

SALVATION: A LINE OR A LIFESTYLE?

BY ALYSSA MILROY

I once had a conversation with my close friend Megan about how can I be sure that I am saved. How can I be sure that I belong to God and will go to heaven since I do not always feel close to God? How do I know that I have crossed the line from suffering in hell after death to rejoicing in heaven for eternity? Salvation is often depicted as something that is given, that at one point in time you do not have it and at another point in time you do. My question is when to we cross the line into salvation and how do we know that we have crossed it?

In the Bible Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from life to death” (John 5:24 NIV). Admit that you are a sinner, state that you want to change, ask for forgiveness, and tell God that you believe Him when He says that Jesus is His Son and you will receive the grace of salvation. Yet his still portrays salvation as an object that God hands me. I do not like this idea—especially since I believe that you cannot lose your salvation—because it is like buying insurance. God guarantees to take us to heaven if we tell Him we believe—and He will—but this does not put very much pressure on me to live a lifestyle that fully reflects the meaning of the grace that God has given me. I tell God I believe and then what? I go to heaven, but my life never changed. There has to be more meaning to salvation.

I believe that God’s saving grace is not something that we *hold* but something that we *live*. Living every moment with the knowledge that God has shared his overflowing mercy transforms salvation from just being something that God gives us into the very thing that we live for. It becomes our *lifestyle*. Once we reach the point that grace is not just something that we receive but also something we live, we are able to have a stronger and deeper relationship with God. Then he can use us in unimaginable ways. It helps me to look at salvation as the fact that because I know who God is and what He stands for, I want to get to know Him better and have a relationship with Him. Every step I take then is given to God with the thoughts that I am a sinner, but that God has shown His mercy on me and so I keep walking forward for Him.

THE HOLY SPIRIT: GOD LIVING IN US

When I get to heaven I want to ask Noah what it was like to live on the ark for forty days and nights. I want to know what is was like for Moses to part the waters or witness the burning bush or see God face to face. I know those direct and physical encounters with God must be amazing, but I will never get to experience them until I

die. All I know is that these stories will be awesome and life changing. It was about a year ago when my point of view on this subject changed. I had not considered Noah or Moses' points of view.

My youth pastor once said that when we get to heaven we will get to hear all of these fabulous stories, but that the very people in these stories will ask us an equally important question: What it was like to have God living in us, directing our every move? This struck me powerfully. So often we feel that if we could only see God and have some sort of physical interaction with Him that everything would be all right, when in reality we have God living in our every fiber through the Holy Spirit. We give so much weight in seeing Jesus in the flesh, when Jesus said that he was leaving earth because someone was going to come who is even greater than him to enter our lives; the Holy Spirit. Knowing that the Holy Spirit guides every move I make greatly changes my entire perspective on what a relationship with Christ is. Every moment in my life, every thought, every action, every spoken word, is a direct interaction with God Himself. To be conscious of this and to understand it is to capture the essence of praying without ceasing, having this constant communication with God.

A CHRISTMAS MIRACLE: THE POWER OF GOD'S LOVE

My family has never been poor, but we have always been financially challenged. Often we had to make choices as to whether to pay that bills or get groceries. The bills were always paid and somehow God had always provided the money for food and such because I have never gone to bed hungry in my life. My mother's excellent budgeting skills have even provided me with nice things like a Playstation 2 and a big TV. My mother would save throughout the year so that by Christmas we would have two or three hundred dollars to spend on gifts or on one bigger gift that we would share as a family—like our nice television. The year of 2004, however, there was not going to be any Christmas money, paying the bills had to come first. Of course neither my sister nor I cared. We knew that Christmas was not about the gifts and we were just glad to get to spend the season with our family. But God had other plans.

One evening, I was doing homework in the living room while my mother and sister were watching television when suddenly there was a knock on the door. I get up and open the door.

"Is this the house of Catherine Milroy?" a young woman asked. She looked about late twenties and had brown medium-length hair. I had never seen her before and wondered how she knew my mom. I looked at my mom and could tell by the look on her face that she did not recognize her either.

"Yes, it is," I answered.

"I have a message for her." Then she handed me this big bag with Von Maur printed in the side. Confused, I thanked her and she left.

I took the bag to my mom and sister on the couch and together we opened the bag. Inside was this small tree—like the one Charlie Brown has in the Snoopy Christmas special—planted in a bucket decorated with snowmen. There were several pegs that stick up to hold cards poking up from the dirt, only these pegs were holding unmarked envelopes. At a glance, we could see that some were gift cards to various places. It only took thirty seconds to recognize what was before us and I jumped up and ran to the door to catch the woman who had given me the bag. She was no longer on our porch so I walked around the corner to look in the parking lot, but there was no one there. No one was getting into a car and there was no car in either direction down the street. There was no one anywhere.

I went back inside and my mom, my sister and I open up all the envelopes on the tree. There were gift cards to Wal-Mart for groceries; to Chili's; to the mall; to Jewel-Osco, a local grocery store where we buy medications; and others just held cash. The tree held a total of \$520 worth of merchandise!

A complete stranger gave us this money and then disappeared entirely. Some of the envelopes said Merry Christmas on them, but there were no names anywhere and none of us recognized the handwriting. Tears were pouring down my mother's face. She could hardly imagine the miracle that God had provided. Now the bills would get paid and groceries and medications could be bought and there would still be money leftover to buy a few presents. I was speechless. The three of us just sat on the couch in silence for several minutes.

What has hit me the hardest in this experience was not that the bills were paid, or that that there was spending money. What strikes me the most is the fact that the woman, when she handed me the bag, said that she had a message—not a gift, not a surprise, not a present, but a *message*. The message that God sent was that He loves us. The bills needed to be paid and medications needed to be bought and my mother had no idea how we were going to pay for it all. Yet, God did. He had already set a plan in motion to provide for us. I believe that the woman may have been an angel who was sent to deliver us a message from God. The second part of God's message was that even if I feel unworthy, God wants to bestow His blessing upon me. I had not prayed about the family situation, to be completely honest I had not prayed at all for a long time. In fact, I had not been going to church or reading my Bible like I should have been either. Despite my lack of communication with God, He showed me that He can take care of me and give me more than what I need no matter what I do.

GOD: WHY A FATHER?

When I was two, my father decided that he did not want to be a part of the family anymore. The next fourteen years were rough. I knew my dad did not love me. He was selfish and mean and everything I did was wrong. The TV shows I watched were stupid, the music I listened to was not real because not all of the members played

instruments. He was rarely around and when he was he was mean. I often wonder why God chooses to call himself a father when so many fathers are dysfunctional.

It is difficult for me to come to God if I think of Him as a father. My father was never there and was never pleased with me. Why would God want to associate Himself with people like that? I have to realize, though, that God calls Himself father based on how he designed the role of the father to work. A father is to provide for his family, to love his children and wife and to help lead the family spiritually. This is God's role in our lives: leader, lover and provider. It is because sin has entered the world that the role of the earthly father has been marred. God calls himself the father based on His own definition of who a father is, not based on the behavior of earthly men. It is difficult because we are human, but we have to accept God as our heavenly father not our earthly one. It is important not to lump God in with the earthly fathers because He is so much more. He is perfect and promises to be there for us unlike any earthly father ever could.