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Once saved, always saved?

Does becoming a Christian so guarantee eternal life for an individual that—regardless of how he lives or acts—he cannot be lost? **by Sakae Kubo**

ONE SUNDAY while returning from a Bible study with another minister, I picked up a hitchhiker along the way. He was no ordinary hitchhiker but a Christian who used hitchhiking to reach people with his beliefs. When he discovered that we were pastors, his burden became "once saved, always saved"—no matter what. After several questions, we pressed him to the point of absurdity, "You mean that you will remain saved even if you should steal?"

"No matter," he averred. "I can take a machine gun, go out in the street, and mow down everyone in sight, and I

would still be saved."

Several years earlier during my student days, a friend and I were hitchhiking near Gary, Indiana. A Christian man who picked up people so he could preach to them offered us a ride. We had hardly entered the car, when he bluntly asked, "Are you saved?"

We fumbled about with words. "Yes, we're Christians. We believe in Jesus."

But he insisted, "Are you saved? Today, now?" We finally admitted that we didn't know. Since God is judging us now, only God really knows, we reasoned. We concluded that only at the end of our lives or when our cases come up in the judgment would we really know for sure.

Why do we become uneasy when someone asks, "Are you saved?" Perhaps we are reacting against that cocksure spirit of the man who believed that once he was saved, he always was

saved even to the point of absurdity. Our reaction also might arise from an overemphasis on the idea of future judgment so that we feel that we can have no clear-cut assurance of our personal relationship with Jesus Christ until then.

Many young people as well as older ones lack an assurance of present salvation. To them salvation is a matter of day-to-day statistics. Did I do more good deeds today than bad? How does the balance book of my deeds come out today? I am all right for today if my good deeds outnumber the bad, but what about tomorrow? What if my bad deeds should outnumber my good at the moment I die? Or what if I should do something wrong and then die? That one unforgiven sin would keep me out of the kingdom.

Salvation seems to hang on a flimsy thread. Today we are in. Tomorrow we are out. Everything seems to depend on

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us. But we are so weak and frail. If it depends on us, how can we have any answers? We try our best, but we keep sinning. How can we say that we are saved?

We also want to shun spiritual pride, but is someone filled with pride if he confesses that Jesus Christ has saved him? On the contrary. In order to make such a confession, he must first admit his weakness and his complete dependence on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation.

Presumption? Then, too, a certain element of fear haunts our minds. We don't want to say that we are saved, because we might sin. Did not Peter say to Jesus, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you"? Yet that very night he denied Jesus three times. How do I know that I will not do the same thing? Better if we did not stick our necks out.

What does "being saved" mean? Also many of us remain uncertain as to what

"saved" means, for the Scriptures speak of salvation from several standpoints.

● **A future event.** In one sense we can never say that we are saved, because salvation is the final, ultimate act. "He who endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 10:22, RSV*). Because this future act will crown our present endurance, no one can say that he is saved now *in that sense*. Hebrews 9:28 also depicts this kind of salvation: "So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."

● **A present activity.** The Bible also speaks of salvation as a process not yet completed but presently in motion. "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18). Second Corinthians 2:15 presents the same idea: "For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing." Yet Scripture

also speaks of salvation in terms that allow us to say that we are saved. When Zacchaeus demonstrated a converted spirit, Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham" (Luke 19:9). Zacchaeus was already saved. Salvation had come.

The moment we accept Jesus Christ as our Saviour something miraculous called "salvation" takes place. And although it is not the whole act, it is a beginning. Hence to the question, "Are you saved?" Zacchaeus could truly say, "Yes, by the grace of God. When Jesus visited me yesterday, salvation came to my house."

Paul says, "For we ourselves were once foolish, . . . hated by men and hating one another; but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, *he saved us*, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:3-5).

THE 3 ASPECTS OF "BEING SAVED"

Many people become confused regarding the question, "Are you saved?" because they misunderstand the threefold aspect of salvation—past, present, *and* future. If someone *has been saved* in the past, but is not now *being saved*—he is lost.

A PAST EVENT

"For by grace *you have been saved* through faith" (Ephesians 2:8, RSV*).

A PRESENT ACTIVITY

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who *are being saved* it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18).

A FUTURE EVENT

"But he who endures to the end *will be saved*" (Matthew 10:22).

* All Bible quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

Can the Christian sing with confidence, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine"?

● *A past event.* Then, too, the Bible describes salvation as something that has taken place and whose results abide. "For by grace you have been saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8). The Greek emphasizes the idea that salvation has taken place in the past and the results of that act continue into the present. God has saved us at a point in the past, and we continue in the results of that act—we remain in the saved condition.

We need to emphasize this aspect of salvation more fully. Truly salvation is a future act, but it is also a present fact—not only in the sense of a process but also in the sense of a completed act.

But how can we know that we are saved? How do we know that Jesus is our Saviour? We can know because we believe and have accepted Jesus as our Saviour. We know we love Jesus in the same way we love our parents. And because we know this, we know that we have been saved by grace.

Why should we remain unsure of our relationship to Jesus Christ? We can be sure of our relationship to our friends. We do not doubt their friendship. We trust in it and act in it. And so with Jesus.

Unfortunately, many feel unsure of this relationship, but we need not doubt. If we cannot be sure of this, we cannot be sure of anything. If we cannot trust God, whom can we trust?

I have two sons and a daughter. As long as they can remember, I have been "Dad" to them. How do they know that they are my children? They know because they have no reason to doubt. So with our relationship to Christ.

We know that we belong to Him because we have no reason to doubt it. And if we belong to Him, then we are saved and can sing with holy confidence, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine."

Christ has brought some of the

blessings of the future into the present. We can enjoy a little bit of heaven here on earth. Salvation has become a present reality—not all its fullness but its blessed beginning.

The same holds true about judgment.

Paul argued before Felix "about justice and self-control and future judgment" (Acts 24:25) and wrote that "we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God" (Romans 14:10). Yet he also held "that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law" (Romans 3:28).

The Christian knows what God's verdict will be as long as he remains in faith because God has already pronounced him not guilty. "As one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men" (Romans 5:18). God has already acquitted the Christian. John puts it in another way: "He who believes in him is not condemned" (John 3:18).

Since God has already pronounced His verdict on the Christian, he "may have confidence for the day of judgment" (1 John 4:17), already knowing what God's verdict will be for him.

Eternal life ours today. The Bible also says the same thing concerning eternal life. We need not wait for the future to enjoy eternal life. It is ours now because it is a quality of life which comes through faith in Jesus Christ and through a living relationship with Him. "He who believes in the Son has eternal life" (John 3:36). Resurrection is the

natural consequence of having eternal life.

"For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:40). The life which Jesus grants to us is a life which we can enjoy now as well as in the future.

To affirm, then, that we have salvation now, that God has pronounced a favorable judgment on us, and that we have eternal life now is to confess the reality and efficacy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

According to Jewish belief, only in the Messianic age would these blessings be realized, but for the Christian the Messianic age arrived with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Christian enjoys these blessings proleptically. The future has entered the present.

We have confidence. The Christian, then, can have assurance. The only question that need concern him is the question of his relationship to his Lord. If he has faith in Him, he can have confidence that he is saved, that God has judged him favorably, and that he has eternal life. He also knows that Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of . . . [his] faith" (Hebrews 12:2), "is able to keep . . . [him] from falling and to present . . . [him] without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing" (Jude 24).

Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one" (John 10:27-30).

*All Bible quotations not otherwise specified are from the Revised Standard Version.