

## **Strengthen Your Core: Salvation**

Lessons: **Genesis 4:8-14a; John 17:1-3**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=%20Genesis%204:8-14a;John%2017:1-3>

Each Sunday this summer we are immersing ourselves in a central point of Christian faith. Each of these central points — God, Jesus, salvation, the Holy Spirit, scripture, and discipleship — is foundational to Christian faith. But I share with you today that if you had to cling to one of them, and you had only one to choose, salvation would be it. Salvation by God’s grace through Christ is the foundational belief of the Christian faith.

If you haven’t picked up a copy of the Week 4 takeaway yet, I encourage you to do it now — you’re going to want it later.

If we’re trying to understand why salvation is so important — why it is the solution — it helps to understand the problem. Why is it that anyone needs saving in the first place?

When we give theological explanations about the human condition, we tend to point to the story of Adam and Eve, who defied God and were banished from the garden of Eden. I don’t find the Adam and Eve story personally helpful — I just don’t relate to Adam and Eve very well. But the next big story — the one Cheri read today — for me exemplifies the human condition and explains why we need saving. The other lesson we heard is its clear and direct answer.

Let’s look at those again.

In the first lesson, God asks brothers Cain and Abel for an offering of the fruits of their labor. Both Cain and Abel provide one, but God seems happier with Abel than with Cain. Cain, the farmer, is envious of his brother Abel, the shepherd, and so takes him out and kills him. When God asks him about it, he avoids the question and backtalks God.

Lots of problems here, right? Envy, disrespect, murder, denial, arrogance. What is the result? God tells Cain that he is “cursed from the ground.” When he works the soil, “it will no longer yield to [him] its strength.” God does not say it will not yield its fruit, which is a more typical product of soil. God says it will not yield to Cain its strength — his strength will be taken away. Then God says, “you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.”

Cain *gets it* right away. Cain immediately understands that the consequence of his envy, disrespect, murder, denial, and arrogance is that he will lose the strength he has taken from his labor and he will be “hidden from God’s face.” It is this — the loss of his strength and his separation from God — that are the dark results of his crime. And Cain cries out to God that this is more punishment than he can bear.

I said earlier that the Cain story exemplifies the human condition. Cain murders Abel, and most of us will never murder someone. So how is this an example for all of us? We should think of the murder as the symbol of Cain’s separation from God. Cain does not fall away from God by murdering Abel; he is willing to murder Abel because he has fallen away from God. What separates Cain from God is the envy, disrespect, denial, and arrogance. Cain was separated from God before he laid a hand on Abel. The result — what Cain sees as punishment — is simply that God makes him aware of what was already true: that he had hidden himself from God’s face, and was no longer in relationship with God.

This entire book is God trying to solve Cain’s problem. Because Cain’s problem is our problem. We may try to serve God, like Cain did, and to do what God asks. But every single one of us is prone to envy,

disrespect, denial, arrogance, and a host of other sins against God and others. Every one of us is created to live in close companionship with God, and every one of us more likely to break off from that companionship than to grasp on to God.

There's the problem, my friends. Every single human being hides ourselves from God's face, and every single human soul longs for that holy relationship. So the rest of the Bible, the entire story of God told in these pages, is God trying to help us find our way back to God.

God gives us the solution to our problem. In the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, Jesus has been working for a long time to help his disciples *get it*. Even Cain *got it*, but the disciples, the ones who are living and working with Jesus 24/7, not so much. In his prayers, in his core-strengthening workout with God, Jesus says: God, we're just about done here, so you'd better make this glorious so that I can point the way to you. You've given me the opportunity to give eternal life to everyone, (and here's the key) "and eternal life is just that they may know you."

So that we might know God, God showed us God's face in Jesus. So that we might know God's love, Jesus showed us his own love by going to the cross. God showed us what a transformed life could be in Jesus' resurrection. That's what salvation is: Knowing God, knowing God's love, and a transformed life.

Salvation is nothing less than a transformed life lived in the presence and awareness and strength of God – what we call the kingdom of God.

How many of us can point to the moment of our salvation? When were you saved? When did you feel God reaching across that chasm to rescue you?

If you haven't recognized that experience in your life, it's easy to get cynical about salvation. We are cynical people, we 21<sup>st</sup> century types, and those of us who are liberals tend to distrust the people who tend to talk about getting saved. So it might be hard for you to imagine what salvation is – what it looks like in your life.

I want to show you a clip from the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou*. The movie is all about salvation – it begins with separation and ends with sacred relationship. The story is this: Three convicts escape a chain gang. Two of them are looking for financial treasure; one wants to reconcile with his wife and regain his status in the family. But they end up with redemption, strength in God, and sacred connection. In this scene, they come upon a river where baptism is about to take place.<sup>1</sup> To me, this scene captures the feeling of salvation – what salvation is like from the inside....

