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I Can't Win – Or Can I?

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“For whoever would save his life will lose it,
and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it.”

Luke 9:24

Obtaining salvation is not the objective of the Christian life.

Wait a minute. Don't jump to conclusions. Read the rest of this paper first. And then, of course, do with it whatever you will.

I repeat. Obtaining salvation is **NOT THE OBJECTIVE** of the Christian life. Think about it. Think with me about it.

I am well aware that there are many passages of scripture that seem to point to obtaining salvation as the objective of the Christian life. A lot is said about being saved and about deliverance, redemption, eternal life, heaven, and hell.

Among the more familiar passages are these:

John 3:16, for God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Acts 2:21, quoting from the prophet Joel, And it shall be that whoever calls the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Acts 4:12, And there is salvation in noone else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

Acts 16:31, Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.

Ro. 1:16, I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith...

Ro. 6:23, For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Ro. 10:9, If you confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

I Cor. 15:1&2, I preached to you the gospel... by which you are saved.

Eph. 1:8, For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God.

I Tim. 1:15, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

II Tim. 3:15, ...the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Heb. 5:9, He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

I Jn. 5:12, He who has the Son has life; but he who has not the Son of God has not life.

This list is by no means exhaustive. It seems evident that the issue of salvation is a subject of major importance in the Bible, so important that it would seem to me to be a gross error to set it aside, or to try to discount it in any way. With so much written about it, it is easy to see how one could assume that obtaining salvation is – or could be – the objective of the Christian life, especially if, by salvation, we mean life after death, gaining heaven and avoiding hell.

However, there is a problem. Other passages of scripture raise questions about just what the objective of the Christian life really is. Chief among them is Jesus' statement, "For whoever would save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it." (Lk. 9:24)

It seems evident that the early followers of Jesus considered his statement to be rather important, for both Matthew and Mark include it. Furthermore, all three gospels also quote Jesus as saying, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." That part of the quote seems clear enough. If I really want to follow Jesus, then I need to set aside any other ambitions or intentions, and follow Jesus. But the part about saving my life is, at best, confusing.

If I try to save my life, I will lose it. But, if I lose my life for Jesus, I will save it. Therefore, I know, from Jesus' own words what I must do to save my life. I will lose it for Jesus' sake. That is clear enough. Only, based on the other part of what Jesus said, if I try to save my life by losing it, I will still lose it. What a dilemma. I can't win.

Or can I?

Not as long as my objective is to save my life.

The operative words are, "my objective". What is my reason for doing what I do? What is my focus in life? What motivates me? Why do I believe in God, and in Jesus as the Christ?

If my objective is to obtain salvation, or, in some way, to save my life so that my place in heaven is assured, I just may be in a lot of trouble.

If my reason for keeping the rules, or obeying God's commandments, or following Jesus are "fire escape" activities designed to avoid hell and gain heaven, I may have missed my way completely.

"Whoever would save his life will lose it." (Lk. 9:24) That seems unequivocal. The confusing part is, "Whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it."

If obtaining salvation is not the objective of the Christian life, what is?

Let, me tell you the story of the ice cream cone.

It was a hot and humid summer day. By mid-afternoon, I was virtually obsessed by the thought of eating a luscious, tasty, and cooling soft ice cream cone from McDonald's. So off to McDonald's I went. I watched in anticipation as the girl who took my order, took a cone and held it under the machine from which the soft ice cream came. She handled the machine and the cone with finesse, and my cone took, shape – tall, creamy white, perfectly whirled, with just the right twist of the cream at the top. It looked just like the one pictured in the ad. It was very nearly perfect. Cone in hand, I went out into the hot and humid summer day.

As beautiful and perfectly formed as it was, I didn't buy that soft ice cream cone just to look at it, nor to keep it nor save it. I bought it to eat it. That it be eaten was its purpose – its life. If I tried to save it, I would lose it. When late it, it was saved for the purpose for which it came into being. Its life was fulfilled. Who knows? Maybe it even got into soft ice cream cone heaven.

I can't win if the objective of my life is to save it and, thereby, in the future to gain eternal life in heaven.

