

17 April 2016

Once Saved, Always Smug
Hebrews 6:1-12

In the ancient Near East, at the time of the Old Testament, gods were considered fickle, changeable beings whose favor had to be purchased with sacrifices. In Isaiah, we learn that God is different. We read Isaiah 49, verses 14-16.

- ¹⁴ *But Zion said, 'The LORD has forsaken me,
my Lord has forgotten me.'*
- ¹⁵ *Can a woman forget her nursing-child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.*
- ¹⁶ *See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are continually before me.*

Isaiah spoke confidently of God's faithfulness. The author of Hebrews has the same confidence in God. Unfortunately, he is less confident in the faithfulness of God's people. We read Hebrews chapter 6, verses 1-12:

Therefore let us go on towards perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith towards God, instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement. And we will do this, if God permits. For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt. Ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly, and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless and on the verge of being cursed; its end is to be burned over.

Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do. And we want each one of you to show the same diligence, so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

As we delve into the complex theology of the book of Hebrews this month, we come this week to what is surely the most personally relevant of all theological issues: salvation. To put it simply, in the question that the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul's response – "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household" – is great, but it still doesn't answer every question.

What *is* believing, for instance? Does it require any actions on our part? Paul seems to say no, in Galatians, where he says we are saved by *faith*, not by works. But James seems to say the opposite, in the Book of James, where he says that faith without works is dead. Then there's the question of whether this salvation is offered to everyone or just a few. John Calvin, and people who share his perspective, say that salvation is limited to those God chooses. Calvin's opponent, Jacob Arminius, and his followers (like John Wesley) say salvation is available to anyone. So how does it happen? Well, if you go with Calvin, it happens by divine election; if you go with Arminius or Wesley, then salvation depends on our own free choice. And in two thousand years of wrangling, none of these questions have been resolved. You see how convoluted the whole matter can get. Now let me add one more wrinkle. Assuming we figure out exactly who can be saved and by what means, is that permanent? In other words, can you *lose* your salvation? Obviously, if you're a Calvinist you say no. We didn't choose to be saved – that was God's whim – so we can't *unchoose* salvation. But what if we believe that our choice is involved? Once we're saved, can we be unsaved? Seems a fairly important point, wouldn't you say?

Now my own upbringing gave me a sort of hybrid theology on this point, with bits drawn from both sides. Southern Baptists, like most Evangelicals, teach that we *choose* our salvation, but that once we've chosen we can't back out. "Once saved, always saved," is the theology in bumper sticker form. This view isn't necessarily logical, but it did what we needed it to do. It gave us a purpose for evangelism – "Get out there and get people to choose Jesus" – but at the same time it reassured us that we didn't have to worry for ourselves or those we love. Because we'd answered that altar call that time when we were fourteen, we were good to go. Guaranteed. No backsies. In this way "once saved, always saved" often morphed into "once saved, always smug."

There were only a few problems with this have-it-both-ways theology, and most of them came from the Book of Hebrews. A couple of weeks ago we read from Hebrews 2 a warning against "drifting away" from our faith. And then there's the passage we read today from chapter 6, especially verses 4-6: *For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened . . . then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt.*

That's fairly blunt. And it gets worse in chapter 10: *For if we wilfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgement, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries . . . It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God* (vv. 26-27, 31). Needless to say, the "once saved, always saved" folks were *not* happy with these verses, and they assumed some amazing theological yoga positions in their attempts to show how these verses don't actually mean what they say. But what are we supposed to do with these passages?

Let's go back to the beginning, because I think a lot of the conflict between the "once-saved-always-saved" and "you-can-lose-your-salvation" positions comes from an erroneous and, I think, unbiblical idea of what salvation is. For far too long, we have treated salvation as a status, a position that we acquire by some means that grants us entry into heaven when we die. If that's what salvation is – an admission voucher – then of course the essential question is, "Do

you have your ticket?” “Are you in or are you out?” And in fact that is exactly how many talk about salvation. They categorize people into two groups: this group is Saved and this group is Lost. “Saved” becomes a classification. “Is your new boyfriend saved?” “I have this unsaved co-worker, and *he* said . . .” And when we talk like that, salvation becomes something like membership in an exclusive club with eternal privileges. At that point, only two things matter: How do you get in? and Can you ever be kicked out?

But the Bible never talks about salvation as a membership card, or as a status to achieve. Salvation is not a threshold to cross one time. When Jesus heals someone, he often says, “Your faith has saved you.” Our translations usually say, “Your faith has made you well,” but the Greek word is simply “saved.” Salvation is something that happens every time God helps us, which means it is something that happens repeatedly. In fact, the New Testament often calls Christians not “those who *have been* saved” but “those who *are being* saved.” Again, it is not a one-time thing. The Book of Hebrews describes salvation as a covenant relationship – and relationships are not things that you choose once and then never have to worry about again. Relationships are always in motion. In a relationship, you are either moving forward, or you are reinventing, or you are – as Hebrews puts it – “drifting away.”

If you think about salvation in these dynamic terms, then those scary passages in Hebrews 6 and 10 make better sense. Hebrews isn’t suggesting that we can somehow slip up and void our membership in the Salvation Club. But it is suggesting that we are capable of turning our backs on a friend who loves us. And the undisguised outrage with which the author describes that betrayal comes from the fact that this particular friend had given literally everything to restore a relationship with us. Given what Christ has done, the author of Hebrews says, how *dare* anyone take it for granted?

Here’s the good news, though. Our reading today goes on: *Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do. And we want each one of you to show the same diligence, so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end* (6:9-11). Yes, we can have assurance of eternal hope, not because we’re so faithful but because God is. God never stops wanting relationship, and God never gives up.

For those who are new to the Methodist church, this is one of the best things about the Wesleyan tradition. Our founder, John Wesley, never thought of salvation as a one-time thing. The idea that we could just jump through the correct hoop once and then never have to think about salvation again revolted him. God’s gift is worth more than that. Salvation, he said, was always a process, in which we start from wherever we are and point our steps toward perfection, one at a time. This is what salvation is: a journey, an amazing relationship with One who loves us utterly. Can relationships be broken? Yes. But if that happens, it won’t be God who gave up on us. God doesn’t do that. That’s your assurance.