The core elements of this pathway are what theologians call the *Ordo Salutis* (Order of Salvation). The term *Ordo Salutis* was coined by Lutheran theologians in the mid-1720s, but the order by which God saves His people has always been on display in His Word. Christians have framed it in various ways, but we can outline it like this:

1. Election
2. Calling
3. Regeneration
4. Conversion

2. Philippians 4:11.

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5. Justification
6. Reconciliation
7. Sanctification
8. Perseverance
9. Glorification

These truths form the spine of the thirty entries in this devotional. Don't worry if any of them are new or unclear to you. In the daily entries that follow, we'll be exploring what God's Word has to say about each. 'Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.'³

Note that while some of salvation's stages occur in the believer's life in turn, others happen simultaneously. However, even when we can't speak of a chronological sequence, there is still a causal, logical sequence presented by Scripture (for example in stages 2-6 above). When I backed my car into a neighbour's vehicle, the impact and the dent occurred simultaneously, yet the impact had to happen for the dent *then* to happen.

It's also worth noting that every stage of the journey on which we're about to embark is centred on Jesus Christ. It doesn't move us 'from' Christ or even 'to' Christ. Nor is Jesus a staging post at a point on the journey, like the cross or my conversion. Any part of the process is incoherent apart from Christ.

As J. I. Packer points out, 'the entire *Ordo Salutis* ... is bound to the mystical union with Christ. There is no gift that has not been earned by him.'⁴ Calvin says likewise: 'So long as we are without Christ and separated from him, nothing which he suffered and did for the salvation of the human race is of the least benefit to us. To communicate to us the blessings which he received from the Father, he must become ours and dwell in us.'⁵ If the *Ordo Salutis* is linear like a railway journey, with the different stages like stations along the

3. Psalm 111:2.

4. J. I. Packer, 'An Introduction to Covenant Theology' (2012). This is the introduction to Herman Witsius' *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending A Complete Body of Divinity* (Nabu, 2010).

5. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford L. Battles, 2 vols. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 3.1.537.

route, Christ is the ever-present, unchanging and essential rails. In Paul's words, 'All the promises of God find their "Yes" in him [Jesus].'⁶

One final, practical note: the doctrines we're about to dive into are so deep and rich that I would recommend you allocate to each, if possible, not one but two days. Spiritual truths take time to sink into our hearts. I have tried to saturate my explanation of each doctrine in Scripture, and to provide avenues for further meditation in some of the footnotes. In the journey ahead, dwelling unhurriedly on each truth in turn will repay your patience.

Let's now allow God's Word to show us the order of His salvation. This will give us a deeper understanding of where we have been, where we are, and where we are going. It will open to us great reservoirs of comfort and confidence as well as a deeper knowledge of our Saviour, as we travel His pathway through this world and beyond. In the Psalmist's words, 'From everlasting to everlasting, you are God.'⁷

Welcome to your biography.

Prayer:

Sovereign God of order, in the midst of this turbulent world I praise you for the path of life. In the weeks ahead, allow me to come to know you, what you have done for me, and what you will do for me more deeply than ever before in my life. Grant me joy, confidence, comfort and deep, lasting life-change as a result. In the name of the Christ who is your power and wisdom, Amen.

Meditation:

2 Corinthians 4:18 says, 'We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.' What things in your life right now might give the impression that the world is random and chaotic? Why would Satan love you to disbelieve or forget about a path through the storm?

6. 2 Corinthians 1:20.

7. Psalm 90:2.

Act I
Life Plans

Day 2

The God Who Agrees: The Eternal Covenant



One of the glories of our salvation is that it was established in eternity past by God's sovereign choice of His people. But in the bottomless depths of that eternity, other realities were moving as well – a 'deeper magic' as Aslan might say. They're little known and often under-appreciated but immensely rich and scriptural. Before God elected us, He foreknew us. And even before He foreknew us, He covenanted with Himself to redeem us.¹ This is known as the Covenant of Redemption or the Eternal Covenant.

In this covenant, the members of the Trinity each pledged different roles.

