

LCMS

Frequently Asked Questions

Doctrinal Issues – Salvation

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Salvation

Will our souls be with God when we die?

Q: *Recently, both my sister and father have died (separately). While I truly believe that Jesus died for our sins, those who accept Him as their personal Savior, I have been troubled as to where my sister and father are now. Are they asleep until the end of the world? Are their bodies asleep, but their souls with God? Or, are they in Heaven with God now?*

A: What Scripture teaches concerning the death of the Christian is summarized as follows by Lutheran theologian Edward Koehler in his book, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*:

In the moment of death the souls of the believers enter the joy of heaven. Jesus said to the malefactor: "Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). Stephen said in the hour of death: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59). Whoever dies in the Lord is blessed "from henceforth" (Rev. 14:13). Paul desires "to be with Christ," and adds that this is "far better" for him than to continue in the flesh (Phil. 1:23, 24). For this reason we pray that finally, when our last hour has come, God would grant us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this vale of tears to Himself in heaven.

On the day of the final judgment, the redeemed souls in heaven will be reunited with their own (now glorified) bodies, and will begin to enjoy the bliss of heaven in both body and soul (John 5:28-29; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Cor. 15). The Lutheran church has always rejected as unscriptural the idea that the soul "sleeps" between death and Judgment Day in such a way that it is not conscious of heavenly bliss.

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On what should we base our assurance of salvation?

Q: *On what should we base our assurance of salvation? I know the Word and the promises of the Gospel are our rock, but how do we distinguish between real faith and mere intellectual assent? I ask this because many evangelicals make me nervous when they say that if one has doubts about one's salvation, one is probably not saved, because the Holy Spirit is supposed to provide inner assurance. (I guess this ties in to the whole Pietist problem.) But in the face of emotional ups and downs, moral failings, intellectual doubts, and confusion over doctrine, how can one know if one truly has faith in Christ?*

A: Lutherans believe that faith is created and strengthened not by looking inside of one's self (to one's own faith and/or doubts) but by looking outside of one's self (to God's Word and promises in Christ). Therefore, assurance of salvation is to be sought by looking to God's Word and promises in Christ (which create and strengthen the faith through which one is saved), not by looking inward at the strength or weakness of one's own faith (which creates either pride and false assurance or doubt and lack of assurance). Anxiety regarding doubts, strength of faith and certainty of salvation are signs of faith (however weak it may be), not signs of unbelief, since the unbeliever has no concern or anxiety about doubts, faith or salvation. If you would like to study this issue further, I would recommend Martin Chemnitz's book on *Justification* available from Concordia Publishing House (800-325-3040, stock no. 15-2186).

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If God already predetermined who was saved, what is the point of witnessing?

Q: *How does the church feel about the theological tension between the universal offer of salvation (Matt 11:28, John 3:16, John 6:40) and divine election (John 15:16, Eph. 1:4, Acts 13:48)? If God already predetermined who was saved, what is the point of witnessing?*

A: Let me first of all refer you to a couple of resources that set forth the position of the Synod on Election and objective or "universal" justification. The doctrine of Election is summarized in the Synod's A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod. You may also find helpful the Commission on Theology and Church Relation's 1983 Theses on Justification (see esp. section VI *The Universal and Finished Results of Christ's Work of Obedience*).

From the standpoint of human reason, the scriptural teachings that God has objectively justified (objective justification) the whole world through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ and wants all people to be saved through faith in Him (subjective justification), and that He elected by grace from eternity those who are saved, cannot be resolved. We must say with Paul when he contemplates the mystery of our election, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!"

And yet, we can say this on the basis of God's Word. By faith we hold that it is precisely because we Christians are God's elect that we proclaim the good news of salvation. We see this in Ephesians, where Paul begins by praising God for His election (the purest of Gospel and only meant for our comfort; Eph. 1:3-10), while at the same time and in the same breath declaring "Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...." (Eph. 3:7-8). This same Apostle, who regarded himself as among God's elect, wrote to the Corinthians, "For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16). We witness, therefore, because God commands us to make known His saving will to others and because we are in fact part of God's elective plan being carried out in history (Eph. 3)!

