

SAVED BY HIS LIFE, OR BY HIS DEATH?

“Jesus is our Savior.” That is a widespread and far-flung proclamation of the Christian Faith. Some of us do not actually believe this. Genuine belief is not something we can turn off or on like a faucet. It wells up from within, and it comes from a whole host of experiences, not all of them fully conscious in our minds at any one time. Nevertheless, if we truly believe that Jesus is our Savior, then we are indebted to Him – we owe Him more than we can ever pay. If we believe that Jesus is our Savior, then our lives are changed by an overwhelming gratitude. We cannot look into each other’s hearts with fullness or accuracy, but that much gratitude is bound to show in one way or another.

Institutional Christianity is always trying to turn such things into formulas; into some kind of test; into rules or axioms whereby we can see who is really “making it” – who God loves and accepts, and who is still struggling or perhaps indifferent to it all. Jesus played total havoc with that kind of rule and assumption. How His followers can keep returning to the same old nonsense is one of the seven wonders of the world. But we do. Every Christian organization in the world keeps getting sucked back into that game: who is “in” and who is not quite “in,” and who is “out.” Jesus was a friend of tax-collectors and sinners. *“Those who are well have no need of a physician,”* He said. And *“I came for the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”* Do we know the difference between the “lost sheep” and the “found sheep”? Of course not; that’s the whole point. Outer circumstances do not tell us anything definitive about the spiritual realities – about the unseen Kingdom of God. Those who do not know their need of God are still lost sheep. It does not matter how rich or poor, how educated or uneducated. Pride means we walk alone in our self-sufficiency. The humble know their need of God.

But I stray, as usual. Most of us believe that Jesus is our Savior. Some of it may still be fuzzy around the edges, but essentially we believe it. And we have reasons – experiences – that give weight and confidence to this belief. We do not respond perfectly; we do not show our gratitude sufficiently; we are not finished products, we know. Yet if you scratch us very deeply, you will still discover that we trust Jesus to be our Savior. When we cannot manage on our own, where else can we turn?

But if Jesus is our Savior, what does He save us *from*? That's one of those questions that sounds profound and deep – for about thirty seconds. Then it melts away as soon as we deal with it head on. My own list is as long as my arm. In no particular order: Jesus saves me from despair and meaninglessness and the loss of hope. Jesus saves me from discouragement and from feeling useless and worthless. Jesus saves me from the fear that God will turn away, or that I can never be good enough for God to love me. Jesus saves me from my own anger or hatred when others betray me or ruin my plans or my hard work. Jesus saves me from my anger toward God, when I have a hard time understanding why God does not fix all the mayhem and evil and chaos going on all around me. Jesus saves me from thinking that what I see is all there is. He saves me from expecting to be rewarded in *this* world for my faithful efforts. He saves me from basing my truth or my efforts on what is going on in the world around me. Most of all, of course, Jesus saves me by restoring and repairing my relationship with God. I talk a lot about Jesus, but Jesus keeps putting me back in touch with God. That never makes me love Jesus less, but it does cause me to love God more.

That brings us, or at least me, to the real questions of this sermon. Does Jesus save us by His death, or by His Resurrection? Does Jesus save us by His ministry and life on earth, or by His crucifixion? Does Jesus save us by what is happening in the here and now, or by taking us to Heaven?

Jesus is the Savior. Knowing Him changes our lives. He is God's Messiah, and everywhere He goes and everything He does show who He is and are part of what He does. Jesus never points a magic wand to anyone and says, "Bingo, you are now saved." Salvation flows *from* Him in a never-ending stream. We cannot get very close to Him and not feel His energy and His spiritual power flowing into us. Unless, of course, we are shielding ourselves, walled off from His influence by our willfulness. We do have free will. It is the Prime Directive.

But it is foolish to ask, "Are we saved more by His life or by His death; by His Resurrection or by His Holy Spirit?" Jesus *is* the Savior! Trying to break off little pieces of Him as if that will help us to believe better or understand more fully only obscures His true identity and confuses us about His truth.

