

THEOLOGY CLASSES · SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY V: SOTERIOLOGY

Lecture 1: The Ordo Salutis: The Order of Salvation

C. Michael Patton and Rhome Dyke · The Theology Program · 58 minutes

Lecture by C. Michael Patton, Th.M., and Rhome Dyke, Th.M., from The Theology Program, published on their public channel. Study notes below from Medina Community Church.

BEFORE YOU WATCH

The course on salvation opens with a word most students have never heard: ordo salutis, the order of salvation. Before any of the famous battles over predestination or the atonement, the teachers ask a quieter question that turns out to be harder than it looks: what is salvation, and when does it happen? Was Peter saved when he was called, when he confessed, or when he was restored? Listen for the moment the class is asked how many of them have quit sinning, and why that question matters for the definition of salvation.

THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

1. What this course is about

Soteriology is the study of the nature of salvation and Christian growth, focusing on the process and responsibilities of salvation from the standpoint of God and man, on the pivotal doctrine of justification that was the central issue of the Reformation, and on the ongoing debate between God's sovereignty in salvation and man's responsibility. The teachers are candid that the doctrine of salvation is enormous, so the course concentrates on what is most relevant today and most connected to the rest of the program: much time on predestination, an important issue to understand rather than one everyone will settle, and much time on the history of the doctrine of the atonement. The stated hope for the course is that students leave with a greater appreciation of how the good news is truly good news, of what God has done by intervening rather than leaving humanity in the condition it chose.

2. The course questions

The whole class is organized around plain questions. What is salvation, and what is its process? Is predestination unconditional or conditional? Does God predestine people to hell, the doctrine Calvin called a terrible one? Why did Christ die on the cross, did he have to, and what exactly did his death accomplish? For whom did he die? Can we say no to the gospel? What does it mean to be born again, and when does regeneration occur, before faith or after? What does it mean to have faith and to repent? Must Christ be made Lord to be saved? What does it mean to be justified, and can someone be justified and still sin, the two questions the teachers call the hallmark of the Reformation? How does one grow as a Christian, and can a person lose their salvation? The teachers tell the story of a friend who despised Christian jargon, was converted, and then caught himself saying he had been born again, only to discover he could not say what the phrase meant. This class is meant to fill words like that with content.

3. Salvation is bigger than the moment of conversion

Most Christians use the word salvation narrowly, for the moment a person trusts Christ. But Scripture uses a whole family of terms for salvation: predestination, regeneration, propitiation, repentance, faith, imputation, reconciliation, conversion, atonement, new birth, justification, sanctification, adoption, glorification. Not all of these are the same thing, and together they run from before time to the resurrection. So the working definition is deliberately wide: salvation is both an event, a definite point at which people are brought into a right relationship with God, and a process by which that rescue is carried through to completion. The class is pressed with an uncomfortable set of questions: if you are saved from sin, why do you still sin, and if from death, why are you still going to die? The scope of salvation in the Bible is wider than the scope most of us carry.

4. Saved, being saved, will be saved

The Bible speaks of salvation in three tenses. Past: by grace you have been saved, as Ephesians 2 puts it. Present: the word of the cross is the power of God to those who are being saved, in 1 Corinthians 1. Future: having now been declared righteous by his blood, we will be saved through him from wrath, in Romans 5. The teachers insist the future tense is not a threat but a hope, because our lives do not always look saved now, and the promise is that the presence of sin will finally be gone. That is why Ephesians speaks of believers as sealed with the Spirit as a guarantee: the seal declares that a process has begun and will be completed. Christ finished the work on the cross, so the past event is not being stretched, yet our hope still reaches forward to the day sin is fully removed.

5. What *ordo salutis* means

Ordo salutis is Latin for the order of salvation, the logical order in which the process of salvation takes place. Some elements are easy to sequence: the atonement happened before anyone in the room believed, and predestination, however defined, before the atonement, while sanctification and glorification clearly come at the end. Other elements are fiercely contested, above all whether regeneration comes before or after faith. Theologians have organized the order in different ways: by tenses, past, present, and future; by the persons of the Trinity and their roles; by what happens before time and inside time; or by dividing what God does alone, called monergism, one worker, covering election, atonement, calling, regeneration, and justification, from what God does through us, called synergism, working together, covering faith, repentance, sanctification, and perseverance.

