

CHAPTER 22

ASSURANCE AND PERSEVERANCE CONTINUED - THE THREE STAGES OR TENSES OF SALVATION: JUSTIFICATION, THEN SANCTIFICATION, THEN GLORIFICATION

The three stages of salvation - indicating that salvation is more a *process* than an *event*.

We have just spent a lengthy chapter seeking to reconcile what the Bible says about assurance of salvation with the warnings given about the danger of losing our salvation. That would all make more sense if we understood more clearly that salvation is a *process* rather than an *event* and that it takes place in three clearly defined stages. Realising that should make it all much clearer.

Let me therefore go back a stage and explain more fully the three different words which are used for the three stages in the process of salvation. If you understand these three words clearly, and remember the distinctions between them, then you will be better able to understand how the Bible can both reassure us and warn us at the same time.

When the Bible uses the words '*salvation*' or '*saved*' it could be referring to any one of these three stages of salvation. We therefore need to know which of them is being referred to at any given time or in a particular verse.

Stage one of salvation - "*justification*"

Justification takes place in an instant at the very beginning of our Christian life. That is the point at which we are forgiven and born again. At that moment we are reclassified and viewed differently by God. We are suddenly deemed, or considered, to be completely righteous in God's eyes. It means that in God's eyes, at that instant, all our sin is transferred on to Jesus Christ and all His righteousness is immediately transferred to us. God then chooses to view us as if we were as sinless and righteous as Jesus, even though, in the way we live, we clearly are not.

All of this takes place instantaneously at the moment of our conversion. Justification is not something that we have to work at or develop. It does not depend on our own merit or achievements. It is purely a free gift through God's grace and mercy, based on our sincere faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and on repenting genuinely.

Most of the time, when people refer to salvation, they actually mean *justification*. It is the first stage of salvation, which is the basis for forgiveness and for receiving eternal life.

Stage two of salvation - "*sanctification*"

Sanctification means the long, slow process of us actually being made more holy and less sinful *in practice*. It begins at the point when we are justified and forgiven. It then continues until we die. Sanctification is very different from justification. Sanctification means the gradual and difficult process whereby we are "*sandpapered*" by the Holy Spirit over many years. He does so to remove the sharp edges and corners from our characters and to *change the way that we think, speak and act*.

The Holy Spirit will work patiently over decades to clean up our thoughts, language, habits and attitudes. His aim is to reduce our selfishness, pride, dishonesty, thoughtlessness, cruelty etc. It is

basically what we mean when we speak of being turned from a new convert into a disciple. You can't stay a new convert all your life. You must either go forward or fall away. The Holy Spirit is the member of the Trinity who mainly looks after this process of sanctifying you. That is yet another reason why it is so essential for us to receive the Holy Spirit.

In other words, the Holy Spirit works on us as a trainer might work with an apprentice gymnast or ballerina to develop them from a raw recruit into a professional. He has been doing that in my life now since 1981. The job is far from complete. I still have a long way to go to reduce the sinfulness, selfishness and immaturity that I display in my dealings with God and other people. Nevertheless, I can say this: I am further ahead than I was all those years ago.

Another word for this process of sanctification is “*maturing*”. It goes on until the day we die. There are many elderly believers in their seventies and eighties who have been walking with the Lord as His disciples for perhaps 60 or 70 years. During that time the Holy Spirit has been “sandpapering” or refining their characters and changing them to be more and more like Jesus. Some of them have a quality of godliness in their lives which is extraordinary.

When an **un**believer becomes old they generally become more cranky, opinionated, unhappy, cantankerous, argumentative, selfish and impatient. However there are some really genuine elderly Christians in their retirement years who are the opposite. They have been mellowed, refined and matured and have a serenity in their lives. They have such peacefulness, gentleness, self-control and patience that it makes them stand out. They are like works of art that God has been patiently dabbling at with His paint brush for decades. Eventually they reach a place where they remind you of Jesus.

