

“CHRISTIANITY THE WESLEYAN WAY (#3):  
THE SCRIPTURE WAY TO SALVATION”

(Ephesians 2:1-10)

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[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 1-22-23]

--I--

1. **[BOTH 9am & 11am Services... ]** Read CEB text: Ephesians 2:1-10 and Pray.
2. Today we’re continuing our sermon series called “Christianity the Wesleyan Way,” in which we’re exploring our spiritual heritage as Wesleyan/Methodist Christians.

A--And as I’ve done before, let me remind you again that my goal in this series is not to make us into “good little United Methodists,” but instead to help us be *great* Christians, who just happen to live that out in a uniquely *Methodist/Wesleyan* way.

B--While last week I reminded us of the many beliefs and practices that we share in *common* with Christians of other traditions, today I want to begin exploring some of the aspects of Methodist/Wesleyan Christianity that are *unique*, beginning with a look at some of our distinctive ***Beliefs***.<sup>1</sup>

3. And while it's true that we're not a "creedal" church -- meaning that "being a Methodist" is not defined by strict adherence to any set "creed"/statement of belief<sup>2</sup> -- there *are*, nevertheless, some beliefs which have historically defined *our* understanding of Christianity as *different* from that of (say) Baptist, Roman Catholic, or Pentecostal Christians.

A--All of these center around our unique understanding of what we believe the Bible teaches about *grace* and *salvation* -- both of which we read about in today's scripture from Ephesians 2, where (among other things) Paul says (Verse 8), “[*We*] are saved God’s grace because of [*our*] faith. This salvation is God’s gift. It’s not something [*we*] possessed.”

1--"Grace," of course, refers to the “*unmerited favor*” of God -- and *all* Christian traditions believe in that.

2--But what makes Methodist/Wesleyan Christianity *different* is our unique understanding of *how* grace brings us to salvation -- the idea that within the one, overall grace of God, there are essentially **3 STAGES / MOVEMENTS OF GOD'S GRACE** to bring us back to a relationship with Him.

B--Taken together, these three make up are what the founder of Methodism John Wesley called “*The Scripture Way to Salvation*” (today's sermon title), and I want to share not only what these *are*, but also how they *affect* our lives as Christians.

-II-

4. First, we believe in what we call “**PREVENIENT GRACE**” – the idea that God's grace first “*comes (to us) before*” any conscious, personal awareness on our part (Verses 4-5a describe this as God's “*great love/embrace*” of us = God's *initiative*).<sup>3</sup>

[And as I've said before, this is why we Methodists baptize infants, & don't limit who can receive Holy Communion -- because we the Bible teaches that God's grace is not limited by whether *we* understand it, or are church members, or not]

5. Yet, Prevenient Grace is just a *beginning* which *moves us towards* a second movement of salvation: **“JUSTIFYING GRACE”** – which is God's grace forgiving us and changing our hearts to put us back into a right relationship with Him through his son Jesus. <sup>4</sup>

A--Vss. 5, 6 & 8 describe this as being "*made alive with Christ*" & "*saved through faith*" while other phrases for this are being "*converted,*" "*born again,*" or "*accepting Christ*"

B--For some people (like the apostle Paul), it happens *suddenly and dramatically*, like a lightning bolt, while for others (like Peter and the other Disciples), this happens *gradually over time*, like a sunrise -- and *both* forms are valid ways to come to Christ.

1--The latter was certainly the case in my life. I grew up in East Point, GA in a Christian family, with parents who took my sister and I to church each week.

2--And even though there was a season of time as a preteen where I began to claim faith as my own, there was never really a time I didn't know Jesus -- it was just a gradual awakening of my understanding, like a sunrise.

C--Yet, by whatever phrase we use to describe it (a lightning bolt or sunrise) we Methodists believe justifying grace means *us* claiming *God's* forgiveness of our sins by accepting Jesus into our hearts, and choosing to follow Him from then on.

6. That said, we Methodists also believe that there's a third movement in the grace of God: **“SANCTIFYING GRACE”** – in which we're *actually* transformed back into God's image over time, and during which we become more and more like Jesus each and every day.

A--We find this in Verse 10 where it talks about the "*works*" we were created to show forth, <sup>5</sup> and in Wesleyan circles we refer to this process as "*holiness,*" "*sanctification,*" or "*moving towards Christian perfection.*"

1--We don't believe, you see, that it's enough merely to have a "conversion" or "born again" experience (as if that's the end-all or goal of salvation).

