

What Must I [Really] Do to Be Saved?

There are dozens of things that Christians sometimes tell unbelievers they must do in order to be saved (see the table below). Many, if not most, of these have some kind of “Biblical support” (interpreted properly or not).

Some Actions that Unbelievers Are Often Told to Take in Order to Be Saved

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Accept Christ | <input type="checkbox"/> Get saved |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ask Jesus to save you | <input type="checkbox"/> Give your life to God |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Be baptized | <input type="checkbox"/> Give your heart to Jesus |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Be born again | <input type="checkbox"/> Have your sins forgiven |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Be converted | <input type="checkbox"/> Humble yourself before God |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Be washed in the blood | <input type="checkbox"/> Invite Jesus into your heart |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Become a Christian | <input type="checkbox"/> Look to Jesus and live |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Believe in/believe on Jesus | <input type="checkbox"/> Make a faith commitment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Call upon the Lord | <input type="checkbox"/> Make Jesus your Lord |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cleanse your heart | <input type="checkbox"/> Make your peace with God |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Come to Jesus | <input type="checkbox"/> Obey the gospel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Commit your life to Jesus | <input type="checkbox"/> Pray “the prayer” |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confess Jesus as Lord | <input type="checkbox"/> “Pray through” (at a mourner’s bench) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confess publicly with your mouth | <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare to meet your God |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confess your sins to God | <input type="checkbox"/> Put your faith in Jesus |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Convert to Christianity | <input type="checkbox"/> Reach out to Jesus |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cry out to God to be saved | <input type="checkbox"/> Receive Jesus |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Decide (make a decision) for Christ | <input type="checkbox"/> Receive the gift of salvation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Deny yourself and take up the cross | <input type="checkbox"/> Repent of your sins |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Draw near to God | <input type="checkbox"/> Surrender your life to Christ/God |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Drink/take water of life freely | <input type="checkbox"/> Trust Jesus |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Enter the narrow gate | <input type="checkbox"/> Turn from your sins |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Follow Jesus | <input type="checkbox"/> Turn to the Lord |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Forsake all to follow Jesus | <input type="checkbox"/> Turn your life over to God |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Get right with God | <input type="checkbox"/> Yield your life to Jesus/God |

Suppose you went through this list and checked off the actions that you think have legitimate Biblical support as actions that result in salvation. Let’s say that you selected 20 of them. Would you think of these as separate action steps to salvation? Or, would you think of these simply as different ways to describe a single heart-action that results in salvation?

Wouldn’t you agree that the simple “believes in Him” truth of John 3:16-18 is sufficient, even though this heart-action might be expressed in the New Testament through the use of a variety of metaphors and synonyms?

John 3:16-18 (NKJV)

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

¹⁸ “He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Why is this issue so important that we would write an article to address it?

Throughout the Good Soil seminar and *The Story of Hope*, we emphasize that “faith” (believing/trusting) is the heart-action step that results in the salvation of a sinner. More specifically, it is faith that is focused on God’s provision for man’s spiritual needs—the death and resurrection of God’s Son, Jesus Christ.

Yet, frequently we are asked the “But what about ...” questions:

- But what about turning from sins; when does the unbeliever do that?
- But what about calling upon the name of the Lord (“praying the prayer”); when does the unbeliever do that?
- But what about receiving Jesus and God’s gift of salvation; when does the unbeliever do that?

These actions (and many of the others in the table above) are mentioned in a few passages in the New Testament. But the New Testament clearly teaches that there is one single heart-action that brings salvation and it is “faith” in Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:8-9

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Because of the various synonyms and synonymic metaphors used in the Bible to describe the act of “saving faith,” some people seem to think that (genuine) faith in Christ is only one step that must be preceded or followed by other steps—turning from sins, praying a prayer, receiving the gift of salvation, and so forth. They fail to differentiate between the synonyms (and synonymic metaphors) for “faith in Christ” and the heart-action of (saving) faith in Christ itself. Consequently the synonyms are misunderstood to be separate steps to salvation.

Does it not make better Biblical sense to think that a sinner is turning from his/her sins, calling upon the Lord in his heart, receiving God’s gift of salvation, when he or she sincerely places his or her trust in Jesus Christ as Savior?

But isn’t this “decisional evangelism” or “easy believism”?

Decisional evangelism? This term is often used to describe the kind of methods of evangelism introduced by Charles Finney in the mid-1800s. Finney’s approach strongly overemphasized the role of the human will (“decisions”) in salvation, to the degree that God’s role (of drawing people to Himself) was seriously neglected. To Finney and those who patterned their ministries after him, evangelism became more a matter of using convincing techniques than a spiritual process of depraved sinners being drawn to God through His Spirit.

