

All Need to Be Saved

Romans 3:9-20

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There's a summary of the Wesleyan understanding of salvation called the "four alls": *All need to be saved, All can be saved, All can know they are saved, and All can be saved to the uttermost* (Kevin Watson and Scott Kisker, *The Band Meeting* 66). Today, and the next three weeks, we're going to explore these. We start with *All need to be saved*.

Some years ago, Nancy and I watched the movie *Grand Canyon*. I didn't understand all of it, but there is a scene that makes a lot of sense. At the beginning of the movie, a man is leaving a Los Angeles Lakers game. He decides to take a short cut around a traffic jam. Then he finds himself lost in an unfamiliar neighborhood, on streets that seem to get darker and more threatening. Then his fancy sports car stalls on one of those streets. Along comes a gang of kids carrying guns. He calls for a tow truck, but before it arrives, five young thugs surround and threaten him. The tow truck arrives just in time, and its driver starts to hook up the sports car. The gang members protest. They had other plans. So the driver takes the gang's leader aside and says, "Man, the world ain't supposed to work like this. Maybe you don't know that, but this ain't the way it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be able to do my job without asking you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you ripping him off. Everything's supposed to be different than what it is here" (summary from Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God* 91).

The world as it is now is not the way it's supposed to be. There's plenty of evidence of that. Just watch the news on TV or open the news app on your phone. Theft and murder, child abuse, all the issues raised by the #MeToo movement, other sexual abuse in many places, the slave trade going on in the world now, various examples of corruption—the list goes on of examples that something's wrong with the world. If we get honest and search our own hearts, we see pride, idolatry, self-will, lust, rage, prejudice, and all kinds of darkness.

Of course there's still good in the world and in us. But, what's good in the world is like what someone on a desert island salvages from a shipwreck (G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 70).

Genesis 3 tells about the shipwreck. That story is basic for understanding what's gone wrong with God's creation, especially the human creatures. The serpent/tempter was already there, questioning, twisting, and denying what God said. The temptation was: Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. They were tempted to stop trusting God and to seize for themselves what God had promised to give them in their relationship with God.

When we hear that story we realize that it's our story too. We all find ourselves tempted to unbelief that doesn't trust God and pride that tries to be as God on our own instead of in relationship with God.

What's gone wrong with the good creation is that humans have always given in to that temptation. We all exchange the kind of world where God is at the center for the kind of world where we are at the center.

The next several chapters of Genesis trace the spread of sin and show God dealing with it. At one point it says, "The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (6:5).

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, argues that all people need God's grace because all have sinned (3:9-20, 23). Paul spends most of the first three chapters of Romans showing that all people are under the power of sin. The emphasis in this passage is that Jews as well as Gentiles are guilty. But the overall theme is summed up in vv. 22-23: "For there is no distinction, since all sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Now let's look more closely at vv. 9-20 and see more clearly what sin is, why it's such a problem, and why we need to be saved from it.

Paul writes about *the power of sin* and of people being under sin's power. Sin is not just the absence of good. We can see sin as a disease and as the corruption of our nature. It's also like an active force that can enslave a person. Back in Genesis, when Cain became angry at his brother Abel, God told Cain, "Sin is crouching at your door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (4:7). Cain failed to master sin. Instead, he was overcome by

it and he killed his brother. In our struggle against sin, we face a clever and treacherous enemy.

Now Paul brings in several references, mostly from the Psalms, that drive home the point that all people are under the power of sin. People who thought that having the word of God automatically gave them status with God find that God's word condemns their sin as much as anyone's.

The framework for this series of quotations emphasizes people's *lack of faith in and devotion to God*. The opening and closing verses of this series say that no one understands or seeks God (v. 11) and no one keeps the fear of God before their eyes (v. 18). This shows sin as a lack of knowledge of God, a failure to seek God, and a lack of regard for God. John Wesley said that the essence of sin is unbelief, failing to trust or refusing to trust God. This is a twisting of the relationship between God and humans. This life without God, not knowing God, leaves a void, an emptiness, in us. When we try to fill that emptiness, we fall into idolatry, making our own gods. Making an idol of self is the sin of pride. So sin is being without God, or trying to live without God.

Next Paul shows that sin involves *turning away from God or going astray*. This is why we talk about being lost when we're not in right relationship with God. When we're lost we're misplaced (not where we're meant to be), we don't know who we really are, we aren't going the direction we need to go. The prophet Isaiah summed up this aspect of sin when he said, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way" (53:6). Jesus told a series of stories that showed God's love for the lost—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (Luke 15).

The next expression of sin Paul highlights is *wicked speech*. Sinful talk is full of death ("their throats are opened graves"), deceit, poison, cursing and bitterness. Our words matter. The spirit or attitude behind our speech matters as well.

