

CHURCH WORDS 101: SALVATION

Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on the law shall live by it...But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach); because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For, "every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved."

(Romans 10:5, 8-13, RSV)

I remember vividly getting off the plane at the Los Angeles airport. It was a stopover on return flight from China where I had been on a mission trip. As I walked down the concourse, I felt something was noticeably different but I couldn't put my finger on what it was. Everything appeared normal around me—travelers hurrying to gates, browsing through gift shops and so on. Then suddenly it hit me. I could understand what was being said around me. The conversations of bystanders and people walking by—the bits and snatches of conversation that I normally took for granted—were intelligible to me.

Why was this so remarkable? I had just been in China for two weeks and despite my poor efforts at speaking Mandarin and the many wonderful Chinese people I met who spoke excellent English, I found myself on many occasions being

in the middle of large crowds of people unable to understand what was being said around me. Before that trip, I had never been in a situation where the cacophony of words in my environment became merely sounds. I felt a little disoriented and lost, certainly excluded. I had not realized the significance of my experiences until I returned to the States and felt the relief of knowing what interactions were occurring around me.

I think that sometimes people may have a similar experience of disorientation and exclusion when they come to church. For those who come from something other than a church background, they discover that there is a whole vocabulary used inside the church that is only used inside the church. Even people who have always been active members of a church may not know what church words mean. Words like grace, covenant, reconciliation, sacrament, and so on are used all the time, but if we're honest, most of us would be hard pressed to come up with a quick definition for some of them.

We even have our own strange words for ordinary things. I'm not speaking from a podium; it's a pulpit. You're not sitting on benches; they're pews. That room at the back is not a foyer; it's a narthex. This isn't a stage; it's a chancel. If we're not careful, each of us will walk out of church experiencing the same sort of relief I felt that day in the airport. "Whew! I'm glad to be back where I understand what people are saying."

One of those church words, and it's an important one, is salvation. If pressed, I think most church folks would say that the term salvation when used around church refers to Christ saving us from hell or Christ saving us from our sins. Yet each of those phrases needs unpacking. Why does Christ need to save us? How exactly does Christ save us? What about those who don't get saved and what happens to

them? What is the whole deal with Christ anyway? Why did Jesus have to die? I think there's an expectation that we're all just supposed to know the answers to these questions or if not us then someone else who is more spiritually informed.

My sermon today is going to sound a little more like a lecture than a sermon, because I'm going to attempt to answer at least some of these questions. That's a tall order, because a lifetime's worth of sermons would still not be enough to explain what we Christians mean by the word salvation. We could fill this sanctuary with the books that have been written on the subject. The good news—at least I think it's good news—is that we don't have to figure it all out today. Despite how the word is thrown around, there's a lot of diversity of opinion out there among scholars and laypeople alike concerning what this word means. So, it's okay if we still end up a little foggy on the subject.

WHY DO WE NEED SAVING?

We are not the only ones who are foggy on the subject of salvation. Paul is foggy too, and he's the person given most of the credit for articulating the Christian understanding of salvation. When we read passages of scripture like the one we've read today, we find Paul, like the rest of the New Testament writers, wrestling with the dilemma of trying to describe what exactly God did through Jesus Christ and how God did it.

We're awful hard on Paul sometimes. We need to remember that he was trying to figure things out just like we are, except he didn't have the rest of the New Testament and two thousand years of tradition to fall back on. If Paul's reasoning is a bit convoluted, he's got an excuse. (Speaking of that, you probably noticed that in today's passage I skipped verses 6-7. They're complicated and this sermon is

already complicated enough. Trust me. It's for the best.)¹ In seminary, I was taught that Paul is arguing his points backwards. Instead of how we often articulate an argument by beginning with a problem and trying to find the solution, Paul was given the answer (Jesus Christ) and is trying to figure out what the question is.² "Something big happened with this Jesus guy I know it. Now I've just got to figure out what it was." It's almost like Paul is playing *Jeopardy*.

Paul begins with the reality he experienced—through Christ, God has brought Jews and Gentiles into a new community of faith and has given them eternal life. This naturally raises several questions: How did God accomplish this? What was wrong with the old way of doing things? What about people who reject Jesus? These are big questions, so Paul's attempts to answer these questions from the back end can meander a little bit.

Paul is clear, however, about what it is that God is trying to fix. Earlier in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, he describes the wrath of God. Instead of it being fire and brimstone, God's wrath turns out to be letting us do what we want.³ Paul writes that when turned over to our own devices, we naturally turn to idolatry. We may not worship an actual idol, but each one of us puts something in the place of God. Instead of worshiping God (making God the most important thing in our lives), we worship or make most important something else—usually ourselves. The result of this worship of something other than God is a world filled with violence and pain, a distortion of God's original intention. Since we are unable to help ourselves, God helps us to return our lives to their intended order.

God saves us from our own destructive tendencies through Christ; yet explaining exactly how this happens is a difficult task. Why did God come to us in Jesus Christ? Why did Jesus have to die? What does Jesus' death accomplish?

