

The Lifelong Journey

John 1:10-18

Preached October 11, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Introduction. Ray Zirkle, a missionary in Costa Rica, Nathan, my middle son, and I traveled nearly 4 hours southeast of San Jose before stopping at a hotel for the night. Early the next morning we arose and continued our journey through a remote rural area. Two hours later the road ended and we were at our starting point – a hike into the rain forest of Costa Rica to visit the Christian community among the Cabecar Indians. After 6 hours of hiking through streams, bogs, dense forests and up and down two steep mountains, we arrived at our destination – a beautiful cleared vista overlooking a fast flowing stream below. There on that plot of ground was the Pastor Onorio's home and a one room church building under construction. That journey proved to be one of the most memorable adventures in my life.

While I will probably never forget that trek into the rainforest, there is another journey of which we are part that is of far greater magnitude. It is the journey of salvation.

Over the past eight weeks, we have been looking at God's great stimulus package, *Salvation*. We have taken an in-depth look at the nature and mystery of salvation. We have seen that salvation is directed not only toward individuals but all of creation. On some of the thoughts shared about the

subject there is not complete agreement within the Christian community. Today, Brian and I are bringing this series to a conclusion. It has been an enriching expedition for me and hopefully for you. If you have missed one of the sermons, I encourage you to go our website and read it under the worship tab.

The Lifelong Journey.

After many years of conversations and encounters with Christians, I have come to the conclusion that most consider salvation to be an experience or an event. In some circles, people often speak of "*being saved*" or their "*salvation experience*." These persons place significant emphasis on a moment they encountered Jesus Christ and prayed to ask forgiveness and invite Him to come live in their lives. Many can point to a day and place when this happened: "I was saved on September 22, 1974 at Mount Pleasant Church."

For many others within the Christian community, they may not use the same language of "being saved," yet they often refer to other significant events marking their salvation – baptism or confirmation. These persons point to those events as moments defining their salvation. While both of these types of experiences are important and valid, they are not the complete picture of biblical salvation. Being born again, baptism and confirmation serve as road markers on a greater journey.

You see, salvation is not a dot or the period at the end of a sentence. In reality, salvation is a line that leads to a destination.

The Bible uses another metaphor for the journey of salvation – a race. The author of Hebrews wrote: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us* (12:1). Here the imagery is constructed of a great stadium filled with people who are watching as we run the race. Paul, near the end of his life, shared a similar picture with one he had mentored: *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*

(2 Timothy 4:7). He saw his life as a race to be finished.

Once in a community that had never held a race, a citizen learned of another community that had an annual 10K race. He soon shared his discovery with others and they decided to have their own 15K race. There was so much excitement as the event was planned – the date was chosen, the course was marked out, stands were set up, vendors were selected to sell funnel cakes, opportunities for people to register were provided and of course, people had to purchase the latest running attire. On the day of the race, everyone who had registered stood at the starting line engulfed with excitement. Then the gun sounded and they were off. But as the runners rounded the first block, they dropped out. They began to hug each other and say, "We have run the race."

Paul's words about his race contain ideas that are critical in running a race – "*I have finished the race*." The race of salvation is a lifelong journey that requires perseverance. If we are to reach the goal, we must persevere. On a couple of occasions, Jesus reminded his disciples of the importance of continuing on the journey - *The one who endures to the end will be saved* (Matthew 10:22).

Grace in the place of Grace.

One of the great beauties of Methodist theology is it contributes to this notion of salvation being a journey. Personally, I am drawn to this understanding and this brings me joy that I am a Methodist.

From our heritage, we often hear three terms that describe the grace we experience on the journey – prevenient, justifying and sanctifying.

- *Prevenient* grace is the grace that comes before the initial experience of salvation. Through this grace, God draws us toward himself and gives us an awareness of the need of a relationship with Him. John Wesley described it as "*the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the slightest transient conviction of having sinned against him*" (Sermon, *On Working Out our Own Salvation*.) Prevenient grace is all of

God's action to bring us to himself and any understanding of how He wants us to live. Remember my opening story of hiking into the rain forest? Ray, Nathan and I had to travel about 6 hours by car in order to get to the place where we could begin the hike. Prevenient grace is God's action in our lives to get us to the starting point of the race.

