

Chapter 6

Christian Salvation

Is the experience of Christian salvation instantaneous or a process?

Between 1900 and 1925, Russell Conwell delivered his famous speech, *“Acres of Diamonds,”* over 5,000 times. In this speech Russell told stories of people who sold their lands and went off in search of riches, only to find out later that great riches were discovered on the lands that they had left. The most prominent story in this lecture is about a Persian by the name of Ali Hafed, who sold his farm and used up all the money from the sale during a world-wide search for diamonds. Eventually he spent all his money, ended up destitute and committed suicide. Afterwards, diamonds were discovered on the property that he had sold, and that farm became the site of the largest diamond mine in the world. That reminds me somewhat of a story that Jesus told of a Prodigal Son who took his inheritance ahead of schedule and left home. After squandering his inheritance he became destitute. Unlike the stories in Russell Conwell’s speech, however, this story had a happy ending. The Prodigal Son eventually found true riches, but not until after returning home.

The Kingdom of God is not something a person finds away from home. It may only be found within. I believe with all my heart that all were saved on the Cross of Calvary, because Jesus died for the sins of all humanity. *“He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world”* (1 John 2:2). *“God is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe”* (1 Timothy 4:10). According to 1 Cor. 15:22, *“all will be made alive in Christ.”* Not only were we all saved on the Cross of Calvary, but we were at the same time raised up with Christ and seated with Him in the heavenly realms. *“God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus”* (Ephesians 2:6).

The point I am making here is that Salvation in Christ is something everyone already possesses. The problem is most people are unaware of it and are not able to experience it. The experience of Christian salvation is described in the Bible as a past, present and future event, depending on which aspect of the salvation experience is being referred to. After all, Christ saves us from many different things, and we are saved from these things at different times. Some of the things Christ saves us from have not even occurred yet. In the mind of God, who is able to view the past, present and future as a single event, salvation may be viewed as occurring instantaneously. But from our human perspective, we view and experience our salvation as various stages of a process which plays out over time. In the broadest sense the term "salvation" refers to many different experiences and events, culminating in the final event at the end of the ages when all are completely redeemed and glorified in Heaven.

To some, salvation means to have eternal life, which they would define as “unending conscious existence.” As I point out elsewhere in this book, that definition of salvation is based on an

incorrect translation of the Greek word “*aionian*,” which actually means the opposite of eternal and everlasting. It refers to a limited period of time, or an age, with a beginning and an end. This definition of salvation is also erroneous because the word “*zoe*,” or “life,” does not in this context refer to physical or conscious life. Those who receive “*aionian*” life during their earthly existence are already conscious and alive physically. “*Aionian*” life refers to spiritual life, not physical or conscious life. Although “*aionian*” life may be experienced in the present, it may only be experienced partially. Spiritual life, or fellowship with God, is something that we grow into. For some, this spiritual awakening begins suddenly during dramatic conversion experience. Others grow into relationship with Christ more gradually and are not able to identify a specific point in time when they were converted. Right now we see Christ only through the eyes of faith, as in a mirror darkly, but some day we will meet Him face to face and will know Him fully (1 Cor. 13:12). Most Christians would agree that an important component of Christian salvation is being made spiritually alive in Christ during one’s earthly existence. The mistake most of us make is adding an everlasting time component to it. All Christians will indeed live forever, and so won’t everyone else. Conscious existence does not end with the death of the physical body.

Another very important component of Christian Salvation has to do with the forgiveness of sin and being saved from the power that sin has over us. No one can be completely saved in this lifetime with respect to gaining victory over the sin in their lives. Believers are admonished in 1 John 1:9 to confess their sins and seek God’s cleansing on a regular basis. We still struggle with sin in our lives (see Romans 6-8). “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*” (1 John 1:8) While it is true that Jesus died for our sins on Calvary, we still suffer the temporal consequences of our sin and still experience the righteous judgments of God in this life and the next. The purpose of our Heavenly Father’s chastisement is to refine and purify us and mold us into the image of Christ. This aspect of Christian salvation does not happen instantaneously.

The final component of Christian salvation is the experience of the ultimate redemption and glorification of our souls in Heaven. Obviously, none of us are currently saved in this sense. In the following Scripture passage, the Apostle Paul describes this aspect of our salvation as something we experience only partially in this life.

“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. (Romans 8:18-25)

Does the salvation process continue into the next life?

Romans 8:29: *“For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son.”*

God’s ultimate goal is to transform each of us into the image of Christ. I believe this refers not only to giving us spiritual bodies like Christ, but the shaping of our characters as well. This being the case, I would assume that God will not be finished with us immediately after we die, when we receive our spiritual bodies.

Paul referred to some of the Christians in Corinth as *mere "babes in Christ"* (1 Cor. 3:1), and some of them were sick and dying because of their sin (1 Cor. 11:30). It is obvious from these passages, and from simple observation, that Christians do not enter life after death with fully reformed characters. Some, perhaps most, Christians think that our basic character will be instantly changed at the rapture, when our bodies are transformed, but is this really the case? If God were to change our characters instantly in this way, the only way He could do it would be to reprogram our brains, as with a computer or robot. Would the result be an authentic change in character, or the loss of genuine character, instead? Only through real and genuine life experiences can we develop genuine qualities of character, especially that of *Agape* love which involves by definition sacrifice and selfless acts of kindness. Also, an important facet of genuine love is empathy, or the ability to feel what others are feeling and identify with the sufferings of others. This can only be genuinely learned from actual human experience.

