

WHAT IS SALVATION?

ROMANS 1:8-17
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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JANUARY 14, 2018/2ND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Last week we talked about God's existence. This week's question is, "What is Salvation?"

I figured I'd get the easy ones out of the way first 😊

This is obviously another *massive* question, and one for which twenty or so minutes are woefully inadequate (two Sundays into this series, I'm thinking that most of these questions could *themselves* have been a series!).

I suspect that for most of us the concept of "salvation" is sort of assumed. But in response to the, "What do you mean by that?" question, we're sometimes surprised by how tricky it is to pin down. Even pastors!

So, in light of my initial difficulties in knowing where to start on this question, I did what any rational human being would do. I asked Facebook. 😊

On Friday morning, I put the question out there: What is salvation? What is the first thing that comes to mind?

I got a very interesting assortment of responses, the most memorable of which came from a good friend and mentor:

Rather than a word evoking celebration of God's loving ways, [salvation] has unfortunately become a divisive term used to position human beings.

Which is why I laughed out loud a few years ago when I saw a church sign with the message, "Jesus saves!" and right next to it a much larger Safeway sign with bigger letters with the message, "Safeway Saves You More."

Indeed.

We should start with the word itself. "Salvation." *Soteria* in Greek. *Yesha* in Hebrew.

Both point to the themes of rescue, deliverance from oppression, preservation from harm.

So, the next question we should ask is, "Do we even think that we need to be saved?" If so, from what?

I had a long conversation this weekend with a friend who grew up in the church but who has walked away and has major doubts about God, faith, and the church. He saw my Facebook post and asked, "What do we even need to be saved from?"

It's a question worth asking, even for those of us who have been Christians for a long time.

And the answers that we give, whether explicitly or implicitly, to the "What is salvation?" question say a lot about what we think we need saving from.

So what *do* we think that salvation is? What *do* we think that we need saving from?

Well, I zeroed in on four common answers out there. There are probably others, but in the interests of time, I thought I'd focus on these and offer a few comments on each.

Salvation is going to heaven when you die

I'm guessing that this might be among the more familiar answers to us. Many of us were raised on this understanding of salvation.

Salvation means that Jesus died on the cross for my sins so that I could go to heaven when I die. Full stop.

This is the view that is preached and taught in all kinds of contexts around the world. But is it true?

There are two problems with this view.

First, it has a lot to say about Jesus' death, but almost nothing to say about his life. Or his resurrection, for that matter. And the empty tomb is arguably more important than the cross. If Jesus is not raised from the dead, Paul says, we're still in our sins.

Second, it pushes salvation almost entirely into the afterlife. It has a lot to say about life after death, but relatively little to say about life before death.

As a kid, I remember quite clearly thinking, "Well, if the point of this whole show was for some kind of a divine-human hybrid to come and die to kick into motion whatever mechanism it might be that allowed God to be able to forgive human beings and usher them off to paradise, then why didn't God just send Jesus immediately after the fall?!"

What's the point of Genesis 4 → Golgotha? What's the point of our few decades on the planet? Is it just a stage to make a decision about what really matters, which is what comes next?

This view of salvation is too individualistic (Jesus died for *my* sins so that *I* can go to heaven) and it has very little to say about *this* world and what God might have in mind for it.

The bible begins in a garden and ends in a city. Revelation 20 says talks about heaven *coming down* to earth not human beings going up to heaven (we're going to talk more about what happens when we die later in this series!).

Salvation looks forward to a new redeemed heaven and a new earth, not drifting up to heaven.

Salvation is avoiding hell

This one is obviously closely related to the previous one in that it imagines that salvation is primarily concerned with afterlife issues.

The afterlife does matter. It is a major existential concern for human beings. We have eternity set in our hearts. We don't *want* to be separated from God.

But this view can easily reduce salvation to little more than a fire insurance policy. It very often involves saying a prayer once upon a time, believing that Jesus took the wrath of God that was intended for us, and that as long as we believe this, we're good.

Avoiding hell is a good thing. But this is a very small view of salvation. Again, it is very individualistic, and it has almost nothing to say about what we're saved *for* only what we're saved *from*.

This view of salvation ignores the central biblical theology of creation. It ignores the question of why God made a world and why God made people.

