

# The Entire Work of God

I. 1. And, first, let us inquire, What is salvation?

The salvation which is here spoken of is not what is frequently understood by that word, the going to heaven, eternal happiness. It is not the soul's going to paradise, termed by our Lord, "Abraham's bosom." It is not a blessing which lies on the other side death; or, as we usually speak, in the other world. The very words of the text itself put this beyond all question: "*Ye are saved.*" It is not something at a distance: it is a present thing; a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of. Nay, the words may be rendered, and that with equal propriety, "*Ye have been saved*": so that the salvation which is here spoken of might be extended to the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul, till it is consummated in glory.

2. If we take this in its utmost extent,

it will include all that is wrought in the soul by what is frequently termed "natural conscience," but more properly, "preventing grace"; —all the drawings of the Father; the desires after God, which, if we yield to them, increase more and more; —all that light wherewith the

Son of God "enlighteneth every one that cometh into the world;" showing every man "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God"; —all the convictions which His Spirit, from time to time, works in every child of man—although it is true, the generality of men stifle them as soon as possible, and after a while forget, or at

least deny, that they ever had them at all.

—*Scripture Way of Salvation*

Amy Oden

With these words from "Scripture Way of Salvation," John Wesley calls us to see the breadth and depth of the salvation God offers us.

Salvation, says Wesley, is "the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul, till it is consummated in glory," an expansive view of salvation indeed, a salvation that permeates our whole lives. At a time when our consumer culture tells us salvation is something "out there" that can be had by "calling this number on your screen" or reading the latest book or following the latest spiritual fad, Wesley reminds us salvation is a "present thing," already here and now, before we dial that number, read that book or follow that fad. God is at work, always and in every way, saving us. Salvation is not simply one component of our lives among others, nor is it to be found in the spirituality department. Salvation, Wesley reminds us, is "the entire work of God."

We divide our lives up into compartments: the kids, work, friends, extended family, our home, finances, chores, church, personal spiritual disciplines, our

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future, the past, and on it goes (notice sleep doesn't even make the list). In this pie chart of our lives we relegate God's presence and work to one or two slices. We give God our Sundays, maybe our Wednesday evenings. We give God our tithes and our talents in service through church and community. We give God the part of the pie labeled "church" or "spiritual stuff."

It's the way we've learned to survive. Fragment life into pieces of the pie. Take things in small bites. Order life in manageable chunks. Otherwise, we would drown in its wake. The complexity of our lives suffocates us. We can only take a deep breath when standing in one, knowable, graspable piece of it.

But what of that moment staring at the skillet as dinner is hurried to the table? What about that late night conversation with my spouse, the only exchange of sentences for the day, unsatisfying and incomplete? What about standing at the copy machine collating the report to pass out at the meeting that starts in 7 minutes? What of that first morning taste of coffee when the day stands before me, open and possible? We may have a vague sense God is somehow present in those moments, but at arm's length, hardly the stuff of salvation.

Wesley reminds us that the enormity of our lives can indeed be devouring. The cacophony of competing demands can drown out God's Spirit testifying to our Spirit that we are children of God. But this is only because we have made a basic mistake. We think it is *our* life that is overwhelming. When we have eyes to see, then we see that this enormity is not ours but is the expanse of God's own life. It is not *our* lives which we attempt to order and grasp. It is God's. All of the complex, connecting parts that can be overwhelming are ways we participate in God's life.

Everything we do, every conversation we have, every meal we cook, every errand we make, all of this participates in God's life. Wesley points out that *all* of our life, the whole of each of our lives, is the landscape for God's saving work.

Moreover, God is calling us, drawing us ever more deeply into God's life. As Wesley puts it, "from the first dawning of grace in the soul" God's salvation is "a present thing." God is always, in every moment and every molecule, saving us. There is no daily drudgery or delight in which God is not at work saving us. Salvation is "the entire work of God."

Another contribution Wesley makes with his expansive view is reminding us salvation is not only the moment of receiving Christ. Many of us find ourselves in religious cultures which insist on reducing salvation to an event, which can be spiritually devastating. Some other Christian families focus singularly on the moment of salvation (justification), to the exclusion of God's ongoing work (sanctification). If salvation is a moment only, then we are continually disappointed and seeking ways to re-create that initial high. For many, and I see this among both adults and teenagers, to re-experience that event of salvation means doing something "bad" in order to come to the altar again to be close to God. The reduction of salvation to an event can also arrest our ongoing Christian walk when we stay stuck in that experience, telling that one story only of God's power and saving grace in our lives. Like a repeating record, we are unable to move into a testimony of the ongoing saving work of God. As communities of faith, Wesley calls us to see how God is constantly renewing us, seeking to sanctify us, saving us.

In the same way that this word from Wesley calls us to look more expansively at God's saving work in our individual lives. This framing of salvation also has

implications for our life together. If indeed salvation is "the entire work of God" then we must be always searching in what way God is at work right here and now in our life together. We must testify to the holiness we see God working in the lives of those around us, claim it for each other and for our life together, so "the entire work of God" can be praised to God's glory. In turn, such discernment requires cultivation of spiritual disciplines that help us nurture those "eyes to see" which we receive by grace.

Finally, while this call to an expansive view of salvation asks us to know God's saving work in all aspects of our congregational life—in Sunday worship and youth lock-ins, in mowing the lawn and tending the nursery—it doesn't stop there. If, as Wesley says, salvation includes

"all that light wherewith the Son of God 'enlighteneth every one that cometh into the world,' showing every man 'to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God'; —all the convictions which His Spirit, from time to time, works in every child of man,"

then God's saving work is ongoing outside our own congregations as well. Wesley calls us to see salvation outside our walls, in our communities, across the globe, claim the glory of God, and give God thanks and praise. An expansive view of salvation indeed. □



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