Another way of putting it is that sanctification involves resisting, and refusing to gratify, the desires of our flesh or sinful nature. Instead, we grow in the "fruit of the Spirit". Our sinful nature produces a horrible kind of fruit, but the Holy Spirit produces a very different kind. Let's look first at what our sinful flesh nature produces:

The acts of the flesh

¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. Galatians 5:16-21 (NIV)

Let's now look at what the Holy Spirit can produce in us, if we allow Him to do so:

The fruit of the Spirit

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Galatians 5:22-25 (NIV)

We saw above the dreadful things we do when we operate in accordance with our sinful fleshly nature. However, with the help of the Holy Spirit, as we grow in holiness, we can see very different

fruit growing out of our lives. The production of that kind of fruit in our characters is what sanctification is really all about.

Remember the series of verses we looked at in the previous chapter about 'fruit'. We saw that God is very concerned indeed to look at the kind of fruit our life is producing. Is it the kind of fruit that comes from a self-centred life devoted to indulging ourselves and gratifying our flesh nature? Or is it the fruit of the Spirit and a steadily increasing number of good works done for God? Do we love others, serve the poor and needy and reach out to those around us who are lost and need the gospel? Those things are the kind of fruit which God is looking for. They will demonstrate that we really are genuine Christians.

We now see the huge difference between sanctification and justification. Justification takes place in an instant and is not based on effort or achievement. It is based exclusively upon the grace and mercy of God, not on our own merit.

Conversely, sanctification is a process that takes decades and it does partly depend on us. It requires our effort, and a willingness to change. It also involves determination to keep on repenting and to keep on turning away from particular sins, habits and patterns of thinking. It is something that steadily develops as we continue to be disciples of Jesus over the years and decades.

Continuing as a disciple

Our discipleship, i.e. our walk with God, can stop. We can fall away if we are not faithful or if we deny or abandon Jesus. Consider this intriguing verse where the apostle Peter is referred to:

But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.' " ***Mark 16:7 (NIV)***

I have added the underlining above. Few people notice that Peter is not included among the disciples at that point. It is immediately after the resurrection, and is only a few days since Peter, while afraid for his life, denied three times that he even knew Jesus.

This is a controversial point and we can't be dogmatic either way, because the Bible doesn't say anything explicitly. However, it seems that that denial altered Peter's status. He presumably still believed in God, and probably in Jesus, but was he still saved? Would he have gone to Heaven, if he had died that day? I don't know, but I suspect possibly not.

At the very least, he was no longer classified as being Jesus' *disciple*. Had he not repented and come back to Jesus, it seems likely to me that Peter could eventually have ended up like Judas. He went to Hell when he died, despite having been an apostle for three and a half years, (though never a genuine believer).

Remember what Jesus had said earlier on this very point. He emphasised the need for us to continue in His Word in order to be classed as being His disciple:

So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, 'If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; ***John 8:31 (NASB)***

Following his threefold denial of Jesus, it would seem that Peter was no longer viewed as being a disciple. However, he was restored as a disciple shortly afterwards. This occurred when Jesus asked him three times 'Do you love me?' It would seem that Peter then became a disciple again and he recommitted himself to Jesus. From then on, he remained loyal and he never again denied knowing

Him. In fact he ended up being executed because of his ministry and his refusal to stop telling people about Jesus.

However, although he was reinstated as a disciple and never again denied or betrayed Jesus, Peter continued to make mistakes, just as we all do. He misjudged situations, made errors and even allowed himself to be intimidated by people. On one occasion apostle Paul had to publicly correct Peter when he made a major error:

¹¹When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. ¹²Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. ¹³The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. ¹⁴When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

Galatians 2:11-14 (NIV)

What if we make mistakes or have failures?

Peter realised that he was wrong on this point about dealing with Gentiles and that Paul was right. So Peter altered his approach. However, this error by Peter did not cause God to stop viewing Peter as being a disciple. Nor did Peter lose his salvation over it. He was just wrong, as we all are from time to time. That's the difference: denying or turning our back on Jesus can lose us our salvation. In doing those things we could throw our salvation away.