Jesus said that what we say shows what's in our hearts (Mt 15:18; Lk 6:45) and that we'll be judged by the careless words we speak (Mt 12:36-37). Despite all our efforts to keep people from saying hateful things, what's in our hearts will come out eventually. We can't clean that up on our own. And standards imposed from the outside can't clean it up.

Paul cites one more group of scriptures that show *violence* as an expression of sin. "Their feet are swift to shed blood, ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known" (vv. 15-17).

War provides another example that the world is not now as God intends it. Even if we grant that war is sometimes necessary, we see that the very need for war demonstrates human sin. The violence and bloodshed in war aren't always sin, but sin is the occasion for such violence and killing. Law enforcement is another example. The force used against criminals is not sin in itself, but sin or evil is the occasion for it. It's necessary to oppose, to restrict, to confine human evil.

There are examples of violence that are sinful in themselves. All kinds of abuse, whether of children or a spouse or the elderly. Violent crime obviously. Excessive or unnecessary force that's disproportionate to the crime. Any use of force to oppress others, for selfish gain—these are examples of violence as sin.

The Bible says a lot more about sin, but basically we see sin's entrance into human experience through the misuse of freedom and responsibility. In the early chapters of Genesis, examples of rebellion, cruelty, deception, alienation, fear, and pride portray the spread of sin throughout the world. In a sense, the story of the Bible is the story of God's dealing with humanity's sin—the whole process of overcoming sin and restoring creation to God's original intention.

We're all flawed and broken and we can't fix ourselves. We're all lost and we can't find the way on our own. We're all sick and we can't heal ourselves. We're all captives and exiles and we can't set ourselves free. We're all trapped and endangered and we can't rescue ourselves. We all need to be saved but we can't save ourselves.

Sin brings death because it separates us from God who is life. I once heard an illustration of sin that's stayed with me. Imagine a clam swallowing a little fish. The fish swims around and begins to eat the clam's insides. Finally the clam can't open up again and it dies. Left alone with our sin, we would eventually be consumed by it, we'd be so turned in upon ourselves that we wouldn't open up to God. We'd be completely isolated, shut in on ourselves. That's at least part of what hell is.

Thankfully, we're not left alone. One reason we know that all people are sinners is that God in Jesus addresses us as sinners. Jesus the Savior comes for us all. God offers salvation to everyone. Only sinners need salvation. Because we're all under sin, we all stand in need of God's grace. And grace is available to everyone. We'll see next week that *all can be saved*.

That list of scriptures that Paul quotes could be just a long list that hammers home the point that we're all sinners. But if we look at the contexts of those verses in the Old Testament, we see that each one is part of a passage where people are looking to God to come and deliver them. So even as he musters all that scriptural support to show that everyone is under sin's power, Paul holds out hope that God does come to deliver.

John Wesley described the image of God in humans as moral, natural, and political. The moral image shows that we're meant to live in righteousness, holiness, and love as God does. The natural image shows that we're meant to have understanding, liberty, and godly motivation. The political image shows that we're meant to rule as God's representatives, reflecting God's glory in the world. When we understand what we've lost, we begin to realize how serious sin is.

Sin distorts and corrupts the image of God in us. Hal Knight summarizes what Wesley said about the effects of sin on the image of God:

The moral image is totally corrupted—our hearts and lives are not governed by love. With regard to the natural image, the disposition of the heart, or will, is now governed by unholy tempers, as characterized by sinful motivations and desires. The understanding is dimmed and more prone to error, and inclined to see the natural world as in effect the whole of reality. Without a relationship with God, our liberty vanishes, in that our choosing is now limited by our understanding and solely directed by an unholy will. As for the political image, our governance of the world is no longer marked by faithful stewardship on behalf of God, but by self-centeredness. (*John Wesley: Optimist of Grace* 50)

Sin is a power that overcomes us and enslaves us. Sin is like a disease that infects us. We choose to sin, but we're also bound by sin. Sin is missing the target God wants us to aim for. It's falling short of God's glory. Humans are meant to be filled with God's glory, to reflect it back to God in praise and reflect it into the world in loving service. But we fall short of that ideal.

Since we're looking at basics of Wesleyan teaching, let's give John Wesley the last word here, from the conclusion of his sermon "Original Sin" (Section III, part 5):

Ye know that the great end of religion is, to renew our hearts in the image of God, to repair that total loss of righteousness and true holiness which we sustained.... Know your disease! Know your cure! Ye were born in sin: Therefore, "ye must be born again," born of God. By nature ye are wholly corrupted. By grace ye shall be wholly renewed. In Adam ye all died: In the second Adam, in Christ, ye all are made alive. "You that were dead in sins hath he quickened." He hath already give you a principle of life, even faith in him who loved you and gave himself for you! Now, "go on from faith to faith," until your whole sickness be healed; and all that "mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus!"

Actually, Jesus gets the last word, as "Christ our Lord invites to his table all who earnestly repent of their sin...."