

SWAN



## SESSION 1: ARE YOU SAVED?

Are you saved? Perhaps you have been asked that question by another Christian. “Being saved” means different things to different people. Jesus Christ died for all humankind and for many, that means we are saved.

The term *salvation* incorporates many different aspects as evidenced in the Bible. Both the Old and New Testaments speak of liberation, deliverance, preservation, forgiveness, victory, and even redemption. These different aspects of salvation are evident in the course of history, specifically in the way Christians – including those in the New Apostolic Church – have understood salvation. Depending on the time and circumstances in which they lived, they emphasized the aspect of salvation that best suited their expectations.

God intervened in the history of the people of the Israel, delivering them from slavery and making a way through the Red Sea to escape the Egyptians. Jesus Christ came to earth to deliver us from the bondage of sin, and open the way to a relationship with God. In our Church there were times when the return of Jesus Christ was predominantly seen as an act of deliverance and preservation: deliverance from suffering and protecting and preserving us from the great tribulation and judgement. Depending on their situation, one could primarily see salvation as deliverance from a difficult circumstance, preservation from danger, or an opportunity to see a loved one again.

However, when Jesus spoke of salvation, He often used the term “eternal life.” Eternal life is much more than immortality. Jesus did not merely say that those who believe in Him would live on, but rather that *they would partake in divine, eternal life, and enter into the fellowship of God in His kingdom*. Consequently, for us, when we speak of salvation, we are speaking of **eternal life in fellowship with the triune God**.

Divine life and fellowship are terms that reference the essence of God Himself; He is the fellowship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He created humanity in His image and invited them into His fellowship. As a result of sin, man excluded himself from the fellowship of God, yet with the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son, humans were again invited into the presence of God. The eternal life spoken of by Jesus Christ is sharing in the fellowship of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, living eternally and in perfect harmony with Him, worshipping, praising, and discovering ever more the aspects of God and His glory.

How can I be saved? In John we read that *unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God* (John 3:5). While receiving the sacraments opens the possibility for salvation, they do not guarantee it. In 2 Thessalonians we read that salvation comes *through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth* (2 Thessalonians 2:13). How are we sanctified, or made holy, by the Spirit? We can look at the Third Article of our Creed for the answer: *I believe in the Holy Spirit, the one, holy, universal, and apostolic church, the community of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the dead, and life everlasting*. These are the ways the Holy Spirit sanctifies us!

Through the **church**: we receive the sacraments, hear the word of God preached, and encounter Jesus Christ in the divine service experience, in serving, and in our brothers and sisters.

Through the **community of the saints**: in the congregation, we learn and practice how to live in the kingdom of God; a kingdom of love founded in fellowship with the Triune God, and our relationships with each other.

Through the **forgiveness of sins**: because of our human nature, there will be times when we don't live up to our kingdom citizenship. However, the Spirit leads us to repentance and confession, and God grants His forgiveness and grace so that we can start anew.

Through the **resurrection of the dead and life everlasting**: Jesus Christ is Lord over the living and dead and neither life nor death can separate us from the love of God and His calling us into His kingdom to experience life everlasting in fellowship with Him.

As Christians, we do not see our time on earth as something that we need to escape from, but rather as a time of grace which God grants so that we can learn to live in His kingdom according to the example of Jesus Christ. God calls us to *walk in the newness of life* – to become a new person in Christ, filled with the love of God, and guided by the Holy Spirit.

In order to walk the way of the kingdom, we must let the mind of Christ guide us as we grow to be more like Him. The beginning of Philippians 2 outlines a few characteristics: *be like-minded, have the same love, let nothing be done through selfish ambition, esteem others above yourself, look out for the interests of others, follow the example of Christ who humbled Himself as a servant and was obedient to the will of God.*

In the same chapter find a nice thought to end our session for today: *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.*

Am I saved? By God's grace and through His work in me, I can begin to live in His kingdom and in His presence already today, while continually looking forward to the day when His salvation will be complete and we can live eternally in fellowship with Him. This should fill us with reverence, awe, and wonder: God wants all humankind to be saved, so much so, that He works in all to give us both the will and power to become who He has called us to be and to bring us into His presence, as He destined from the very beginning.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you answer the question: Are you saved?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Describe a time when you needed saving.

