

## The Questions

When a sanctified believer sins, how/when is sanctification restored?

What are sanctification and justification, and what is the difference?

Once saved, are you always saved? If I'm saved when I am 21, and 30 years later I kill someone, will I still go to heaven?

## The Talk

Back at the beginning of the year, we did a series called *Graffiti* where we took a bunch of fancy theological words and broke them down, explored their meaning again. These are words that Christians have come up with over the last 2,000 years to try to describe the radical, life-changing transformation Jesus brings to us. When you've had an experience as dramatic as this, you want to talk about it. Even when the words don't exist. That's why we have theology. Theology is what happens when 2,000 years' worth of people try to make sense out of this God who's too big for our words.

We do theology to help us. Theology is meant to be a guide to the Christian life. Unfortunately, too often these words become walls instead of guides. They keep people out. They make you feel like you have to be a professional theologian to be a Christian. And that's not true. At all.

Jesus came to change all of us. His Gospel invitation is for everyone. And you don't need an advanced degree. You don't need to learn a bunch of fancy words. You don't have to become a professional Christian.

There's simply this profound, life-altering experience, a transformation. It's as radical as being born again. It's a death of the old ways you've lived, a whole new way of living.

It's beyond words. Those who've experienced it know that sense of awe, of reverence we talked about last week. The Bible describes it as a rescue. You've been saved from death.

That's why it's called Salvation. Which is what we're talking about today. And Salvation is a big, confusing topic. So we're going to borrow some theological words to help us map it out, to help us get our heads around it. Let's look at the words we've agreed upon as a Church. Let's consider *how* Christians have experienced being rescued by Jesus.

First, how many of us have learned to think of Salvation as a thing that happens once and then never again? That's what I grew up thinking. I was able to point back to the time "I got saved". And then boom. Over and done with. If you imagine a timeline of your life, then getting saved is a point somewhere on that timeline. **[graphic]** So we often ask, "When did you get saved?"

But the problem for me was that I "got saved" when I was 7. At 7 I didn't have much to be "saved" from, at least in my own mind. All I knew was that Jesus loved me. It wasn't until I got older that I really understood the gravity of the sins I commit. Of the habitual dysfunctions I'm trapped in. Of the larger systemic diseases that have infected not just me but my culture as a whole.

The older I get, the more I see that I need to be rescued from. I need to be saved today more than I needed it at 7.

Many Christians have recognized that Salvation isn't just a one-time event. Being saved isn't something that happens to you once and then never again.

Salvation is actually past, present and future.

I "got saved". I am being saved now. And I believe I will be saved. [shift the graphic. keep the timeline but now add past/present/future elements]

And here is a place where the theology can help us. Theologians try to name the different pieces of the Salvation experience. We talk about Conversion [Past Salvation] as when we are first transformed by Jesus' Good News, first rescued. The time we are made right with God. This is Justification. The moment the Holy Spirit indwells us. It's the beginning of our new life. Paul describes this in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" -- 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NLT)

But that's not the END of Salvation at all. In fact, it really is just the beginning. If the conversion event is like your wedding day, then salvation is much like the rest of your marriage. The day after your wedding, you and your new spouse aren't really all that different from single you. You spend the rest of your life learning how to be married together. You figure out how to die to yourself, how to serve the other person. You become a different person the longer you're married.

So too with Salvation. At our conversion, we become new creations living in the old world. But many of us will still have old habits, old, destructive patterns of behavior. Even after we've been rescued, we can choose to return to our sin (like the dog that returns to its vomit in Proverbs!). So after we're converted, the rest of our lives is a journey of learning to live Jesus' new life. It's learning to be free from our old sins and death. Theologians call this present-tense salvation Sanctification [on the graphic] (and this is something we Nazarenes put a ton of emphasis on). We really believe that you don't have to live in the old status quo. That God really does want you to be FREE from sin and death. You don't have to live in that old trash. You and I are being saved from all that. Right now. Present tense. That's why Paul tells the Colossians to "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." -- Philippians 2:12 (NRS)

But we know that no matter how long we've been Christians, we're not perfect. And no matter how well we live out the Christian life, we live in a world that is still deeply broken. We know that this life we live now is not the End, not all we have to hope for. We wait for God to return, to bring justice, to save us from Evil and Death once and for all. Until that moment, we will not be finally saved. Theologians call that final salvation Glorification [on the graphic].

