



WHY
DID

THE NECESSITY *of* CHRIST'S
OBEDIENCE *for* OUR SALVATION

JESUS

LIVE A
PERFECT
LIFE?

BRANDON D. CROWE

WHY DID JESUS LIVE A PERFECT LIFE?

THE NECESSITY *of* CHRIST'S
OBEDIENCE *for* OUR SALVATION

BRANDON D. CROWE


Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Brandon D. Crowe, *Why Did Jesus Live a Perfect Life?*
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2021
Used by permission.

CONTENTS

Preface ix

Abbreviations xi

PART 1: DEFINITIONS

1. What Is Required? 3
2. The Basis of Justification 15

PART 2: EXEGESIS

3. The Obedience of the Last Adam 35
4. The Mosaic Law and Perfect Obedience 59
5. Jesus's Obedience and Salvation in the Gospels 85
6. The Obedience of the Perfect Priest 105
7. Obedience, Resurrection, and Salvation 121

PART 3: IMPLICATIONS

8. Jesus's Obedience and Our Justification 147
9. Jesus's Obedience and Our Obedience 165
10. What Is Required Is Finished 185

Contents

Bibliography 191
Permissions 199
Scripture Index 201
Subject Index 207



PART 1

DEFINITIONS



WHAT IS REQUIRED?

This is a book about Jesus and the salvation he has accomplished. But it's also a book about what is required of those who follow him as disciples. Surely these are two of the most important issues in life. Not surprisingly, these are questions on which there is much debate and disagreement. They are also complex questions that merit many volumes to address. Even so, there is a place for succinct and selective discussions of key issues, which is what I aim to do in this book.

The New Testament presents Jesus as the fully obedient Son of God. He is the perfect Savior who deals definitively with sin. On this, there is widespread agreement.

Yet the perfect obedience of Jesus receives less attention than one might expect in contemporary discussions of Jesus and salvation. When we turn to Scripture, the perfect obedience of Jesus is emphasized in the Gospels, Acts, Paul's Epistles, Hebrews, and elsewhere. The obedience of Jesus is also an emphasis of the early church, in writings that echo the New

Testament. If we want to understand the scriptural teaching on salvation, then the perfect obedience of Jesus is an important—if sometimes neglected—topic to consider.

In this book, my aim is to show anew some of the ways in which Jesus is a beautiful Savior and how we ought to live in response. I want to highlight ways in which his work is unique and how that informs what is required of his disciples.

Mounting Complexity

The issues covered in this book are complex. It's probably no surprise that debates on the doctrine of salvation are ongoing. To some, the questions have been settled hundreds of years ago. To others, we need a new Reformation in light of new insights from theology and biblical studies. This latter perspective is especially true for those following New Testament studies over the past forty years or so.

For example, for better or worse, one of the most disruptive developments in biblical studies pertaining to salvation in the past few decades is known as the New Perspective on Paul. Though this movement is diverse, in general it calls for a reassessment of Paul's theology, especially in light of a reassessment of ancient Jewish sources. This has been particularly pertinent for the doctrine of justification. Justification has been traditionally understood—in both Protestant and Roman Catholic circles—as the way a sinful person is made right before a holy God. According to some proponents of the New Perspective on Paul, however, justification has much less to do with “getting saved”—or with “getting in” to the covenant community. Instead, justification is about how people from very different backgrounds (i.e., Jew and gentile) dwell together as the people of God. In this sense, justification has more of a “horizontal” emphasis between people groups, rather than a “vertical” emphasis between individuals and God.

The New Perspective has sent shock waves across the landscape of biblical studies over the past few decades, and its tremors continue to be felt today. The dust of these debates has now settled quite a bit, but that doesn't mean that clarity abounds. Many are convinced by the newer proposals; many are not; and many are somewhere in between. The debates have also spilled over to other areas of New Testament interpretation. Despite a number of new insights into the apostle Paul that we've gained, I'm concerned that the New Perspective has led many not to greater clarity on the Bible's teaching of justification and the work of Christ, but to greater fogginess, waffling, and imprecision on matters that require precision and confidence.

The New Perspective is just one example. Another recent contribution argues that *faith* is best understood as *allegiance*, and thus we are saved by "allegiance alone."¹ Studies such as these require us to address some of the most pressing of all questions: How are sinners made right before a holy God? To what degree and in what way do our works play a role in salvation? Are we saved *entirely* on the basis of the work of another, or is it through some combination—however nuanced—of faith and our own works?