We certainly do not agree with Finney’s “decisional evangelism” (or what some have called “decisional regeneration”). Finney ignored the essential role of God in salvation that was clearly taught by Jesus in John 6:44a (NASB): “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”

However, we do believe that, from the human perspective of salvation, there is a point when an unbeliever (through the convicting work of the Holy Spirit) chooses (decides) to trust (believe) Jesus Christ as Savior. But that’s not “decisional evangelism” in the sense that the term was intended to describe. Keep in mind that the same apostle who recorded John 6:44 also recorded John 3:16.

Easy Believism? No doubt, there is a lot of shallow, “easy believism” evangelism going on in the world today. Perhaps that is why many Bible-believing Christians find it hard to accept the fact that salvation comes by simply believing in Jesus Christ and His redemptive work. But adding other steps to salvation isn’t the solution to easy-believism. That just creates an equally dangerous doctrinal untruth. The key to the solution is to make sure that when people “believe in Jesus” they do so with clear understanding and genuine heart-commitment (trust).

That’s why our Good Soil Evangelism and Discipleship training and resources were created—to equip believers to do evangelism and discipleship in a way that unbelievers will (1) clearly **understand** the gospel, (2) genuinely **embrace** the gospel, and (3) firmly **hold on** to the gospel. **See: www.GoodSoil.com/about**

A person who is thoroughly acquainted with *The Story of Hope*, from start to finish, would be hard-pressed to say that this evangelism resource encourages “easy believism.”

First: Keep in mind that by the time we get to the end of *The Story of Hope* in a Bible study with an unbeliever, we’ve taken the person through 40 redemption-related events. In that process, we’ve engaged him/her in some penetrating personal questions, such as “Who is Jesus—a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord?” and “Do you think that your name is written in the Lamb’s Book of Life and upon what do you base your conclusion?”

Second: Keep in mind that we’ve led the person through eight faith response questions in order to assist them in clearly and sincerely embracing the gospel message and trusting Jesus alone to save them:

- From the Bible we learn that one, and only one, true eternal and holy God exists, that He is our all-powerful Creator and just Judge, and that we are accountable to Him. **Do you believe this?**
- From the Bible we learn that we are made by God, loved by God, and that God deserves our full obedience. **Do you believe this?**
- From the Bible we learn that we have sinned against God and deserve His righteous punishment. **Do you believe this?**
- From the Bible we learn that we are facing God’s judgment and cannot escape it on our own. **Do you believe this?**
- From the Bible we learn that Jesus Christ is the perfect Son of God and the perfect Son of Man, the only way to eternal life. **Do you believe this?**
- From the Bible we learn that Jesus Christ, God’s Son, died for our sins and rose from the dead to rescue us from death and give us eternal life. **Do you believe this?**
- From the Bible we learn that we must trust in Jesus’ death on the cross as the only satisfactory payment for our sins, as we abandon our trust in other things that we formerly relied upon to save us. **Do you believe this?**
- From the Bible we learn that Jesus alone has power over death and that He gives eternal life to those who trust solely in Him for the forgiveness of sins. **Do you believe this?**

Third: On page 60 in *The Story of Hope*, we have summarized God’s story of hope and led the person to personalize John 3:16-18.

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

¹⁸ “He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Then, also on page 60, we led the person through a personal faith response statement:

I now understand that the God of the Bible is the one True God. He is perfect and holy.

Through the teaching of the Bible I now see myself much differently than I previously did. I now realize that I was born with a sinful nature, that I have disobeyed God continually, and that my sin has deeply grieved God who made me and loves me. I know that my sin has separated me from God and that the just punishment for my sin is eternal separation from Him in a literal place of torment that the Bible calls *Hell*.

I understand that the death and resurrection of God’s Son Jesus Christ is the only hope for me to be forgiven, for me to escape the eternal punishment for my sins, and for me to receive God’s gift of eternal life.

I am now trusting Jesus Christ and His death on the cross, and no one or nothing else, as the only sufficient remedy for my sin problem and its dreadful consequences.

So, if all went well, the person has ...

- Completed a fairly rigorous study of the Bible's redemptive story.
- Expressed verbally his or her belief in eight vital redemption-related truths.
- Personalized the truths of John 3:16-18 to his/her life.
- Expressed again, in the personal faith response statement of page 60, his/her agreement with what the Bible says about God, man, sin, death, Christ, the redemptive work of Christ, faith, and eternal life.
- Expressed that he/she is "trusting Jesus Christ alone and His death on the cross as the only sufficient remedy for his/her sin and its consequences."

So, if the person is genuinely trusting Jesus Christ for salvation, what else does he/she need to do in order to be saved?