One of my favorite verses that sums all this up is Philippians 1:6: "I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns." -- Philippians 1:6 (NLT) God began a good work within you - Conversion. God is right now continuing that work - Sanctification. And God will finish that work on the Day of Christ Jesus - Glorification. Salvation past, present and future. I have been saved. I am being saved. I will be saved.

Salvation is more than just a single moment. Salvation is past, present and future.

So that brings us back to our questions: If I'm saved, if I'm being sanctified, can I lose that? Can I halt the process?

The question behind those questions is "Is there any hope for me?" Maybe you've done something you can't forgive yourself for. Maybe you think your list of sins is too long to be forgiven, too awful to be pardoned. You think, They don't know what I've done. There's no way God would welcome someone like me.

Or maybe you're in a spiritual slump. You remember the days you were full of energy, excited about God. You felt connected at a deep, intimate level. You lived every moment in the thrill of your rescue, your salvation. But not anymore. You feel like you're going through the motions. It's *hard* to follow Jesus, when it used to be so easy. Some of those habits have been harder to kick than you thought. Some of those sins you thought you'd beaten come crawling back in.

So you wonder... what's wrong with me? Is there any hope for me?

And the answer is Yes. Yes there is hope for you. Your sin can never exceed God's love. Paul said it best in Romans 8:

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? ...No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow-- not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below-- indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. -- Romans 8:35-39 (NLT)

Nothing - not even your sin, can separate you from God's love. You cannot "lose" your salvation. You can't do anything so bad or so wrong that God says, "That's it! Over the line. Salvation revoked, all privileges suspended!" Can't happen. Won't ever happen.

That's good news for us. We're not trying to *earn* God's love. Our Salvation, our security, isn't merit-based. That's what we mean by Grace. You can't earn Grace. Grace is free. It's born from love, not work.

Have you ever felt like your Salvation, your journey of faith, was a big game of Chutes and Ladders? **[graphic!]** Have you ever played that game? You're moving up the board, doing well, feeling good about yourself, then you spin a wrong number, hit a chute and drop back down to the bottom. Being at the bottom is demoralizing. It happens often enough, you want to just give up. The game is one long series of ups and downs, to the point that it almost seems that 'winning' is going to happen by random chance. You're tempted to throw up your arms and say, Forget it! I quit!

Up and down. Up and down. Good and bad. Does that sound like you? A Chutes & Ladders Salvation is exhausting. It turns into Legalism really quickly. Take a look at a close-up of the Chutes & Ladders board **[graphic]**. You get to go up a ladder if you do something good, and at the top you're rewarded. But if you do something bad... BOOM, down the chute you go, to face

the consequences at the bottom. Is your Salvation merit-based? I read my Bible and prayed this week! Up the ladder to my super-spiritual reward. I feel confident and happy because I volunteered or left an extra-big tip when I went out to eat. My security comes from the good I do.

The problem is, when I mess up, I lose my security. I haven't been praying regularly. Or I missed Church. I yelled at my spouse or the guy who cut me off in traffic.

Crap. Down the chute I go. My punishment? I feel awful, defeated. I question my faith, my relationship with God. I start to drift away. I wonder what the point is. Am I really just going to start all over again?

You know what a Chutes-and-Ladders Salvation looks like, don't you? It's paralyzing. You're afraid to do anything for fear of doing the wrong thing and sliding back to start. It's exhausting, checking and double-checking every rule, making sure you're always crossing every T and dotting every I. Defeatism and Legalism are the twin children of a Chutes and Ladders faith.