Intricate discussions on salvation and justification can quickly become complex, especially for those who encounter new arguments that challenge traditional views. (Sometimes you think you know something until you're asked to defend it.) This can lead to frustration and even a crisis of faith. What traditional points of understanding should stay? What should go? Is there a clear answer? Do the New Testament writers even agree on this question?

In the face of potential confusion about salvation, justification, and the work of Christ, I've found it helpful to focus on

1. Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

one question—a question whose answer has far-reaching implications. It’s a question that may seem obvious but is asked less often than you might think. One’s answer to this question has a number of interrelated implications.

Piercing the Fog: One Key Question

The one key question that unlocks many of these debates, and one that helps explain the New Testament’s emphasis on the obedience of Jesus Christ, is this: Is *perfect* obedience necessary for eternal life?

This question could be rephrased a number of ways: Is perfect obedience necessary for justification? Is perfect obedience necessary for salvation? Did Jesus *have* to be perfectly obedient in order to save us? And if so, why?

This is a simple question, but it’s related to several other points, with which it forms an interconnected web. For example, one’s answer to this question may determine the degree to which the New Perspective on Paul is compelling. If you believe that *perfect* obedience is necessary for salvation, then saying we are justified on the final day on the basis of our whole lives (as some New Perspective proponents argue) won’t work.² If God requires perfect obedience, then even our best obedience is not adequate to meet the demands of God for eternal life.

Again, if you believe that *perfect* obedience is necessary for salvation, it will likely reveal what you believe about the biblical figure Adam. Was Adam required to be perfectly obedient? Was a covenant made with Adam? Even more fundamentally: Was Adam really the *first* person? Was Adam even a *real* person?

If you believe that *perfect* obedience is necessary for salvation, it will likewise reveal your approach to the Old Testament

2. See especially N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 121; for a more extended discussion and further nuance, see Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, COQG 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 936–62.

law. How do the New Testament writers view the law? Are there layers of complexity in the use of the law in the New Testament? Is there room for understanding the law as God's gracious condescension to Israel *and* for viewing it as containing a principle requiring perfection for eternal life?

Asking whether perfect obedience is necessary for salvation does not solve all debates, but it's an important compass to help keep our bearings in what can easily become a disorienting quagmire. This question also highlights a number of related issues that have to be addressed. For example, we cannot easily fudge on the question of the historical Adam, since, as I will show in following chapters, the need for perfect obedience has historically been traced back to the first man and what was required of him.

Answering the Question

To state the obvious, *asking* the question is not enough. We also need to investigate what answer the Bible gives to this question.

My answer to this key question is *yes*—the Bible does indeed teach that *perfect* obedience is necessary for salvation. If we miss this key point, we will have an impoverished understanding of what Christ does to save us. If we downplay or dispense with the idea that perfect obedience is necessary for salvation, we'll miss one of the key emphases of the New Testament, and thus the necessity and much of the beauty of Christ's work on our behalf. And if we miss this point, we will elevate our own works into an unworkable theological position.

In support of this claim, this book looks at select topics and texts from the New Testament with an eye to what is said about Jesus and the need for perfect obedience. I will discuss how and why Jesus is presented as the perfectly obedient Son of God and how we are to relate to him by faith. This is primarily a book about what Jesus has done, but it also touches

on related areas such as faith, salvation, justification, and sanctification.

To be clear, this is not an exhaustive study of the work of Christ, Paul's theology, or justification. Far from it. This is a sketch in which I aim to provide a strategic set of windows that open up to some helpful vistas. These will draw our attention to some ways the New Testament highlights that the perfect obedience of Jesus is necessary for our salvation.

In this first part of the book, I clear the land by providing orienting discussions. In chapter 2 I clarify commonly used terminology related to the obedience of Jesus. Many people speak about the active and passive obedience of Jesus, but these terms are not widely understood. Even if one were to disagree with or quibble with this or that aspect of these traditional categories, we need to be clear on what we're talking about. Chapter 2 will thus bring much-needed clarity to the conversation. I argue that active and passive obedience are not two *stages* of Jesus's obedience, but two ways of describing his *unified* obedience, and both aspects are necessary for salvation. I also discuss the various benefits of justification, which correlate to the entire obedience of Jesus, and how justification relates to salvation.