2--No. We believe the Bible clearly teaches us that we must also seek to *walk and grow in* that salvation.

B--And that's why we Methodists don't preach holiness like some Christians do – to make us feel bad or guilty, but instead lift it up as something that we want to *aspire to*, not only because it's an awesome way of life, but (as Verse 10 says), it's the "*end*" -- the reason *why* -- we were created in the first place! <sup>6</sup>

7. So here, then, is a three-fold understanding of how the grace of God works in our lives that's unique to Wesleyan/Methodist Christianity, and it leads to **TWO UNIQUE IMPLICATIONS**, as well.

–III–

8. The first of these is that we believe **biblical Salvation is best understood as being a process**, rather than as a *once-for-all event / experience*.

A--Now, it's true that salvation can (and usually does) contain pivotal events and experiences (i.e., instantaneous "points") along the way.

1--You and I may or may not have dramatic spiritual experiences in a church service, at a Christian retreat, a religious revival/crusade, etc.

2--But we *don't* believe salvation should be understood primarily *as* these events, but instead primarily as a *journey through* the three movements of grace that *may or may not* include dramatic events and experiences along the way.

B--That's why you won't hear me refer to conversion as "*being saved*," because biblically, "*being saved*" includes *all three* movements of grace -- from Prevenient through Justifying and Sanctifying Grace.

1--I have Baptist friends who'll sometimes ask me *when* I was "saved" (as if it's necessary for us to be able to name a date and place for it to be so).

2--I tell them I've been "saved" my whole life: ...God wooed me as a child, I claimed Jesus as Savior when I was a preteen, and have been continually "*being saved*" since then – and they look at me all confused! <sup>7</sup>

C--But you see, for Wesleyan/Methodist Christians, salvation /"*being saved*" is as much a *journey* as it is a *destination* – it's as much a *process* as an *event* (and that's unique).

10. ...Which brings us to a 2nd implication to our understanding of grace: our belief that **the Christian life is best understood primarily in terms of relationship**, rather than status.

A--For us, salvation is *not* primarily a *state* to be achieved, but a *network of relationships* lived out between God, ourselves, others, and creation itself. <sup>8</sup>

1--For a Wesleyan Christian, Christianity has more to do with an ongoing, living relationship with our heavenly Father *today* than simply repeating a sinner's prayer or coming down to an altar at some point in life.

2--So it's not a matter of whether or not we've been "born again" in the *past*, but instead about where are we in our relationship with God *right now*.

3--I mean, think about it: we can go through a marriage ceremony five years ago, but if we haven't spoken to our spouse since then, we don't have much of a relationship, do we?

B--This is exactly why we *don't* believe the concept of "*once saved, always saved*" (that some traditions focus so much on) is biblical. <sup>9</sup>

1--Sure, from God's perspective *in heaven*, we have eternal security – but *none* of us live life from *God's* perspective!

2--No, since from our *human* point of view we're constantly striving to become more of what God wants us to be, we are instead (as Paul puts it in Philippians 2:12) to "*work out our salvation with fear and trembling.*"

C--In other words, what's most important in our Christian life is *not* what *experiences* we've had with God in the *past*, but what kind of *relationship* we have with Him *today*

–IV–

12. So here, then, are some of the distinctive *beliefs* that we as Wesleyan / Methodist Christians have historically embraced, all of which center around our unique understanding of what the Bible teaches about *God's grace and salvation*.

A--Again, we don't have to *believe* or agree with all of these things in order to "be a Methodist," but these *are* the beliefs which define us in a *distinctive* way:

1--We believe in grace from God which reaches out to all people and creation -- a grace which initiates us into a lifelong relationship with God through Jesus.

2--...And an "amazing grace" which is continually transforming not only our *individual* souls, but also *all other persons and things* around us.