And Jesus' good news is that the Gospel is not a Punishment and Reward system. God's Kingdom isn't a meritocracy. In fact, Jesus describes it as a much more organic process. He turns to farming to talk about what the Gospel is, how it transforms our hearts:

A farmer went out to plant some seed. As he scattered it across his field, some of the seed fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seed sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow. But the plant soon wilted under the hot sun, and since it didn't have deep roots, it died. Other seed fell among thorns that grew up and choked out the tender plants so they produced no grain. Still other seeds fell on fertile soil, and they sprouted, grew, and produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted!" -- Mark 4:3-8 (NLT)

Jesus goes on to interpret the parable for us, describing the different kinds of soil the Gospel seed lands on:

The farmer plants seed by taking God's word to others. The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message, only to have Satan come at once and take it away. The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word. The seed that fell among the thorns represents others who hear God's word, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things, so no fruit is produced. And the seed that fell on good soil represents those who hear and accept God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!" -- Mark 4:14-20 (NLT)

Jesus says that Salvation is a lot like a farmer sowing seed. God offers the Gospel freely to everyone. Some people have closed themselves off to the Gospel before the seed even hits them - their hearts are as hard as a paved path. Other people have a surface-level faith; it can't survive under pressure, under harsh conditions. Still other people have so many distractions in their lives they can't see the Gospel. And some have a heart that's ready to receive Jesus' life-changing seed.

Here's what's interesting about Jesus' metaphor: God sows the seed. And God causes the growth. God sends rain and sun. In fact, the only thing that we have any control over is the condition of the soil.

The real questions before us today are: Is your heart conditioned for growth? What are you doing to cultivate your heart?

The farmer can't control much in the world. He can't make it rain. He can't make the sun rise and set. He can't control whether the seed will be healthy, how quickly the plant will grow. God does all that. All the farmer can do is prepare the soil.

So too, with our Salvation. God is the one who rescues us. God is the one who causes us to grow. All we can do is prepare our hearts. We can be sure that we work the soil of our souls, that we order our lives and cultivate a heart that is ready to welcome the Gospel.

In this sense, Christianity is a life we live on purpose. If we don't cultivate our hearts, if we are content with a shallow faith, if we let our lives be crowded with what we know is toxic to the Gospel seed, then the good work God does in our lives can die out.

We can't *lose* our salvation. I can't say that enough. Nothing we do can make God so angry he grabs our Salvation from us and rips it out by the root.

But we can *leave* our salvation. We can choose to ignore God. To harden our hearts to God's Spirit. We can leave God for the cares of this world. We have free will. God will give us what we want. God won't drag any of us into Heaven kicking and screaming.

But God is always out there in the fields, casting more seed, sowing more Gospel. Looking for that good, fertile soil ready to accept this life-giving transformation.

Christianity is not religion on accident. You can't follow Jesus by mistake. The Gospel seed won't grow in a heart that's not cultivated. That's why the Church holds our Spiritual Practices so dearly. Like our theology, these are practices that over the past 2,000 years we have learned cultivate our heart for the Gospel.

When you live a Chutes & Ladders faith, those practices become rules that beat you down, make you weary. If you don't read your Bible, if you don't give, if you don't keep Sabbath then watch out! Down the chute you go. Beat yourself up over and over.

These practices aren't meant to be a source of pain and frustration for you. They are ways to prepare your heart to receive God's growth. They are the work of the faithful farmer who readies the soil, confident that God will bring a miraculous harvest.

You are not responsible for the results of your faith. When things are good, cultivate your heart. When things are bad, when you're feeling defeated or frustrated, cultivate your heart. Every farmer knows that seasons come and go. So too with the seasons of our faith. A slump doesn't mean God has abandoned you. A mistake doesn't mean God is going to punish you. We're not playing Chutes & Ladders.

If you have been transformed by Jesus, then you are growing. And nothing you do will make God turn his back on you. You can rest secure in that knowledge. All you need to do is cultivate a heart that is ready to receive the Gospel.

But if you have turned away from God, if you have hardened your heart, then know that God is still sowing the Gospel seed. If you have abandoned your faith, God is willing to take you back. All you need to do is cultivate a heart that is ready to receive the Gospel.

Today's the day to begin. Maybe you need to start reading the Scriptures, or keep a Sabbath with your family. Maybe you need to be more generous with your time or money. Maybe you need to find a mentor.

I don't know what the next step is for you. But I do know that God is calling you to more. To a bigger life. To growth. God wants to turn your life into a miraculous harvest. So what is your next step? Are you willing to take it? Are you ready to cultivate a heart that responds to the Gospel?

Because you have no idea what God is going to do. All we know is it'll be bigger than we can comprehend.

<prayer>

Intro "Walk"