

## **How Are We Saved? How Do We Get to Heaven?**

### **1) Not by works.**

To start with, we can't earn our way into heaven by doing good deeds. Why not? Well, God is absolutely perfect and heaven is for perfect people. And even the kindest and nicest individuals, even the Mother Therese types of this world are still imperfect. For instance, if we only sinned three times a day, if we only had three negative thoughts per day, most people would consider that to be a relatively saintly kind of life, yes? But even with only three sinful thoughts a day, over the course of an 80-year life, that adds up to more than 80 000 sins. If any of us were in court and had 80 000 charges against us, what would our chances be of getting off? Not great. That's why we can't earn our way to heaven. Even the most perfect people aren't perfect enough for heaven.

This is a problem for God and for us. God loves us and doesn't want us to be excluded from heaven and end up in hell. But he can't allow sin in heaven, or that would wreck the place. Sin would act like red food colouring in water. Even a small drop of food colouring distorts and changes the colour of a large amount of liquid.

### **2) What's the solution?**

Because God loves us and doesn't want to exclude us from heaven, God sent his Son Jesus to Earth to pay our way. Jesus' death on the cross paid the price for sin and washes it away. When God did this, he acted a bit like a good judge who loves the person convicted of a crime. The judge cannot ignore the crime or dismiss it. If he did that he would be violating justice himself. At the same time, if the person convicted can't pay the fine, then the judge, caring for the convicted person, decides to issue the conviction but then pays the fine himself. That's what Jesus' death essentially is. God himself is paying our fine. Thanks to Jesus we are saved through God's grace.

### **3) How do you and I get in on the solution, and receive salvation ourselves?**

To make sure that we ourselves are saved we need to do two things mentioned in Mark 16:6, get baptized, and then as adults believe. 1) Baptism is God's chosen method to formally connect us to Jesus' death and resurrection. Romans 6:3-4 says: "Do you know that everyone who has been baptized into Christ has been baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead, ... we too might walk in newness of life. In Galatians 3:27-29 Paul also says that baptism makes us descendants of Abraham, in other words baptism is our formal adoption paper into God's family.

2) However, just as important if not more important than baptism is belief. You might ask, "belief in what?" Well, we believe that a) we aren't perfect, we desire to be better and we need God's salvation. And b) Jesus is our saviour and he forgives us our sins when we ask him to.

In our Lutheran doctrinal statements, it states that **we are saved by grace through faith**. It also says that faith is lived out through the act of repentance. In other words, if you want to put your faith into action, and know whether or not you have saving faith, confess your sins to God and ask for forgiveness and help in doing better. And then believe that God does forgive you and gives you that second chance, third chance, fourth chance, etc... And that is saving faith.

### **Is infant baptism O-kay?**

In the Old Testament circumcision (for boys) was the ritual which demonstrated that a Jew was part of God's people and a descendent of Abraham. Male Children of Jewish believers were circumcised when they were eight days old (Gen 17:10-14, Lev. 12:3, Luke 2:21). Circumcision was automatic for every Jewish boy, and the parents made the decision.

Now in the New Testament baptism is clearly seen as the replacement for circumcision Colossians 2:11-12 and Galatians 3:27-29. Since baptism replaces circumcision we just assume that unless the New Testament tells us to **stop** including children in God's family or church (which it doesn't), we also continue with the Old Testament practice of initiating infants into God's people.

There is also at least one New Testament example (Acts 16:25-34) where the father in the household made baptismal decisions on behalf of everyone else in his household. Now the Scriptures don't clearly say whether there were infants in that household in Acts 16, but if there weren't infants, then there certainly were older youth and adults. And Paul clearly tells the father's that his decision counts for them (Acts 16:30-31). And if the father then can make a baptismal decision that counts for older youth and adults, then certainly parents can make baptismal decisions on behalf of children.

### **Does baptism, on it's own, save us?**

Unless one is a child, no. 1 Peter 3:21 clearly tells us that baptism has a role in salvation and isn't just symbolic. And for a child, Luther and the reformers talked about the fact that children are saved on the basis of their baptism and their parents' faith. But for adults, eventually we have to get to the point where we own our faith for ourselves. And so, in addition to baptism, we have to acknowledge that we aren't perfect, and we have to ask for forgiveness and ask God for help in doing better. And we have to make a regular practice of this. We don't just confess our sins to God once and then forget God for the rest of our lives and expect that we will be saved. So, unless you die as a child, no, baptism on it's own, without active faith or belief won't save you. With active faith or belief that, when you confess your sins to God he forgives you for Jesus' sake, then baptism plus belief certainly will save you. Mark 16:6 says: "The one who believes and is baptized will be saved, but the one who does not believe will be condemned." In other words, belief and baptism are both important, but baptism without belief does not save us.

### **Can we lose our salvation?**

Yes, but if we confess our sins and desire to return to God we can always have it back. In Matthew 13 Jesus tells the parable of the sower and the seeds. The seeds represent the lives of people who hear God's word. In Jesus' parable, some seeds don't sprout at all. Some seeds sprout and produce fruit and some seeds sprout but unfortunately die out. In other words, these latter seeds represent people who were alive to God at one point but later lost their salvation.

Luther talks about the fact that we can lose our salvation either through, a) persisting in some heinous sin and refusing to repent or b) just through drifting away and ignoring God. At one point Luther says that unless someone comes to church and receives communion as a rock bottom minimum at least three or four times a year, it is to be wondered whether they are Christians. Notice, Luther does not say for sure that they are not Christians, only God can make that judgement. But he says that it looks that they likely are not. Elsewhere Luther and the reformers talk about the fact that although we aren't saved by doing good works, if no good works result after we are saved, again, it is to be wondered whether or not the faith we profess was real. As Jesus says: "The tree is known by its fruit." (Matthew 12:33).

However, God desires that everyone come to heaven and so he gives us many, many chances. Both the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), and Ezekiel 18 tell us that if we drift away from our faith we can always, always return and God will welcome us back! This is why we often include the confession as part of our worship service at All Saints. It is not to make people feel awful about themselves, but it is to reaffirm our relationship with God because everyone needs grace.

### **To Sum Up.**

To receive salvation we acknowledge that we aren't perfect and we ask God to forgive us and help us do better. And secondly, we don't just do this once, but we make a fairly regular practice of this for the rest of our lives. Luther recommends that we practice our baptism daily. Every time we confess our sins we in essence are being baptized again. In the Small Catechism Luther says: "It [Baptism] means that our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires, should be drowned through daily repentance; and that day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever."

A prayer that does this could say the following. **"God, I acknowledge that I'm not perfect, I could and should do better. By the power of your Spirit show me what I need to confess to you... Lord, forgive me for these things, for Jesus' sake. Help me do better, and eventually take me to be with your Son in heaven. Amen.** And if we say this or something similar sincerely, no matter what we have done, or how we feel about it, we know that we are forgiven and saved!