However, merely making mistakes, not knowing things, being wrong, or even *doing* wrong, do not necessarily have that result. These are quite different concepts, with very different outcomes.

We do not lose our forgiveness, or even our status as disciples, every time we sin or mess things up or fail. However, we can lose our *future rewards* at the Judgment Seat of Christ if we live unworthily of Jesus or disobey Him. It may also affect the *role* we are given in the 1000 year reign of Jesus when He returns to the earth. (See Book Four in this series for more details of the Judgment for Christians and of what will occur when Jesus returns to reign on the earth).

So, what we do and how we live matters enormously. It will all be dealt with one day when we are judged. Hopefully that will be at the Judgment Seat of Christ. However, if we go so far as to fall away, then it would be dealt with at the Great White Throne. God forbid that that should ever happen to you.

Being a genuine disciple is the means by which we gradually change and learn how to love and obey Jesus. So, being a loyal and committed disciple is the key to becoming sanctified and mature. It is also the key to the rewards we will one day get, or not get, at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

If we continue to grow in sanctification we will remain as His followers to the end and stay on "the Way". If we aren't being sanctified we will eventually drift off, grow cold and fall away. So, sanctification has a major bearing on whether you *continue* as a Christian. You can't just stand still. You must either go forward by being sanctified, or go backwards by not being. There is no other choice and no middle ground.

What happens if we drift away from Jesus and cease to follow Him?

If we go too far in wandering away from Jesus or if we deny Him, despise Him or take Him for granted, then a point may be reached where our name is erased or blotted out of the book of life. I don't know where that specific point is, or when another person has reached it. I know very little about where other people stand with God.

What I do believe is that if a person continues to disregard God and has no fear of Him or respect for Him, such that they go cold and allow their hearts to grow hard and leathery, then they could eventually lose everything. It is not just their reward, that is at stake, but eternal life as well. Remember that the writer to the Hebrews says that without sanctification no one will see the Lord:

***Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.
Hebrews 12:14 (NASB)***

Look also at what Jesus Himself says in the book of Revelation as He addresses the church at Sardis and urges them to wake up and repent:

***'He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.
Revelation 3:5 (NASB)***

Note that in that verse Jesus is speaking to a particular local church. The implication of His words is that if they will not repent and change their ways then He will erase their names from the book of life. They would then be lost. If not, then His statement would be meaningless.

Therefore, knowing those facts, we have all the more reason to seek for sanctification so that we can grow continually in holiness. It is not that we are justified by this process. That has already been done. However, the process of growing in holiness, i.e. being sanctified, is what helps to keep us firmly rooted in Jesus Christ, honouring Him and fearing Him. It has a crucial part to play, as does the fear of the Lord, in keeping us from that complacency that can cause us to throw our own salvation away.

If justification is by faith alone, what about sanctification? Is that by faith alone as well?

Justification certainly is by God's grace, through faith alone. However, sanctification is different. It operates differently and it is achieved differently.

Sanctification is, effectively a *'joint venture'* between us and the Holy Spirit. We seek to become sanctified and He helps us to do so. It is not achieved solely by the Holy Spirit and it is not achieved solely by faith either. It also requires obedience, effort, perseverance, determination, passion and commitment. None of those things are needed in relation to justification. That is given to us freely when we truly repent and believe (trust) in Jesus Christ

So, sanctification requires faith, but it is not achieved by faith alone. It also requires our input. We have to choose wisely, make sacrifices and walk in obedience over many years. If it did all depend solely upon our faith in Jesus and on what His death on the cross achieved for us, then what would be the purpose of the Judgment Seat of Christ?

If *all* that Jesus was to do when we stand before Him as our Judge at the Judgment Seat of Christ was to say *"I view you as having all of my own righteousness imputed to you,"* what would be the basis for

Him to praise, rebuke or reward any of us? We would all surely be equal if it worked that way? We would all simply have His imputed righteousness and nothing more. If so, we'd all be identical.