At best it implies that this world is a temporary kind of "testing ground" where we get a few years to make a really important decision about Jesus' death, after which the real business of heaven and hell can take over.

Salvation as therapeutic consolation

This is a big one in our day. Salvation here involves Jesus saving us from damaging understandings of ourselves. Our central problem is shame and failing to recognize how dearly loved we are.

Jesus saves us by loving us and validating us and telling us that we are God's special cherished possession. Jesus is kind of like Oprah here. 😊

This view of salvation places a lot of emphasis upon the incarnation (God with us), but very little on ugly things like the cross. It would point to stories like Jesus with the woman at the well or the parable of the Prodigal Son and interpret these to mean that our central problem is shame or feelings of inadequacy or unrealized moral/spiritual potential from which Jesus rescues us.

The problem here should be obvious. Again, it's too much about us (common trend!). And it fails to take seriously the fact that Jesus did *not* in fact bless and baptize and validate every expression of being human.

Whatever else we say about the cross, we must surely acknowledge that it exposes our sin and violence as the ugly realities they are—realities that we need to be saved from!

Far from being the spiritual guru to unlock all of our inner potential, Jesus was often the anvil upon which expectations and hopes were shattered and recalibrated. Or a stumbling block. Or a stone the builders rejected.

To borrow a phrase from Canadian author Mark Buchanan, Jesus “mends us in places we didn’t know we were broken and breaks us in places where, before his advent, we were utterly content.”

We believe that Jesus loves us just as we are. But he does not leave us there. Salvation is more—much more—than realizing that we are loved and special, even if it includes this.

Salvation as political strategy

This understanding of salvation veers to the opposite end of the spectrum for those who think that it’s primarily about afterlife issues.

Here, salvation is profoundly this-worldly with little, if any concern for the afterlife. People here would point to Jesus’ location in the prophetic stream of the prophets of Israel, to his teaching on the kingdom of God being a place of peace and justice for all.

Salvation is embracing Jesus’ vision of life on earth, bringing down the rich and powerful, raising up the lowly, reconfiguring social and political life so that it more closely resembles what God had in mind in creating a world within which all can flourish.

Here, salvation is political. It rightly reminds us that we too easily read afterlife concerns into biblical references to “salvation,” when very often the deliverance that the people of Israel were anticipating had nothing to do with what happened after they died. It had to do with present rescue from real enemies and real oppression.

But this view can easily ignore the very real personal and existential concerns that human beings have always had. And it can be naïve as to just how much human beings can really accomplish. It often forgets that human beings are sinful and self-interested and have never been able to save ourselves, whether in this life or the next.

In each of the above (and probably others besides), I think we see a view of salvation that is too small. It isolates one important part of salvation and imagines that it tells the whole story.

Well, that's a lot of words about what salvation *isn't* or at least isn't exclusively. I should probably say a few words about what salvation is.

I want to return to the church sign that I mentioned earlier.

Jesus saves.

Salvation is bound up in the very name: Jesus, Yeshua = "God saves."

One of the best ways to figure out how Jesus saves (today) is to look at how Jesus *saved*. So I did a quick tour through the gospel of Luke yesterday, paying attention to the appearance of the word "salvation" or "saved."

Luke 1:77: Zechariah says before Jesus is born that he will "give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. *Jesus saves by forgiving.*"

Luke 2:30: Simeon, says "My eyes have seen your salvation." Before Jesus does or says anything, he is seen as a source of salvation. *Jesus saves by taking on human flesh, by showing himself to be God with us, God for us, God among us, experiencing and restoring what it means to be human.*

Luke 3:6: John the Baptist in the wilderness says, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." *Jesus saves by being for all humanity, not just for the Jews.*

Luke 6:9: Jesus heals a man with a withered hand, saying to the Pharisees who opposed him, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" *Jesus saves by restoring physical health and by reclaiming the Sabbath for its original intent.*

Luke 7:50: Jesus encounters a "sinful woman" who shows up while Jesus is eating with the Pharisees. She anoints him with expensive perfume and weeps at his feet. In response to the Pharisees who say he should realize the nature of the sinner who is doing this, Jesus talks about how those who have the greater debt forgiven respond with greater love. He ends by saying to the woman that her sins are forgiven, that her

faith has saved her, and that she can depart in peace. She didn't pray a prayer or invite Jesus into her heart. She didn't even say anything, according to the text. Jesus hadn't died for her yet. But he says that her faith has saved her. *Jesus saves by forgiving. Jesus saves by responding to love offered with love given.*