There are a number of answers to these questions that have been offered over the centuries. Each seems to get at a facet of how God's salvation happens, but none fully explains the mystery of what Christ does for us.

HOW ARE WE SAVED?—CHRIST AS SACRIFICE⁴

When we read the New Testament, we find that the early Christians understood Jesus' death on the cross in terms of their own religious background, first century Judaism. According to their tradition, the Torah outlined the proper means by which humans could make up for their disobedience to God. Through various types of sacrifices (animals, produce, money, etc.) people could make amends for their wrongful actions. Understood in this light, Christ's death becomes a once and for all sacrifice for human disobedience.⁵

(A similar motif occurs regarding the celebration of Passover. Just as a lamb was slain and its blood spread on the doorposts of Israelite homes when they were slaves in Egypt so that they were spared from the Angel of Death, Christ's blood saves those who follow him from eternal death.)⁶

In addition to the confusing idea of God offering a sacrifice to God's self, the problem for us modern folk is that we tend to frown upon animal sacrifice nowadays. The idea of killing something to make things right with God seems violent, not to mention messy. Yet, before we're too hard on our ancestors in faith, we should remember that our religious conceptions are also culturally conditioned, and we have our own rituals that taken by themselves are a little strange but nonetheless speak to a greater spiritual significance—e.g. lighting a candle before the statue of a saint, laying a wreath at a graveside, the exchange of rings at a wedding or sipping

little cups of grape juice and eating little pieces of bread in church, etc.

HOW ARE WE SAVED?—CHRIST THE VICTOR

Prior to the Middle Ages, Christian theologians described Christ's death on the cross as the defeat of the powers of evil. (This idea also has its beginnings in imagery used in the New Testament.)⁷ When humans sinned/were disobedient to God, they fell under the sway of Satan and his minions. A ransom had to be paid to free humanity from its captors.⁸ Coming to earth in the form of a human, God suffers and dies to pay that ransom, yet in a supernatural bait-and-switch; the powers of evil are fooled. Jesus was no sinner and is vindicated through his resurrection. The powers of evil overstep their authority and therefore lose their power over humanity.

The problem with this view of salvation comes as we question exactly who or what Satan is and the nature of evil itself. We may understand evil in less personal terms today, but for the last two thousand years, evil has shown itself to be far from vanquished. Furthermore, this rather complicated ransom scenario seems a little beneath God. Why would God have to go through with this type of negotiation? Before we dismiss this view as mere mythology,⁹ however, we should appreciate the fact that at least this view does take evil seriously as a force in the world rather than thinking of evil solely in terms of individual actions.

HOW ARE WE SAVED?—SUBSTITUTION

The Medieval theologian Anselm offered a different theory that understood Christ as the substitute for a sinful humanity. It was humanity that deserved the punishment of death but

Christ took our place and suffered the punishment we deserved. Anselm used the common understanding of power in his day—that of the feudal lord. Just as an offense to a lord by one of his vassals would result in punishment, so also our offenses to God must be satisfied. The justice of God cannot be ignored. Punishment is required, but thankfully God is also merciful and in Christ undergoes that punishment for us.

Anselm's understanding of the means of salvation was adopted by reformers like Martin Luther¹⁰ and largely still survives in Protestant theology today—especially Evangelical theology. Whenever a person's religious conversion is described as “being saved” or “being born again” they are following this understanding of salvation. (This is the understanding of salvation that I was raised with.) By accepting Christ as savior, you are accepting that Christ took the punishment intended for you.

The strength of this view is that it takes sin seriously. Disobedience to God is not excused or rationalized away. The problem, however, occurs in the way it views God. Is God a slave to justice? God is God after all. Couldn't God just cancel the debt and alleviate the need for punishment. Why does God have to come in the form of Christ and die in order to please God's self? There seems to “introduce a division, or at least a tension, into God.”¹¹ Is God such a stickler for punishment, even if it involves suffering, that somebody's got to undergo torture and death even if that somebody is God?

HOW ARE WE SAVED?—MORAL INFLUENCE

About the same time as Anselm, Peter Abelard developed a different view. Unfortunately for him it took about nine hundred years before it became popular. In this view, God

can forgive sin immediately and without any type of sacrifice or punishment. In Christ, God went to the trouble of suffering and dying on the cross in order to influence humanity. Through death on a cross, God shows us the depth of God's love and the serious and tragic results of human disobedience. Even in the midst of torture, Christ forgives his torturers. When the depth of this love is truly understood, our only response is one of love and obedience.

The problem with this view is that it runs the risk of not taking sin seriously enough. Given the human propensity for violence and our love of death, don't we bear responsibility and guilt? There is power, after all, in the idea that Jesus bore our guilt on our behalf. The strength of this understanding of the means of salvation comes in its rejection of the idea that God would somehow require violence and murder as a part of God's plan. Furthermore, it stresses the life-changing force the cross of Christ can have upon a person's life.¹²

GOD REACHING OUT TO US

Each of these theories or views on how salvation works has its problems. Each one is in some way a metaphor for what exactly God did when Christ died on the cross, and each one unravels when that metaphor is pushed too far. Yet, metaphors are what we have to work with when we humans try to describe the indescribable work of God.

