

## How Were People Saved Before Christ?

February 2023

Sometimes people think Christianity is unfair. If the only way to heaven is through faith in Jesus, and Jesus wasn't born until about 2,000 years ago, then did all the people before that go to hell? Does God only care about the people who came afterwards?

The Bible's answer to this question is that Jesus also was the Savior of those who lived before He came to earth. Before that, people were saved in the same way we are: through faith in Christ.

Jesus is the eternal Son of God, who came in human flesh (John 1:1–14) to take away the sin of the world (v. 29). He was active and powerful to save even before He took on human flesh, by virtue of the promise of all that He would accomplish after He took on human flesh.

In Christ, God did for man what no man from Adam onward could do for himself on account of sin. Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation. Christ is the promised *Seed of the woman who would bruise the serpent's head* (Genesis 3:15), thereby conquering death and hell, redeeming sinners and restoring them to God.

This promise was passed down through primeval patriarchs (Genesis 5) and renewed for Noah. Genesis 6 calls Noah *a just man* (the Hebrew word emphasizes that He was *justified*, that is, declared righteous and forgiven of his sins by faith). It was then given to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 12:1–3). Abraham “believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). It was repeated through various prophecies, such as the *Suffering Servant* prophecies of Isaiah (42:1–9; 49:1–13; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12).

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Christ and His salvific work was foreshadowed through the sacrificial rites that climaxed in circumcision (Genesis 17), the Passover (Exodus 12), and those of the Tabernacle (Exodus; Leviticus). These were types and shadows that provided Old Testament people with a veiled look forward to the person and work of Christ that they could hang their faith on. They were also powerful *means of grace*. Through them God distributed the saving benefits of Christ's coming work and created and sustained their faith in the Promised Savior.

The letter to the Hebrews clarifies that these Old Testament rites were fulfilled in Christ (as were all the prophecies). In chapter 11, the writer lays out how the Old Testament saints lived by faith and were ultimately saved by faith; in other words, as they trusted in the mercy of God in Christ to come and received His saving benefits in the ways that were divinely provided for them. “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1)

Jesus Himself is clear that He, God in the flesh, and His saving work—His perfect life, suffering, death and resurrection—were the Old Testament's primary content (John 5:39, Luke 24:25–27, 44–47). He and His apostles taught that being a *true Israelite* had always been a matter of *faith in Christ* and not a matter of bloodline (John 8:31–50; Romans 4:1–13, 9–11; Galatians 3, 4:21–31). Old Testament examples include: Rahab, the harlot from Jericho, and Ruth, the Moabite (Joshua 2, 6:22–25; Ruth 1–4; Hebrews 11:31; Matthew 1:5). Both of these women, though born Gentiles, were reckoned as true Israelites by faith.

Jesus Christ is the center of time and eternity and of the biblical testimony. Old Testament believers were saved by a forward-looking faith centered on the prophecies of the coming Christ. They received the benefits of His atoning work on the cross before He came.

We are saved by the same faith, which now looks back in time to His already accomplished saving work. We receive here and now the benefits of Christ's work in the Word and Sacraments.

Looking forward or backward, we each trust in the same Christ.

**Rev. Robert Lawson, Jr.**, serves as pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church, The Dalles, Oregon, and Concordia Lutheran in Hood River, Oregon.

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