

Tough Questions/Real Answers:

SALVATION

Romans 3:22b-25

Ephesians 2:8-10

Must I be saved? From what? For what?

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There was a lady who died after a long illness and found herself at the Pearly Gates of Heaven. As soon as she spotted St. Peter, she went right up to him and asked, "How do I get in?"

St. Peter replied, "You have to spell a word."

"Which word?" the woman asked.

"Love," St. Peter replied.

The woman quickly responded, "L-O-V-E," and St. Peter welcomed her into the joy of heaven.

About six months later, this same woman happened to be standing near the gate when St. Peter got an emergency call to another part of heaven. He grabbed her and asked if she could watch the gate while he was away. She agreed, but St. Peter had hardly been gone when her husband arrived at the gate, seeking to get in.

"I didn't know you had died!" she exclaimed.

"I just did," he said.

"Well, I am so surprised to see you here. How have you been doing?" she asked.

"Pretty well," her husband replied, "up until a few minutes ago." He should have stopped there, but he continued, "You remember that cute young nurse that took care of you while you were sick? We got married about a month after you died. Then I won the lottery. So I sold our little house and bought a big mansion. My new wife and I took a trip around the world, just like you had always wanted to do. I bought a ski boat, and earlier today I was water-skiing and fell. The ski hit my head, and here I am. So how do I get in?"

"You have to spell a word," the woman said.

"Fine," he said. "What is it?"

"Czechoslovakia," she replied.¹

How do you get into heaven? Do you have to spell a word? Do you have to know what to tell and what not to tell the gatekeeper? Is there a secret password that will get us through the heavenly gates?

Often we hear the question, in our Bible Belt culture, “Are you saved?” Our children and youth get this from their friends who attend other churches and can’t quite conceive of what a Methodist is. I used to get that when I was growing up. One of my young friends was asked, “Are you saved?” He replied, “From what?” I think those are both are good questions, and they are the tough questions I want to deal with today. Is salvation even a relevant concept in our world today? Is it something we need to worry about? Must I be saved? From what? For what?

The short answer is yes. Yes, we need to be saved from our sin. There is a radical alienation between human beings and God that must be overcome if we are going to be in relationship. There is a barrier caused by our unwillingness to let God have control of our lives. We want to rule our world, and that radical self-centeredness is the essence of sin. It’s not simply about saying nasty words or abusing substances or behaving badly; there is something broken in the good universe that God made. The late Dr. Albert Outler put it this way: “Something has gone fearfully awry in the human enterprise. Everywhere (and in our own hearts!) we see the signs of this tragic discrepancy between our visions of what human existence ought to be and what it actually ever is.”²

The New Testament word for “salvation” is related to healing or restoration. Salvation is the process of someone whose spirit was broken or fractured becoming whole again through the power of God. Salvation is the healing of that brokenness, the restoration of that relationship. We are not saved from sinning; we still make mistakes and sometimes willfully disobey God. But we are saved from the power of sin. We are saved from the stranglehold of evil on our lives. We are saved from the consequences of living out of relationship with God.

How does this happen? It happened 2000 years ago on a lonely cross on a despised hill called Calvary. When Jesus gave his life sacrificially on the cross, he repaired the breach. He bridged the gap. He restored the possibility that we could live in relationship with our heavenly Father. He made our justification on the cross. He became the atonement for our sins. (Those are big theological words—justification and atonement—that I am unpacking on Wednesday night—plug for dinner church!—but I don’t have time to explain here.) Suffice it to say, Jesus brought us back to relationship with God. Paul says in Romans, “*since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.*”³ To restore our life, Jesus gave his.

When we hear the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ, we have a three-fold response to make. We repent of our sins. We renounce our self-will and put our lives under God’s control. We have faith in the saving sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In other words, we say we’re sorry; we submit to God; we believe in Jesus. At that moment, we enter a saving relationship with God. This is a gift, given to us by the grace of God: “*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*”⁴

I made that three-fold response over 50 years ago. In a youth meeting, I felt the overwhelming presence of God. So I repented of my sins. I put my life in God’s hands.

And I promised in my heart—all alone in a roomful of people—to follow Jesus. It was a moment that had been coming since I was baptized as a baby. I had already been through Confirmation and joined the church. Technically I was already in. But that night I received an assurance, as Paul says, that I was a child of God: “*When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.*”⁵ I was reassured of my place in the family of God. I was saved.

When we are saved, we are saved from the consequences of sin. The ultimate consequence of sin is death. Romans 6:23 says, “*The wages of sin is death.*” It was because of sin that death came into the world in the first place. Death was not part of the original plan. But human beings sinned, so we die.⁶

Everybody dies, but only those who die in their sins die forever. If you die believing in Christ, you go to heaven and live eternally. If you die without salvation, you are cut off from God for all eternity. If we are free to choose relationship with God, we are also free to reject God. This is what we normally refer to as “hell.” Various Scriptures describe it in terms of darkness, fire, sadness, and misery. You don’t want to go there.

