

HOW DOES JESUS SAVE US?

Jesus saves us by reconciling us to God. All true Christianity is based on relationship. We are not saved by codes, by rules, by any kind of outer efforts, behavior, or self-improvement schemes. And very sadly for many of us, we are not saved by acquiring possessions, power, knowledge, popularity, or sexy bodies. Bummer!

We are saved by the power, peace, healing, and unearthly confidence of a love-bond – a relationship with Almighty God. While millions of humans may quickly say that God is a God of love, the evidence makes it quickly obvious that most of us have only a very partial belief or trust in God’s personal love for us. We get glimmers; we get moments of full awareness perhaps. But most of us, most of the time, live in enough fear, guilt, confusion, depression, anxiety, and loneliness to make it clear and obvious that we do not fully believe or trust that God loves us.

So, in the classic language, sin rules in this world. Our reality and the reality of most of those around us is a condition of alienation between us and God. We live in a state of “separation” from God. And that is the true concept of sin. Satan is constantly reminding us that we are not perfect (and therefore nobody could truly love us, never mind God). For this reason we call it a “broken world.” That is, nothing runs like it was designed to run. Nothing flows with ease or smoothly, because the pattern is constantly troubled or interrupted by the alienation between us and our Creator.

All evil – jealousy, hatred, anger, sloth, disease, uncaring, etc., including self-hatred – is generated from our “lostness”: the disconnect between us and God’s love for us. (This, of course, is worth serious and unhurried meditation. Meaning, we need to know this reality deeply and clearly, until it no longer confuses us.)

So each of us has our own personal experiences and our own personal stories of how the principles of sin and reconciliation are at war within us, and at work within us. We are all being saved – if and as we become more aware of God’s love for us. But the difficulty of any human being coming to truly believe in the love of God is far greater than most people will acknowledge. We live in a huge state of denial: denial that we have any problem accepting God’s love for us. Strangely, many humans

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today are pretending that coming to an acceptance of God's love is just the relatively simple matter of deciding we will think so – that we can just up and decide that God loves us whenever we want to. Once again, the evidence all around us is that very few humans truly believe it. Those of us who try to believe it quickly discover that it is constantly going out of focus, or going into “dark nights” when we doubt it altogether. Meanwhile, our behavior frequently doesn't match any firm conviction that an Omnipotent God truly loves us.

What is this evidence? Obviously all the marks of jealousy, fear, loneliness, depression, and anger (the Seven Deadly Sins and their many expressions) are clear indications of our estrangement. How can a person know they are loved by the Omniscient, Omnipotent God, yet still worry about who else likes them or how much status or “success” they have in this world? If we truly know it, the roots for jealousy, fear, etc. would no longer be viable. In fact, we have known, and have seen in others, that when awareness of the love of God becomes real for us, we begin to heal, we are transformed, we begin to find ourselves in a very different kind of reality. It is often called “conversion.” All conversion that is not based in this awareness of God's personal love for us is a mirage.

But this change or shift into the awareness of God's love is not something we can think our way into, self-induce in ourselves, or learn from some other human being (though some loving humans do help to raise our interest in the possibility). It is true that we may like the theory, and even enjoy thinking about various aspects of the philosophy or theology of a loving God. But if we start to move from theory to reality, the possibility of a real relationship with God is both too promising and too threatening to contemplate. It is too promising in that the prospect seems too good to be true, and this sets up a severe aversion within us. What if we start to believe it, start to open ourselves to the hope of it? Then what will we do if the hope turns out to be false? That would be too shattering to endure or survive. Better never to open ourselves to such a devastating and shattering disappointment.

A real relationship with God is also too threatening to contemplate. What would that do to our self-image? How could we stay in control of our own lives any longer? What might this God expect of us or ask of us if we allowed the love-bond to form and be acknowledged within us? Even a true relationship with another human is highly troublesome, and all of us keep some distance from others even in our best relationships.

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How much more troublesome and threatening is the prospect of true intimacy with the Almighty?

But the problem is, as we have already commented: apart from God – alienated from God – we are never our true selves, and life cannot unfold anywhere near to its true shape or form. So how does Jesus save us? **By reconciling us to God.**

I hope I haven't been "beating around the bush" too much for you. How does Jesus save us? Jesus saves us by reconciling us to God. End of sermon. But not the end of my comments. That means you can turn off from the rest of this and contemplate its significance in your own life. But I intend to go on musing about some things for a while longer.

How does Jesus reconcile us to God? That is, how does Jesus heal or erase the distance between us – overcome the alienation and separation between us and God?

