

## The Three "Tenses" (or Stages) of Salvation

I was shocked, confused, bewildered as I entered Heaven's door – not by the beauty of it all, not the lights or its decor. But it was the folks in Heaven who made me sputter and gasp – the thieves, the liars, the sinners, the alcoholics, the trash.

There stood the kid from seventh grade who swiped my lunch money twice. Next to him was my old neighbour who never said anything nice. Herb, who I always thought was rotting away in hell, was sitting pretty on cloud nine, looking incredibly well!!

I asked Jesus, "What's the deal? I would love to hear Your take. How'd all these sinners get up here? Surely there has been some mistake!! And why's everyone so quiet, so sombre? Give me a clue."

"Hush, child," said He. "They're all in shock: No one thought they'd see you!!"

**Salvation!** – A theology or topic that is absolutely central to the Christian faith. But what is it and how do we experience it? And is salvation something that a Christian experiences at a single point in his or her life, or is there more to it?

Today I would like to present to you the three phases or stages of salvation. These could be called the three "tenses" of salvation: Past, Present, and Future.

First, why do we need to be saved?  
God's Word makes it very clear that...

***... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (Rom 3:23-24)***

And in Acts 4:12 the apostle Peter declares:

***Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.***

When I talk to people about a need for a Saviour, many claim that they aren't all that bad. They say they are confident that the good they have done will outweigh the mistakes and bad things they have said and done. As if God has some divine scales on which He will put our good deeds and bad, to see which triumphs.

What people seem not to realise is that God puts ALL our deeds, both good and bad on one side, and He himself is on the other. And if our lives don't match His holiness, we are unacceptable.

1 Peter 1:15-16 tells us:

***But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; 16 for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.***

And Hebrews 12:14 says:

***Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.***

Of course, none of us is capable of living a sinless, perfect life. The Pharisees tried to do this, putting all sorts of extra stringent regulations in place in addition to what Moses had set forth.

And Jesus said to his followers (Matt 5:20):

***For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.***

Praise God, you and I are not in a hopeless situation. **God has made a way**. And it is so incredibly easy, many find it hard to accept.

The apostle Paul tells us in Rom 6:23

*For the wages of sin is death, but **the gift of God** is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

And in Eph 2:8-10 we read:

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is **the gift of God** – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

You see, God calls us to "good works" **after** we have been saved. Our salvation from the penalty of sin is all due to God's grace – His transforming love that welcomes you and me as His sons and daughters.

So what about all those bad things you or I have done in our lives. How does God deal with that?

Remember that haunting cry that Matthew records for us in 27:46; a cry that came from deep within the heart of Jesus while he was on the cross:

*About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?').*

2 Cor 5:21 tells us

*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

It was in this moment the great transaction took place, when your sin and mine were ascribed to Jesus, and His righteousness, His holiness, was in turn ascribed to us.

The greatest miracle in the Bible is not the parting of the Red Sea, or the raising of Lazarus from the dead – but the salvation of an individual by the power of God so that the person becomes a new creation in Christ Jesus.

So by His grace you **have been saved**.

This is the first phase or stage of salvation. It is the "past tense" – If you have acknowledged God as your Lord, by His grace you **have been saved from the penalty of sin**.

**Past tense**: Saved from the penalty of sin.

And as a result, we have that awesome privilege of calling the Creator of this universe..."Father!"

2 Corinthians 6:18 says:

***And, 'I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.'***

But there's more to the story. By God's grace **we are being saved from the power of sin**. During our life here on earth, God's work continues in us.

1 Cor 1:18 says:

*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, **but to us who are being saved** it is the power of God.*

Have you ever prayerfully meditated on John chapter 17? This is one of the most powerful passages of Scripture where we gain an insight into Jesus' heart like nowhere else in the Bible. Jesus is praying to His Father just before the crucifixion and says:

*13 'I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. 14 I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world.*

*15 **My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. 17 Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. 19 For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.*** (John 17:13-19)

When we were translating the NT for the Sochiapam Chinantec people of Southern Mexico, I tried to explain the concept of sanctification to my language assistants, but we couldn't settle on a word that expressed this idea. However, not many days later Antonio shared this with me. He said,

"You know how there is an embroidered tortilla cloth placed on the pulpit in church. Well that cloth is never used to wrap up tortillas to keep them warm. It is set aside for just one purpose – to adorn the pulpit. It is ná<sup>1</sup>chan<sup>1</sup>. It has been set aside for a special purpose."

This is what being sanctified means – we have been set aside by God for a special purpose.

Remember the Lord's prayer in Matthew 6, where Jesus taught His disciples to pray. At the very end of that prayer are these words:

*...but deliver us from evil.*

or as other translations put it:

*...but deliver us from the evil one.*

You see, God doesn't want to just deliver us from the wiles of Satan, he intends for us to be His hands, His feet, His mouth of blessing to those around us. As I quoted previously, we are "saved onto good works."

Even though you and I can experience God's grace and be saved from the penalty of sin, He wants us to learn to lean on Him for all the challenges and difficulties we may face in life, including those that come from within.

The apostle Paul says it well in Romans 7:

*18 For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.*

*21 So I find this law at work: although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 22 For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23 but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? 25 **Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!***

The Bible does not recognize "faith" as a valid faith, unless that faith leads to obedience.

Hebrews 5:9 makes reference to Jesus' life while on earth. It says,  
*"And being made perfect, he (Jesus) became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him."*

A person who thinks he or she is saved, but does not care about obedience, had better take another look at the New Testament.

And when we face derision or hardship in our walk with Christ, Paul declares in Romans 8:31-39...

*31 What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? 33 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. 34 Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.*

*35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36 As it is written:*

*‘For your sake we face death all day long;  
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’*

*37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

### **Amen and Amen!**

So in summary ...

Past tense: We have been saved from the **penalty of sin**.

Present tense: we are being saved from the **power of sin**.

But the story is not finished. There is also a future tense to our salvation.

The apostle Paul tells us in Phil 1:27-29:

*27 Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel 28 without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, **but that you will be saved** – and that by God. 29 For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.*

And Rom 5:9 tells us:

*Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!*

And the Apostle John tells us in 1 John 3:2:

*Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*

Jesus Himself made this promise in John 14:1-3

*‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. 2 My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.’*

The Apostle John in the marvellous revelation he had of the future saw this take place (Rev 21:1-4):

*Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne*

*saying, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death" or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*

So, in summary, there are three tenses to God's work of grace and our salvation:

Past tense: We have been saved from the **penalty of sin**.

Present tense: we are being saved from the **power of sin**.

Future tense: we will be saved from the **presence of sin**.

Through your faith, and Christ's sacrifice, God regards you as righteous – Past tense!

Then, there is sanctification—a process whereby you and I are being delivered from sin's power and set aside for a special purpose – to be Christ's representatives – Present tense!

Finally, in heaven, we will be delivered from sin's presence – Future tense!

What occurred in our past, works itself out in the present, and comes to consummation in the future. Justification now, leads to glorification then!

And when we stand before God in heaven, wisdom will dictate that we show our empty hands and say with the song-writer Edward Mote: **"On Christ the solid Rock I stand; All other ground is sinking sand."**

Hallelujah, what a Saviour!