I do confess to you that when I hear most Christians talking about "salvation," I have no interest in it whatsoever. They seem to mean something so small and picayune that I cannot imagine caring

about it or wanting it for myself. Their notions about Heaven seem totally boring to me. Their explanations about who goes to Heaven make me avidly hopeful that I will never have to go there. That's one of the few things we agree about, by the way. They are certain that I will never go there, and I am grateful and rejoice to hear it. I am far from a perfect soul. If you put me in a perfect place, is that going to be fun for me, or good for anybody who is already there? But never mind, we need to get on with this sermon.

It has seemed to me that Christians (and their Christian institutions) have a tendency to fixate on one aspect or portion of the Christian Gospel and then to neglect or gloss over the rest. Some tell the story, for instance, with the Cross always at the center of the Message. The Cross is the core truth, and everything else either points toward the crucifixion or it is comparatively insignificant.

Others emphasize the Resurrection. Jesus rose from the dead, and everything of real significance depends on and proclaims this truth. Jesus in His earthly ministry told parables, preached sermons, healed people, even rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, but none of this matters much in their eyes. Easter is the only thing that really matters.

Still others celebrate Pentecost. For them the coming of the Holy Spirit is the core truth around which everything else is illuminated.

In some places where Christians worship, there is always a cross with the figure of Jesus still hanging on it. It hangs in the most prominent place of all. What does that tell us about the Message of central importance? In other places of worship there is also a cross in the central place of honor, but there is never a figure of Jesus hanging on it. The major Message is not about crucifixion, but about Resurrection. And what symbol do you put in the sanctuary if you think the coming of the *Holy Spirit* is the most important Message? What symbol do you put in the chancel if you think the transformation of each individual's life is the most important thing of all? And that our relationship with God is what changes our lives once we trust it, and this guides and directs our lives ever afterward?

In and around all these themes and proclamations, there are still some who praise God and dedicate their own lives to a New Life they feel at work within them, never fully formed but active: changing perceptions, guiding them, cherishing them, asking for favors from

SAVED BY HIS LIFE, OR BY HIS DEATH?

them, even sending them at times to care about and teach others – if they are receptive. After all, what is “salvation”? Salvation is life in God’s presence; life in God’s Kingdom; life when we have recognized our true and rightful KING – and rejoice to have Him directing and guiding our lives.

Do any of us still imagine that Heaven is about geography? That we live the best lives we can, according to our own ideas of what is “good,” and then when we die Jesus rewards us with a choice piece of real estate in some far-off realm? That’s it? That’s salvation? Maybe real estate can save *you*, but I can promise you that real estate will not be enough to save me. I need a Savior who loves me, forgives me – who keeps guiding and transforming my life. I did not always know this was what I needed, but having found it – having experienced it – that becomes more and more obvious. Once the veil is torn away, once the denial is over and done with, relationship outranks real estate. I want to *be* with God. I want to be with Jesus and His people. I do not care how many mansions or rooms or dwelling places there are, or tents or sleeping bags or just a place on the grass. I want to *be* with the Savior who loves me and with the God He reveals to me. I cannot imagine why He would *want* me to be with Him, but that’s *His* problem. And after all, it’s *His* idea – His invitation.

* * *

We do not really have to choose between Jesus’ teachings, Jesus’ crucifixion, Jesus’ Resurrection, or Jesus’ returning to us as the Holy Spirit. That, in fact, is the point and purpose of this sermon. I want to convince you – beg you, is probably more accurate – to stop trying to make one aspect or facet of the Christian Gospel into the whole story. If you tell me you have never had any tendency to do this in the first place, I probably will not argue. I might just smile on the inside and wait for a more honest day. Maybe it’s true that some of you have never had to struggle with the Christian Faith as much as I have. I doubt it, but maybe that’s true.

In any case, if you really think the life and ministry of Jesus is of critical importance, is it fair to ask why you know so little about it?

If you think the crucifixion is the core and key of the Message, why do you hem and haw if I ask who the sacrifice is being made to, and in what way does the death of an ancient Jew still help you?

If you tell me that the Resurrection is the central truth of your life, do I have a right to wonder why the deaths of your friends and loved ones still bother you, or why fear is still a problem in your life?

If you really believe in the presence of the Holy Spirit – the living presence of Jesus with you each and every day that you do not shut Him out – well, then probably I do not have any questions for you. I get too busy dealing with my own: Why is my life not clearer, more focused, more devoted and dedicated to the King and the Kingdom I really believe in? Why am I still so easily distracted? Why am I still so tentative in the ways I try to serve and love my God? Those are my real questions.