The classic Christian explanation of this "salvation" is put into language and symbolism that come from temple worship and animal sacrifice. Jesus is "the lamb of God" because lambs are sacrificed on the altar to appease God – to pay God to forgive us, or to turn away God's wrath. Of course, in temple worship we have to keep bringing such gifts and we have to keep sacrificing things on the altar to keep getting enough forgiveness and approval to keep from being punished or destroyed. Therefore it all has to be done according to set and proper rules and procedures. When was the last time you read the book of Leviticus?

Finally, with great relief and enormous gratitude, we are told that God has provided us with a sacrifice of such high merit that we no longer have to keep doing all the constant lesser sacrifices. Jesus, with sinless purity and merit beyond our comprehension, has been sacrificed for us – once and for all. Jesus has been crucified on the Cross, a cross which actually served as one of God's altars. And the blood of Jesus atones for – pays off, makes up for – all of our sins, past, present, or future. And so we are reconciled to God by the incomparably precious blood of Jesus. And this, in some guise or another, is the explanation of Jesus' saving power according to 80% of Christendom still today. We are saved by the blood. We do not fully understand it, but His blood has magical powers, and it can mysteriously make us acceptable to a God who would otherwise annihilate us or throw us into the fire to be tortured in unbearable agony forever.

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So Jesus' blood pays the price for our sins (which in this context means our "badness," including all our misdeeds, wrong thoughts, failures, and imperfections). And God, in God's mercy, did fix it so that Jesus would die on the Cross to save us. That is, God provided the sacrifice (not us; we had no such sacrifice available). In short, God killed his own Son so he wouldn't have to kill us. I hate to break it to you, but that does *not* reconcile me to God. The thought of such a thing makes me entirely furious. How or why would I ever want to be reconciled to a God like that? I have never known or heard of anyone who draws my love, admiration, loyalty, and respect with anywhere near the appeal and power of Jesus. If you tell me that God is so enslaved to his own anger and wrath and malice that he cannot keep from punishing me except by killing Jesus, well, you not only lost me, but if I were stupid enough to believe you, the only result would be that I would hate God forever. There would be no love or reconciliation for me from this direction, I can promise you that!

Jesus saves us by reconciling us to God. Only, the problem is not God's anger; it is ours. And it is not God who kills Jesus; it is us. How long before we listen to the story and get it straight? Who crucified Jesus? We did! Not God. Who got so angry and threatened by the love of Jesus that they couldn't see straight – couldn't contain themselves or restrain themselves from committing murder? It was humans, not God.

As is clear from the comments already made, there is huge alienation and separation between us and God. All of it boils down to the fact that we do not dare to trust God. Along with everything else in that mix is the fact that this is a very hard place in which we find ourselves. People we love are dying, hurting, getting sick, killing each other – all around us, all the time. Who is in charge? Who is responsible? Who made this place? We try to "put a good face on it," as we say; there is much beauty and friendship possible and many opportunities, and we need to keep a good attitude and make the best of it. But everything we ever care about here gets destroyed in the long run. Everything we work to build gets torn down. Everyone we love suffers and eventually dies. Under the pretty surface of things, the pain is enormous. The darkness is bleak indeed. Unless we actually believe in dimensions beyond the ones we see, there is no hope for us. Our hope – except for superstition and wishful thinking – comes *after* we are reconciled to God. So the truth is that under the surface, we are unspeakably angry toward God. How very dangerous to admit that, in any conscious manner. And so the greatest denial of all denials is our animosity toward God. We do not trust God.

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We do not love God. If you require any evidence, look around you. How easy is it for us to put our lives in God's hands? How eager are we to turn our wills and our lives over to God? How frequently and joyfully do we "love the Lord our God, with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength"?

We need to stop being naive and pay attention to the great disconnect between all our religious poses (on the one hand) and what we really think and how we really live (on the other). But how do we admit, even to ourselves in secret, that we are in truth exceedingly angry toward and distrustful of God? If there is a God, what if God should hear us? So there is not only this greatest of all denials, but there is great reason for us to be in this denial yet to keep trying to tell ourselves that we really love God, trust God, and want to serve God. It is the root and foundation of all Pharisaism.

Onto this scene comes the Messiah – the Anointed One. That does not imply divinity. (Another subject, but that comes later, in the fourth-century creeds.) "The Messiah" means that He is the Anointed One: our King – our true and rightful King. How does this Messiah reconcile us to God? He teaches what we instinctively recognize to be the truth that we need and want to know. Therefore we do not believe Him, certainly not at first. The anger we have toward God begins to transfer onto Him. "We all received Him gladly." That's how the story is supposed to read. I still know people who try to read it that way: Jesus was so nice, and everybody loved Him, and everybody understood His wonderful teachings and parables, and now we all believe in Him and follow Him. Only, that is *not* how the story reads. Not even close.

