From its beginnings some 2,000 years ago, Christianity has claimed that it provides something for its believers not available in any other religion. That something is salvation, a new condition for believers that has been defined in a wide variety of ways across the centuries and the continents where Christianity has grown. Usually, salvation involves a resurrection after one’s death into an eternal, heavenly existence, but how one attains salvation and the other benefits it includes has been defined in many different ways.

In American evangelical Christianity, achieving salvation is called “getting saved,” often referred to as being “born again” through a spiritual awakening likened to a second birth. Becoming saved can be a long process that takes place over months, even years, or it can be a sharp, sudden experience that happens in an instant. In either case, the conversion comprises a life-changing experience in which the convert’s new character differs significantly from the old, at least in their own mind.

It is common to say that being saved “transforms your life,” but what does that mean specifically? On the one hand, it is clear that salvation changes “you,” the individual who becomes saved. On the other hand, it also is clear that it does not alter “life” in any significant way. Life is a series of joys and tribulations, of enjoyment and boredom, of health and sickness. Those events continue in their unpredictable way, and salvation does nothing to alter it.

Salvation’s effects center on the individual. First, there is a spiritual transformation within oneself, described in a variety of ways: a feeling of peace, inner security or gaining a new spiritual perspective. This inner peace may improve people’s confidence; give them an ability to persevere in a difficult task or circumstance; or enable them to shed damaging behaviors such as substance abuse.

Second, one develops a new relationship with God. Since God is “saving” an individual, prayer to God takes on a new meaning. Some boldly claim to “talk to God”; others humbly say they feel someone is listening. For some, the relationship carries an emotional component (they “feel” their contact with God), but others claim such experiences only rarely, if at all.

Third, saved individuals often join a church. This provides a social benefit, a welcoming community whose members include the saved individuals in their activities; become concerned with the individuals; and provide a social arena for them to express their talents.

In contrast to an individual’s personal transformation, life’s travails continue as they will. Christian believers are plagued by illness and accidents just like non-Christians. Although occasional announcements of a miraculous healing occur, especially in the Christian press, these are news because of their rarity value. They are not everyday occurrences.

Mental illness, depression and suicide plague believers, as well, just like nonbelievers. The former head of the Texas Baptist Convention, Phil Lineberger, took his life after battling depression for years. Well-known Pastor Rick Warren of the Saddleback Church had a son stricken with mental illness from his youth who finally shot himself at age 27.

Even though churches provide social support for marriage, being a Christian does not ensure that one will avoid adultery or divorce. Billy Graham’s grandson Tullian Tchividjian resigned his pastorship at a Florida megachurch after both he and his wife admitted to affairs, even though they had been married some 20 years. Divorce followed. Sexual abuse can happen within evangelical churches and religious organizations, just as it does in Catholic and other churches.

And salvation does not prevent the sudden calamities of life. Christians are just as likely to die, be injured or lose their property in auto wrecks, armed robberies, shootings, earthquakes and tornadoes.

The point is not that Christians are particularly bad off or that being saved makes one vulnerable. Rather, salvation does not alter the random events of life, whether positive or negative. Believing in Jesus is not magical; the “living Christ,” as he is often termed, does not miraculously protect his followers from bad things happening to them. Salvation affects saved individuals and perhaps makes them more prepared to deal with such events, but it does not change the events themselves.