In any case, can I persuade you to trace and track a few things with me?

A woman comes up behind Jesus and touches His robe. She is healed instantly. She had been suffering with a flow of blood for twelve long years. Jesus feels the power go forth from Him and turns to ask, “Who touched me?” Before the story ends, this woman is healed, forgiven, restored to the community. (Luke 8:43-48) I know some of you love this story too. I simply want to point out the obvious – the obvious but not always the noticed. This all happens *before* the crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. It is not the blood of the Cross that saves this woman. It is the forgiveness and love of God operating through God’s Messiah that saves her.

You and I may be saved “by the blood,” but this woman is saved *from* the blood and *by* the grace and power of God – and before the Cross or the Resurrection has taken place. God’s Messiah is endowed with authority and power from the time of His baptism onward, and it does not take His death or His Resurrection to activate His power or to make possible His salvation. It simply is not true that the Cross is doing all these things. *Jesus* is doing these things. God is doing these things *through* Jesus.

We can add in many other stories from Jesus’ earthly ministry: Nicodemus, Mary Magdalene, Peter, Zacchaeus, Mary and her sister Martha, beggars and lepers and a Roman Centurion and the Gerasene demoniac. Jesus never says to any of them, “Oh wait! Soon I will be crucified and then we can sprinkle some of the blood from the Cross on you and *then* you will be saved.”

SAVED BY HIS LIFE, OR BY HIS DEATH?

Humans love to come up with theories and formulas so they can explain the truth and instruct each other about how it all works and under what conditions God will love us. If we throw all of that out the window and turn to trust God for grace and mercy like Jesus taught us to, it would save a lot of malarkey from human egos and human teachings and human churches that have nothing to do with God's real truth or love.

Please, I am not saying that the Cross is unimportant. I am moved by it and changed by it more than some of you. (More of that next week.) My point is that lots of Christendom is trying to teach people today that it is *the Cross* that activates the love of God. Some people think I am a heretic, but I have never taught you any heresy anywhere near as evil as that one. Others teach that there are exact formulas for salvation and that they themselves know what they are. That if you do not say the "Sinner's Prayer" and invoke the Name of Jesus in a precise and proper manner before you die, you will not get into Heaven. I hate it when humans pretend that they are in charge of the mercy and forgiveness of God – when they think that their understanding of Christian truth is bigger than the heart and mind of God. Johannes Tetzel selling indulgences to people to free them from Purgatory in Martin Luther's day pales by comparison. I may be a heretic, but I have never taught you any heresy half as evil as that one.

* * *

"Paul stood up, raised his hand for silence, and began." And then Paul outlines some of the holy history of what God has been doing from the time of the Exodus all the way to and through the death and Resurrection of Jesus. Paul is not picking and choosing little pieces of the story to be more important than the others. For him it is all part of God's wondrous plan, clear back to Moses – clear back to Abraham. And now God's plan is on the move again, under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Of course, not everybody liked that sermon either. *"A campaign of persecution was started against Paul and Barnabas, and they were expelled from the district."* (Acts 13:50) So they go on to Iconium, and the last verse in the chapter says: *"The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."* I hope *that* verse is about us too.

* * *

SAVED BY HIS LIFE, OR BY HIS DEATH?

Are we saved by His death, or by His life? The answer is YES. It is not either/or; it is both/and. In the presence of Jesus, we do not need to wait for His death or His Resurrection. His love and His power come from God, and they are active at all times – wherever He is. The Kingdom is wherever the King is – if indeed we have chosen Jesus to be our true and rightful King.

We have no need or desire to forget the Cross or the Resurrection. They draw all the threads together with incredible clarity. If we do not do the familiar knee-jerk response that so much of Christendom tries to teach, then the Cross and the Resurrection are beacons of light and truth. I keep wanting to forget that Jesus is not successful in this world – not until He transcends it. I keep wanting to forget that the Resurrection is about LIFE beyond anything this world can do to stop it or deny it or threaten it or buy it off.

And, thank God, some days I do not forget and cannot forget. And whatever else is going on, those days are glorious days indeed.