

**Ephesians 2 - 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.**

John Wesley the founder of the Methodist Church believed that it was every Christian's duty to seek to restore in themselves the image of God that was broken when the first man and woman disobeyed in the Garden of Eden. He believed and Scripture supports him that that was God's purpose from the beginning of time and through Jesus Christ that goal was achieved.

John was very energetic and his writings and sermons fill volumes on this subject. He investigated and wrote on the minutest of details. And because of that the Methodist Church, unlike many other denominations has no written creed, doctrine, or confession. Instead, Wesley's writings and sermons serve as the basis for our understanding of God and Scripture. Wesley compiled and published his sermons, with notes, for that very purpose.

Unfortunately, as those who are participating in our study of Wesley's sermons can attest, they are not the easiest pieces of literature to read and as a result most Methodists ignore them.

But I've read many of his sermons and, old English and all, they are still powerful and the message they give is still pertinent and relevant today. So in the upcoming year, as the Spirit moves me, I will attempt to bring some of Wesley's sermons to you in a modern interpretation. I will not be doing a word for word interpretation, that would be way beyond my ability. I will to the greatest extent possible keep the structure and theme intact but my primary will be focus on the message.

This morning we begin with a sermon Wesley delivered in 1765 entitled "The Scripture Way of Salvation." In that sermon, Wesley brought together many of the themes he had woven into his writings and teachings into one coherent approach to what it meant to be a Christian. What is our purpose in the world?

In fact Wesley discussed the purpose of religion in general. What are people looking for when they turn to religion? What do you seek when you come to church on Sunday, when you read the Bible, or say your prayers at night?

As Wesley noted in that sermon we make it a lot harder than it has to be. We get bogged down in doctrines, theology, and traditions. We argue over lifestyle, worship style, and pretty much anything else we can have an opinion on.

But for Wesley, the entire purpose of a Christian could be summed up in one word, salvation. And there was one and only one way of achieving salvation, and that was through faith. He wrote and I quote, “that these two little words, I mean faith and salvation, include the substance of all the Bible, the marrow, as it were, of the whole Scripture.”

John Wesley asked three questions; two we will try to address this morning and the third next week. First, what is salvation? Second, what is this faith that saves us? And third, how are we saved by faith?

So, what is salvation? What does it mean to be saved? First thing we have to recognize is that it does not mean that when you die you will go to heaven, that you will live forever in paradise, eternally happy. It is not a blessing that we receive on the other side of death. Look at the words of our reading from Ephesians this morning. It says, “You have been saved”. It’s not something that will come in the future. It’s not something far away. It is here and it is now! You are saved when you first receive the grace of God and it is with you throughout your entire life and it will be fulfilled by the coming glory and return of our Savior Jesus Christ.

This “salvation” is even broader than that. It is what draws us to God and is the source of all that is considered good in the world no

matter what one believes in. The world calls it our “conscience”, Wesley called it “preventing grace”. In short the grace that keeps us from killing each other; the grace that allows the most evil person to love their children; the grace that has kept humanity together since the fall of Adam and Eve, is all part of God’s plan of salvation for the world.

But for us as Christians salvation consists of two parts, justification and sanctification.

Now justification is just a fancy word for pardon. It is the forgiveness of all our sins and it allows us to have a relationship with God. That justification, that pardon is ours because of the price paid by Jesus Christ on the cross, the shedding of his blood for our sins. We are justified when we accept Jesus as our Savior. When we recognize our sin and our inability to deal with it alone and ask Jesus to save us. When we believe that his death atoned for our sins. At that moment we are pardoned and there are immediate affects, the peace of God, that peace that surpasses all understanding and the hope and joy of knowing Jesus Christ.

We have to be careful though. Through Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven but we are still more than capable of sinning. There is great euphoria, joy and comfort but it’s a like falling in love. After the first

rush, the real work begins. That real work is the second part of salvation, sanctification.

At the same time that we are justified, in that very moment, sanctification begins. In that instant we are born again, born from above, born of the Spirit: there is a change in our lives. We are inwardly renewed by the power of God. That power gives us the ability to truly love; first God and then our neighbor, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ. Prior to that, our ability to love is only a pale reflection of true love. That power also gives us the ability to expel the love of the world, the love of pleasure, of ease, of honor, of money, together with pride, anger, and self-will and in short, changes our earthly, sensual, devilish mind, into "the mind which was in Christ Jesus."

From that moment of our being born again, the gradual work of sanctification starts. We become saints, but not necessarily saintly. We are enabled "by the Spirit" to "put to death the misdeeds of our body"; we become dead to sin and as we are more and more dead to sin, we are more and more alive to God. It is a process of growth. We go from grace to grace, being careful to avoid sin, each grace building on the other. Our hearts and minds change, we become "zealous of good works," doing good for others whenever we can. We worship God with our lives, not only in spirit, but also in truth.

And there is an ultimate goal for all this. John Wesley called it “entire sanctification”; a full salvation from all our sins, --from pride, self-will, anger, unbelief; or, as the writer of Hebrews says, "go unto perfection." But what is perfection?

I can almost hear your thoughts; “perfection, you can’t be serious, no one can be perfect.” And by ourselves you are absolutely correct. We cannot even come close. But with God all things are possible. Do you believe that? Perfection, for Wesley meant perfect love. Perfect love excludes sin, fills the heart, takes up the entire capacity of our souls, rules our lives. After a while we are not even aware of it. It becomes as natural as breathing. It is a love that is always rejoicing in God, prays unceasingly, and always giving thanks. That is what Wesley called salvation. And it is only achieved through faith, which brings us to our second question.

What is this faith? The most succinct definition is found in Hebrew 11, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith is supernatural and is of God. You cannot just wake up one morning and say, “I think today I will have faith.” It is a gift given to us by God when we finally believe, when we stop fighting him.

Scripture tells us that God shines a light and gives us the power of discernment when we have faith. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians, "For

God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." In short God gives us the ability to discern his spiritual truths, his commands, and his purposes. Faith is having our eyes, hearts, and minds opened by God to his kingdom. Faith allows us to see the things that the world cannot comprehend and cannot see.

And the most important aspect of that opening, that faith is the conviction that God not only reconciled the world to himself through Christ, but also that Christ loved *me*, and gave Himself for *me*. This is the faith by which we *receive Christ*. This is the faith that makes Christ all things to us. It is personal and it is intimate and for some of us it is so overwhelming that it frightens us.

Wesley wrote that through this faith we have assurance and that the Holy Spirit witnesses in us this assurance that we are the children of God. It is then that we can come to Christ as children. From this assurance, we derive confidence and strength, knowing that God is with us in all things.

It is by this faith we are saved, justified, and sanctified, and faith alone. Which brings us to our third question. How does this faith work to save us?

Now you might say at this point “who cares?” If we are saved by faith, and faith alone, why do we need to know how it works? Wesley thought it was extremely important that we know. Because that faith transforms us, it is our witness to the Holy Spirit that works in us and now resides in those who are saved. And that is what we will talk about next week.