

Scripture Way of Salvation

A Wesleyan Way of Equipping the Next Generation (Philippians 2:1–13)¹

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Introduction

Good morning. It is an honor to be here at APNTS. Thank you to Prof Lynne for the invitation to share with you today. I understand that this semester, your chapel services are focusing on the APNTS mission statement, vision, and goals. “Bridging cultures for Christ and equipping each new generation of leaders to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout Asia, the Pacific, in the world.” As I reflected on this statement and considered what I might share with you, I was drawn to the phrase “equipping each new generation of leaders.” As a theological educator, a phrase like this resonates with my own experience. It is a primary task for us, as professors and lecturers, to equip each new generation of leaders. One of the unique ways we do this, as a part of the Church of the Nazarene, is to equip the next generation of leaders with the tools they need to articulate a Wesleyan understanding of God and God’s relationship to the world. As my area of study is Wesleyan theology, I thought it would be appropriate to share with you a brief articulation of our unique way of thinking using two tools from the Wesleyan tradition.

Today, we are going to focus on the Wesleyan way of thinking and speaking about God. Countless books and articles have been written on this subject, and what I present today is nothing new. But in our brief time together, I hope to outline a basic understanding of Wesleyan Theology, or a Wesleyan way of thinking and speaking about God. When we talk about Wesleyan Theology, the first thing you might be asking yourself is, “Why

¹ A sermon preached at APNTS on September 12, 2023.

did you not say a Nazarene Theology?” That’s a fair question. Let me explain my reasons for this. The Church of the Nazarene traces its lineage on the Christian denominational family tree through the branches of holiness revivalism and the Methodist Church. From these two branches, the Church of the Nazarene was born.

If you follow the branches a bit further, you will find early Methodism, which was founded by John and Charles Wesley. These two 18th-century Christians were priests in the Church of England who developed a network of small discipleship groups in the British Isles that became so big that the movement grew into a number of different churches now present in nearly every country of the world. All the Christian denominations whose branches link to the Wesley brothers employ their method of seeking to understand God and questions of faith and Christian living. We call this method Wesleyan Theology.

One of the many ways the Wesley brothers educated others about thinking theologically was through the preaching and publishing of sermons and hymns. It was important for the Wesley brothers to make education and learning accessible to as many people as possible. One way of doing this was to print sermons as pamphlets that could be sold inexpensively. Many of these sermons still exist and are available to read in printed volumes and online.² In addition to the sermons, the Wesley’s published hymn books, which were used in Methodist worship.³ Indeed, we just sang one of those hymns, *And Can it Be?*

² For published sermons in print, see the *Bicentennial Edition of the Works of the Rev John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975-). A list of the published volumes of this series see <https://wesley-works.org/volumes-published/>. For a collection of Wesley’s sermons in modern English see Kenneth J. Collins and Jason E. Vickers, editors, *The Sermons of John Wesley: A Collection for the Christian Journey* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013). To access John Wesley’s sermons online, see <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/>.

³ Volume 7 of the *Bicentennial Edition of the Works of the Rev John Wesley*, edited by Franz Hildebrandt, is a critical edition of *A Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodists* (1780). This work may also be accessed online here: <https://archive.org/details/collectionofhym00wes/page/n7/mode/2up>.

In addition to making the sermons and hymns economically accessible, they also tried to make them educationally accessible. In other words, they tried to write and structure them in such a way that a wide audience could read and understand them. To be sure, not all their sermons and hymns are like this, but many are. For today, we will examine and analyze one of the sermons alongside one of the hymns. In doing this, we will be able to identify what we mean by a Wesleyan Theology. The sermon is called “Scripture Way of Salvation,” and the hymn is “And Can it Be.”⁴

Every attempt at doing Christian theology includes a discussion about creation, the Fall/sin, God’s covenant, Jesus’ fulfillment of the covenant, and the Spirit’s presence bringing about transformation and new creation. The Wesleyan way of approaching these issues is called “the way of salvation.”⁵ Some of the ways we understand the way of salvation are similar to other Christian traditions and denominations, and others are more unique to us. Let’s have a look at how the Wesley’s described the way of salvation in this sermon and hymn.

Part 1: Preventive Grace

John Wesley begins his sermon by asking the question, “What is salvation?” His answer provides a glimpse into a Wesleyan way of thinking about God. He said,

The salvation which is here spoken of is not what is frequently understood by that word, the going to heaven, eternal happiness. It is not the soul’s going to paradise, termed by our Lord, “Abraham’s bosom.” It is not a blessing that lies on the other side of death or, as we usually speak, in the other world. The very words of the text itself put this beyond all

⁴ The sermon text may be found here: <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-43-the-scripture-way-of-salvation/> The hymn lyrics may be found here: https://hymnary.org/text/and_can_it_be_that_i_should_gain.

