Salvation

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What if I told you that the rest of your life hinged on one decision that you had to make, and I was about to tell you the right choice to make? If you make the right choice, you get to live a life of luxury, live in a fancy house, drive nice cars, have everything you could ever want. If you make the wrong choice, you end up out on the streets for the rest of your life with nothing, and all of it hinged on what I was about to say? You would probably either think I was a crazy person and dismiss me, or you would pay close attention, because you would want to know the right choice to make.

What we are going to talk about today and what you decide to do with it will very literally decide the way you spend not only the rest of your life, but the rest of your eternity. If you would pay attention because what I say might affect your life here on earth, what we are going to talk about today goes far deeper than that. We are going to talk about what salvation really means.

So, if you don’t yet know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, if you haven’t given your life to him, pay close attention, because your eternal future is at stake. Maybe you have already accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior and you’re already checking out because you’ve heard this stuff before, your eyes are already glazing over. My challenge to you is to make sure that you pay attention as well, because for you, what is said here today won’t decide your eternal future, that’s already done. What it might do is help you talk about salvation with someone else who needs Jesus and help decide their eternal future instead.

Before we can talk about what salvation is all about and how we get receive it, we first need to back up and talk about why we need salvation in the first place. And that starts all the way back in the very beginning, with who we were created to be.

Humanity was created to be the pinnacle of God’s creation. God created us in his own image and likeness, unlike anything else in all of Creation. He also gave life to humanity with the breath of God himself, which means that humans are more than just beings formed from the dust of earth. That means we were created with something outside this world. We were created to be eternal creatures. That means that each and every one of us has an eternal destiny, we will all live out eternity somewhere. Whether we live for all eternity in the presence of God, or separated from God all depends upon what we do with Jesus and the gift of grace that he offers.

God wants us to spend eternity with him. He created us to be in a relationship with him. Jeremiah tells us that God knows us intimately, that he knows us and has a plan for our lives even before we are born. Each and every one of us is known and loved more deeply by God than we could possibly imagine, and we were created to be in relationship with him. But we messed up. First Adam and Eve messed up, but we have all followed in their footsteps. Paul tells us that no one is immune to sin. He says in:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Romans 3:23 ESV

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53:6 ESV

And sin brings with it the consequences of that sin: eternal separation from God, eternal death, instead of eternal life.

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 6:23 ESV

Colossians 2 tells us that we are dead in our sins without the grace of Jesus, we are spiritually dead without him. So because of our sin, because of our choice not to follow God, we have condemned ourselves to an eternity without him.

People have all kinds of ideas about what eternity without God would be like. But I think the stark reality is that we are separated from God. Whatever else it will be like, that is the worst thing that could possibly happen. James tells us that every good and perfect gift comes from God. That means every good thing that we can think of, friendship, love, comfort, peace, good health, all those and so many more come from God alone. And all those things will be gone for those who spend their eternity separated from God. An eternity with nothing good whatsoever.

People often think they will be okay because they are a good person. People are confident that they will make it to heaven, because they have done enough good things in their life, at least enough good things to make up for the bad. We all have a tendency to think that way sometimes. What we have to realize is that no amount of good deeds will make up for the sin in our life, that’s not how this works.

Recognizing and admitting our own weaknesses, our own sinfulness is probably one of the most difficult and uncomfortable things that we will ever do. But it is absolutely vital that we recognize our sin, because we won’t accept the grace and forgiveness of Jesus until we understand why we need it so much. We won’t allow Jesus to do what he needs to in our hearts until we understand how broken we are to begin with.

I don’t think anything breaks the heart of God more than the people he longs to be with more than anything choosing to spend eternity apart from him. We cannot imagine the pain and heartache that our disobedience and our rejection of God causes to the heart of God, because he loves us deeply and he longs for us to be in a relationship with him

Because of our sin, there was this gap between us and God that we could never bridge. We were all doomed to that eternal fate of being separated from God. And there was nothing that we could do ourselves to fix it, there was nothing that human beings could do to get to God. Something had to be done if we were going to be saved from that fate, but we couldn’t do it ourselves. God was the one who had to take action, God was the one that needed to do something about this problem. And John 3.16 tells us that he loved us so much, that he did exactly that .

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

John 3:16–17 ESV

That gap between us and God that we could never bridge, God did it for us by sending his Son to die in our place, to experience that tortuous separation from God, and to pay the penalty for our sin. God did that because he loves each and every human being that has ever existed, and he desperately wants us to spend eternity with him. So, he gave us a way home, a way to be with him forever, through giving the life of his Son.

Those of you who have children, you understand what a sacrifice this really was to some extent. I would like to think that I would be willing to give my life for the life of someone else if it was ever called for. But when you ask me to think about giving the life of one of my children, I automatically go into defense mode, because the lives of my children are so precious to me.