All of the different theories about how God saves us from our own sinfulness—our disobedience to God—are arguing in the same direction. All agree that in Christ, God did something radical in order to make things right between God and humanity. The different theories are just trying to figure out how that happened. The good news of Jesus Christ is that no matter how we wish to believe God did it, in the death of Christ God saves us from ourselves—not only here

and now but also from an eternity spent in a distorted reality. Whether God has saved us by defeating evil, undergoing punishment that we deserve or by demonstrating the extent of God's love for us, we can at least thank God that it happened in the first place. In Christ, God reaches out to us and one way or the other does everything to restore our relationship that we cannot do on our own.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Healing and reconciling God, in Christ you came near to us in order to share our pain and our joy, to mend our broken relationship with you. We wish to respond in love but often fail. Help us to freely give ourselves to you as you have given of yourself for us. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

¹ Here Paul cites Deuteronomy 30:12-14 and reinterprets the original meaning regarding the commandments given through Moses and understands it as a reference to the law being "incarnate" in Christ's death and resurrection. Paul Achtmeier, *Romans* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985): 169. See also, James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998): 280-281. Paul is using an interpretive technique called *midrash* that was common to his era and used by rabbis within Judaism. *Midrash* often involves using one scripture (in this case Deu. 30:12-14) to interpret another (Leviticus 18:5 that Paul quotes in verse 5). For more about *midrash*, see Luke Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation, rev.* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999): 55-58.

² See E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* from Fortress Press, where Sanders writes that Paul argues “from solution to plight.”

³ The best and most accessible interpretation of Romans 1 that I have read comes from Paul Achtemeier’s commentary on Romans in the Interpretation Commentary series. “The most frightening thing about this passage is the way Paul describes God’s punishment for the sin of idolatry. It is frightening simply because, had Paul not told us they were signs of wrath, we could easily have mistaken them for signs of grace! When God visits his wrath in the way described in this passage, there is no divine cataclysm, no fire from on high sent to consume sinful society. Rather, the wrath which God visits on sinful humanity consists in simply letting humanity have its own way...In a move that our contemporary world shows is perhaps the most terrifying thing God could do, God punishes sin by letting us have control over our own destinies.”

⁴ I drew these categories from the following sources: Eugene Teselle, “Atonement,” in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, ed. Donald Musser and Joseph Price (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992):41-43; William C. Placher, “Christ Takes Our Place: Rethinking Atonement,” *Interpretation* 53 (January 1999): 5-20; John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1977): 318-324.

⁵ E.g. Romans 3:25, Ephesians 5:2, Hebrews 10:12, etc.

⁶ E.g. 1 Cor 5:7; John 1:29, 36; Rev 5:6, 12, etc.

⁷ E.g. Colossians 1:13, 2:14-15

⁸ The term “ransom” is used in Mark 10:45.

⁹ The term “mythology” is troublesome and I use it here with a grimace, because I didn’t come up with better phraseology. In modern discourse, “myth” tends to be used in reference to a naïve way of understanding reality, yet mythology often speaks to the truth of the human predicament in ways rational inquiry fails to do. For a helpful essay, see Mary Gerhart, “Myth,” in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, ed. Donald Musser and Joseph Price (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992): 321-323.

¹⁰ Luther (along with Augustine centuries earlier) interpreted Paul’s writings about sin and the law (esp. Romans 7) in terms of his own experience as a medieval monk who agonized over his own sinfulness. Paul, however, seems to have exhibited no such anxiety during his days

as a Pharisee prior to becoming a follower of Jesus (see Galatians 1:13-14 and Philippians 3:6). The typical Protestant reading of Paul is “a reading *back* of Luther’s own experience *into* Paul.” James D. G. Dunn and Alan M. Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993): 14. Understanding Paul as a medieval monk and first century Judaism as medieval Catholicism is an historical misinterpretation of scripture and theology. For a nice explanation of the historical misinterpretation of Paul and a good interpretation of Paul’s writings on the matter of salvation, see Dunn and Suggate’s *The Justice of God*. The classic essay that called into question the traditional Protestant interpretation of Paul is Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976): 78-96.

¹¹ Teselle, “Atonement,” 43.

¹² A theory that falls in this category, which I find attractive, is advanced by the philosopher and literary critic Rene Girard. Girard writes that basic to human society is rivalry that results in violence. In order for a society to survive, it focuses all of its conflict upon one person or group—scapegoating. The Bible and the story of Jesus in particular point out the innocence of the scapegoat. The Gospels reveal that violence does not cure violence and the innocence of Christ forces us to admit the scapegoating we do as individuals and as corporate bodies. See Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Y. Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1984) and *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. P. Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1977). For a great example of a biblical scholar using Girard’s writings, see James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1991).