B--You see, as Wesleyan / Methodist Christians, we believe it's a grace which offers us "*The Scripture Way to Salvation.*"

13. [PRAYER: "*Lord, some of us have come to this church or another all our lives. We've been essentially good people. And whether we understood it or not, we've always believed in your great Prevenient love and grace given to us. But Lord, at the same time we've never allowed your Justifying Grace to come and change us, because we've never given our heart to you. Today there are some among us who want to do that. Forgive us of our sin. We invite your Son Jesus in our hearts to be our Savior and Lord, and we promise to follow you all our lives.*

*There are still others of us, Lord, who made that commitment at some time in the past, but we've mistakenly believed that that was all we needed in our Christianity. As a result, we've never grown in Holiness or in your Sanctifying Grace, seeing our connection to other people and even to creation itself as a part of full salvation in you. Lord, forgive us, and help us this day to follow you as our Methodist forebearers did: in Holiness of heart and life. We come to you today trusting in your amazing grace to bring us to full salvation in You. In the name of Jesus we pray this, Amen.*"]

14. [11am Closing Hymn: #378, "Amazing Grace"]

## ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Some people today may ask why beliefs are important anyway? After all, if all Christians have a relationship with God through Jesus, then why do the individual unique beliefs matter? I would argue that they matter because they help us understand *who* we are in our Christianity. While it is true that beliefs are *not* Christianity itself (which consists mainly of our *relationship* with God), they nevertheless *do* help us to define and articulate our *understanding* of that relationship, and our own identity within it.

<sup>2</sup> For example, unlike some Christians churches, organizations, and institutions, we don't deny people a place to be "Methodist" just because they can't or won't sign a statement of faith to belief in certain doctrines or doctrinal positions. Instead, we believe that as long as it doesn't affect the *heart* of Christian faith, then there's plenty of room for differences, which is why there are Methodists who are "liberal/progressive, conservative/traditional, feminist, charismatic, high-church, evangelical" and so on – and there's room for all of them in the Methodist family!

<sup>3</sup> Other key passages for this concept include Romans 5:8, Psalm 139 (esp. Vs. 13), Romans 2:4, Isaiah 49:1, Galatians 1:15, Romans 5:16-20, and others

<sup>4</sup> Because we believe the Bible teaches Justifying Grace, we believe a biblical Christian is *not* simply a "good person," or is a person who goes to church, or prays, or reads their Bible. These things can *help* us become or grow in Christian faith, but our Christianity is not defined by us doing them. No. As Jesus says in John 3:7, "*you must be born again.*" Other key biblical passages for this concept include John 3:3-8, Romans 3:24, Romans 5:1, Galatians 2:16, 1 Peter 1:23.

<sup>5</sup> Other key biblical passages for this concept include Hebrews 12:1-2, Philippians 2:11-12, Hebrews 6:1, Matthew 5:48, Romans 6:19b-22, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7, Titus 3:4-7, and others.

<sup>6</sup> What's unique here is that we believe works should follow/be a result of Preventive and Justifying Grace; that "faith makes possible works." So then, we believe that biblical salvation is not only about God's grace *alone* – it's *also* about our own human responsibility to *respond* to and actively work *with* that grace, as well. In theological terms, this is called "synergism": God works, so we can work; God then works more, so we can work even more, etc. In this understanding, there's an integral relationship between divine grace and human response: God's grace makes possible human works and responsibility, but *both* are important to the other.

<sup>7</sup> The Greek translation of Verse 8 today's text literally means "*by grace you are being continually saved through faith....*"

<sup>8</sup> That is: we believe biblical Salvation is intended not only for the individual, but for all of creation, as well – for institutions, for governments and politics, for nature, as well as for people! In theological terms, we call this the "*larger eschatological context to salvation.*" That is: it is "wholistic" in it's context (who and what it includes). In fact, the very word "salvation/saved" comes from the Greek root word "*sozo*" which means "*wholeness/completeness.*" We believe biblical salvation includes personal holiness and social holiness – it should affect not only our heart and mind, but also our interactions with others, and with our world environment. And this is one reason why we Methodists are so involved in social issues, standing up when there are injustices in the workplace or in government, being advocates for the poor and outcast, and for proper stewardship of our environment and world. It's why we believe that issues like racism, terrorism, war, global warming, recycling, and saving the rainforests are not simply issues that should be left to some "liberal agenda," but instead are at the heart of God's renewal of creation itself, described in Revelation 21 and other passages. For example, in addition to Revelation 21, read Isaiah 11, Isaiah 65:17-25, 2 Corinthians 5:17, and Galatians 6:15. For an excellent overview of this concept, read John Wesley's sermon "*The New Creation*" in Albert Outler, The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6, Sermon 64, pp. 288-296.

<sup>9</sup> In some circles this is referred to as "backsliding" -- the concept that God does not force us to love Him, but instead gives us the choice of following Him or not, and that we can actually move backwards in our faith development IF we're not moving *forward*. Famous biblical examples include the stories of King Saul and Judas Iscariot, both of who started out strong in following God but continually made bad choices along the way that resulted in their falling away from God