

Is Salvation An Event or a Process?

In the two previous messages we looked at the theme of once saved always saved, or eternal security. We entitled it 'Is Salvation For Keeps or for Keeping?' We saw how the Bible teaches that a believer cannot lose his salvation, though we are all warned to make sure we have the genuine article in the first place. Following on from that theme, we ask the question, "Is Salvation an Event or a Process?" By that we mean, is there a particular time that a person becomes a child of God, and it is cast in stone from that day, or is it a process of sorts, rather like growing into something?

To know the answer to this is crucial. I once met a clearly committed man who said to me, "When it comes to going to heaven, I'd say I have about 6 out of 10". Yet he professed the same Christian faith. Clearly, he was under the impression that salvation is something you grow into, get better at, and by your commitment, perfect till the end. Hopefully, at that point, you have had enough time to get to whatever point you need to be at to be accepted into heaven.

This already presents us with some problems, for what if you die a day after truly believing in Jesus Christ for the first time, but not having had the time to 'grow into this Christian life'?

There are many who feel that salvation cannot be an event, for it seems to cheapen the whole thing and make it a quick-fix 'decision'. Decisionism is the teaching that focuses on basically begging, cajoling and even intimidating people to make a spur-of-the-moment 'decision' for Christ, whatever that means, without true Holy Spirit conviction taking place leading to true repentant faith, which will occur at a point in time. Now I am against 'decisionism' myself, in the sense that sinners are given the idea that a) salvation is based upon their actions, not God's grace, and b) because of the phony easy-believism that is so often connected with decisionism. But nevertheless, we do not go to another extreme because of one extreme. We must search the Scriptures to find out the Bible's perspective on the nature of salvation.

First, we find is that the **titles** that the Bible gives to describe salvation indicate an event, not a process. Consider:

Born Again. Many people dislike this term. But it is a term coined by none other than our Lord Jesus Christ in John 3:3. Birth, is that an event or a process? There is certainly a process whereby the embryo grows in the mother's womb, but there is a single day in time when the birth takes place, it is an event. I think all mothers are thankful that it is an event, as excruciatingly long as that event may seem on the day!

The question 'Have you been born again?' does not mean, are you in the process of being born again? It asks if this **event** has occurred in your life.

Justified. Believers are said to have been justified by God the Father. Justification is a legal term. It is where a judge declares the accused not guilty. Now, it is quite obvious to all that the day a judge passes his sentence is an event, it occurs on a single day. The case may have been a process, but the day the judge acquits the accused, it is an event. Likewise, there is a single day on which, on the basis of making Christ his only plea, the sinner is declared innocent. It is an event. God could not declare you innocent over a period of time, you are either declared not-guilty or guilty in the eyes of God today.

Redeemed. Believers are said to be redeemed. Now redemption was when a person went and bought something back; it may have been land, goods, even relatives or slaves. By using this word to describe salvation, God is clearly emphasizing that salvation is a transaction, there must be a particular day that Christ bought you out of the slave-market of sin.

Forgiven. The best way scripture describes forgiveness is by comparing it to a debt of money that is owed. Forgiveness is when the debt is written off, and the debtor released from his debt. Again, we are not talking about slowly paying back the debt, otherwise forgiveness would not be a suitable term. We are talking about writing off the debt. That must occur at a particular time, on a particular day. It is an event.

Sanctified. The word *sanctified* is related to the word *holy*. It means to be set apart for a specific purpose. Now if you can picture a whole pile of clay vessels, and from those vessels taking some out and setting them in a particular place for a particular purpose, then it again becomes clear that this is an event, not a process.

However, we wish to pause here on the issue of sanctification which will help us clear up a whole lot of issues. At the moment of salvation, a believer is sanctified, set apart for God. Paul says to the Corinthians in I Corinthians 6:11: “And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our Go”. This is what we call *positional sanctification*, God imputing His righteousness to the believer and setting Him apart for service. But there is a second aspect to sanctification which answers so many of the questions regarding salvation being an event or a process; there is what is called *progressive or practical sanctification*. This is day-to-day living, the working of the Spirit in us to make us more like Christ. Each day that we obey the Word by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are changed by His power into the same image, from glory to glory, to be more set apart for the Master’s use. It is here that people get confused. This process of conforming us into the image of Christ is often confused with salvation itself. Since sanctification is where we become more like Christ, the critic says, “how can you go to heaven if you are unlike Christ? This process must be completed.” But Scripture does not say that. Scripture describes this process as God’s good pleasure to make us useful in His service, not to finish applying our salvation. We have to understand that becoming like Christ, practical sanctification, is a lifelong thing, whereas positional sanctification takes place in a moment: the moment of repentant faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. If it were not so, surely believers who live longer, and have more time to become like Christ, have a greater chance of going to Heaven! Like we saw last week, salvation is not dependent on us. If it were up to us to keep holding on, the best of us would fall off. If salvation is not obtained by works, then it cannot be kept by works either. The final aspect to sanctification is called ultimate sanctification, the state we will be in glory, completely perfected and like Christ.

Consider the term, **regeneration**. *Regeneration* means to be made alive. Now frankly, I can’t think of a more obvious description of an event that regeneration, a dead corpse made alive. Something is either dead or alive. It cannot gradually hover between both. It is either alive at a moment or dead. Before we meet Christ we are dead in trespasses and sin. At the point of salvation, we are regenerated by the Spirit. This is why Paul says in 2

Corinthians 5:17: “Therefore if any man *be* in Christ, *he is* a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”

Now a final designation of Christians with regard salvation, is **believers**. We know that that this of all speaks of an event. Believing in Christ is something you do at a point in time. Some tend to think of believing as a gentle persuasion into the truth until one day you wake up and you find that, it turns out, you are a believer. No, that doesn't capture the idea of believe at all. The word believe carries the idea of committing yourself and your future into the care of another. It is a transfer of trust from self to Christ, a surrendering of self-rule to the Lordship of Christ. As you can imagine, a commitment occurs at a particular point in time, it's an event. A surrender on the battlefield takes place at a particular point in time. Again, like with all the other examples, there are processes leading up to it, and processes as a result of it, but it is nevertheless an event in time.