6. The Pauline order in Romans 8

The course follows the order Paul gives in Romans 8:29 and 30: those God foreknew he predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, those he predestined he called, those he called he justified, and those he justified he glorified. The teachers point out a striking grammatical fact: every verb in the chain, including glorified, is in a past tense, the Greek aorist, even though no one in the room has been glorified yet. The future is spoken of as already done because it is certain in the hands of God, the same certainty behind the seal of the Spirit. That tension between process and event, they note, sits underneath the whole Reformation dispute: is salvation a process, as Rome held, or an event, as the Protestants insisted? The course will follow the Protestant tradition while trying to understand honestly why the question was so hard.

7. The Pelagian order

Four historic orders of salvation are then laid side by side. The Pelagian order flows from Pelagius's view of man from the previous course: people are born neutral, with full ability to choose God without grace. So salvation runs from innocence through good works or bad works, with confession and further good works balancing the scales, a process of staying in the right, and finally glorification for those who end on the good side, damnation for the rest. The teachers call this the natural religion of the average person on the street, and they warn that it has seeped inside the church as well: do good, go to heaven; do bad, go to hell.

8. The Roman Catholic order

The Roman Catholic order begins with a conditional election: God looks ahead through the corridors of time and predestines to save those he sees choosing him. The atonement is provided for all. Then baptism removes original sin, confirmation seals a person's own profession, and a long process of justification follows in which God and man work together. A mortal sin, something grave like murder or adultery, forfeits grace, and since baptism cannot be repeated, restoration comes through confession and penance. Those who die without unresolved mortal sin pass through purgatory, where lesser, venial sins are purged, and then on to glory. The teachers note that purgatory has softened considerably in recent Catholic theology, from ages of waiting to something brief, but the structure remains a process a person can rise and fall within.

9. The Arminian order

The Arminian order, held by Protestants in the tradition of Jacobus Arminius, likewise begins with conditional election grounded in foreknowledge: seeing that you will believe, God graciously decides to save you. The atonement follows, then the calling of the gospel, and then prevenient grace: God restores the dead sinner just enough to make a genuine choice possible, balancing the scales so a person can either believe or reject. Those who believe are regenerated and conditionally justified, conditioned on continuing in faith. The teachers are careful to represent Arminians fairly: informed Arminians do not say a bad sin costs you your salvation; they say only a willful abandonment of faith does, and many hold that such apostasy cannot be undone. What Arminians are protecting, the teachers stress, is what Scripture seems everywhere to assume: real choices for which people are really responsible.

10. The Reformed order

The Reformed or Calvinistic order, which the teachers trace to Augustine, begins differently: God does not look ahead; he sovereignly elects particular people, then provides an atonement for those he elected, then calls them in time, then regenerates them, opening hearts that were dead and unable to respond. Regeneration must come before conversion, because a dead person cannot believe; once God makes the heart alive, faith and repentance follow, two sides of one coin. Justification then both forgives and clothes the believer in Christ's righteousness, and sanctification and glorification complete the work. Only conversion and sanctification involve man at all; everything else God does alone. The presupposition underneath, the teachers note, is original sin: it is because man is that helpless that God must do all of this. On this scheme the line of salvation never wavers: from election to glorification the outcome is so certain it can be written in the past tense.

11. Sanctified by works, saved by faith

A sharp clarification closes the survey of the Reformed chart: sanctification involves works, but salvation is never by works. By the time a believer is being sanctified, he is already saved, by grace through faith and not of works, as Ephesians 2 says, while James 2 shows works as the outcome of real faith rather than its cause. On the other side of the chart, damnation is conditional in the sense that God is not active in it: man rejects the general call by his own choice and bears his own judgment. Most Calvinists today, the teachers note, deny that God damns in the same active way he saves; that darker doctrine, double predestination, is saved for a later session.