⁵ See Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley’s Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) and Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994).

question: “Ye are saved.” It is not something at a distance: it is a present thing, a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of. Nay, the words may be rendered, and that with equal propriety, “Ye have been saved”: so that the salvation which is here spoken of might be extended to the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul, till it is consummated in glory.⁶

The first thing we must understand when thinking in a Wesleyan way about salvation is the fact that we are not talking about just being forgiven of sin and going to heaven when we die. That is a part of it, a good part of it, but it is a very narrow way of understanding salvation. For Wesleyans, we believe that salvation is a lifelong gift and experience, not just something that happens when we die.

So, how does God go about working out this salvation in our lives? This brings us to Wesley’s first point: prevenient grace. Because this is a word that we do not often, if ever, use in our everyday language, let me try to help us understand. The word “prevenient” may also be understood as preventing. If you prevent something from happening, you interrupt it before it can happen. For example, let’s say that I see my daughter Miriam is about to fall off the back of the sofa. I rush to where she is and grab her before she falls. I have prevented her from falling. She did not ask me to help, nor did she know I was able to help, but I was there when she needed help. Another way of understanding this word is to use the words “providence or providing.”⁷ For something to be prevenient, it provides the possibility for a certain outcome to happen. For example, I make provision for my children’s lunch every day. They had nothing to do with it, but every day at lunchtime, they go into their backpacks, and there is lunch; it has been provided for them with no effort on their part.

In a similar way, this is how Wesley understood the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. God is at work in the lives of people, you and me, long

⁶ Collins and Vickers, *The Sermons of John Wesley*, 579.

⁷ Al Truesdale, editor, *Global Wesleyan Dictionary of Theology* (Kansas City: The Foundry Publishing, 2013), 429-31.

before we know or realize he is there. The provision of God in our lives is nothing of our own doing. We do not make the Holy Spirit come to us, nor can we force God to do what we want. We recognize that God has been at work in our lives, consistently and constantly, long before we knew it. God, in his prevenient grace/gift of provision, gently reveals himself to all people, pointing them towards the recognition that they are in need of salvation from sin (conviction) and opening their eyes to the means of salvation: Christ. Wesley compared prevenient grace to our natural conscience.⁸ We all live by and have convictions based on a code of morality, whether we realize it or not. Wesley would say our natural conscience is a work of prevenient grace.

How is this different from other traditions? What makes this uniquely Wesleyan? Prevenient grace represents a uniquely Wesleyan view of the love of God that emphasizes both God's sovereignty and his relationality. Simply put, God is sovereign, meaning he is all-powerful, the God above all gods, but he is also relational, meaning his very nature as Triune is relational, communal, and self-giving.⁹ Both his sovereignty and his relationality are characterized by unconditional love. In short, although God could force us to love him, he chooses to offer his love for us unconditionally, risking that we may not love him in return.¹⁰

The point Wesley was trying to make here is that God's love comes first. Sin has broken the relationship between humanity and God, making it impossible for humanity to turn to God on its own. Out of his love for us, God offers the gift of prevenient grace, which enables us, by the Holy Spirit, to recognize our need for him and respond to his love.

And can it be that I should gain
An int'rest in the Savior's blood?

⁸ See Wesley's sermon, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation" in Collins and Vickers, *The Sermons of John Wesley*, 80-81.

⁹ See David B. McEwan, *Exploring a Wesleyan Theology* (Lenexa: Global Nazarene Publications, 2017). Accessible here: <https://whdl.org/en/browse/resources/11475>.

¹⁰ See Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism*, Second Edition (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2015).

Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, should die for me?

He left His Father's throne above,
So free, so infinite His grace;
Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race;
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;
For, O my God, it found out me.

Part 2: Justifying Grace

What are we being saved from? And how are we being saved? In terms of what we are being saved from, the simple answer is sin and death. Paul talks about this in his letter to the Romans: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). There it is: salvation from sin means salvation from death. It means eternal life. But the question for us is: When does eternal life begin? Does it begin at death? We will get back to this in a moment. But first, let’s look at the second question, “How are we being saved?” It is by grace through faith in Christ that we are saved (Ephesians 2:8–9). Christ saves us—his life, death, resurrection, and ascension accomplished the fulfillment of the covenant between God and humanity. Jesus accomplishes what humanity was unable to accomplish on our own. Paul continues in Romans, “So, now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). We call this being set free from the condemnation of sin: justification.¹¹

Wesley explained justification and sanctification in the following way: justification is what God in Christ does for us, and sanctification is what God by the Spirit does in us.¹² In saying that justification is something God does for us, Wesley is reflecting on the fact that the work of Christ on the

¹¹ Truesdale, *Global Wesleyan Dictionary of Theology*, 277-79.

