

All Can Be Saved to the Uttermost

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

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When each of our children was born, my dad mentioned that Ben Franklin said a baby is “all future.” I thought of that almost a year ago when our grandson, Charlie, was born.

Bob Benson tells in one of his books about when his grandson Robert was born. One day Bob’s ten-year-old, Tom, said to his mother, “Robert sure is lucky.” She wanted to know why Robert was so lucky in Tom’s mind. “Because he gets to do all them new things.” Now she wanted to know what all those new things were that Tom was referring to.

“Well, he’s never climbed a tree or waded in the lake or run through a field or felt the wind in his face or ridden a bicycle—all them new things.”

Bob says that he thought later about all of God’s children and about our life in the Spirit, and about all the wonderful surprises and stupendous things God has for all of us to do and see and feel and be. And how we just sit down where we came in and have all the questions and all the answers, and how we know all the things to say and sing, and how we know all the steps and plans for everybody else and their children too. He says, “I wonder how many new joys and insights and ways of punching holes in the darkness and poems and songs and smiles and simple pleasures we miss because we can’t begin to conceive how lucky we are, because in Christ are ‘all them new things’” (*Come Share the Being* 37-38).

We’re talking about salvation, using a summary of Wesleyan/Methodist teaching called the “Four Alls”: *all need to be saved* (because of sin), *all can be saved* (because of grace), *all can know they are saved* (because of God’s faithfulness and the witness of the Holy Spirit). Now we come to the fourth all: *all can be saved to the uttermost*. “Uttermost” is an interesting word. It means the farthest you can go or reaching the greatest or highest degree. Talking about being saved to the uttermost means salvation leaves nothing untouched. God’s work in us affects every part of our lives. It’s a total transformation. And it extends as far as we can imagine—even farther—into eternity.

In the scripture from 1 Thessalonians, Paul prays that God will sanctify us through and through, entirely, to the uttermost. To sanctify is to set apart, to devote for sacred purpose, to make holy. We speak of the *Holy Spirit*, not just because the Spirit is Holy, but also because God's Spirit makes us holy. Holiness is part of God's character and nature. God has always told his people, "Be holy, because I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44, 45; 1 Peter 1:16). Hebrews 12:14 says, "Make every effort to live in peace with all people and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord."

Holiness is a theme all through 1 Thessalonians. In this section we see that the God who calls us is the God of peace. In the Bible, "peace" means more than just the absence of strife. It also speaks of salvation and wholeness.

The God of peace who calls us is faithful. God is true to his own nature. God is consistent. God does what he says. He will sanctify us. He will fulfill his purpose of making us holy, of saving us completely.

Salvation, holiness, being restored to God's image is for our whole being, our entire personality. Paul prays that God will sanctify us entirely. He mentions spirit, soul, and body. This is the only time he uses those three ideas together. They're not three separate parts of a human being. The Bible's view of human personality is holistic. Talking about spirit, soul, and body is talking about the entire person. God's aim is for us to be whole and integrated in all of our thoughts, feelings, actions, all aspects of our life.

Our spirit is also known as our heart or will. Soul is like the control center of who we are. Our body, of course, is what we can see and touch. Our bodies are part of God's good creation. In Christian faith, salvation isn't release from the body; it's redemption of the whole person. God intends someday to resurrect and transform our bodies to make them like Christ's glorious body.

In the meantime, we can experience foretastes of that resurrected life through the healing power of God in our bodies, our minds, our emotions, our spirits, our relationships. God wants us to be truly alive in all of these aspects of our being. There's nothing in our lives that God wants to leave untouched by his grace, power, love, and salvation.

Sometimes we call this work of God's Spirit *sanctifying grace*. We receive sanctifying grace through faith. And we participate in this journey to wholeness as we give ourselves to God. We give all we know of ourselves to all we know of God. We keep learning more of ourselves to give and we learn more about God to give to. We participate with God's transforming power as we engage in means of grace or spiritual disciplines.

Sanctifying grace is the Holy Spirit's work in our lives *to root out sin*. The Old Covenant sacrifices could only cover sins and highlight the seriousness of sin. In the New Covenant, Jesus' sacrifice is sufficient to root sin out of our lives (see Romans 3:25; 1 John 4:10; Hebrews).

God takes sin very seriously and God is intent on ridding our lives of sin. And yet we don't have to clean up our lives before God will accept us. The good news is that God accepts us and then goes to work rooting out the sin.

Part of what the Holy Spirit does is convict us of the sin that clings to us and then lead us to repentance. Sin does remain, but it no longer reigns. It's still present, but it doesn't have to control us. The rule and power of sin are being diminished by the power of God's Spirit.

Here's a practical application of this. Identify some particular sin that you struggle with. Or, get quiet and allow God's Spirit to reveal to you some area of resistance, some aspect of your life not yet yielded to God. As you repent and believe, allow God to take that sin from you. Our willingness for God to take sin from us, not our ability to give it to God, is the key. If we were able to give it to God, we wouldn't need God. Will power alone isn't enough. We need the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit changes our attitude toward God and sin. The next time you're tempted in that way, your first impulse will be to resist that sin. It can actually become easier to obey than to disobey God (see Bob Tuttle, *Sanctity Without Starch* 126).

Another aspect of the Holy Spirit's work in sanctifying grace is *restoring the image of God in us*. God made us in his image and God wants us back. Sanctification is the process of becoming more and more like Jesus who is the image of God. God is out to renovate us completely.