To think about how much God must love us in order to give the life of his one and only Son, it’s just unimaginable. But that’s how much he loves us, that is how intense and how strong his love for us is. Jesus died in our place, he died to save us from the eternal consequence of our sin, and he freely gives that grace to all who believe in him.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Ephesians 2:8–9 ESV

Because of that free gift, we are justified, we are seen as righteous before God. Paul says that we put on the righteousness of Christ like a garment. We are given this righteous status that we could never achieve on our own. And that righteousness, that justification makes us finally able to be with God.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

Romans 5:1–2 ESV

So because of Jesus, we now have this unshakable hope of being with God in all his glory, we are covered by the grace that Jesus freely gives, we have an assurance eternal life.

Many people would like you to believe that God’s love and grace means that everyone gets to enjoy that hope and that glory, that a loving God would never allow anyone to be condemned to that eternal separation from him that our sin brings. There was a very controversial book that came out a few years ago called *Love Wins*, and it was essentially the idea that love wins out over everything, that there is no eternal punishment for sin, and that we all get to enjoy eternity with God because he loves us. That sounds really wonderful, but unfortunately it’s not true, that’s not what we read in the truth of Scripture.

God has offered this free gift of grace through what Jesus did for us on the cross, but we can refuse that gift. And unfortunately many do exactly that. Have you ever given a gift to someone, and you were really excited to give it to them, and then they hated it. Guys, if your wife ever says, “Oh you got me a vacuum, how thoughtful”, then you got the wrong gift.

Now imagine if you got someone a gift, and they never opened it, they never acknowledged it, and they refused to even take it from you. In order for a gift to be given, it also has to be received. And that’s what the grace of Jesus is called, a free gift. Which means that we have to receive it. God’s grace is free gift, but only those who choose to receive it will receive the justification and forgiveness that comes with it.

So how do we do that, how do we receive this free gift of grace. Well, a group of people on the Day of Pentecost had the same question. In the book of Acts, after Jesus had ascended to Heaven, the disciples were left alone, without Jesus to lead them and guide them. And then, on the Day of Pentecost, the Helper finally came. The Holy Spirit that we talked about last week, fell upon them.

All of a sudden, these guys who were mostly uneducated fishermen were speaking all these different languages that they had never learned, telling the people around them about the Gospel, about Jesus who had risen from the dead. Acts 2 tells us that there were devout Jewish men there from every nation under heaven, and they were all hearing the Gospel, they were all hearing about Jesus Christ in their own language. And they were riveted, their full attention was on the disciples because they knew who they were, and they knew they didn’t speak all these languages, and yet here they were, preaching the Gospel boldly to people from all over the world. Peter says:

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Acts 2:36 ESV

And their response is in:

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Acts 2:37 ESV

These people who were hearing the Gospel in their own language, they believed in what was just told to them. They heard, understood, and believed in the Gospel. They just need someone to tell them what to do next. So Peter got up, and he didn’t hesitate, he didn’t stutter, he didn’t say, “Hold on let me go ask my pastor”.

And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:38 ESV

What Peter did there was answer their question, and ours today, about what they should do once they believed in Jesus. So what I want to do is take what Peter said here apart and look at what he meant by those things he said.

The first thing he told them to do was to repent. Repentance is realizing what we’ve done wrong, being truly sorry for the sin we’ve committed, and then turning away from it. Living in a house with young kids, we have lots of opportunities to learn about forgiveness, especially when the kids take to beating on each other for whatever reason. The words of repentance come easy, asking for forgiveness happens all the time. But it’s not often that you see true repentance with little kids, at least not with mine yet. We have had countless conversations talking about how being truly sorry for something means you don’t go back and do the same thing all over again.

But truth be told, we do that a lot with God. We go to a great church service, or hear a convicting sermon, or maybe we go to a conference, or even on a mission trip. We get convicted of all these things in our life that need to change. Maybe it’s gossip, maybe it’s treating others poorly, maybe it’s foul language, maybe it’s countless other sins that we struggle with on a daily basis. We say we’re sorry, we ask for God’s forgiveness, but then we go right back to it. You soon find yourself talking badly about someone else, you find yourself start treating others the way you promised you wouldn’t again, you start to let words slip out of your mouth that shouldn’t be coming out of the mouth of a Christian, and we go right back to our sin. That’s not repentance, because if we are truly repentant, which is what Peter told those people to do in Acts 2, then we turn away from our old life of sin.

The next thing Peter told them to do was be baptized. There was this girl in my high school youth group that was a Christian, she believed in Jesus, she came to church, and I think she lived as a follower of Christ as much many of us did. But she had never been baptized before, and she had decided that she never would. She considered herself a Christian, she tried just as much as the rest of us. But she thought if she agreed to be baptized, she would be negating that belief that she was saved by grace through faith.