¹² For more see Wesley’s sermon “Justification by Faith” in Collins and Vickers, editors, *The Sermons of John Wesley*, 149-59.

cross is something we have absolutely nothing to do with. Jesus accomplishes this on his own, on behalf of humanity. He took on our sin—anything and everything that has broken the relationship we had with God, and he took the outcome of this: death. Jesus took on death and defeated it. His resurrection from the dead makes possible our resurrection from the dead. This is what is meant by “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life.” Justification is the gift of eternal life, fully and freely given to you. You have done nothing to earn this gift. It has been given to you because of the love of God in Christ. Your relationship with God can now be made whole because of what Christ has done. This is what God does for us.¹³

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
 Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
 Thine eye diffused a quick’ning ray,
 I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
 My chains fell off, my heart was free;
 I rose, went forth and followed Thee.

Part 3: Sanctifying Grace

This brings us to the third part of Wesley’s sermon on the way of salvation: sanctifying grace, or what God does in us. He explained, “And at the same time that we are justified, yea, in that very moment, sanctification begins. In that instant, we are born again, born from above, born of the Spirit: there is a real as well as a relative change.”¹⁴ The real change Wesley is talking about is justification. Our relationship with God has been made right through the work of Christ. Our status before God has changed. We no longer stand condemned for our sins. The relative change Wesley is talking about is sanctification. Sanctification is just a big word for becoming more and more like Jesus: being sanctified, being set apart, being made whole,

¹³ For more on Justification see N.T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Collins and Vickers, *The Sermons of John Wesley*, 580.

renewing the image of God in us, and growing in relationship with God.

This is the heart of Wesleyan theology: the recognition that God's reconciling work in Christ is not just about salvation from death; it is salvation for life. Again, Paul said to the Romans,

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death . . . Christ lives within you, so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God. The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, he will give you life to your mortal bodies by the same Spirit living within you. Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, you have no obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do (Romans 8:1-4, NLT).

This is good news for everyone! The things that cause damage to our relationship with God and with others can be overcome in the power of the Spirit! The place we may find ourselves in now is not the place we will always find ourselves in. The life we live now is not the life we have to live tomorrow or the next day. By the power of the Spirit of God, we can change; we can become more and more like Christ. We do not need to live our lives under condemnation for sin or in shame for our past. Our relationship with God is dynamic, not static.

Wesley concludes the sermon with a very practical discussion of the ways in which our sanctification/becoming like Christ is nurtured and developed. He speaks of acts of piety and acts of mercy. Works of piety include Bible reading, prayer, worship, participating in the sacraments (particularly the Lord's supper), and meeting together with other Christians who share with us on the journey of discipleship. Works of mercy include outward expressions of our faith in Christ: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving to those in need, acts of hospitality, and other ways of sharing the love of Christ with others who do not yet know him.¹⁵ One of the things I

¹⁵ See John Wesley's sermon, "On Visiting the Sick" in Collins and Vickers, *The Sermons of John Wesley*, 353-361.

find most comforting about the list of works of mercy is the fact that I know before I offer any kind of act of mercy to someone, God's prevenient grace, his Spirit, is already at work in that person's life. The Spirit is drawing them to him, and I get to participate in this work of redemption. Love is relational.

No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him is mine!
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach th'eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

Conclusion

This is the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, on Wesleyan Theology. There are many more things we could say, but I wanted to offer you a simple framework to help you understand the heart of Wesleyan Theology. Beginning with the premise that God is love, the way of salvation describes God's love for us and our dynamic relationship with Him, marked by prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. He draws us to him, never forcing himself or coercing us to respond to him. He offers us the gift of eternal life through Christ, whose work has changed the relationship between God and humanity. He empowers us by the Spirit to grow ever more loving to him and others. Wesley would say our hearts are being more and more filled with the love of God so that there is no room for anything else but love for God and others. When the heart is full of love, there is no room for sin.¹⁶

Wesleyan theology is full of hope. It emphasizes the love of God and the possibility of Christ's prayer finding fulfillment on earth as it is in heaven. This hope is a present reality, not just something to long for in the future. In short, Wesley would say that fully following the ways of Jesus is, in fact, possible—through the prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying work of God. Amen.

¹⁶ Collins and Vickers, *The Sermons of John Wesley*, 580.

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