Nevertheless, Jesus heals many. He does not engage in the usual efforts that humans use to get power, wealth, popularity, or position. That is, He makes no effort to achieve what we call "success." He calls people to follow Him. And more and more He acts like our rightful King. Finally He makes His move: rides into Jerusalem just before Passover, claiming to be the true King, and calling everyone who will listen to come help coronate Him. And yet, Jesus makes no effort to coerce anybody or to bribe or threaten anybody. He lays the choice before us. But it is up to us. We will choose Him, or He will die. And He will die at our hands – that is, at the hands of humans who are terrified or angered or appalled at what He is saying, doing, and claiming.

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In short, Jesus gives us a true and authentic chance to choose Him – to claim Him as our King, to follow His WAY and His ways. And in fact, He does claim to be the true Messiah, the special agent from God: “I am of God and from God, and have come to lead you into a far better and greater Life.”

So we killed Him. And what is the penalty? The penalty is the Resurrection – and Pentecost. The penalty is that we do not get punished for the hatred and anger and animosity that caused us to kill Him. That is what finally reaches us and reconciles us – what finally persuades us, if we notice: God is not who (is not “like,” is not at all the kind of BEING) we have always deeply feared and believed God to be, down deep inside. We are saved by the blood because Jesus’ blood proves that we have been wrong about God. God does not do any of what we have been blaming God for. God does not refuse to relate to us until we are perfect. We refuse to relate to God, despite all of God’s offers and invitations throughout our history and all of earth’s history. But God, as always, does allow our free will to work its way out. And this time, above all others, it is necessary for us to see it played out. How deep does the love go? All the way. And what is the real concern when we have done the worst, the most unjust, the most incomprehensible evil imaginable? The real concern is still to forgive, to gather us in, to awaken us to true Life. The punishment is Resurrection and Pentecost: endless new chances to claim Him as our true King.

And so, unimaginable and unfathomable as it would have seemed to us if we hadn’t seen it unfold: God in Jesus found a WAY to allow us to claim our true King, even though we had rejected, forsaken, and abandoned Him. Resurrection and Pentecost. He is back! And now any of us have the chance – the opportunity – to claim Him and follow Him, whenever we are ready and willing. And there is absolutely nothing the world can do to prevent it or stop it. Not only that, but if we claim Jesus as our true King and follow Him, it in no way coerces, forces, or controls anyone else who is not ready to claim and follow Him. “*My kingdom is not of this world.*” The true King and true Kingdom is a dimension going on all around us, and it is more real in many ways than the one most people think is real. So we can claim Him, live for Him, die for Him ... whatever it takes. We never have to do any physical harm to anyone else because of our love for Him. Want to talk about miracles? Our Lord and Savior is the most incredible, amazing King and Leader the world has ever seen or heard of. Though of course most of the world does not really see it or hear it even yet.

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Finally, I want to scold you a little bit, mostly in fun and with a light heart, I hope you realize: Stop reverting back to the “same old, same old.” I mean, every time you hear a Scripture passage that reminds you of the old way of thinking about Jesus and the Cross, do you have to pretend you’ve never heard of the New WAY? I think the New WAY is the old way that never really caught on. And I strongly suspect that Paul thinks in the New WAY far more than most Christians of our own day and time. How many times in the New Testament do you hear Paul talking about the flames or punishment of Hell? Find me a passage, I dare you. Paul is concerned about the bondage we are already in, and how Jesus came to free us. Paul is about reconciliation because of a God who in Christ Jesus truly loves us, cares about us, wants a covenant relationship with us in a bond of love.

“God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” is the core and key to what I have been trying to say here, and to where it originated for me as well. (II Corinthians 5)

But when you read *“He rescued us from the domain of darkness”* (Colossians 1:13), do you think of the Cross and how that frees us from our anger and despair – from Satan’s lies, and from our own mistrust of God’s love? Or *“It is now my joy to suffer for you; for the sake of Christ’s body, the church, I am completing what still remains for Christ to suffer in my own person.”* (Colossians 1:24) That’s a remarkable comment, and one which implies, or states outright, that it’s not magic blood or a magic potion but the revealing of God’s love – and Jesus’ love, and the love of the followers of Jesus – that reconciles people to God.