If God were to instantly create these attitudes, feelings and qualities of character, without exposing us to the actual living conditions under which they are authentically produced, they would not be real, in my view. That is why, when he created us, he placed us in a flawed world and gave us the freedom to make both right and wrong choices, suffer the consequences of those decisions, and in the process develop genuine qualities of character. One of my favorite Scripture passages that describes this process is found in the book of James:

James 1:2-3 *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”*

According to the above passage, *“perseverance must finish its work.”* If this work has not been finished by the time you die, then it may logically be assumed that more time will be required after death. If we view salvation as a process, rather than an instantaneous event, then the warning that James gives in Chapter two of his epistle regarding the relationship between faith and works would apply to Christians, even after death. We are saved by faith, not of works, but our salvation is an ages-long process and will not be complete until our character fully conforms to that of Christ.

Sometimes the Bible expresses truths from a positional point of view, from the viewpoint of our position in Christ. Positionally, according to Ephesians 2:6, we have already been seated with Christ in the heavenly places. From God's point of view, who can view the events of history from a timeless perspective, the process of our transformation into the likeness of Christ has already been accomplished. He views us *“in Christ”* through the cross of Calvary. But in our human experience, we view this transformation as a process that occurs over time. Especially in the

writings of Paul, many of these truths about our relationship with Christ are expressed as positional truth, while at other times they are expressed as experiential truth. These conflicting views of our salvation may be easily resolved if you view salvation as a continuing process from our human experiential perspective, but a completed process from God's perspective.

Positional vs. Experiential Truth

Romans 8:18-25:

"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."

In the past, I felt that the above passage of Scripture should not be taken literally. I presumed that "all creation" would include both animate and inanimate objects. How can an inanimate object "wait with eager expectation" or "groan?" After much study and contemplation, not only of the Scriptures, but also of physics, I have come to realize that the above passage of Scripture may be accepted as literal truth. Consider the following passages of Scripture which deal with both the omni-presence and creative activity of God, in the person of Jesus Christ. In the Bible, God the Father and Jesus the Christ are used interchangeably, two distinct personalities but one in essence. The third person on the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is also used to describe both God the Father and Jesus Christ interchangeably.

"You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ." Romans 8:9

"For in him (Christ) all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him." Colossians 1:16

"For in him (God the Father) we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'" Acts 17:28

God's creation is "separate" from God Himself only in the sense that Jesus Christ is Separate from God the Father. Jesus is God's offspring, His only begotten Son. Well, guess what? We are also God's offspring, according to Acts 17:28 (see above). We are actually divine, in the same

sense that Jesus Christ is divine, except that we are “begotten” of Christ and are made up of “Christ parts,” Because Christ is in turn made up of “God parts,” we would by extension also have divine natures. We do have separate and distinct personalities, but we are made of the same “stuff” (spirit) as the triune Godhead. I also believe that all creation, including both animate and inanimate objects and entities, are part of God. Another way of terming this would be to say that we are all “manifestations” of God. Nothing is separate from God Himself. God is omnipresent. There is nowhere that God is not. We are all intimately connected with God, and with each other for that matter.

So why does the Bible describe humanity as “lost,” or “separated from God,” or “under condemnation,” or “enemies of God?” The reason is that most of us are not consciously aware of our divine natures. We are not aware of God’s presence in our lives. We have no conscious relationship with God. We live in the “Hells” of our own making. We are separated from God only in our conscious awareness, or should I say, lack thereof. There is no place we can go, or be sent, where we can escape the presence of God.

I like to distinguish between our “true spiritual selves” and our “fleshly self-unawarenes” (See Romans 7) by using the terms “positional” and “experiential” truth. Positionally, we have divine, spiritual natures, and were redeemed by the blood of Christ on Calvary, and have been raised up with Christ and reside with Him in the heavenly realms. (See Eph. 2:6). Most non-Christians are not at all aware of this. Christians have experienced these positional truths only partially, and have experienced only the “first fruits” of the Spirit.

POSITIONAL:

EXPERIENTIAL:

Alive

Dead

Spiritual

Fleshly/Carnal

Redeemed

Under condemnation

At home

Lost

Cleansed from sin

In need of forgiveness

Saved

Unsaved

Children of God

Children of Satan

United with God/Christ

Separated from God/Christ

Both Christians and non-Christians are in a process of transition from one mental state to the other. The process of Christian salvation is not instantaneous. It is an ages-long growth process. No one is completely “saved” or “lost.” The Spirit of God is at work in our lives before, during, and after our profession of faith in Christ. All are at some stage in a process which culminates at the end of the ages. In the end, everyone will be presented faultless before the throne of God, and

every knee will bow to Christ and acknowledge Him as Lord, and God will become “*all in all*” in everyone’s conscious awareness. (See 1 Cor. 15:22-28)