But what about confessing Jesus with the mouth (publicly before others)?

Some would ask:

"Don't Matthew 10:32-33 and Romans 10:8-11 teach that a public confession is a required step or prerequisite to salvation?"

Matthew 10:32-33

³² "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven.

³³ But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.

Romans 10:8-11

⁸ But what does it say? "*The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart*" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): ⁹ that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, "*Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.*"

Rather than to view a public confession of Jesus as one's Savior as a prerequisite to salvation, perhaps it is the natural and expected fruit that occurs in the life of everyone who genuinely believes (trusts) in Jesus for salvation. Otherwise, it would seem to be a "work" that one must do to be saved and that would contradict Ephesians 2:8-9.

On a more practical note, if a person is in total isolation from other people when he or she initially "believes in his/her heart," how can that person fulfill the requirement of a public confession?

But what about Romans 10:13?

Doesn't this verse require an unbeliever to pray a "sinner's prayer" to God in order to be saved?

We need to understand the immediate context of Romans 10:13 as well as its connection to a more remote context. This verse is at the heart of Paul's discourse about Israel's unbelief and the benefits granted to Gentiles because of Israel's unbelief. Romans 10:13 is a quotation from Joel 2:32, which points to the future "great and dreadful day of the Lord" when "everyone who calls on the LORD will be saved." In Romans 10, Paul made a present application of Joel's statement and emphasized the "everyone" part of the statement. God (even now) accepts everyone—both Jews and Gentiles—who call upon him.

But what did Paul mean by "calls on the name of the Lord"? We need to look again into the remote historical context of Romans 10, the Old Testament. That phrase was used commonly in the Old Testament to describe the act of worshipping the LORD. For example in the days of Enosh, son of Seth, "men began to call on the name of the LORD" (Genesis 4:26). Abraham "built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD" (Genesis 12:8). In the Old Testament the two

divisions of mankind were thought of as (1) those who worship the LORD and (2) those who do not. Today we often think of these divisions as “the saved” (or saints) and “the lost” (sinners).

Paul himself used the “call on the Lord” expression in the New Testament to describe genuine worshippers in 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 2 Timothy 2:22.

1 Corinthians 1:2

²To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ— their Lord and ours:

2 Timothy 2:22

²²... along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

Thus, in Romans 10:11-13 Paul was probably not thinking of a “sinner’s prayer” for salvation. Verses 11-12 seem to suggest that he was emphasizing that anyone, a Jew or a Gentile, can become a true worshipper of Israel’s Jehovah God.

Romans 10:11-13

¹¹As the Scripture says, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” ¹²For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, ¹³for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Should I not ask an unbeliever to pray a prayer to be saved?

We chose to keep page 60 of *The Story of Hope* flexible and somewhat open-ended, allowing for a variety of possible ways for you to lead an unbeliever to express a faith response to Jesus Christ. On that page, we also chose not to ask an unbeliever to “pray a prayer” to be saved. All too often, the prayer is perceived as the action that saves, rather than the heart-action of faith in God’s Son, the Savior. It’s common to hear people say, “I prayed the prayer,” even though there is no evidence that they understood what they did, nor any evidence that their lives have been changed by the gospel.

It’s certainly not wrong for a person to express his/her faith in Jesus Christ through a prayer—many of us have done that in a meaningful way. But if we choose to lead a sinner to express his/her faith in Christ through a prayer, we must be sure that this person clearly understands that there is nothing supernatural about “the prayer” itself. It’s not another “magical” incantation nor is it an “I prayed the prayer” act to cling to for assurance of salvation.

In fact, if a person has come to the point where he/she has genuinely trusted Jesus in his/her heart, such a prayer isn’t necessary.

Let’s suppose you have shared the gospel with an unbeliever who now says that he/she is trusting in Jesus alone for salvation. An alternative approach to helping him/her “mark” that heart-action would be to ask him/her to express thanks to God, through a prayer, for the gift of eternal life that God has given to him/her.

But what about repentance?

Isn’t repentance a separate step to salvation that precedes genuine belief in Christ?

Why don’t you emphasize repentance more?

Entire books have been written on the subject of “repentance and faith.” So we won’t attempt an exhaustive study of those concepts here. The key, however, is to understand the meaning of the Biblical terms translated “repentance.”

The meaning of repentance. Because of some common, traditional religious practices, “repentance” and “penance” are often confused. The basic meaning of penance is to express sorrow for sin—in some cases even to the extent of self-castigation and deeds of attempted self-justifying righteousness. Even some evangelicals demand that overt expressions of sorrow for sins and renouncement of those sins must precede saving faith.