12. Where the course will stand

The teachers close by showing their hand. Both traditions argue from the Bible: the Reformed texts emphasize God's sovereignty, and the Arminian texts emphasize the reality of human choice, and the class will have to wrestle with both rather than deny either. The course will follow the Reformed model as the closest fit to Scripture, with one honest concession: the only real place to mix and match would be whether regeneration precedes conversion. And it will keep all three tenses in view. I am saved, I am being saved, and I will be saved are all true at once, and none excludes the others. You are here, somewhere in the middle of a salvation that began before time and will not fail to finish.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

1 Corinthians 1 · 2 Corinthians 5 · Ephesians 1 · Ephesians 2 · James 2 · Romans 5 · Romans 8

KEY TERMS

Soteriology

The doctrine of salvation: the study of the nature of salvation and Christian growth, from God's eternal purpose to the believer's glorification.

Ordo salutis

Latin for the order of salvation: the logical order in which the parts of salvation take place, from election through glorification. Logical order, the teachers stress, is not always temporal order.

Salvation as event and process

The course's working definition: salvation is a definite event in which people are brought into right relationship with God, and also a process completed only at glorification. Scripture speaks of it in past, present, and future tenses.

Monergism

One worker: the parts of salvation God accomplishes alone, with man wholly passive. On the Reformed order this covers election, atonement, calling, regeneration, and justification.

Synergism

Working together: the parts of salvation in which God works through us, namely faith, repentance, sanctification, and perseverance. Even here the teachers insist the power is God's.

Prevenient grace

In the Arminian order, the grace that comes before conversion and restores fallen people just enough to make a free choice for or against God possible, balancing the scales.

Effectual grace

In the Augustinian and Reformed understanding, grace that actually accomplishes salvation in the one it comes to, rather than merely making salvation possible.

The aorist of certainty

Paul's use of the past tense in Romans 8:29 and 30 for events still future, glorified most of all, because what God has purposed is so sure it can be spoken of as done.

Mortal and venial sins

In Roman Catholic teaching, the distinction between grave sins that forfeit saving grace and lesser sins that do not, the machinery behind confession, penance, and purgatory in the Roman order of salvation.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

Sixteen questions from the lecture. Circle your answers, then check them against the key at the bottom.

1. Why do the teachers say our usual definition of salvation is too narrow?

- A. Because salvation is really only about escaping hell
- B. Because we fix on the single moment of conversion, while Scripture spreads salvation across a whole family of terms running from predestination to glorification
- C. Because the word salvation never appears in the Old Testament
- D. Because only theologians are qualified to define salvation

2. How does Scripture speak of salvation in three tenses?

- A. Saved from sin, saved from Satan, saved from self
- B. Justification, adoption, and baptism
- C. By grace you have been saved; the word of the cross is power to those being saved; having been declared righteous, we will be saved from wrath
- D. Only the future tense is ever used of salvation

3. Why does the sealing of the Spirit matter for the definition of salvation?
 - A. A seal would be pointless if salvation were already complete; it declares that a process has begun and is guaranteed to finish
 - B. It proves salvation can be lost if the seal is broken
 - C. It replaces the need for faith
 - D. It refers only to the apostles
4. What story do the teachers tell about the phrase born again?
 - A. A seminary professor refused to use the phrase in class
 - B. A convert who hated Christian jargon caught himself using the phrase, and neither he nor his friend could immediately say what it meant
 - C. The phrase was invented in the nineteenth century
 - D. A church removed the phrase from its statement of faith
5. What is the difference between monergism and synergism in the order of salvation?
 - A. Monergism is the Old Testament pattern and synergism the New
 - B. Monergism means salvation by works, synergism salvation by faith
 - C. They are two names for the same thing
 - D. Monergism names what God does alone, such as election and regeneration; synergism names what God does through us, such as faith, repentance, and sanctification
6. Which parts of the order of salvation does the lecture say are easy to sequence?
 - A. The atonement before anyone's faith, predestination before the atonement, and sanctification and glorification at the end
 - B. None of them; the order is entirely unknowable
 - C. Regeneration and faith, which everyone agrees on
 - D. Only justification
7. What grammatical observation do the teachers make about Romans 8:29 and 30?
 - A. The verbs are all commands
 - B. Every verb in the chain, even glorified, is in a past tense, because the outcome is so certain it can be spoken of as already done
 - C. The passage is written in Aramaic
 - D. The verbs are all in the future tense
8. On the Pelagian order of salvation, how is a person finally saved?
 - A. By God's unconditional choice before time
 - B. Through baptism and the sacraments alone
 - C. By doing good works, balancing out bad ones through confession and more good works, and ending life on the right side of the scale
 - D. By prevenient grace restoring the will
9. Why do the teachers linger on the Pelagian view at all?
 - A. Because it is the view of most seminaries
 - B. Because Pelagius was later canonized
 - C. Because the church officially adopted it at the Council of Orange
 - D. Because it is the natural religion of the average person, do good and go to heaven, and it has seeped inside the church as well