We watch some of those TV shows where people renovate houses, rehab or fix up places for people to live.

John Wesley sometimes compared life with God to a house. The front porch is repentance. We've heard the invitation of grace and we've left old ways of sin to come to God. The door is justification. That's where we enter, we come into this new relationship with God, this life with God. Sanctifying grace is exploring all the rooms of God's great house. We become more at home, we get better acquainted.

I've also heard a similar illustration that's flipped around a bit. Our life is the house. We hear Jesus knocking and calling. We open the door and receive him. Then he comes in and starts to fill our life with his life. He starts renovating who we are, restoring us to be all that we're created to be.

Sin weakens or destroys the foundation for life as God intends it. The house I grew up in was built in the 1920's. We moved there in 1970. It was already settling some and the floor in one of the upstairs rooms was sloping. It got worse over the years. Around the chimney, things stayed pretty solid. But the foundation was weak or settling, so the floor sloped away from the center and cracks appeared in walls. My parents decided that fixing the foundation would take too much effort and expense. They reinforced the basement walls, but that didn't seem to make much difference. Every so often they would put up new wall paper. They even added on to the house at one point. Those cosmetic changes made it look better for a while, but they didn't fix the basic problem.

That's like how we try to deal with sin. We try to fix up, change our appearance and some behavior, we add new activities onto our lives. But none of that fixes our basic problem. Jesus wants to get to the heart. He knows we need a new foundation and renovation. Sometimes we may even need to rebuild.

C. S. Lewis borrowed an illustration like this to describe God's work in our lives:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on:

you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.

The command *Be ye perfect* is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command. (*Mere Christianity*, Macmillan Paperback, 174)

The goal of sanctifying grace is to bring us to a whole-hearted devotion, a single-minded commitment to God. John Wesley spoke of an experience of *entire sanctification* or *Christian perfection*. “Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). “Let us go on to perfection” (Hebrews 6:1).

Before United Methodist pastors are ordained, we stand in front of the clergy in the Conference and answer a series of questions. First is, “Have you faith in Christ?” That’s not hard to answer. But the next three ask, “Are you going on to perfection? Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life? Are you earnestly striving for it?” (*The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016*, paragraph 336).

Most of the time the answers to those questions are accompanied by nervous laughter. When you hear those Bible verses or Wesley’s teaching about Christian perfection, your reaction is probably, “That’s impossible! No one is perfect or can be.” But we need to understand what Wesley meant by *Christian* perfection. He didn’t mean absolute purity or flawless performance.

The essence of holiness and Christian perfection for Wesley was in the two great commandments—to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself (Mt. 22:37-38). The Holy Spirit can so fill our hearts with love for God and our neighbor

that sin and self-will are crowded out. Our great desire is to know and love God.

That desire of our heart is what really matters for Christian perfection. This isn't a perfection of performance, but of motive and intention. If children bring their mother a bouquet of flowers she'll accept it with love, even though it has weeds and dirt and flowers from the neighbor's garden in it. Their gift isn't perfect, but they give it out of love so their intention is perfect. She may later explain to them about picking flowers, but she doesn't condemn their faulty gift; she accepts the love that it's given with (see Steve Harper, *John Wesley's Message Today* 95).

Wesley spoke of a moment, an experience, of being perfected in love, but he also spoke of the process of growth that goes before and after it. And though he told the Methodists to expect it at any moment, he pointed out that people normally experienced this entire sanctification just prior to their death. He never seems to have claimed this for himself. But he was trying to draw the early Methodists forward, helping them grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. He had discovered that the only way to keep Methodists alive was to keep them growing. If we're not going forward in our life in grace, we're going backward.

The idea of being perfected in love, of coming to a time in our lives when we really do love God with all our heart, gives us a goal. It gives us something to move toward. And we should expect God to give us this gift at any moment, even right now. Wesley was realistic about our struggles, but he was also optimistic about the power of God's grace.

Salvation is a present gift. It is for this life, but being saved to the uttermost carries us beyond death into ongoing life with God, and then even further into new creation.

In a sermon called "The New Creation," John Wesley describes the changes that will come to the world when Jesus appears again in all his glory and God's kingdom comes in its fullness, when all things are made new. There'll be no more natural disasters, no more disease or death, and so on. The way he concludes that sermon shows us something of what it means to be saved to the uttermost:

But the most glorious of all will be the change which then will take place on the poor, sinful, miserable children of men. These had fallen in many respects, as from a greater height, so into a lower depth than any other part of the creation. But they shall 'hear a great voice out of heaven, saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be their God.' Hence will arise an unmixed state of holiness and happiness far superior to that which Adam enjoyed in paradise. In how beautiful and affecting a manner is this described by the Apostle! 'God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: For the former things are done away!' As there will be no more death, and no more pain or sickness preparatory thereto; as there will be no more grieving for or parting with old friends; so there will be no more sorrow or crying. Nay, but there will be a greater deliverance than all this; for there will be no more sin. And to crown all, there will be a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all the creatures in him! (Sermon 64, 1785; <https://www.umcmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-64-The-New-Creation>)

On our way to that fulfillment, God is out to sanctify us completely, to preserve everything about us blamelessly at the coming of our Lord, Jesus Christ. God who calls us is faithful, and he will do it. Let's trust the Lord, surrender to him, and cooperate with him in the process of becoming all he wants us to be.