

SALVATION— WHAT IS THAT?

BY RANDY HODGES

The story goes that Lois was married to Emmitt, a master penny-pincher. Emmitt was also a bit eccentric. Though he was paid well, he and Lois lived frugally, largely due to Emmitt's insistence that 20 percent of every check be saved—by stuffing it under their mattress. (Emmitt did not trust banks.) Emmitt often reminded Lois that the money would come in handy in later years.

At age 60, Emmitt was struck with cancer. Near the end, he made Lois promise, in the presence of his brothers, that she would put the money he had stashed away in his coffin so he could buy his way into heaven.

Everyone knew Emmitt was a bit odd, but this request was sheer craziness. Yet, Lois promised, assuring both Emmitt and his brothers that she would do as he asked.

Emmitt soon died, and Lois was a woman of her word. The morning following Emmitt's death, she took the entire sum of nearly \$26,000 to the bank, where she deposited it. Lois then wrote a check for the full amount, which she promptly placed in the casket.

Emmitt's odd plan of trying to buy his way into heaven shows his ignorance of what God's Word tells us about how we really can come to live with God in heaven forever. The Word presents a plan of salvation that is marvelous and wonderful. Let's consider the matter of salvation by finding God's answer to this simple question:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE SAVED?

God's Word wonderfully explains the experience of salvation in ways we can better understand. Often, God relates heavenly things (like salvation) to things we already know and grasp in life. Yet, no one image fully explains all the wonders of salvation. So, Scripture uses a variety of images to help us better understand what it means to be saved.

Imagine a beautiful, flawless, intricately cut diamond. From one angle, the light marvelously sparkles with fiery splendor. Turn the gem just a bit and the view changes, revealing yet another marvelous image. The possibilities seem endless. Yet, with all the possible views, it remains the same diamond. Like the beautifully cut diamond just described, Scripture presents salvation by employing a variety of "views" to reveal more of the whole of salvation to us. Each view touches on another marvelous aspect of the great gift that God offers each of us. The "scriptural images" which follow help us to better grasp some of the wonder of what it means to be saved by God.

To be saved is to be delivered from bondage.

Apart from God, sin enslaves us, leaving us helpless to free ourselves. Though we want to break free and do that which is good and right, sin has us in its powerful grasp; and, in our own strength, we are unable to break free.

However, *God excels in the business of deliverance*. He delivered His people, the Israelites, from bondage to the Egyptian pharaoh. Over and over, God delivered David from danger and enemies. Just before this runt of a young boy stepped on the battlefield to engage the giant warrior Goliath, David remembered all the times God had delivered him. He expressed his confidence in God: "Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the

armies of the living God. The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine” (1 Samuel 17:36-37).

And God delivered David.

God delivered Daniel from the den of lions. He delivered Jonah from the belly of the great fish. He delivered the apostle Paul from the hands of violent attackers, from the raging sea, from the plans of evil men, and from many other dangers. *God excels in the business of deliverance.*

God can deliver you too. He wants to deliver you from sin’s bondage. If you are enslaved by sin, God wants to set you free. If you are enslaved by alcohol and unable to help yourself stop drinking, God wants to set you free. If you are addicted to nicotine and the “tobacco monkey” won’t get off your back, God can set you free. If you are caught up in Internet pornography, God can set you free. Your inability to control your gambling problem may continue to grow until it destroys you and perhaps your family too. But God can rescue you and set you free. If you are held captive to illicit drugs, you can continue in the control of drugs until they rob your life of all that is good, or you can turn to God who wants to set you free. *God excels in the business of deliverance.*

Being enslaved by any sin that controls, dominates, and tyrannizes us is not salvation. It is slavery. And God’s Word makes it clear that every one of us has sinned. Without God’s intervention, we all are held captive by sin. Our sin may or may not be obvious to those around us.

Nevertheless, Jesus Christ came to set us free! And He will set us free, if only we will ask. “The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer . . . in whom I take refuge” (Psalm 18:2). God wants to release us from sin’s power over us so that we can be freed to give ourselves to God. To be saved is to be delivered from sin’s life-destroying bondage. *God excels in the business of deliverance.*

To be saved is to be treated by God as if we had never sinned.

The picture that Scripture paints of the moral condition that all humans possess apart from Christ is not pretty. The picture of our moral condition is painted in dark colors, which reveal that we are sinners separated from God and His holiness. The picture grows even darker as we see ourselves as having no righteousness in us. Because we are so far separated from God, unless something drastic changes us, our final destiny will be outer darkness and eternal separation from God. Apart from God's intervention, we are all headed for judgment and eternal destruction.

But God stepped in to do something in Christ Jesus about our sinfulness. He takes the dark picture that depicts our moral nature and "repaints" it in lighter and brighter colors. That is just what God does for us in justifying us.

To help us understand salvation better, the Bible grabs the word "justification." It means that God does not respond to us as the guilty, condemnation-deserving persons we are. Rather, when we take Jesus as our personal Savior, God forgives us and begins treating us as if we had never done anything wrong. God justifies us. Justification means God treats us "just-as-if-I'd never sinned." He provides us with a righteousness that is not earned, but so very needed.