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If we do good, will we be saved?

Q: *Near the end of the Athanasian Creed, it says "that if you do good" you will be saved. How does this relate to being saved by grace?*

A: The statements of the Creed read as follows: "At whose coming all men will rise again with their bodies and will give an account of their own works. And they that have done good will go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire."

It is important to note that the Athanasian Creed does not here say that certain people will "enter eternal life" because they "have done good." It says that "those who have done good" (and only those who believe in Jesus alone for salvation are able to "do good" in God's sight) "will enter eternal life." On Judgment Day, God will point to our good works not as the cause of our salvation but as the evidence of the faith through which we have been saved and which enabled us to do that which was well-pleasing in his sight. There are numerous Bible passages that make the same point and use the same language (e.g., Matthew 25:31-46, Romans 2:6-10, James 2:14-16). The confession of these sentences in the Athanasian Creed in our churches is, in fact, a helpful reminder of the relation of faith and good works as taught in the Bible.

(In this connection you may wish to review the following comments on Romans 2:6-10 in the NIV *Concordia Self-Study Bible* [published by the LCMS] which explains: "Paul is not contradicting his continual emphasis in all his writings, including Romans, that a person is saved not by what he does, but by faith in what Christ does for him. Rather, he is discussing the principle of judgment according to deeds. Judgment will be rendered according to one's deeds in the sense that the good works of the believer give evidence that he has faith. Good works, which are seen, give evidence of faith, which is unseen."

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Do believers have eternal assurance?

Q: *One of your FAQ answers states that it is possible for one to lose his salvation. However, in your [Theses on Justification \(1983\)](#) on this website it says plainly that believers have eternal assurance (paragraph 58). Which is it?*

A: Lutherans believe both are true and Scriptural: It is possible for a believer to fall from faith and lose salvation, and it is possible for a believer to have complete assurance of eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. If this seems paradoxical to human reason, then (Lutherans say) this is only because the teaching of Scripture itself on this issue (as on many other issues) appears paradoxical to human reason.

For Lutherans, this is essentially a matter of properly distinguishing between Law and Gospel: Warnings against falling from faith are the strongest form of God's Law, intended to warn against "carnal security" based on "good works" or against the attitude that "since I'm saved, I can do anything I want to do." Assurances of God's constant and eternal love in Christ are the sweetest and purest form of Gospel, intended to comfort those who are plagued by their sins and by their failures to keep God's Law perfectly.

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Help me to understand faith and good works.

Q: I am having some trouble coming to understanding of faith alone based off of the Scripture that was cited on your website and was hoping for further explanation regarding the seemingly conflicting messages. I think for me what is most problematic is actually Romans 2--not listed as a reference but essential in understanding fully Romans 3 and 4. Romans 2 is based on the idea that to be truly Jewish is to be inwardly circumcised and not outwardly circumcised and inwardly something else. Then given Romans 3 and 4, is this necessarily an attack on good works as being a means for salvation or is this an attack on professing to be one thing and actually being another? I was just wondering because of the obvious stark contrast to James 2:14-26.

A: The key question you seem to be asking is this: Is what Paul says in Romans 3 (e.g., v. 28 "...we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of law") "an attack on good works as being a means for salvation?"

As you no doubt are aware, the central and consistent teaching of Paul that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ is nowhere more beautifully summarized than in Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God--not because of works...." By its very definition "grace" means that human works do not contribute in any way to a person's salvation or justification, as St. Paul says in Romans 11:6, "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace." Or as the apostle had already said in 3:28, "...a man is justified by faith apart from [Greek: choris] works of law." Paul said this, of course, in the context of Jewish opinions regarding what was required for salvation. By making circumcision a necessary requirement for one to be saved (See Acts 15:5ff.), the Jews had attacked the Gospel of God's grace at its very core (see Gal. 5:1-12!).