## BIBLE REFERENCES

John 3:5

2 Thessalonians 2:13

Philippians 2

3. Work through Psalm 18 as a group. What does salvation mean to the author? What words do they use to describe being saved?
  
4. What does the New Testament say about salvation? Look-up and read any Bible verses that are referenced.
  
5. What might be the effects of thinking about salvation only as an escape?
  
6. Discuss the Third Article of our Creed. How does it describe the work of the Holy Spirit?
  
7. Read Philippians 2:1-13. Discuss what these verses teach us about living as citizens of the kingdom of God.
  
8. A new year usually brings with it new expectations, hopes, ideas, even resolutions. What resolution will you make to invest in your relationship with God this year? How can we as a small group help each other stay firm in our commitments?

## SESSION 2: WHY DO YOU GO TO CHURCH?

Why do you go to church? Perhaps we think that preparing to live in God's kingdom is something we can do ourselves, but this is not true. God created us for relationships; with Him, with each other, and with the rest of His creation. Just loving God is not enough. Jesus makes it very clear that loving our neighbor is just as important (Matthew 22:37-39), and we also see throughout Scripture the importance of stewardship and caring for what God has given us, namely the creation. Therefore, to live in God's kingdom, in the future and already today, we must cultivate and grow each of these relationships, and Jesus created the church for that reason.

In the divine service we experience specific things individually and communally.

*Individually*, when we come to church, we detach ourselves physically and mentally from daily life in order to encounter God. When we set ourselves apart in this way, our personal relationship with God can be strengthened through the preaching of His Word, and the receiving of sacraments and blessings. The sermon teaches us various aspects of what it means to live in God's kingdom and refocuses our lives on Christ and His return. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we express our desire to be with God and to experience His kingdom: *Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* The absolution assures us of the grace and forgiveness found in Jesus Christ and Holy Communion strengthens the divine life that God has created in us.

In the divine service, we also share experiences as a *community of believers*. We gather together with people that we did not choose and that perhaps we would not know or have a relationship with if it wasn't for our shared faith in Jesus Christ. And when we gather, we join together in praise and worship to God, and together experience the awe and wonder of expressing who He is and what He has done. We share life with each other; in joy and in sorrow we comfort, support, and uplift one another. We also learn how to overcome our differences, forgive, and reconcile.

In the sermon, we experience the power of God's Word – how His message reaches and speaks to each soul individually, even though we all come to Him with completely different situations in life. When we pray aloud, *Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*, we publicly profess to God *and each other* our need for His grace. The sacrament of Holy Communion is far more than receiving a wafer, it is a meal of fellowship; between Christ and each person individually, but also the fellowship of the believers with one another. Jesus Christ *welcomes all* to His table, *shows all* the same love and grace, and shares His life *with each one*. Finally, the divine service requires that many individuals use their gifts and talents to create the experience for the congregation; from the preaching of the sermon, to musical gifts that are shared, to the decorating and cleaning of the church, to the members that greet each one as they enter; all gifts contribute to the experience of coming to church.

While we've discussed many answers to the question that we started our session with, each one of us must take time to reflect and ponder; why do I go to church?

I come to church because I experience the presence of Jesus here; I need my brothers and sisters to grow into the new person God is creating in me; to praise and worship my God; to celebrate communion with Jesus Christ and with my brothers and sisters; to set myself apart from all the noise and chaos of daily life to focus on the holiness of God; to see and share life with my community of faith; and before I leave the divine service to experience God putting His arms around me and blessing me.



5. Talk through each aspect of a divine service experience, from the moment you walk in the door to the moment you leave.

a. Who contributes to each part? Have every person in your small group reach out to at least one person that you discussed with a small message of thanks.

b. PERSONAL REFLECTION: How can you contribute?

6. *We are all the church, all the time.* What does this mean to you?

a. The Greek word translated as “church” in the New Testament is *ekklesia*. A literal translation of *ekklesia* would be “a called-out assembly” or “a gathering of people”. Further discuss how this understanding of the word church enlightens the statement above, or the way you read the word “church” in the Bible.