- *Justifying* grace is God's action where the journey begins and salvation is first experienced. God sounds the gun and we begin to run. As we respond to God's action through Jesus Christ, that is we receive him by faith, our sins are forgiven and we are adopted as God's daughters and sons. As John wrote, we are *born not of human will but born of God*. This is the place where the gun sounds and the race begins.

- *Sanctifying* grace is the grace God gives us that enables us to continue the journey of salvation so that we can reach the goal God has set before us. Through this grace, we grow in our relationship with Christ and our faith deepens. Wesley described this as "*being saved from the power and root of sin and restored to the image of God*." In the race metaphor, it is that "second wind" the runner gets after running for a while when the endorphins kick in and he is able to continue with vigor. Sanctifying grace is as the second, third, fourth, fifth winds needed to continue on.

In our scripture lesson, John uses an intriguing phrase regarding the grace we receive through Jesus. He wrote that we have received "*grace upon grace*." The word translated "upon" is "ἀντί" in the Greek. Most of you know that "ἀντί" means "against" or "instead of." John is saying that God has given us grace *instead of or in the place of* grace. What a wonderful way to express the abundance of grace God gives; before we begin the journey - prevenient grace, then justifying grace and sanctifying grace to carry us along the journey. For each step of the journey, God gives us grace, grace that he lavishes upon us (Ephesians 1:7).

The destination.

Salvation is a journey to a destination. Most in this region of the world believe that destination is heaven. But in the Bible, we find another destination.

James shares the goal of our journey in succinct fashion. James tells us that difficult times can lead to perseverance which can lead us to the goal – that we *may be mature and complete* (1:2-4). Here is the ultimate goal for salvation for each person – to be mature and complete.

While most parents enjoy the time when their children are young, they know innately that the goal of parenting is to nurture mature human beings. God wants his children to grow up and be mature in faith. He does not want us acting immaturely all our lives, enslaved in childish behaviors. But he wants us to be like Christ who served him fully and gave himself for others.

God wants us to be complete, that is to become all He created us to be. From the very beginning God had a plan for us to be all he created us to be. Paul wrote: (Philippians 1:6) *I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ*. Jesus gave this exhortation in the Sermon on the Mount: *Be perfect* (or complete) *therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect* (Matthew 5:48).

Paul understood this goal, gave himself fully to God and experienced grace upon grace as he moved toward it. In Philippians, he wrote: *I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus* (3:14). He knew he had not arrived, but he kept pressing on.

Through the years, I have been blessed and inspired to know several who kept pressing on throughout their lives to be all God created them to be. Let me share about two of them.

Margaret Neal had a servant's heart until she took her last breath. At an early age, she was diagnosed with cancer and for a number of years fought the battle with that enemy that constantly stalked her. Yet despite that, she loved Christ and his church. She was faithful in her participation and did everything she could to make the ministry of her church successful. She gave herself to study and growth. I remember being in her home near the end of her life when cancer had struck her body with a vengeance. She said to me, "Dwight, I can't do what I once did but I still want to serve. I can call people on the telephone." Margaret kept pressing on to the goal.

Charlie Ellis was a true churchman, who loved God with all his heart and loved his church. While he was living and able, he did not miss services. He encouraged his pastor and others. He committed himself to learning and growth. He had been successful in business and had a generous heart. Not only did he support his church through his tithe, but he was always the first to step forward when someone had a need. He was a humble man who kept pressing on to the goal until he died.

Four steps along the journey.

Salvation is a lifelong journey in which God lavishes his grace on us. To reach the goal, there are four steps we must take over and over again – Accepting – that is accepting Christ, making him our own; receiving – grasping hold of Christ and joining him on the journey; believing – fully trusting in him each step of the way; and knowing – seeking to know him fully and intimately.

These steps – accepting, receiving, believing and knowing must be taken over and over again.

Invitation

Lao-tzu is credited with this proverb: "*A journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step*." Michael Moncur suggests another rendering of this proverb: "*Even the longest journey must begin where you stand*" (www.quotationspage.com/quote/24004.html).

The journey of salvation must begin with that first step of faith. Then it continues with the next.

Where are you on this journey? Have you taken the first step? Will you take the next to press on toward the goal God has for you?

My hope is you will take that next step of your journey.