10. In the Roman Catholic order, what do baptism and penance each do?
- A. Baptism removes original sin and cannot be repeated; penance restores those who fall through mortal sin afterward
 - B. Both remove original sin whenever repeated
 - C. Baptism justifies and penance glorifies
 - D. Neither has any effect on salvation
11. What is prevenient grace in the Arminian order?
- A. The grace given only to the elect
 - B. God's restoring of dead sinners just far enough that a genuine free choice for or against him becomes possible
 - C. Another name for glorification
 - D. The grace conferred by the Lord's Supper
12. How do the teachers say informed Arminians describe losing salvation?
- A. Any sin at all forfeits salvation
 - B. Salvation can never be lost on any Arminian account
 - C. Not by committing some grave sin, but only by willfully abandoning the faith itself
 - D. Only mortal sins from the Catholic list forfeit it
13. Why must regeneration precede conversion on the Reformed order?
- A. Because baptism must come first
 - B. Because faith is a work that earns new birth
 - C. Because conversion happens only at the end of life
 - D. Because a person dead in sin cannot believe; God must first make the heart alive, and then faith and repentance follow
14. Which parts of the Reformed order involve man at all?
- A. Election and calling
 - B. Conversion and sanctification, and even there God supplies the power
 - C. The atonement
 - D. None; man is passive throughout
15. How does the lecture keep sanctification's works from becoming salvation by works?
- A. By denying that works matter at all
 - B. By making works the condition of final justification
 - C. The one being sanctified is already saved by grace through faith; works are the outcome of that salvation, as James 2 shows, never its cause
 - D. By restricting works to the clergy
16. Where does the course say it will stand, and with what honesty?
- A. It will follow the Reformed order as the closest fit to Scripture, while admitting both traditions argue from the Bible and that the real dispute is whether regeneration precedes conversion
 - B. It will follow the Arminian order without qualification
 - C. It refuses to take any position
 - D. It will follow the Roman Catholic order

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 C · 3 A · 4 B · 5 D · 6 A · 7 B · 8 C · 9 D · 10 A · 11 B · 12 C · 13 D · 14 B · 15 C · 16 A

TALK IT OVER

1. The class was asked how many of them have quit sinning, and how many are not planning to die. If salvation includes rescue from sin and death, in what sense are you already saved, and in what sense are you still waiting? How does the seal of the Spirit speak to the gap?
2. The teachers observed that we know the moment of Paul's conversion but cannot name the moment of Peter's. Does your own story have a clean moment, a long dawning, or both? What does that suggest about defining salvation only by the moment?
3. Lay the four orders of salvation side by side. Which one most resembles what you believed before you could name it, and which single difference between them do you now think matters most?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

Paul traces the unbreakable chain in Romans 8: those God foreknew he predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, and those he predestined he called, and those he called he justified, and those he justified he also glorified.

GO FURTHER

The lecture's own assignments: begin the sixteen key terms early, read the two case studies in the syllabus, presenting the substitutionary view of the atonement and the destiny of the unevangelized, and take up the week's reading in Grudem along with John Piper's paper *Are There Two Wills in God?* The teachers also walk the class through the course bibliography: Roger Olson's *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, whose method of asking what unites, what divides, and what may be debated without dividing they say describes the whole program; Bruce Demarest's *The Cross and Salvation*, in their judgment the best single textbook on soteriology; John Stott's *The Cross of Christ*, a masterpiece; R. C. Sproul's *Faith Alone on justification*; Michael Horton's *Putting Amazing Back into Grace*; Charles Ryrie's *Balancing the Christian Life*; and Charles Swindoll's *The Grace Awakening*. The course turns next to the doctrine of election.