The faith of which Paul speaks, of course, is a living faith in Jesus Christ that produces, by God's Spirit, the good works that God wills be done in the Christian's life. That is why, immediately after his beautiful summary of the Gospel in Ephesians 2:8-9, he continues, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." Of this living faith, Luther so eloquently said: "Oh faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, so that it is impossible for it not to be constantly doing what is good. Likewise, faith does not ask if good works are to be done, but before one can ask, faith has already done them and is constantly active" (Formula of Concord, SD, IV, 10-11). This is precisely what the entire book of James is all about. Genuine faith is a faith that shows itself in good works. Or as Luther again put it once, as an apple tree makes fruit and the fruit does not make an apple tree, so works do not make a Christian, but a Christian does good works.

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What does the LCMS believe regarding man's freedom of will?

Q: *What does the LCMS believe regarding man's freedom of will?*

A: The *Lutheran Cyclopedia* (Erwin L. Lueker, editor; Concordia Publishing House, 1975) contains the following helpful summary of the Lutheran understanding of what Scripture teaches regarding the freedom of the will:

The Scriptural doctrine of the freedom of the human will is closely connected with the doctrine of original sin (see Sin, Original). The doctrine of the freedom of the human will after the fall of man must be studied from the viewpoint of original sin. Scripture emphatically declares that man, also after the fall, continues to be a responsible moral agent, who in earthly matters, to some extent, may exercise freedom of will; but it asserts that "natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, . . . neither can he know them" (1 Co. 2:14); that man, by nature, is "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1); that "the carnal mind is enmity against God" (Ro 8:7) and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Co 12:3).

Accordingly, Scripture denies to man after the fall and before conversion freedom of will in spiritual matters, and asserts that conversion is accomplished entirely through the Holy Ghost by the Gospel. God "hath saved us, . . . not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace" (2 Ti 1:9); "Turn Thou me, and I shall be turned" (Jer. 31:18).

Accordingly, Article 18 of the Augsburg Confession ("Freedom of the Will") states:

It is also taught among us that man possesses some measure of freedom of the will which enables him to live an outwardly honorable life and to make choices among the things that reason comprehends. But without the grace, help, and activity of the Holy Spirit man is not capable of making himself acceptable to God, of fearing God and believing in God with his whole heart, or of expelling inborn evil lusts from his heart.

This is accomplished by the Holy Spirit, who is given through the Word of God, for Paul says in 1 Cor. 2:14, "Natural man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God."

Additional Scripture passages which may be helpful as you study and discuss this issue are: John 1:12-13; 15:16-19; Rom. 10:14-17; Eph. 1:4; 2:1-9; Col. 3:12; 2 Thess. 2:13.

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God chose us?

Q: I understand that God chose those for salvation before the very foundation of the world. The Bible does not say that there are those who are chosen and that there are those who are not. So, does that mean then that God chose everyone to be saved before the foundation of the world and therefore it is man's choice whether he will accept God's saving grace or not? However, one cannot come into God's grace by himself, but by the Holy Spirit "leading" him unto salvation. Is that the correct interpretation? I am confused by the fact that we were chosen by God before the foundation of the world, yet the very action of choosing can mean that there were those who were not chosen. I know that God wishes everyone to be saved. Can you help me?

A: The question you are wrestling with is really the question, "Why are some saved and not others?" Theologians throughout history have referred to this question as the "crux theologorum" ("the cross of the theologians") because of the difficulty (and from the Lutheran perspective, the impossibility) of giving an answer to this question which is satisfactory to our human reason.

Some answer this question by pointing to man's "free will"--only those are saved who "choose" to be saved. Lutherans reject this answer as unscriptural because according to the Bible even man's will is "dead" and powerless to "choose" God and his grace in Christ. We are saved not because we "choose" to be saved but because the Holy Spirit works faith in our heart through the Gospel (even faith is a gift!). Others answer this question by pointing to God's sovereign will: God himself predestines from eternity some to be saved and others to be damned. Lutherans reject this answer as unscriptural because according to the Bible God sincerely desires all to be saved and has predestined no one to damnation.

