

The Meaning of Words

Jesus said that we're to go into all the world and preach the Gospel. OK, so let's imagine that you are doing that. You are right now on some isolated island on the other side of the world where the natives have had no contact with the outside world—not ever—and know nothing about anything. Having observed passing ships and airplanes, though, they do know that there is an outside world. They lead a subsistence life-style, little more than that. But they welcome you and are eager to hear you out. What do you say? (Let's assume for the sake of this exercise that communication isn't a problem because with you is a bilingual person who translates with precision.)

They: *"Who you are isn't important to us. What we want to know is, Why are you here?"*

You: *"I have come to share with you the good news that God has made salvation available to you. You must believe in Christ Jesus to be saved. By believing in Jesus you can have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. That is the Gospel."*

They: *"God? What or who is that? And, What is this thing you call 'salvation'? And what does it mean, 'believe'? And what does the word 'Christ' mean? And who is Jesus, if he is a person? And what does it mean to 'be saved'? What are sins? What's eternal life? And 'Gospel'? What's that? What in the world are you talking about?"*

Jesus came to His people Israel, who had a deep background in spiritual matters. They had the entire O.T. revelation, and knew it well. We in America likewise know the revelation of spiritual truths in the Bible or have heard of these matters from church pulpits. But others in the world have no such knowledge. So, how would you answer these natives? Every believer in Jesus should be able to answer these questions truthfully. I suspect, though, that many of us simply assume that we know what these words mean and, if pressed to explain them, would not be able to do that. In order to think clearly, we need to know the exact meaning of the words we use.

I'll assume that you can answer the 'Who is God?' question. You would discuss creation, sovereignty, some of His attributes, His self-revelation, and that He judges us. Let's discuss the word, 'salvation.' What exactly do we mean by this word?

You: *"Salvation means rescue or deliverance. I'm sure you people here know what those words mean. We are enslaved by sin, which is a controlling nature that compels us to do evil, to ignore God and His will, and it causes a holy God to condemn us. We all must die because of sin. We also are controlled by a wicked, supernatural, invisible being called Satan. In mercy, God has made salvation available. Salvation means He rescues us from all these, from the power of sin, from death, from the just condemnation of sin, and from the control of Satan."*

Then, recalling Luke 19:9, where Jesus used the word in response to Zacchaeus' repentance, you add, *"It necessarily involves a change of life as a result of encountering Jesus."* Salvation creates responsibilities, and God has revealed what they are in His sacred writings.

They: *"How and why? How do we get this salvation? And why? What's the purpose of it?"*

Almost all preaching in evangelical churches deals with the 'How' question. We have to reflect deeply on all Scripture to adduce the 'Why.' You answer their 'how' question by referring to the infinite Son of God coming to earth in human form, named Jesus, living the right and good life that God desires of us but none of us are able to do, then sacrificially dying the death for sin that we deserve, and then rising from the dead. And our need to believe in Him and His work. The 'why' is more difficult because it requires insight from the Spirit after long meditation on Scripture.

You: *"The reason for salvation is . . . "*

They: *"We need to interrupt. Again you use the word 'believe.' What's that? To us, 'believe' means to think something is true, but it may not be, as in, 'I believe that boy there is my nephew.' Or as in, 'I believe it will rain soon.' What does 'believe' mean in this context of salvation?"*

You: *"The word 'believe' is shorthand for trust, commit, love, obey, fear, and serve, all of these. And more, it includes our turning from sin to live a life that pleases God, as He has revealed we're to live it. After we understand who Jesus is and all He's done, believing is our response that makes salvation effective for us."*

They: *"OK. Now please continue."*

You: *"God is infinitely glorious. His glory is immense, beyond anything we can imagine. And His glory is His transcendent goodness. He glorifies Himself by expressing His goodness. And He expresses that by disposing of all evil and by selflessly, sacrificially loving those who don't deserve goodness. So God makes salvation available and, to those who desire it, who desire Him, who take the side of goodness, He blesses them with a new kind of existence in His glorious presence. The purpose of salvation is God's own glory."*

They: *"You are overwhelming us. This is enough for now. We'll hear more from you another day."*

When that other day arrives, you continue explaining these essential truths. But first they have questions . . .