"This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:22-24). And the great news is that this change in the way God treats us is available to everyone who will turn from their sin and, by faith, take Jesus Christ as their Savior. In justifying those who turn to Jesus, God transforms the way we relate to Him. Where we were His enemies separated from God by our sin, once we are justified, we become God's friends. The change in our relation-

ship with the Heavenly Father is huge. Before, we were alienated, separated, and estranged enemies; but now, we become forgiven, accepted friends. It's a total turnaround. It's a new relationship with God.

God offers us pardon and forgiveness that we do not deserve, and He provides acceptance that we could never earn. This amazing gift of a totally changed relationship with God is summed up in the word "justification."

To be saved is to be treated by God as if we had never sinned.

To be saved is to be adopted into God's family.

In the youth group of a church I once served, there was a teenage girl who was tall, thin, blond, and athletic. Kim was a competitive swimmer, using her God-given body and strength to excel at a sport she loved. When you looked at Kim's parents, it was not hard to see where she got her long, athletic build. Like Kim, both her mom and dad were tall and trim.

One day soon after meeting Kim, I commented to her parents how obvious it was that Kim was their child. Their response knocked my socks off: "She's adopted!" I could hardly believe it. She looked an exact younger image of her parents, yet they assured me it was true—Kim was not their child by birth, only by adoption. She not only looked like her parents, but she obviously loved and was loved by them. No doubt about the family relationship—Kim really was their child.

The relationship of Kim to her parents beautifully depicts what happens to us when we are saved. Scripture says it like this: "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship [or adoption]. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Romans 8:15-16).

When God saves us, He invites us into His family. He

sets us free to enjoy the full benefits of belonging to His very own family. This wonderful reality becomes ours as we give our hearts to Jesus. In the Book of Galatians, Paul expresses this very truth, saying, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (3:26).

To be saved is to be adopted into God’s family.

To be saved is to be born again.

“Jesus declared, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again’” (John 3:3). To be born again is to have the Holy Spirit make us over again, to make us new from within. It is to have God re-create us from the inside out.

To be saved is to be born again.

There are many other images that Scripture uses to tell us about salvation.

To be saved is to be reconciled to God.

Apart from Jesus Christ and His salvation, we’re at war with God. We are His enemies. Instead of fighting alongside God in His war against evil, we position ourselves as rebels who are asserting ourselves and our will to have our own way.

However, when we are saved, we surrender ourselves to the supremacy of God. We quit opposing Him and surrender ourselves to Him. In doing so, we say, “I no longer wish to fight against You. Instead, I wish to join with You.”

By God’s grace, He allows us to give up being His enemy in order to become His friend. This is what Paul says in his letter to the church at Corinth: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

To be saved is to become God’s friend by reconciling with God.

To be saved is to be brought from darkness into light.

“He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves” (Colossians 1:13).

To be saved is to be brought from darkness into light.

To be saved is to have the opportunity to start over again.

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). In salvation, God gives us a second chance. A golfer would call it a “mulligan.” A child may call it a “do-over.” In life, the chance to start over again is called a “miracle.”

To be saved is to have the chance to start over again.

To be saved is to begin the journey of holy living.

It is sanctification begun. Theologians refer to it as “initial sanctification.” They mean that when we are saved, God plants within us a holy desire to move closer and closer to Him, to become more and more like Him. He offers us the chance to begin growing, developing, and maturing. He molds and shapes us, increasing our likeness to His glorious Son, Jesus Christ. The longer we serve Him, the longer we walk with Him, the more we become like Him.

Still, it all starts at the time we are saved. Many years ago, John Wesley reminded those to whom he ministered of this truth. I’ll paraphrase his words:

Salvation is not just deliverance from hell or going to heaven; no, while salvation is all that, it is so much more. Salvation is a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its initial health, and its original purity; salvation is a recovery of the divine nature; it’s the renewal of our souls in the image of God, renewal in righteousness and true holiness, renewal in justice, mercy and truth.*

To be saved is to actually begin the exciting journey of

becoming like Christ himself. It is to begin the journey of holy living.

HOW CAN I EXPERIENCE GOD'S GREAT SALVATION?

Ultimately, salvation is to be experienced. We can know all about it and even realize what God wants to do in saving us; but unless we experience it, all our understanding is for nothing. So, how do we come to find the great gift of salvation that God offers?

It's really quite simple. First, we admit our need to both ourselves and to God. In confessing our need, we start to allow God to work within us. Once we've admitted our need for salvation, we simply talk with God. A prayer we could pray might go something like this: "Father, I have done wrong. I'm sorry. Would You forgive me and help me to change so I can start pleasing You? I want Jesus to be my Savior, and I want to follow Him for the rest of my life. Please help me. Amen."

When we sincerely ask God to save us, He hears our prayer and does for us what we can never in a million years do for ourselves. He saves us and makes us a new person in Christ Jesus. It is the most important decision we can ever make.

How about right now?

Don't run *from* God. Run *to* Him. He offers you salvation in Christ Jesus!

Notes:

*John Wesley, *Wesley's Works*, vol. 8 (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1986), 47.

Scripture Cited: 1 Samuel 17:36-37; Psalm 18:2; John 3:3; Romans 3:22-24; 8:15-16; 2 Corinthians 5:17, 19; Galatians 3:26; Colossians 1:13

About the Author: Dr. Hodges is senior pastor of Hernando (Florida) Church of the Nazarene.