



Wesleyan Roots

What Makes United Methodism Distinct

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT



Unit 2: Understanding the Nature and Action of God

Session 6: Salvation as More of a Journey-in-Process Than an Event

What Do We Mean By “Salvation?”

Christians seem to talk about salvation a lot, so what precisely does this mean? Most Christian traditions believe salvation is a gift of grace by faith through the love of God as made possible through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) are all active in God's salvation. To some Christians, the product of salvation is when we go to heaven after we die. Wesleyan Christians agree with this, but there is another dimension to salvation in addition to an understanding of an afterlife. Indeed, United Methodists understand that salvation begins now. **Salvation** is a state of relationship in which we live in harmony with God through the actions of Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit. As such, it is generally considered to be a process that lasts throughout our lives, and even after.

During my years in ministry, I have met individuals who have had an experience of salvation that appeared to be instantaneous. One man, the brother of a church member, had lived a difficult life burdened with addiction, homelessness, and the health concerns that can accompany those conditions. When this man entered into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, it seemed to happen very quickly – almost instantaneously. The change was immediate. He did not physically look like the same man. In his case, God gifted him with sobriety and improved health which lasted the remainder of his life and equipped him to have a home with family from whom he had previously been estranged. It was an amazing sight, and I thank God for the reality that this kind of sudden transformation can happen.

That said, this does not seem to be the story of most Christians with whom I come into contact, either through the United Methodist Church or other denominations. Most of us tend to describe our experience with God throughout our lives as a journey or a process. I like to

think of salvation in the Wesleyan context as a journey-in-process, and it may be helpful to talk about some of the points along the journey.

Prevenient Grace

Imagine a timeline moving from left to right across a large piece of paper. On the far left, almost at the edge but not quite, there is a star which represents your birth as a baby. Nine months or so before would be your conception, and this would be further toward the far left of the paper. Even before that is **prevenient grace**, God's grace that goes before us into our lives (see Session 2). Prevenient grace provides for us the capacity to realize that we need a relationship with God. It nudges us in such a manner that we might decide to say “yes” to a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. To represent this on the timeline, I usually scribble a cloud going off the left-hand side of the paper representing prevenient grace, and the cloud moves above the timeline to the right, representing God's grace that goes before us. God pursues a relationship with each one of us through prevenient grace, and there are no exceptions to this. God loves every human being right from the start.

This is one place where our Wesleyan perspective differs from that of some other Christian traditions. A number of Christians in other denominations understand God as less loving and more angry. The reason for this is because of the sinful state often referred to as **original sin** or birth sin.¹ Wesleyans think of original sin somewhat differently. It is not that the image of God in which we were created was eradicated by sin, but rather that God's image within us has been marred or distorted by sin. This is a significant distinction, and we believe that God's very nature, being one of grace, envelops a newborn with love just like loving parents do. The bottom line here is that Wesleyans do not tend to understand God as being angry with human beings

¹ Helpful and differing Wesleyan discussions of original sin can be found in the work of Bishop Scott J. Jones and Randy L. Maddox. See Jones, Scott J. *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002. And Maddox Randy L. *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*. Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994.

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from birth, but instead God loves them and desires the best for them.

Justification

Let us imagine the timeline once again. As we move to the right, the line would be intersected by a vertical line with arrows going up and down at both ends. This is the point of justification. **Justification** is when a Christian accepts the offer of the gift of a relationship with Jesus Christ, and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ become real for them. The work of justification took place on the cross just over 2000 years ago and is affirmed as we repent of our sin and seek to lead a new, God-centered life. **Justifying grace** is the grace that acts to reconcile us with God through the work of Jesus Christ, and it is an amazing gift of God. Just as a person hits "Control J" in a word processing application to justify margins on a page, God "sets us straight" and we begin to participate in a relationship with God. The Bible calls this "new birth," being "born again," or being "born from above" (John 3:3).

The justification that we receive as a gift of God through Jesus Christ may have been instantaneous, but we may or may not remember it. In some other Protestant traditions, Christians believe that authentic salvation occurs when they can name the date and time when they were "saved." Some can do this, like the man I wrote about earlier, but perhaps most of us cannot. I cannot remember when I received justification as a gift of God. There came a point in my life when I just found myself there. Since I was raised in the context of a church, it was more like walking up a ramp than taking a big leap. I was there almost before I knew it. I did experience the rite of confirmation (see session 3) and it was extremely important to me, but I suspect I experienced justification prior to that day.