But the more immediate problem is the hell on earth that we experience when we are cut off from God, a hell that we create for ourselves. Sin is radical self-centeredness, and there is nothing more miserable than thinking the world revolves around you. The freedom of the gospel is to know that it’s not about you. Living life alienated from God, we drift aimlessly on the currents of a constantly changing cultural sea, never anchored, never safe, never home. We find ourselves in bondage to every evil desire and false god in the book.

The Good News is that we can be *saved from* the bad stuff —sin, death, hell (now and forever), misery, meaninglessness, anxiety, alienation, and fear. When we are bound to God, every other god is powerless. But the better news is that we are *saved for* the good stuff.

We are saved for good works. Good works don’t save us; we are saved by grace through faith, as Ephesians said. But listen to the very next verse in Ephesians 2: “*For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus **for good works**, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*”⁷ Our response to the salvation we find in Christ is to serve God with our works, to do things that glorify God, to get busy for the Kingdom of God. That’s what Jesus called the abundant life, and it’s what he came to give us.

Then, when our abundant life is over, we are saved for eternal life. We will all still die, but we will not die forever. We who are saved will be resurrected to eternal life with Jesus before the throne of God in heaven. “*The wages of sin is death,*” Paul said, “*but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”⁸ It’s all a part of the process of salvation.

Are you ready to leave the pain of hell on earth and the prospect of hell eternally for a life that is abundant and full of good works and lands you in heaven at the end? No-brainer! Yet you’d be surprised—or maybe you wouldn’t—at how hard that is for some people.

In September of 2002, a U. S. Navy ship rescued a 62-year-old Vietnamese immigrant from a sailboat that had drifted 2,500 miles from his home in Long Beach, California. Richard Van Pham had set out four months earlier to sail 25 miles to Catalina Island off the coast of California, but a sudden storm blew him off course and

broke his mast. His outboard motor and two-way radio also failed. He had been living alone on his boat in Long Beach harbor and had no family, so nobody knew he was missing. For four months, Richard drifted on that disabled sailboat, drinking rainwater and eating whatever seabirds, fish and turtles he could catch. Then one day he was spotted by an airplane 275 miles off the coast of Costa Rica.

When the Navy rescued him, they determined that the disabled boat was not worth saving, so they set fire to it, and the boat sank into the ocean. For Richard Van Pham, it was a bittersweet parting. One of the Navy men told CNN, “He waved goodbye to the boat. He was upset. He said he was going to miss it.”⁹

I’m sure it was hard for Richard to say goodbye to a place where he had been shipwrecked and isolated and nearly died of hunger and thirst and had the rare opportunity to eat raw sea turtle. We get so used to our pain, don’t we? If I may draw a spiritual parallel here, God gives us the opportunity for rescue, to leave the sinking, stinking ship of sin and climb aboard God’s boat and get a hot shower and a cooked meal and clean clothes and eventually a flight home. If sometimes you still miss that old life, just remember what it felt like to be drifting and hungry and thirsty and dying inside.

So here’s the question: are you saved? Max Lucado says it’s sort of like asking a couple, “Are you married?” If you have been through the wedding ceremony and signed the license, then of course you are married. It’s all legal—a done deal. You’ll never be more legally married than you are on your wedding day.

But salvation, like marriage, is more of a process than an event. Imagine the married couple on their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Their own parents have passed on; there have been triumphs and tragedies to deal with. Children have grown up in their home, and now there are grandchildren. There have been valleys and mountaintops too numerous to remember. After half a century, the bride and groom can finish each other’s sentences and even start to look alike (a thought which troubles my wife deeply). Aren’t they more married now than they were fifty years ago?

Lucado says, “The marriage certificate hasn’t matured. Ah, but the relationship has, and there is the difference. Technically, they are no more united than they were when they left the altar. But relationally, they are completely different. Marriage is both a done deal and a daily development, something you did and something you do.

“The same is true of our walk with God. Can you be more saved than you were on the first day of your salvation? No. But can a person grow in salvation? Absolutely. It, like marriage, is both a done deal and a daily development.”¹⁰ I have been saved for over 50 years, and I was again this week. It was a done deal all those years ago, and it is a daily development still in my heart.

Are you saved? You were saved 2000 years ago by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. You are saved when you repent of your sins and accept Christ as your Lord. Your salvation is a relationship that saves you *from* the power of sin and saves you *for* a life that is abundant and eternal. Must I be saved? Yes, and I am being saved day by day—thanks be to God!

¹[https://www.reddit.com/r/Jokes/comments/5gvoqx/you have to spell a word to get into heaven/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Jokes/comments/5gvoqx/you_have_to_spell_a_word_to_get_into_heaven/).

² Albert Outler, *Evangelism and Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996), p. 93.

³ Romans 3:23-25.

⁴ Ephesians 2:8-9.

⁵ Romans 8:16

⁶ Romans 5:12.

⁷ Ephesians 2:10.

⁸ Romans 6:23.

⁹ "Man Rescued after Months at Sea," *CNN.com*, September 24, 2002.

¹⁰ Max Lucado, *He Chose the Nails* (Nashville: Word, 2000), pp. 106f.