They: *"We still don't understand what sin is. Where did it come from, what does it look like, and what's wrong with it?"*

You: *"Yes, we do need to discuss that further. At the beginning of this world, the first man purposely disobeyed God. It was an act of rebellion, of wanting to be independent of His Creator. So God declared that all mankind would be under the control of sin from then on. Man was created to mirror God's goodness on earth, and thus to glorify God. Sin, however, is contrary to God's goodness. The one who sins not only fails to glorify God, because of sin, he offends God, he offends His Person, His character. Expressing sin is the pursuit of evil instead of good. So all who sin are condemned by God. Justice demands that. What does sin look like? A few examples include violence, hatred, selfishness, vindictiveness, telling lies, being proud, being indifferent to God and His will, worshipping other gods, and all kinds of sex other than within marriage. Stealing what belongs to another person is sin, and even coveting what belongs to another is sin. Sin is so pervasive that almost everything we think and say and do is sin."*

They: *"Got it!. Go on now with what you were going to say."*

You: *"You should understand the word, 'Christ.' A long time ago, the Creator God took a certain people as His own, revealed Himself to them, and commissioned them to serve Him by obeying His laws and by taking that revelation to other peoples. They failed. Repeatedly they failed to be and do what God had ordained. So in those sacred writings, that revelation from God, someone to come was promised, a unique person who would be what that nation failed to be and do. He would atone for the failures and sins of that nation, and He would lead them as their Ruler into a new life over a recreated world. He would not fail because that person would be uniquely enabled by God Himself."*

"In time, that promised Person came. He was God Himself, but He was born miraculously as a human. He worked great miracles, He revealed the beauty and goodness of God, fulfilling the promised work. He was put to death as a sacrifice for sin, rose from the dead because he was God and had eternal life, and He ascended back to heaven where He waits to return to earth some day to complete His promised work. His name is Jesus. It is He who "saves" us—thus the word salvation, which I've already explained to you."

They: *"Let's go back to 'believing.' What if we do believe, and what if we don't?"*

You: *“Good question! Let’s think first about ‘if we don’t’. We need to understand that God has done the most wonderful thing for us, making available the forgiveness of all sin for everybody, at the cost of a humiliating and agonizing death. God Himself paid the just penalty our sins deserve. If we ignore what God has done, then we offend God even worse than our sins do. So His condemnation remains on us, which means we’re forever apart from God and blessing, forever in a place of permanent suffering. Salvation is—and must be—effective only for those who believe in Jesus, who take the side of good, who desire to be with and know our Creator. Now, if we do believe, God Himself comes into our lives to enable us to live in a way that pleases God, in a way that glorifies Him. We’ll need to know exactly how we’re to live, and God has already revealed that in his sacred writings.*

“All people will be raised from death to a new existence. If we believe in Jesus, we live that new existence with Jesus, with God, experiencing peace and joy forever. If not, however, if we reject what Jesus has so graciously done for us, we live that new existence in a special place God has prepared for all wicked beings, a place of horrible suffering.

“But I must warn you. I’m here to extend to you God’s offer of eternal life. We don’t make a decision based on a balancing of risks and benefits; believing or not believing is not based on calculation of what’s best for you. And this offer isn’t an intellectual exercise, something to think about or debate from time to time. It’s an invitation to be with your transcendent Creator God, the One who gives you life and provides for you, the One who is good and who loves you. You should rejoice at receiving this invitation and seize upon it.

They: *We think we’re good people. We’re not violent. We don’t hate. We take care of our own. Maybe we don’t need to have forgiveness of sins if we don’t sin. If God really knows us, He should love us and want us with Him because of what kind of people we are.*

You: *Let’s be very careful here, because this is a key issue. Self righteousness is deadly. Righteousness is living a life of love toward others. That means God’s kind of transcendent, selfless love, a self-sacrificing love. We must be as righteous as God is to be in God’s presence, and none of us are. God has already declared in His sacred writings that we all, that is, all people on earth since time began, are controlled by sin and therefore are under condemnation. Yes, you may indeed be good people as other people evaluate morality, but that’s irrelevant. We all must trust in Jesus for salvation. He alone lived that kind of righteousness that God demands. And by grace, God imputes Jesus’ righteousness to us if we believe in Him. The alternative—and the only alternative—is death.*

They: *“How do we know if what you’re telling us is true?”*

You: *“Everything I have told you comes from the sacred writings that came from God Himself. And, as God is holy, He is unable to tell a lie or deceive us. God has revealed all this because He is good. He loves us—all of us, including you people—and He wants us all to know Him and be blessed by enjoying Him. And one more reason: Jesus really did rise from the dead and lives today. That absolutely proves the truth of everything—everything!—that are in those writings, which I’ve been telling you.*

Let’s stop here. Dear Reader, in Acts 16:31, Paul and Silas tell a certain frightened jailer, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.” That verse is not, I repeat, *not* all that anyone needs to know to be saved. The next verse says, “They spoke the word of the Lord to them,” which means Paul unpacked all that verse 31 so tersely says, explaining what ‘believe’ means, what ‘Lord’ means, who Jesus is, and what ‘saved’ means. Without understanding those words, verse 31 is meaningless.

The Gospel is Jesus, *everything* Jesus. So we need to know the meaning of all the words that Scripture uses in the Gospel. Why? So that we really understand all that the Gospel means. I’m convinced that millions of church-goers right here, in today’s America, are scarcely more aware of the words used in the Gospel than the “natives” on that imaginary isolated island. May this lesson help us to be gripped by all that God has done for us, and so be changed into all that God lovingly intends.