Luke 9:23-25: Jesus says that anyone who wants to follow him must take up their cross and deny themselves daily. He says that those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose it for his sake will be saved. *Jesus saves us by reminding us that there are parts of us that have to die in order to live. Jesus saves us by showing us that selves are not just for validating but for denying, also.*

Luke 18:41-43: Jesus encounters a man born blind. He asks him what he wants him to do, and the man responds, "Lord, let me see again." Jesus responds, "Receive your sight, your faith has saved you." *Jesus saves us by honouring our faith and helping us to see.*

Luke 19:9: Jesus and Zacchaeus. He has been convicted of his wrongful economic practices and promises to change his ways and pay back what he owed. Jesus says, "Today (not in the future), salvation has come to this house." *Jesus saves us from harmful ways of living with our neighbours. Jesus saves us from our own injustice and greed and selfishness.*

Luke 23: Jesus hangs on a cross and he hears the voices on the ground, saying, "He saved others, why can't he save himself?" Jesus says, "Father forgiven them, they don't know what they are doing. He suffers and dies. Jesus saves us by showing us that we need more than just rescue in this world but the next. *Jesus saves by taking on the sins and the burdens of all humanity and putting them to death in his body. Jesus saves in rising from the dead three days later, victorious over the grave, delivering humanity and all of creation from bondage and suffering and decay.*

That's just a partial tour through the life of Jesus. And I just isolated that passages that used the word "salvation" or "saved." There's obviously much more that could be said about how Jesus' teaching saves us from ourselves, and trains us to love one another well, restoring our relationships not only with God but with one another.

But even in this partial tour, we see that salvation is both individual and corporate. It is concerned with physical, embodied life (not immaterial souls living in heaven). It validates human beings (incarnation) and takes on our burdens and shame and need for

forgiveness, while still taking our sin seriously (cross and empty tomb). It involves all of creation, not just human beings. And it is eternal.

Jesus shows us that salvation is far bigger than we often make it.

We are saved *from* our sins, from the grip of death and the principalities and powers of cosmic evil.

We are saved *for* living authentic human lives, for the flourishing of all creation, for love, for wholeness and harmony.

If I had to summarize what salvation is in one sentence, it would be something like this:

Salvation is:

**all of Jesus... (birth, life, example, teaching, death, resurrection, ascension,
future return)**

for all of us... (the physical, the spiritual)

**for all the world... (for all people, not just the chosen nation, not just
individuals)**

and all for life. (in this world and in the next).

Bad grammar, but good theology, I think. 😊

And salvation is received by faith, as our passage in Romans reminds us.

Paul tells the church in Rome that he comes in the name of “God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son.”

The good news of his Son. And his Son is, indeed, very good news. Because he accomplishes for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

As we have seen, salvation is global in scope. It is the biggest and brightest and best hope for all of humanity and for all of creation. It is something that we can contribute to and participate in, but cannot accomplish.

Salvation is a God-sized task.

And salvation is a gift to be received. We receive it by faith, not just in the sense of intellectual assent, but in turning all of who we are toward God and God's purposes.

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It's not about praying a prayer once upon a time. It's not about checking off a list of moral accomplishments. It's not about inviting Jesus into our heart to be our "personal Lord and Saviour."

It can include each of these things, but that's not what salvation is.

It involves our beliefs, our behaviours, our desires, our loves and our hopes. All of these are to be reconfigured by Jesus Christ.

It is an invitation that requires a response. It is the call of Jesus to come and follow Him. It is the result of the unending and incomprehensible love of God for us. It is the reminder that God is victorious and that we are invited to partake in His greatest victory, the victory over death.

And it takes a lifetime. It's not something that we just check off a list, praying a prayer, moving from the "unsaved" to the "saved" category.

In 1 Corinthians 1:18, Paul says,

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are **being saved** it is the power of God.

He says it again later in the letter:

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are **being saved**.

Salvation is not an event, but a lifelong process that encompasses our past, present, and future, and one that locates us in God's broader project of restoring, redeeming, and renewing all of creation.

This is good news. As Paul says, “it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.”

All of Jesus, for all of us, for all the world, and all for life.

Amen.