But the main word for repentance (*metanoia**) in the New Testament has a very different meaning—“to change one’s mind.”* It’s a mind-change that is so deep-seated that the person’s total being—values, choices, and lifestyle behaviors—

will be impacted. Often, this change will be accompanied by visible expressions of sorrow, but those emotions are not what true repentance is all about.

Instead of ignoring repentance or just giving “lip service” to it, genuine Biblical repentance is a major focus of Good Soil Evangelism and Discipleship theology, training, and resources (particularly *The Story of Hope*). The Good Soil E&D Scale and the “worldview onion” model are designed to help us assess the status of a person’s mind, in relation to the truths of God’s Word. The “worldview noise” communication model is designed to help us come to grips with the challenges we face in presenting the gospel to people whose minds need to be deeply changed by God’s Word—people who need to repent.

* The verb *metanoein* means to take subsequent note of something, to adopt another view, and therefore to regret the prior viewpoint. (from page 49 of *Conversion in the New Testament* by Richard V. Peace).

The relationship between repentance and faith. As was stated above, some believers see repentance and faith as two separate, successive steps: (1) I repent (“express deep regret” for my sins and a willingness to forsake them), and then I can (2) believe in Christ so that He will save me from these sins that I regret and have forsaken.

But another way of viewing repentance and faith is that they are two simultaneous facets (flip sides) of the same action: (1) At the same time that I initially trust (believe) in Christ to be my Savior, (2) I am abandoning (repenting of) the trust that I formerly placed in other things—my thinking is totally flipped.

This view explains why the terms seem to be used interchangeably in some New Testament passages.

Paul clearly connects the two concepts in **Acts 20:20-21**:

²⁰ how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, ²¹ testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

The fact that the original words for repentance and faith are joined by one article would indicate that they are inseparable here.

Acts 2:22-24, 36-38: When asked, “What shall we do?” Peter said, “Repent.”

²² “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know— ²³ Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; ²⁴ whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.

³⁶ “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

³⁷ Now when they heard *this*, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men *and* brethren, what shall we do?”

³⁸ Then Peter said to them, “**Repent.**”

In Acts 2:22-38, Peter confronted the most important worldview beliefs that needed to be changed in the minds of the Jews. These beliefs centered around their views of Jesus of Nazareth. There is no indication in this text that Peter told the Jews to “believe” (*per se*). But as these Jews changed their old way of thinking toward Jesus of Nazareth (repented), they simultaneously believed in Him as the Lord (God) and Christ (Messiah) that Peter had declared Him to be.

Acts 16:29-34: When asked, “What must I do to be saved?” Paul said, “Believe.”

²⁹ Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ And he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

³¹ So they said, “**Believe** on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ And he took them the

same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his *family* were baptized.

³⁴ Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household.

We can't say for sure why Paul gave a different response to the question of this Gentile* Philippian jailer, as compared to the response that Peter gave to the Jews on the day of Pentecost. But as an ordinary Gentile, the jailer probably knew very little or nothing at all about Jesus of Nazareth. He didn't need to change his mind (repent) about Jesus as much as he needed to believe in Him. And in order to give him a basis for that belief (trust), Paul and Silas "spoke the word of the Lord to him" (perhaps for several hours).

Did Peter (in Acts 2) and Paul (in Acts 16) each present only half of the way to salvation? If repentance and faith are the "flip sides" of the same heart-action, the answer is "No"—they both gave essentially the same response but emphasized what their hearers most needed.

*According to Acts 16:13 there probably was no Jewish synagogue in Philippi. Thus, it is very unlikely that the Philippian jailer was a Jew.

The Gospel of John: *The word "repentance" does not appear in John's Gospel.*

Some evangelicals evaluate a sermon or book about salvation based upon how frequently the word *repentance* is used. The assumption seems to be that, if the word is not used frequently, then the speaker or writer advocates easy believism and doesn't believe in or value the concept of repentance. Is it not possible that a person can believe and value the Biblical doctrine of repentance without making frequent references to it?

For example, the words "faith" and "believe" appear nearly 100 times in John's Gospel, but the word *repentance* doesn't appear there (nor does it appear in any of his three epistles). Did this mean that the beloved disciple of Jesus espoused a shallow view regarding how men and women become members of God's family?

As a disciple of Jesus, John certainly knew about repentance and used the word *repent* several times in the book of Revelation*. We suggest that John probably saw true faith (belief) in Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, to be the flip side of repentance. Thus, every time John exhorted his readers to believe in Jesus, he was also exhorting them to change their minds with regard to what they previously believed and trusted.

John 20:31

³¹ But these are written, that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you might have life through his name.

***Note:** It is interesting that the first two times John used the word *repent* in his New Testament writings it was directed toward people who professed to be Christians (Revelation 2:5, 16).