However, let me quickly add, that even though this faith is a once-off transaction, because it is from God, it will never totally fail. Philippians 1:6: “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform *it* until the day of Jesus Christ:”. So faith may falter, may waver, there may be disobedience, rebellion and backsliding, but never finally or totally. A faith that fails entirely did not cause the end or the loss of the salvation, it showed it was never genuine to begin with.

Recall John the Baptist, he got to a point where he sent messengers to Christ to ask, are you the Messiah, or should we wait for another? He had serious, real doubts. His faith was faltering. Had he denied Christ? Had he totally turned his back on the faith? No, he just doubted. Christ sent back a message to encourage him and strengthen his faith. Thus as he died a martyr, his faith endured to the end. This enduring faith was not the requirement for salvation, it was the valid expectation of his salvation. Enduring faith to the end is what can be expected from a truly saved one –though there may be slips, doubts and falls along the way.

On the other hand, there is what is called the apostate. The apostate is summed up in the character of Judas. Apostasy means falling away, which some take to mean falling from salvation. But a careful study of Judas reveals otherwise. In John 6:70 Jesus says : “Jesus answered them, Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil? ” He says these words probably in his second year of ministry. Judas was in Christ's words, a devil from the time Christ has chosen him. He did not say, I have chosen you twelve, and one of you will become a devil. No, Judas was unsaved at this point. A year later, the night of His last supper with the disciples, as He is washing their feet, He says, “ye are clean, but not all. For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean.” In other words, Judas was still not saved at this point. That night, Jesus would one last time, graciously offer reconciliation to Judas, who turned it down. He went on to betray Jesus and then hang himself. In Acts 1, the apostles desiring to choose a replacement for Judas say the following in verse 26 “That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place”

There's the word *fall*, interestingly enough it means to pass by, to neglect, to overstep without touching, and that proves the point. Judas came close to the truth, but never

possessed it, that one time event never occurred in his life. He was never cleansed as he had never come to personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It was not that the process of salvation was thwarted in his life, it was that the event never took place in the first place. That is an apostate, one who has a knowledge of the truth, but never personally makes it his own, and so rejects it by teaching falsehood or by denying the truth later.

The difficulty is that many people feel “I grew up in the church, or I grew up in a Christian home, therefore I have become a Christian”. They feel that therefore somehow the event of salvation has been transferred to them by default. But Scripture teaches otherwise. God does not have any grandchildren. You are either His child or you are not. Your parents’ salvation is theirs; you need to be saved individually. Others feel that having been surrounded by religion and church their whole lives has somehow caused them to be saved. If you were surrounded by planes when you grew up does that mean you can fly? No, unless you have personally encountered the Lord Jesus Christ and by faith received Him as your God and Messiah or Saviour, then you are in danger of being one of those in Matthew 7:21-22 to whom the Lord had no personal relationship with.

Often, we are frightened by the reaction of others. We fear that if we were to say, you know, I may have grown up in church, but I don’t think I ever have received Christ personally, that event has never occurred in my life, that there will be frowns of disapproval. What will they say? Parents, Sunday School teachers, pastors, won’t they feel rather like you were deceiving them, or even disappointed that you should reveal this, like a slap in their face? But friend, ultimately, all of us will stand before God one at a time. Each of us will be tried individually. You will be able to call no witnesses. You will not enter heaven on the basis of another’s credentials. God will not open the door to large groups who were of a particular denomination. God will judge each person on the basis of what you decided about Christ. You cannot worry about what people will think if we are talking about heaven or hell. Christ died for you publicly, despising the shame. How can we let pride hold us back? That pride will be our destruction, for salvation comes to the humble, the one who admits his or her need and submits to Christ.

I was told of a church in the States where an evangelist was preaching a series of meetings. At the end of one of them, the pastor of the church that was hosting the meetings told the evangelist, “I need to be saved”. The evangelist said “Stop kidding around, pastor!” The pastor replied, ‘No really. Through what you’ve preached I’ve seen that this has never occurred in my life. I’m not saved. I need to be”.

That’s amazing. A pastor who had no doubt often preached on salvation, realized the event had never occurred in his own life. Another incident involved a pastor’s son who was studying in Bible college. He came home because of an accident in the family. At the time, some meetings were being held at the church. He too, at the end of it, spoke to the assistant pastor and told him, I’m not saved. I need to be. This was a good, upstanding pastor’s child. One who was blameless in a sense, studying for the ministry, but he recognized that he had taken for granted that the event had occurred in his life, when it hadn’t.

This is why Paul tells the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 13:5, examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith. How important, especially for the religious, for those who regard themselves as Christians, to ask, was there an event? Was there a turn in the road, where I turned from living for self, and turned to Christ to become my new life? Was there a day I asked for forgiveness for being a rebel? Was there a day I became a new creation? Was there that event, where God redeemed me, forgave me, sanctified me? Not, "I've always been in church, my parents were Christians", but "when did I encounter Christ for my self?" And since then, has my faith been proven to be of God by the fact that I am still seeking to live for Him? Not perfectly, totally or finally, but I am seeking to live for God to the end?

Is salvation an event or a process? Justification is most definitely an event, an event that begins the process of becoming like Christ which is consummated in heaven.