Part 2 focuses on biblical texts. In chapter 3 I address one of the most consequential and debated aspects of the obedience of Jesus—the relationship of Jesus to Adam. In this chapter I give extended attention to Romans 5:12–21. Here it's clear that Paul understood Adam to be a real person. If we miss this relationship, or if we downplay the reality of Adam as the head of the human race, then much of the New Testament's portrait of Jesus and his work will crumble. I will also seek to show that the obedience required of Adam was comprehensive, and not limited to one command.

Chapter 4 considers what the New Testament says about the law of Moses, asking, specifically: Did the Mosaic law require perfect obedience? Wasn't it given to a redeemed people? Didn't

it provide ways to atone for sin? I will argue that a full answer to this question must relate the law of Moses to Adam. The Mosaic law was indeed given to a redeemed people, yet it still echoes the need for perfect obedience if one were to seek life by means of works. Here I will address the complicated use of Leviticus 18:5 in the New Testament, including in Luke 10, Romans 10, and Galatians 3.

Chapter 5 looks to the Gospels, where the perfect life of Jesus is narrated. In the Gospels Jesus is consistently presented as the fully obedient, representative Son of God, who, by his obedience, accomplishes salvation. His people therefore should trust in him, that they may have life. In other words—in the Gospels, the obedience of Jesus benefits his people. Key texts include Jesus’s baptism, temptation, the Lord’s Prayer, the binding of the strong man, and union with Christ in the Gospel of John.

Chapter 6 turns to Hebrews and considers the sacrifice of Jesus as high priest. Focusing particularly on the incarnation and the use of Psalm 40 in Hebrews 10, I will show that Jesus could only serve as an effective and final high priest by doing all that God commands, and thus overcoming the dichotomy between sacrifice and obedience that was so often a problem for God’s covenant people.

Chapter 7 considers the implications of Jesus’s resurrection for his obedience. Looking at the Gospels, Acts, and Paul’s Letters, I will show that the logic of the resurrection requires and assumes Jesus’s perfect obedience. The resurrection proves that Jesus never sinned and that he entirely, always, fully did the will of God. Since the resurrection is necessary for salvation, this means that Jesus’s perfect obedience is necessary for salvation.

Part 3 turns to practical application. In chapters 8–9 I relate these issues to justification and Christian discipleship. What is required of followers of Jesus? If Jesus is the perfectly obedient Savior, and if his perfect obedience is necessary for salvation, then what is the role of our imperfect works? Is our obedience

optional? Should we say our obedience is *necessary*? If so, does this undermine the role of Jesus’s perfect obedience? These are important questions. Thankfully, they’re also questions that have been dealt with at length, and I think decisively, in the history of Christian exegesis. More importantly, these are issues that are addressed sufficiently in the New Testament itself. I conclude briefly in chapter 10 with some final observations.

Finding the Right Recipe: Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Theology

Keeping the “Biblical” in Biblical Theology

One of the reasons I think that this question—Is perfect obedience necessary?—has become so murky in recent years is an overemphasis on a limited subset of New Testament writings. For example, instead of asking, “What does the New Testament teach?,” a great many studies focus on what Matthew, Mark, or Luke says. This is often what is in mind when someone thinks of “biblical theology.”

On the one hand, focusing on the contributions of specific biblical authors is legitimate and is an approach that I have often used myself. On the other hand, this approach has significant limitations, especially if it is the staple of our diet of biblical interpretation. A biblical theology consisting of one text (or one author) is not sufficient; such an approach doesn’t deal with all the riches of revelation we have on a given topic. We therefore need to be circumspect about this corpus-by-corpus or author-by-author approach. This approach tends to separate biblical writings from one another rather than synthesizing them. For those who hold to the sufficiency of Scripture, it is important to recognize the need for *all* the Scriptures in order to have a sufficient picture of any theological issue.

To be sure, this is not the *only* way to do things. A corpus-by-corpus approach may be used for a variety of reasons. Some

use this approach because they find in the New Testament irreconcilable diversity among its writings, leading to the need to prioritize certain writings over others. Some even find irreconcilable diversity among the thirteen letters of the Pauline corpus. Indeed, it is standard in many circles of New Testament scholarship today to deal mainly with a subset of the traditional thirteen Pauline Letters—normally around seven of them—due to the theory that Paul did not really write all of them. Despite the popularity of this method in recent years, it’s a relatively novel approach that deviates in significant ways from the early witness of the church. It also assumes much of what it seeks to prove—not least by viewing diversity in the New Testament as *irreconcilable* diversity.

