



How Do I  
Know if I'm  
Really  
Saved?

JOHN  
ORTBERG

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*How Do I Know If I'm Really Saved?*

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# HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M REALLY SAVED?

We must, in fact, do nothing less than engage in a radical rethinking of the Christian conception of salvation.

DALLAS WILLARD

What does it mean to be saved?

Let's face it: the world is a mess.

Hunger and poverty haven't gone away. Powerful celebrities assault women. The climate gets warmer. Marriages break up. Religion divides people. Politics can't get any uglier.

## HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M REALLY SAVED?

There is no question about it. Our world needs saving.

But it's not just the world. Humanity needs saving too. *I* need to be saved. Maybe so do you.

One thing is sure: if salvation is possible, it is supremely worth knowing about.

*What does it mean to be saved?*

Ours is a world where everything is at risk, and what we treasure, we long to save. We want to save rain forests and whales and Word documents. We want to save photos and letters and mementos from the important people and events in our lives. Doctors want to save limbs and lives (though mere human beings can never *really* save a life, only postpone its death).

We have savings accounts because we value money. We mark daylight saving time on the calendar because we value hours and minutes and seconds. Politicians promise to

save jobs, or culture, or a way of life—or even to save us from war.

Even in our games, we seek salvation. Relief pitchers “save” a win. Goalies who stop the other team from scoring record a “save.”

Movies like *Saving Private Ryan* remind us that the saving of a human life is a drama like no other, and in that particular story, the sacrifice of one life for another touches us in a way no other story can.

*But what does it mean to be saved?*

We long for salvation. And yet it is a word that has lost much of its urgency, especially in the world familiar with Christianity, simply because we *think* we know what it means.

The truth is, it has become trivialized, formulaic, and disconnected from daily life.

The phrase *paradigm shift* is much over-used, but I believe something like it is needed here. Salvation is too important a word to languish in misunderstanding.

## HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M REALLY SAVED?

My good friend Dallas Willard once wrote, “We must, in fact, do nothing less than engage in a radical rethinking of the Christian conception of salvation.”<sup>1</sup>

I think he’s right.

Somewhere along the way, the power and the promise of the gospel has been lost. We’ve shrunk it down, and in doing so, we’ve shrunk God down. The salvation that Jesus came to offer is bigger and grander and more vital than what we have turned it into.

It is the hope of the world.

It is the reclamation of human life.

It is the promise of meaning.

It provides the security to live at peace each day, to face the past without guilt and the future without fear.

That is why “we must . . . do nothing less than engage in a radical rethinking of the Christian conception of salvation.”

This little booklet contrasts two ways of thinking about the term *salvation*.

The first revolves around how people can be sure they'll go to heaven when they die, and it usually involves affirming certain beliefs or praying a particular prayer that results in making one a "Christian."

The other is about experiencing eternal life under God's reign and power right now. It's less about relocation than about transformation. It's less about what God wants to do *to* you and more about what God wants to do *in* you. It's not about getting into heaven; it's about heaven getting into you.

I believe the latter version is the correct one, the one Jesus taught, the one that changed history.

*So what does it mean to be saved?*

I'll give my best, short, clear answer to the title question "How do I know if I'm really saved?" at the end of this little booklet.

## HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M REALLY SAVED?

But first, we have to start here:

### **What Salvation Isn't**

Before we talk about what salvation *is*, we need to talk about what salvation is not.

There is an old story about two students from a Christian college who were going door-to-door sharing their faith. One of the doors was answered by a harried mother carrying an infant in one arm and operating a vacuum cleaner with the other. The students could hear a baby crying in the background and see a toddler scribbling on the walls with a crayon, a pot boiling over on the stove, and a pile of dirty laundry in the corner.

“Ma’am, are you interested in eternal life?” they asked.

Utterly frazzled, the mother heaved an exasperated sigh and lamented, “Frankly, I don’t think I could stand it.”

Now, provided the door wasn't abruptly slammed in their faces, odds are those students would have shared the gospel with her. Why? Because for many people—Christians in particular—the gospel is the divine arrangement that, once heard and accepted, ensures the person a place in heaven.

In other words, if you believe the right things—that Jesus is the Son of God and that he died on the cross to forgive your sins—you will be allowed into heaven when you die.

It reminds me of the climax of the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, when King Arthur and his knights come to the castle they've been seeking. Lying between them and the castle is a bottomless abyss, and a wizened old bridge keeper guards the only bridge that allows access. If they can give the correct answers to his questions, they are allowed to cross. If not, they are cast into the abyss.

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I think this is how many people today think about salvation. When we die, we are either headed for the castle (heaven) or the abyss (hell), and “salvation” is knowing the right answers so that God has to allow us to cross the bridge.

The problem is, Jesus doesn't talk about salvation that way. Jesus never said, “Believe the right things about me and I'll let you into heaven after you die.”

In fact, Jesus—and the entire New Testament, for that matter—defines “eternal life” only once, with great precision, and in a way that has been largely lost in our day. Jesus says, “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3, NRSV).

In other words, Eternal Life = Knowing God.

Notice Jesus doesn't say, “That they may

know *about* you.” He says, “That they may *know* you.”

What’s the difference?

A lot of people know *about* God. Even atheists know *about* God. But *knowing* God, as Jesus speaks of it, is something wholly different. Knowing God means to know myself as his beloved friend as a gift of grace. Knowing God is to live in a rich, moment-by-moment, interactive, participatory life together. Knowing God means to experience what Paul called “the power of his resurrection” (Philippians 3:10) in the details and tasks and challenges of our daily, ordinary lives.

Knowing God means awakening to the reality that within each and every moment of our lives is an opportunity to walk with God, to talk to God, to enjoy God, to depend on God, to thank God, to need God, to serve God, and to rest in God.

And the best part is he’s already here. We

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just have to show up and spend time with him.

When you need help, tell him. Then pay attention and look for him to give you the strength or wisdom or the right idea you need to keep moving forward. When you are joyful, recognize his goodness behind the joy and take time to praise him. When you see beauty, recognize the hand of the Artist and thank him. Ask him to open your eyes even more so that you can see the world from his perspective. Ask God to share his experiences with you. Say, “Father, what do you feel when you look at this person? What was in your heart when you created this tree? How much joy do you experience when you look at the vast beauty of what you’ve created?”

People who are intentional about being connected with God have a way of finding him in the unlikeliest places. St. Ignatius spoke of finding God in all things.

Missionary Frank Laubach called it playing the “game with minutes,” in which the goal was to “bring God to mind at least one second out of every sixty.”<sup>2</sup> Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth-century Carmelite monk, described it like this:

During my work, I would always continue to speak to the Lord as though He were right with me, offering Him my services and thanking Him for His assistance. Also, at the end of my work, I used to examine it carefully. If I found good in it, I thanked God. If I noticed faults, I asked His forgiveness without being discouraged, and then went on with my work, still dwelling in Him.<sup>3</sup>

*This is eternal life.*

## HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M REALLY SAVED?

It's not the procurement of an insurance policy that doesn't kick in until after you die, nor is it a magical "get out of jail free" card that ensures us a place in heaven someday. It's not about knowing the right answers or affirming the right doctrine in church.

It's the unspeakably rich, interactive fellowship and joy that exists between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It's about knowing God—awakening to his extraordinary presence in the midst of your ordinary days, removing the obstacles that keep you from having an intimate relationship with him, seeing the world and all of humanity through his eyes, and abiding in his love and protection.

It's about allowing Jesus' life to permeate our lives one choice, one moment, and one heartbeat at a time.

*This* is what it means to be saved.