The Father agreed to give the Son a people for His own possession. Jesus knew this when He prayed, 'Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me.'²

When my father promised to take me fishing as a boy, I would take that to include everything necessary for it to be fulfilled – drive us to the river, help set up my equipment, bring lunch and so on. The Father's promise of a people for His Son entailed many profound, beautiful actions, all of which He fulfilled.³

1. This sequence is logical rather than sequential as it took place in eternity past, before time had been created. See the Introduction.

2. John 17:5, 6. See also John 17:2, 9, 24; Luke 22:29.

3. This included: planning the cross for the Son (Rev. 13:8), promising the Son (Gen. 3:15), preparing the way for the Son (Mark 1:2,3), sending the Son (John 3:16), endorsing the Son (Matt. 3:17), guiding the Son (Luke 6:12), giving the

The Son for His part agreed to redeem His people in obedient accordance with His Father's plan. 'For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.'⁴ 'This charge [of dying and rising] I have received from my Father.'⁵ Like the Father, the Son's agreement also entailed many extraordinary things, all of which He faithfully fulfilled.⁶

The explicitly named parties in the Eternal Covenant are the Father and Son. Some have argued that the apparent absence of the Spirit here undermines the Trinity. However, the members of the Trinity don't act independently of each other. They are perfectly, constantly unified. In Augustine's words, 'just as Father and Son and Holy Spirit are inseparable, so they work inseparably.'⁷

Furthermore, the Spirit's characteristic nature is to point away from Himself, directing our focus to the Father and the Son.⁸ In Scripture, His role is to enact and apply the will of the Father and the Son while normally remaining tacit. For example, it is He who applies the saving work of the Son to the people promised by the Father.⁹ We can be confident that the entire Trinity is operating in the Eternal Covenant.

One key implication of God's Eternal Covenant is this: it displays His aseity. In other words, it displays the self-sufficiency of His existence, independent of anything outside Himself.¹⁰

Son words (John 17:8), giving the Son authority (John 17:2), delivering the Son for death (Acts 4:28), raising the Son (Rom. 4:25), receiving back the Son (John 14:28), accepting the Son's request to send the Spirit (John 14:16), and accepting the Son's ongoing advocacy for His people (1 John 2:1,2). This list isn't comprehensive, but the point is that the Father completed the many things included within His promise.

4. John 6:38.

5. John 10:18.

6. The Son obeying His Father's will entailed: entering the world with a human body (Col. 2:9) and nature (Phil. 2:6-8), being subject to God's law (Gal. 4:4), fulfilling and accomplishing the law (Matt. 5:17,18), taking His people's guilt (Isa. 53:6), paying their penalty (Isa. 53:5), having His righteousness credited to them (2 Cor. 5:21), drawing them to Himself (John 12:32), and having laid His life down, taking it up again (John 10:18).

7. Augustine, 'De Trinitate' (New City Press, 1991), 1.7. This is known as the concept of inseparable operations.

8. John 15:26; 16:13,14.

9. John 6:38,39; 17:4.

10. Acts 17:25

‘Then Moses said to God, “If ... they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.”¹¹ Somewhat randomly at first sight, God speaks these words out of a bush which is on fire yet fails to burn up. Yet this is a brilliant (if you’ll forgive the pun) visual illustration of the very aseity He is communicating to Moses. Unlike humans, the Creator’s own existence blazes perpetually, of its own accord, without ever being depleted or needing fuel or going out.

In the winter months, as a family, we love to eat by candlelight in the evenings. But the candles burn only because we light them. And then as the days go by, they gradually shorten until they’re tiny stumps which eventually, inevitably go out. This is exactly what our lives are like. This is part of what it means to be human. God is different. Being Himself the First Cause, His existence is without a prior cause. His life blazes self-sufficiently, independently and perpetually. He is ‘a se’.

So what? Is this merely abstract theology or is there a practical point for us? And what does God’s aseity have to do with the Eternal Covenant anyway? These are deep theological foundations we are digging to be sure, but be patient. The down-to-earth, life-changing truths they support, which we have nearly reached, are worth theological and intellectual sweat! Here comes the final spade-work before we get to see how this impacts our day-to-day lives.