So, can I win? What is the objective of the Christian life anyway?

I suggest an answer for you to consider. The objective of the Christian life is to recognize that God has already given me life, to live in response to that gift, and to be the best me I can be, looking to Scripture for guidance. I am privileged be a child of God. I commit myself to faithfully living as a child of God. Why would I make the mistake of believing I have to do something to gain the life that has already been given to me, or that gaining life is the objective of the Christian life?

I wouldn't make that mistake unless I believe that I do not already have my life. If I believe that gaining my life is God's reward to me for believing all the right things, and doing all the right things, then, of course, my objective must be to gain my life.

Since I believe that salvation is in God's hands, and that God has already given me my life, the dilemma in Jesus' statement is resolved.

I can win. I have already won.

The rich young ruler came to Jesus, and said, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

After exploring the question with the young man, Jesus told him he needed to re-focus his life. Keeping all the rules wasn't the point. Following Jesus was. There wasn't anything for him to do to save his life – not in the sense of preserving for the future. It was saved only in the living.

The same point seems to be made in the parables of the talents and the pounds. In each story, the characters were given something – talents or pounds – with instruction to do with them as they would. In each case, two of them used what had been given them and added to it. They were rewarded – if you want to see it as reward – by being given more responsibility. One, however, sought to preserve – keep intact – save what he had been given, and, in the end, he lost it. For two of them, the objective was to faithfully use what had been entrusted to them. For the other, the objective was to save it.

Could it be that all the Scriptures that deal with salvation could be interpreted from another point of view? Maybe all of them are suggesting that the objective of the Christian life is to use my life up for Jesus, even as Jesus used his life up for me. Maybe that is the only way to experience the fullness of the life that God has given me.

I would save – or gain – my life. That isn't the point. I would live my life like Jesus lived his life and with the same objectives. That is the point.

I think of an illustration.

We have been married for twenty-seven years. I believe that the man is the head of the household, and that the wife is to be submissive in all things. I am self-centered and demanding. I don't listen to her, nor take her into account. When she displeases me, I let her know in no uncertain terms. For twenty-seven years, it has been going on, and neither of us is very happy. Of course, I know what is wrong. If she would just straighten up and do as she is supposed to, we would be happy. I even threaten to leave her if she does not.

Then one day I come home and, to my utter amazement, find that she is gone and there is just a note to tell me what is going on. "I've had it." she writes. "I will not live this way any longer. Today I have filed for divorce."

At first, I am very angry. I rant and rave. I yell invectives, and smash dishes and furniture. Then I go to see her. "You can't do this to me. You come back home right now. Who do you think you are to treat me this way?"

She is adamant. "I will not live that way any longer. Our marriage is over." Finally, I realize she really means what she is saying.

I beg. I plead. I cry. I make promises. I want to save my marriage. I do everything I know to do to persuade her to come back to me. I don't look at myself.

I express anger. I make threats. Then I plead and make promises some more.

"Are you going to throw twenty-seven years away? How can we work out our differences if we aren't together? Come back and you'll see how much I change."

Nothing works. All my efforts to save my marriage come to naught.

Maybe saving my marriage isn't the objective I need to have in mind. Maybe the time has come for me to really look at myself.

With fear and trembling, I take that task on.

What I discover is that I live very destructive patterns. I began to understand why my wife won't live with me. I marvel that she stayed as long as she did. That marriage is lost. I realize that I don't want it either.

I decide to change those destructive patterns, but not with the objective of saving my marriage. I decide to change them so I can become the person I now want to be. I decide to change them for my sake. I decide to change them so that my life will be more satisfactory to me.

My wife may or may not come back into the marriage. If she does, I will have gained the relationship. Whether she does or not, I will have gained me.

When I try to save the marriage, I lose it. When I turn my attention to living the most constructive and loving life I possibly can, then I do what may result in saving the marriage. I create an environment in which a satisfying and fulfilling marriage can be a reality.

"Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it." I can't win if I lose my life to gain it. I do win when I realize that I have my life and live it to the fullest. Then I experience my life.

Who could ask for anything more?