Sanctification

A number of Protestant denominations would consider a person's salvation to be complete at this point. Once a person accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, they are saved and that is that. Back to the timeline, however, moving to the right past the intersecting vertical line representing our relationship with Jesus Christ, you may notice that there is a good bit of your timeline left. In the case of Wesleyan Christians, the process of our journey of salvation is still very much underway. Once we are justified, we immediately begin the process of **sanctification**. This is the point after our justification when we actively cooperate with the Holy Spirit to grow in our faith and to become more Christlike, and it is yet another gift of God in the Wesleyan way of salvation. In the United Methodist Church and in other Wesleyan denominations,

sanctification is a big Wesleyan root. We believe God accepts us just as we are in justification, then goes about the business of transforming us mightily during sanctification. God's grace through the Holy Spirit acting upon us at this point is called sanctifying grace. If a person chooses to cooperate with this grace, he or she will become more and more like Christ in the way they live and in the way they love others.

Our Wesleyan roots also include three other points to name here. First, at some point in our journey Christians receive **assurance of salvation**. This was of great importance to John Wesley. I describe it for myself as a sense of "peace with God." I did not always have this; in fact, I sought assurance of my salvation on an inward level for a long time. It was not until I became familiar with my Wesleyan roots that I received this gift.

Secondly, Wesley did not agree with the teaching from some Christian groups of the "Perseverance of the Saints." Another way of saying this is that Wesley did not agree with the concept "once saved, always saved." Most United Methodists agree, thinking that the understanding of "once saved, always saved" does not stand the test of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (see Session 5). The heart of this difference with some Christian groups is our understanding of free will mentioned earlier in this study in Session 4. **Free will** is a gift of God to humanity and is one way in which we are created in God's own image. Wesley believed that at some point a person could change her or his mind and "backslide" out of relationship with Jesus Christ. It is critical to note here that Jesus Christ never leaves us, not ever. In the event a person does "backslide" to the point that they no longer consider themselves a Christian, prevenient grace again is present to pursue that person and to convince them to reenter that relationship with God they had previously. God never loses any human being, although it is possible for a person to "self-select" out of relationship with God by one's own choice and action. Another important aspect to consider at this point is that periodic human doubt about God and our relationship with God does not mean one is "backsliding." In fact, wrestling with our doubt can lead to great spiritual growth as intentional Christians.

Finally, Wesley taught that it was possible and plausible to experience full sanctification while still alive. He called this being "made perfect in love," and Wesleyans refer to this as **Christian perfection**. It is helpful to understand what Christian perfection is not. It does not mean that a person will never make a mistake, it does not mean that a person will reach Christian perfection in this life and stay that way

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until death, and it does not mean that a person becomes sinless, infallible, or without error. What it did mean to Wesley is that a person could reach a point in their Christian journey where they do not break a known commandment and, more importantly, where they love others as Christ loves. I think of Christian perfection like this: in my mind I am thinking about a person that caused me serious harm. When I see this person, my stomach clenches, my heart starts to beat faster, and I struggle with whether I will speak to them or what I will say to them if I do decide to speak. In a state of Christian perfection,

however, I would look at that person and experience no anxiety, no anger, and no fear. I would only experience genuine love for him or her! That would be amazing for me, and for those with whom I come into contact. I pray that I might be made “perfect in love” in this life so I can experience the opportunity to truly love as God loves.

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United Methodist Identity Points:

- Salvation is a gift of grace by faith through the love of the Triune God, made possible by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit.
- Most United Methodists describe their experience of salvation as more of a process than an event.
- Salvation includes the whole work of God in our lives. For United Methodists, salvation is not only justification and sanctification, but God’s saving work throughout our entire lives.
- God acts in salvation in a number of ways. Through prevenient grace, God pursues a relationship with us. Through justifying grace, we are reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. Through sanctifying grace, we become more Christ-like through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- If you are a Christian, how do you think of your salvation? Is it more of an event, or is it more like a journey? Why?
- How has God pursued you to be in relationship with God? It might have been through a relative, or through a favorite teacher. It might have been at camp as a young person, in a small group during your college years, or in many other ways.
- As part of the process of salvation, do you believe God can utilize non-Christians or people of other religious traditions to influence us? Why or why not?
- In what ways is God calling you to become more like Christ through sanctification?