So, that is not the basis for the Judgment Seat of Christ. The confusion comes from mixing up these two entirely separate judgments:

- a) **the Great White Throne judgment** - we escape this, i.e. avoid even being present at it, solely on the basis of our having been *justified*. That is because we are deemed to have all of Jesus' righteousness, imputed to us. Thus *real* Christians will not be at that judgment. Its purpose is to punish all those who have sinned and who have never put their trust in Jesus, or have not remained faithful to Him.
- b) **the Judgment Seat of Christ** - This is for all genuine Christians. It is intended to evaluate the *fruit* produced by our lives and to see what we *achieved* with the talents and opportunities that we were given (our stewardship). It will involve examining our innermost motives and intentions, as well as looking at our actions. We will all come out with different 'scores' or assessments which are unique to ourselves.

Those assessments will also be perfectly weighted and discounted to reflect our precise individual circumstances, age, talents, gifts, opportunities, abilities, knowledge, background, etc, plus the nature and extent of the opposition we faced. Only God is clever enough to make a judgment which requires so many factors and variables to be considered. (See Book Four for a fuller discussion of the Judgment Seat of Christ.)

So, though justification is by faith alone, sanctification *is not* by faith alone.

Stage three of salvation - “glorification”

This is the final stage of the overall salvation process. As with justification, this also happens in an instant. It occurs after we have died (for most of us). However, those of us who are alive on the earth at the point of the rapture, will be carried up to Heaven without ever having died. But, if we have died prior to the rapture, then our physical bodies will be raised from their graves and we will be transformed and given a new resurrection body.

If, however, we are alive at the point of the rapture (when Jesus comes to take away His Church) then we will still be instantly transformed and given our glorified resurrection bodies, just like those people who have been raised from their graves.

So, every real Christian, whether alive or dead, will then receive a new resurrection body. That resurrection body is eternal and immune from death, illness, injury or decay. Therefore after we have died, (or for some, at the point of the rapture when they are carried up into Heaven whilst still alive) we will be instantly transformed into the glorified condition that we will remain in for eternity. We will then have a perfect resurrection body. It will never grow old, sick or tired and will never die.

But, in addition to that glorified resurrection body, we will also be given a new and perfect *nature*. We will no longer have a sin nature or any tendency to sin at all. At that time (but not before) we will become perfectly sinless, like Jesus. So, this final stage, glorification, needs to be clearly distinguished from both justification and sanctification.

Glorification is an instantaneous event by which we are transformed. It involves not just “*deemed*” or “*imputed*” righteousness. It is *real and actual righteousness*. We will be truly different and will never sin again. Conversely, as we are now, we sin every day even though, if we are Christians, God

chooses to view us as if we had all the righteousness of Jesus. However, when we are glorified it will no longer be “*as if*” we were righteous and sinless. We will *actually be sinless in the way we think, speak and act.*

Glorification does not depend on us or on anything we do. It is something that God will do for us miraculously, through His power. It is the final stage of that process of our salvation. It brings to an end the long process of sanctification (sandpapering) that we have discussed above.

Conclusion

So, of these three concepts the first and the last, justification, and glorification, are not dependent on our own efforts. They each happen in an instant. They are both solely dependent upon God. He does it for us, through His grace. The only part of our salvation that we can contribute to by our own effort is the long process of sanctification while we live on this earth as disciples. Sanctification is not what gives us forgiveness or eternal life, but it is one of the main things that keeps us following Jesus and being faithful to Him.

It may help to think of these three aspects of salvation, i.e. justification, sanctification and glorification, as being the three 'tenses' of salvation. They correspond to the past, present and future tenses of salvation. So, we can say "*I have been saved*" (justified); "*I am being saved*" (sanctified); and "*I will be saved*" (glorified). All three statements are correct, and the Bible uses the word "saved" in all three of these contexts.