So how do Lutherans answer this question? The answer is that Lutherans do not try to answer it, because (we believe) the Bible itself does not provide an answer to this question that is comprehensible to human reason. Lutherans affirm, with Scripture, that whoever is saved is saved by God's grace alone, a grace so sure that it excludes all human "action" and "choice" but rather rests on the foundation of God's action in Christ and his "choice" (predestination) from before the beginning of time. Lutherans also affirm, with Scripture, that those who are damned are damned not by God's "choice" but on account of their own human sin and rebellion and unbelief. From a human perspective, there is no "rational" or "logical" way to put these two truths together. Lutherans believe and confess them not because they are "rational" and "logical," but because this is what we find taught in Scripture.

For a further discussion of this issue, you may want to read *Of the Election of Grace* in the Brief Statement of the LCMS, and/or Articles II and XI in the *Formula of Concord* (contained in the *Book of Concord*, the Lutheran Confessions).

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If a Christian is already saved, should he/she do good works? (2 pages)

Q: *If I believe someone to be a believing Christian, can I ever criticize him for failing to do good works? Given that he is saved by faith, does God see to it that he will do good works and if so, does God fix the number and character of these works? Can a person with faith feel assured that he is doing enough good works, and that God is indifferent to further ones? Can a person who is not saved do good works? Is God indifferent to them? Or is He glad when an agnostic performs an act of Christ-like mercy? If a Christian knows that he is saved by knowing that he has faith, should he bother with the question whether he is practicing Christ's teachings, given that faith alone is sufficient for salvation? Or should he bother with it only because a large enough absence of good works would suggest his faith might be too weak for salvation?*

A: You may criticize your Christian brother for failing to do good works insofar as God's Word criticizes him (faith without deeds is dead—James 2:14-26), but you must criticize yourself at the same time, because no one is perfect, all have sinned. We need to be merciful and forgiving to one another. Also encourage one another to do good works (Heb. 10:24-25).

Consider this Word to be the answer to your next two questions: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:10). The answer to the second part of this question is no, we cannot feel assured that we have done or are doing enough good works, since we do not know how many God has set for us to do. We don't know what God's plans are. If God has prepared in advance the works we are to do, He cannot be indifferent to any of our good works. Again, we need to encourage one another to do good works.

All our good works are tainted with sin. "All our righteous acts are like filthy rags," as Isaiah reminds us. Therefore, they cannot be counted for our salvation. Only the perfect, all-sufficient righteousness that Jesus accomplished for us with His perfect life, will be enough for our salvation. This comes to us by grace, imputed to us through faith, faith being a gift of God (Eph. 2:8-9).

God recognizes the Christ-like good works of the unbeliever as good in the sense that they are done according to the divine Law written in their hearts (Rom. 2:15). However, since they come from a wicked heart that is dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1), and not from faith, they are sin (Rom. 14:23) and in the spiritual sense displease God (Ps. 53:1-3). In the Kingdom of God's power, the civil righteousness--the good works of unbelievers--are good only outwardly. These are necessary for the welfare of human society, and God even rewards them with temporal blessings. But these good works of the unbelievers get them nowhere with God in His Kingdom of grace. Even works of civil righteousness will ultimately receive the condemnation of Jesus and will not prevent eternal punishment (Matt. 25:41-46).

The Christian is not saved by KNOWING that he has faith. By grace, God has given him faith in Jesus, and it is through that faith he is saved. For example, Abraham believed God (had faith, not just knew he had faith) and it was credited to him as righteousness (Romans 4:3). Yes, the Christian should bother whether he is doing Christ's good works, even though he is saved by faith alone. It is God's will and express command that the Christian should do good works, which the Holy Spirit works in him. Christ's good works are indicators that the Christian has Christ's faith and not something else. Christ's good works will be the products of that faith, and those good works will be the public signs on which Christ will pronounce His public final judgment (Matt. 25).