I want to be clear here, baptism is not the thing that saves us, she was right about that part, it is the grace of Jesus alone that saves us. But Scripture makes it clear that a part of our process of coming to faith in Jesus needs to include baptism. Peter tells us here in Acts 2, that our response to hearing about Jesus and putting our faith in him should be to repent and be baptized, and that word in the Greek means to be fully immersed. Jesus tells us in:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Matthew 28:19–20 ESV

Some people look at baptism as a simple obedience issue, that if we are truly followers of Jesus, then we will be baptized because he told us to do this. But baptism goes a lot deeper than just being obedient.

Peter talks about how baptism is linked in some ways to Noah, because in the case of Noah, people were saved through water. He says:

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

1 Peter 3:21 ESV

You see, baptism links us to the Resurrection of Jesus. Paul says this in Romans 6**:**

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:3–4 ESV

The Bible talks a lot about how we are dead in our sin without Jesus, but then Jesus came to give us new life.

…Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Colossians 2:11–12 NIV

When we are baptized, we join Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. Our old selves die with him when we plunge beneath the water. And when we rise out of the water, we are rising to a new life in Christ, led by the Holy Spirit.

In fact, Peter also tells us that when we are baptized we will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:38 NIV

There are two things there that Peter says will happen when we put our faith in Christ, repent, and are baptized. He says that we do this for the forgiveness of sins, and that we will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We talked last week about how essential the Holy Spirit is in our lives, how much he helps us and guides us in following after Jesus. God gives us the Holy Spirit to dwell within us on a permanent basis, so that we will always have that Helper, we will always have him to help us in our lives. Peter says that the gift of the Holy Spirit comes when we repent and are baptized.

If you’ve ever wondered why we offer an invitation for those who believe in Jesus, but aren’t yet baptized to come and do so, this is why. Baptism is not something that we can just take or leave. It is inherently connected to our new life as a follower of Jesus.

In the early 1800’s the Restoration Movement that our church is a part of was really starting to get rolling, and a man named Walter Scott came along who was an evangelist. Walter Scott started working alongside guys like Alexander Campbell and Barton Warren Stone, who are the big two names of the Restoration Movement

Walter Scott had a very simple way of explaining salvation to people that became known as the five-finger exercise. It actually has six steps to it, but it was a very quick and easy way of explaining how a person could be saved. And the neat thing about it is that it explained both the steps that we take toward salvation, and the steps that God takes to save us as well. It very neatly sums up what Peter says there in Acts 2.38.

There are three steps that we take: Faith in Christ, Repentance of Sin, and Immersion or baptism into Christ. And there are three things that God does for us: He forgives our sins, He gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the last one is a closed fist, as if we have secured salvation, He gives us the gift of eternal life.

That’s a great way to remember what Peter has to say there in Acts 2. But here’s the thing, today’s sermon is not about “3 Steps You Can Take to be Saved”. Today is about looking at a biblical picture of salvation. What does the Bible have to say about what salvation is all about? What we find is that the biblical idea of salvation is not so cut and dry.

Salvation in the New Testament is sometimes talked about in the past tense.

For in this hope we were saved.

Romans 8:24 ESV

Paul talks about salvation here in the past tense, and he often does. This is what is called an aorist verb in the Greek. Which means that it is a past action that is decisive and final. This is something that is already done, and there is no reversing it. Because of what Jesus did for us, we have been saved, period.

Sometimes the Bible talks about salvation in the future tense.

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.

Romans 5:9 ESV

This speaks of a salvation that is yet to come. That’s a theme we see throughout Scripture, salvation is already, but not yet. There’s a tension there that we need to get comfortable with. One of the professors at Lincoln was very fond of saying that we need to learn to be okay living with the tension in the middle. He said, “Living in the tension of the middle of two opposing forces or ideas is more often than not where reality resides.”

Jesus has already accomplished what he needed to accomplish to achieve our salvation. It was an already accomplished, decisive act, we already have it, and as long as we continue to have faith in Jesus, there is nothing that can take that away from us. But there is also a sense like we see here where there is more to come.

And then sometimes the Bible talks about salvation in the present tense.

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

1 Corinthians 1:18 ESV

Here, salvation is not something that has already happened, or something happening in the future, but something that is constantly happening to us and in us.

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,

Philippians 2:12 ESV

Paul is not talking to people who are not believers there, he’s talking to the believers in the Philippian church. They have already accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior, their eternal salvation is already secure. So are they done, is that the end of it? Paul says no.

Paul looked at salvation as a process, something you continue to go through, continue to work out throughout your life. Our eternal salvation is already secured for us by what Jesus did for us on the cross, and we can be assured of that. But we continue to see God’s grace actively at work in our lives after we come to Christ. We continually give over the parts of ourselves that are not in line with God’s plan for our lives, the things that hold us back from becoming more like him.

This is a lifelong process that we go through, a lifetime of changing and growing closer to Jesus. All helped along by the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We could call that process discipleship, we could call it sanctification. The reality is that this is what it means to follow after Jesus. This is what it means to be his disciple. This is what it means to give your life over to him, and allow him to be the Lord of your life. This is what salvation is all about. The only question that remains, is what will you do with Jesus?