Others study discrete units of the New Testament for better reasons, such as the need to hear each author on his own terms, the need to deal with a more limited corpus because of how complex the issues are, the desire to study one book of the Bible as deeply as possible, and so forth. As I’ve said, this is a legitimate approach. Yet if this is the staple of our diet—if this is all we ever do—it can be unhealthy. We also need studies that synthesize the biblical texts and assume fundamental unity across the biblical writers’ perspectives. We need studies that look at all thirteen of Paul’s Letters alongside all four Gospels. We need studies that look at both James and Galatians. We need studies that don’t bifurcate between the writings of Paul and Peter.

In this book, I will therefore look across the landscape of the New Testament. I assume a fundamental unity of the New Testament (and Old Testament) and believe it is not only legitimate but necessary to bring the New Testament voices together in a coherent way. Not every study has to take this approach, but it’s important that some do. We also need the Old Testament. The New Testament grows organically out of the Old Testament, and the Old Testament witness is assumed and integral to the witness

of the New Testament. To discuss the perfect work of Christ, therefore, requires us to consider the Old Testament as well.

Systematic and Historical Theology

In terms of historical and systematic theology, I am convinced that exegesis has often been done well in the history of the church, and we have much to learn from our exegetical predecessors. We need to engage the biblical texts anew today, but we should do so in light of what has been said in prior generations. Rarely are we the first to ask important and difficult questions of the biblical texts. It is wise to consider insights from previous generations.

I have often found it to be true that interpretive positions from the past, if they are indeed accurate interpretations, stand the test of time. We have certainly learned more about a whole host of things in recent decades, and sometimes older interpretations need to be modified. But surprisingly often, the best interpretation is already there somewhere in the history of interpretation, even if it could be nuanced further. As one New Testament scholar lamented, “Many of the best arguments in the history of interpretation have never been refuted, just forgotten or ignored.”³ I therefore interact liberally with systematic and historical theology wherever possible. I also do this to bring as much clarity as possible to terms that are often too nebulously understood today.

Combing and Combining Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Theology

I also believe that tradition is not the last word and that we need always to be looking to Scripture for new insights. This

3. Andreas J. Köstenberger, translator’s preface to *The History of the Christ: The Foundation for New Testament Theology*, by Adolf Schlatter, trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 14.

is not, then, a book merely about what others have said. I also engage constructively in the task of exegesis to demonstrate in some fresh ways how the work of Christ is multifaceted—like a diamond. My primary focus is thus on biblical theology. Yet I believe that biblical theology is best done by ignoring artificial distinctions between historical, systematic, and biblical theology.

Many important questions have been raised in recent years, and it's not my aim either to minimize their difficulty or to provide a thorough discussion of—for example—the doctrine of justification. My concern is to highlight and appreciate the uniqueness of Christ's work. Though I often agree with the emphasis on Christian discipleship in some recent reassessments of the Bible's teaching on salvation, I fear that the baby has too often been thrown out with the bathwater. Traditional readings of Paul, for example, are not as exegetically thin as they have sometimes been made out to be. Though the "traditional" is not unassailable, typically the burden of proof should be on the newer insights to wrestle deeply with exegetical tradition. Whatever one's final conclusion on the matters covered here, I hope to bring clarity to the terms of the debate so that some strong voices in the exegetical tradition can be part of the discussion today. My method will therefore comb and combine biblical, historical, and systematic theology (with an emphasis on the *biblical*).

At the same time, this is not a book that is burdened with a large number of technical discussions. Many of the topics I address in this book I have written on in a more technical way in other venues. The footnotes that I include in what follows typically reflect particularly pertinent or important sources, or new sources I have not cited in earlier works.

Conclusion

Whether you've encountered recent debates or not, whether you're just now considering these issues or have considered

them for many years, whether recent reformulations leave you convinced, resistant, or uncertain, in what follows I hope to advance the conversation and provide some new ways of thinking through the issues.

In short, my goal is to defend the position that Jesus's *perfect* obedience is necessary for eternal life, which is to say it is necessary for our salvation. This is not a matter of a few isolated prooftexts but is woven into the warp and woof of the New Testament in various ways, as we will see in what follows.