The Eternal Covenant shows God’s aseity in the following way. By it, He expresses His innate qualities without having to depend on creation to do so. Qualities like His glory, love, wisdom, faithfulness, relational nature and so on require situations of more than one solitary party in order to exist. The trinitarian God fulfils this requirement within Himself, without having to rely on creation’s existence, because He, uniquely, is multi-personal.

Other monadic, single-person gods such as Allah have to depend on creation in order to express their glory, love, wisdom and so on. In other words, they are not self-sufficient. They are contingent on creation for being themselves. They are fundamentally incomplete and needy. Compared to the living God, they are one-dimensional. In the

11. Exodus 3:13-14.

one true God, as C. S. Lewis says, ‘there is no hunger that needs to be filled, only plenteousness that desires to give’.¹² Lewis goes on,

We must keep always before our eyes that vision of Lady Julian’s in which God carried in His hand a little object like a nut, and that nut was ‘all that is made.’ God who needs nothing, loves into existence wholly superfluous creatures in order that He may love and perfect them.¹³

So why has God chosen to show us His aseity through His Eternal Covenant? So what? Here is the practical fruit for us from the theological foundations laid above.

The Eternal Covenant displays His innate glory, as each person’s qualities play out before one another.¹⁴ It is only as an innately glorious God that He is able to display His glory before His people.¹⁵ His glory is not derived and fake. It is inherent, and more real and precious than anything else in your life. In approaching Him, you come not to a cardboard cut-out god but to the meaning of life Himself. You are coming to glory Himself. With this God alone, you get to be part of something greater than yourself.

The Eternal Covenant displays His innate love, as the members of the Trinity relate to each other in love.¹⁶ It is only as an innately loving God that He is able to reach out and love His people.¹⁷ The triune God has placed His love, better than life itself, upon you.¹⁸ With this God you are more loved than you will ever fathom, for ever and ever and ever. No matter what your life’s circumstances, you can know that you are complete.

The Eternal Covenant displays His innate wisdom, as the members of the Trinity collaborate and coordinate plans of infinite magnitude between themselves.¹⁹ It is only as an innately wise God that He is able to work His wisdom for His people’s everlasting joy in

12. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Harcourt, 1960), p. 126.

13. *ibid.*, p. 127.

14. John 17:5.

15. Romans 11:36.

16. John 17:24.

17. John 3:16.

18. Psalm 63:3.

19. 1 Corinthians 2:9.

Him.²⁰ The God of infinite intelligence and knowledge has planned for your eternal happiness and fulfilment in Him. You can know that the logistics of your security and joy in this world, as well as in the world to come, are covered.

The Eternal Covenant displays His innate faithfulness, as the members of the Trinity commit to and fulfil their promised roles from across the expanse of eternity, at unfathomable cost.²¹ It is only as an innately faithful God that He is able to reach out and anchor His people's salvation in His own faithful nature.²² Your salvation is as sure as the strength of the Father's and Son's and Spirit's bonds with each other. You can walk through this world with utter confidence in your eternal future.

The Eternal Covenant displays His innate relational nature, as each member of the Trinity interacts with the others in eternity past.²³ It is only as an innately relational God that He is able to reach out for a personal connection with you.²⁴ Before you existed, He knew you by name. He enjoys knowing you and desires for you to know Him. You matter to Him.

We could continue indefinitely. We will be exploring and enjoying God's manifold qualities for all eternity. Suffice it to say for now that the Eternal Covenant is a magnificent explosion of revelation. It represents the furthest point in eternity past which God has chosen to reveal to us – the greatest extent to which He draws back the veil of time to allow us to glimpse behind it. As such, the Eternal Covenant is the foundational anchor to our salvation. It is the very first way in which our eternal God stoops to introduce us to Himself. Tremble before Him with fear and joy!

Prayer:

Eternal Father, thank you for promising your Son a people, and for faithfully, lovingly fulfilling that promise. I praise you for mercifully

20. Romans 11:33.

21. Mark 14:36.

22. Hebrews 6:17, 18.

23. John 17:5, 6.

24. Psalm 8:4.

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including me in that people. As I meditate on your Eternal Covenant, learning more about who you are, move me to worship. I pray this by the enabling Spirit and through the obedient Son with whom you covenanted before the dawn of time, Amen.

Meditation:

Of all of the implications of the Eternal Covenant, which strikes you most? Why?