Faith, big or small, strong or weak, as long as it trusts in Jesus' merits, will SAVE. Saving faith is not contingent upon the amount of works one does, but is a gift of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel. Trust

in Jesus above all for forgiveness and life eternal. Work while it is day before night comes when we cannot work, knowing that God has given us a purpose and things to do for Him in this short little life.

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Do we have to try to amend our life in order to be saved?

Q: *Listening to a sermon on Sunday, the pastor was telling us that we should lead good lives and try not to sin. But we do know that God is all forgiving and that he died for all of our sins. To me, this sounds like double talk. On one hand we are not to sin, but on the other hand, we don't have to worry as long as we believe in our Lord Jesus Christ everything will be okay. I don't think our Lord came down and taught for three years on how to be holy and lead good lives and then die on the cross so that we can do what we want. Don't we have to ask for forgiveness, be truly sorry and really try to amend our life in order to be saved?*

A: It would be good for you to talk to the pastor to determine just what he said and meant. Sometimes we don't hear correctly or catch the connection. So go to him and ask him to explain further.

Scripture teaches us to repent of our sins: to be truly sorry for them and trust in Christ for forgiveness, every time we sin. At the same time, we sincerely and earnestly resolve, by the assistance of God the Holy Spirit, to henceforth amend our sinful lives. We do not play around with this. But repenting thus does not mean that we will never sin again. When we sin again, we go again in repentance and faith and resolve, and God forgives again.

As we trust in Jesus' merits, God forgives and saves us. In the end, it is unbelief--failure to trust in Jesus--that will condemn us to hell. Being saved does not depend on how hard we try to amend our sinful life, but as Paul said to the jailer in Philippi when he asked what he should do to be saved: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household." Then, being forgiven in Christ, we will be compelled by God's love to leave our sins and live as God wants us to live.

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Can you lose your salvation?

Q: *Can you lose your salvation and if you can, what do you need to do to regain it again?*

A: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod believes and teaches that it is possible for a true believer to fall from faith, as Scripture itself soberly and repeatedly warns us (1 Cor. 10:12; 1 Pet. 5:8; 2 Pet. 3:17; Heb. 2:1-3; 3:12-19; 6:4-8, etc.). Such warnings are intended for Christians who appear to be lacking a right understanding of the seriousness of their sin and of God's judgment against sin, and who, therefore, are in danger of developing a false and proud "security" based not on God's grace, but on their own works, self-righteousness, or freedom to "do as they please."

By the same token, the LCMS affirms and treasures all of the wonderful passages in Scripture in which God promises that He will never forsake those who trust in Christ Jesus alone for salvation (John 10:27-29; Romans 8; Heb. 13: 5-6, etc.). To those who are truly repentant and recognize their need for God's grace and forgiveness, such passages are powerful reminders of the true security that is ours through sincere and humble faith in Christ alone for our salvation.

A person may be restored to faith in the same way he or she came to faith in the first place: by repenting of his or her sin and unbelief and trusting completely in the life, death and resurrection of Christ alone for forgiveness and salvation.

Whenever a person does repent and believe, this always takes place by the grace of God alone and by the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word in a person's heart.

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Would you explain "predestined" in Romans 8 and Ephesians 1?

Q: *Would you explain the LCMS position on "predestined" in Romans 8 and Ephesians 1? If one is predestined to be adopted as a redeemed child of God, then does it follow that another is predestined to not be adopted and therefore damned?*

A: The LCMS believes that Scripture clearly teaches (in passages such as those mentioned in your question) a predestination to salvation by God's grace in Jesus Christ alone. The LCMS does not believe that Scripture teaches a predestination to damnation: God desires all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:3-4). Like so many teachings of Scripture (e.g., the Trinity, eternity, the two natures of Christ, the love of a holy God for rebellious sinners), this teaching seems contradictory and is incomprehensible to human reason. We believe it not because it "makes sense" to human reason, but because this is what we find taught in the pages of God's holy Word.

For a helpful summary of the LCMS position on predestination, see the section on [Of the Election of Grace](#) in the Synod's *Brief Statement* (adopted in 1932).

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