It may be even harder to stay on track with some of the following:

“For in him God in all his fullness chose to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things to himself, making peace through the shedding of his blood on the cross – all things, whether on earth or in heaven.” (Colossians 1:19-20) Does your mind start to revert? How does this reconciliation happen? Is “reconciliation” a magic-potion word, or a relationship word? The reconciliation is because the Cross reveals the animosity and hatred and mistrust of us humans toward God. That is, we had hoped for God’s Messiah for hundreds of years, but when He came, we rejected and killed Him. Our fear and mistrust was too great for us. But the Cross revealed our misunderstanding of God’s nature and purposes toward us. So the reconciliation means that for the first time, the relationship between us and God can form, and be right, and last

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through the night. We can claim it, trust it, and stay in God's love, however unbelievable that seemed to us beforehand. By the way, why does the Cross impact things in Heaven? Can the death on earth reconcile things in Heaven? Only if it reveals the love of God – restores relationship with God – in all the realms and dimensions of all creation. Are you sure the old explanations and explainers have heard Paul correctly?

“But now by Christ's death in his body of flesh and blood God has reconciled you to himself, so that he may bring you into his own presence” (Colossians 1:22) Are you hearing anger, wrath – that God really wants to punish or destroy you, except for the sacrifice of Jesus that pays your unpayable debt? I think Paul sees that Jesus reveals to us the true heart and will of God. And I believe that the usual explanations of atonement are a sad and unfortunate overlay on the New Testament message. By the way, a great synonym for “atonement” is *reconciliation*.

“For he has forgiven us all our sins; he has cancelled the bond which was outstanding against us with its legal demands; he has set it aside, nailing it to the cross.” (Colossians 2:13-14) He has forgiven us what? “Sins” does not mean our badness. He has forgiven us our *alienation* – our assumptions and fears and mistrust that believed God really wanted to destroy us. Don't we speak the language, even yet? He has cancelled our notions that salvation means doing everything right, meeting the legal demands of the Law – living up to a code of behavior that will require a just God to admit us into his approval, but only after we get it all right. That is a foolish dead-end street, says Paul, the former “Law man.” Jesus has nailed the codes and rules to the Cross. He has revealed that trying to get right with God this way is a false and empty hope. And what the Cross really reveals is that God has always loved us, and that God's Son, by letting us have our way with Him, was willing to show us how deep our own anger and fear and mistrust were. But it also revealed how deep the forgiveness, and how broad the invitation for us to declare Him our King – and to be reconciled, once we understood the reality of our true condition, and the reality of God's true attitude toward us.

Of course, you can go back to the old explanations and doctrines if you want to. But at least realize and remember that it will take you right back to the righteous but vengeful God we thought we knew and surely believed in before we met Jesus. And it will take you back to a world where free will is mostly an illusion, and where most things are predestined. A world where Jesus was born to die on a cross, and He had very little to say about it; where Judas was chosen to betray Him; where

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all of us are already preordained to respond correctly and go to Heaven, or to respond incorrectly and go to Hell. A world where it's all just a big puppet show, so you don't really have to understand any of it or try to figure it out.

You see, one of the reasons Christianity has not had a greater and truer impact on more of our world, even though the impact of Christianity has been great and huge in many ways, is that from nearly its beginning, most of the world has not been able to fathom or believe its real Message. Almost from the beginning, the Message has been corrupted – turned back toward what the world already thinks it knows, what it already expects to hear, what it is used to hearing. Despite everything Jesus tried to teach and show and reveal, even up to and through His own innocent and very painful death, our world quickly turns right back into the “same old, same old”: God hates us. God wants to burn us. God will punish us. In fact, God will throw us into Hell and torture us forever, unless we do exactly what some religious institution or creed or pope or pastor tells us to do.

Some of you will tell me that the liberal church has long ago stopped believing in such things, even though it often still acts like it behind the scenes. The problem is, the liberal church doesn't believe in much of anything anymore, except in giving money to help the poor or to save the whales. It's hard to find a liberal church today that really believes in the Resurrection, in Pentecost, in a personal and meaningful everlasting Life. Is a personal relationship with God possible? Is it automatic? Does anybody still even want such a thing? Since liberal churches rarely talk about such topics, many have concluded that these are old issues that no longer matter.

How nice! We get to choose between the evangelical fire and the liberal ice. What a complete and total travesty of everything Jesus came to teach and to reveal. I do so hope that we will see and hear Jesus as fresh and new as His coming really is – and that we will keep it clearer this time, at least in *The New Church*.