Did you watch the faces of the men? The George Clooney character is like most of us, cynical, full of himself, too big for his britches. Pete, the tall one, is befuddled. But Delmar – the one who rushes in – Delmar hears the singing, sees the faithful walking toward the river, and feels the love of God in Christ calling to him. He's so moved at that moment that he rushes toward Christ. He runs into the river, and is baptized.

When he emerges, he's gasping for breath. And he immediately knows he's been forgiven, that he is clean of his crimes in the sight of God, and that no human can change that. His face, his entire body, knows he has been saved.

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<sup>1</sup> The script can be read online at [http://sfy.ru/sfy.html?script=o\\_brother](http://sfy.ru/sfy.html?script=o_brother). This piece is about 1/4 of the way through. It begins at the end of the scene called "Pete and Delmar" and ends a few lines into "A Car."

What's incredible about all this is that God achieves salvation in us through love: through Jesus' love of his people shown in the cross, in God's never giving up on us after thousands or millions of years of failure, in the continual and continuing presence of God's Spirit moving in our lives and directing our paths. The official term for this love – for God's unmerited, unearnable, present and pressing love – is grace. It is grace that saves us. It is grace that provides salvation through faith.

For Delmar, the guy in the movie who gets baptized, grace feels like forgiveness. Delmar experiences God's love as forgiveness for all the bad things he's done. We may laugh when he brings up the Piggly – Wiggly, and admits that he really did rob the store, but it is God's grace that allows him to both admit it and have his soul freed of it. It is God's love that frees Delmar to start fresh. It is God's forgiveness that allows him to begin again, to change his life. For Delmar, grace feels like forgiveness.

But love doesn't feel the same for all of us. For some of us, that feeling of God's unconditional, unearned love feels like a relief from shame. When for one moment we experience God's grace reaching out across the chasm to grasp us, whatever we've been ashamed of doesn't drag us down anymore. For some of us, God's grace is the experience of knowing, deep down, that we are enough – that we were good enough at our birth and we're good enough now. Whatever healthy real love is for you, you have to accept that God in Christ has it for you. God's showering you with grace; you have to accept it.

On your takeaway sheet, we've listed 3 essential aspects of salvation:

- § accepting that God in Christ loves you
- § accepting God in Christ
- § accepting apprenticeship (*or* discipleship).

We shouldn't think of these as steps. It's not like there's a particular order. But salvation is a complex thing, and these three pieces are essential to it. But I'd like you to take out a pen and add one more. Step 2.5 is this: accepting that you have a role in your salvation. When Delmar goes running into the water to be baptized, he is accepting his role in his salvation. And the transformation of his life begins.

If you've practiced the 12 steps of recovery from addiction, then you have experience with the four essential aspects of salvation. Step 1 is about knowing you're loved; Steps 2, 3, and 11 are about accepting the One who is doing the loving; and the rest of the Steps are about accepting your own role and acting on it.

Having a transformed life is about an ongoing transformation of your spirit. The transformation occurs when you accept God's reaching out across the chasm with love, accept it, and act on it. So if you're waiting for something external to happen before you accept salvation, you're going to miss it. God's salvation is not about a change in your physical health, your financial status, or your legal dilemmas. It's not that trivial. God won't settle for just shifting around an annoying part of your life. Salvation radically changes the character and nature of life itself.

That strength and love and connection that Cain lost when he broke from God? Salvation gives it back. Salvation gives you strength and love and connection through the power of God's love.

And here's the key, folks. You have already been saved.

Contemporary author Reynolds Price tells the story about a man named Whit Wade, who returns from World War II severely wounded.<sup>2</sup> A spiritual healer named Juanita asks him, "Did your brain get damaged, or any of your backbone?"

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<sup>2</sup> Reynolds Price, "The Foreseeable Future" in *The Foreseeable Future* (Scribner 1991)

He replies "Not actual physical damage. What hurts is my soul."

"That WILL give you fits. Are you saved?" she asked.

He said, "Pretty surely. I'd rather drink lye than talk about it, but I accepted Christ when I was 13."

"And you know he loves you?"

Whit said, "I do", but his eyes were still shut. And he braced for an oncoming missionary spiel. If it came, he would thank her and fight his way out through whatever trouble [Juanita's] dogs threw at him.

But Juanita kept up a long, breathing silence. Then, with a first little yip in her voice, as if she might have waked herself up, she said, "Whitley Wade, you are now alive. Any day you'll realize that you have been healed."

You have already been healed. You are already saved. May you claim the strength, forgiveness, and new life you have already been given.