

Thinking Clearly About Salvation

"I will rejoice in thy salvation" (Psalm 9:14).

Salvation is the most frequently preached and taught subject in evangelical churches. Nevertheless, I suspect that we don't really understand it. So at the risk of boring my readers with yet another discussion of it, I sense the need to bring it up here. Following are certain aspects of salvation that require some discussion. (In the Hebrew Scriptures, salvation can refer to some necessary rescue or deliverance, such as the Israelites from Egypt; but for this lesson, salvation is the spiritual blessing that's the main subject of the New Testament.)

(1) Salvation is purposeful. God has a reason for offering it, but we need to infer what that is from many disparate texts. His primary reason will be to glorify Himself. It is not, as we selfish creatures would assume, solely to benefit us. One possible reason for salvation is, the Father desires to exalt the Son, whom He loves. All salvation is focused mainly on the Person and work of the Son. Thus our faith in the Son, a faith that involves repentance, obedience, sanctification, sacrifice and suffering, accomplishes that great objective. If this is the reason, it heightens the need for our response to the Gospel to be biblical regardless the consequences. But perhaps there's something else.

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 do not 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. We thus can say that the purpose of salvation is God's own glory. This reason also compellingly means we're constrained to live according to God's standard of goodness revealed in Scripture and not however we please.

A purposeful salvation *necessarily* means that we have responsibilities to fulfill. Salvation brings obligations. We hold today the erroneous view that salvation is a free gift. In the era when Scripture was being written, a gift created obligations. No gift was "free." A recipient was expected to respond in some mutually understood way. Grace occurs within a relationship, and all relationships—if genuine—involve responsibilities.

(2) Salvation is an already/not yet blessing, to be fulfilled by being with God. The Gospel is Jesus. When He said, "I am the [true and living] way, no one comes to the Father except by Me," that means He, Jesus, is the invitation. We're still here in this life after believing in Jesus to "work out" our salvation, with "fear and trembling," because salvation is a process that includes our sanctification, lots and lots of repentance, transforming into Jesus' character, and doing good works, i.e., "bearing fruit." And God cares deeply about how we "work out" our salvation. Resurrection and glorification will complete our salvation. Although the indwelling Spirit guides and enables us, we personally bear the responsibility to be willing and actually do the "working out" of our salvation. If there's no fruit, there may not be salvation; God will judge. The Word in us is the Spirit (John 6:63), so we are like Jesus, the Living Word, if we're following Him. (To "follow" Him means to imitate Him, be Christ-like.) We're miniature Jesus's.

Unlike salvation, justification is a one-time declaration at the moment of believing. It's what makes it possible for the Spirit to indwell and for us to bear fruit. We mustn't conflate salvation with justification (although almost everyone does). Abraham first was declared righteous in Genesis 15, by believing God's promises re the future, and then he had to act on that by obeying God (Genesis 22), which was a testing of his faith in those promises. The "test" was proving the genuine-ness of his faith. Same for us.

(3) We're to live this present life as if we're already in the future. The positional truths of Scripture (crucified with Christ, raised with Christ, seated in the heavenlies, dead to sin, sanctified, all believers one body, etc) are to be lived out in the here and now, in this life. Every saint in the Bible lives as if in the future; we make God's promises about the future a present reality. His promises are true, so they are eternal, valid and operative in the present, although to be fulfilled in the proper future time. Thus Hebrews 11:1 says (paraphrased), by faith we are convinced of and committed to God's promises/truths about the future, and we live them out as a reality in our present lives. And it's why Paul says in Philippians 3, "Live out what you have already attained."

(4) Charismatics and other equally thoughtless Christians have done much mischief in the church, viz, deception and confusion. God identifies with His Word! That means we encounter God in the Scriptures. Period. He is silent only inasmuch as we ignore His Word. Yes, the Spirit is given to us, but the Spirit, the source of the Word, uses the Word, exclusively. To be indifferent to the Word—or to misuse the Word—leaves us not only in the dark re God's will but it offends God because we're ignoring *Him*, and that dishonors Him. Salvation in this era is a relationship with the living Christ by His Spirit thru the Word. Until our glorification, the Christian life is incorporating and then living out the Word of God; that's sanctification and maturing or growing. If something isn't in the Word, it's not for us (politics, for example, other entertainment, etc).

(5) Salvation requires three steps: (a) Knowing the basic facts that constitute the Gospel. These are truths in propositional form. We don't just believe in anything, but in biblical truths. But knowing these isn't saving faith. (b) Then we need to agree with those facts. We assent to their truthfulness. But even this isn't saving faith, although tragically millions of people stop here and suppose that because they know certain facts, they're saved; they're not. (c) Then we need a work of the Holy Spirit to change our minds and hearts so that we love Jesus, commit to Him, obey Him, and trust Him. *This* is saving faith. This is what the demons won't do—altho' they all certainly know the facts of the Gospel as true truths. Many people today suppose that they're in a "relationship" with Jesus and don't need to know any doctrinal truths. That's nonsense. We must know and be gripped by the truths of Scripture and how the Son fulfilled them.

(6) Missing from today's evangelical understanding of salvation is commitment. One careful expositor claims that the word used in Scripture that is universally translated as "holy" really means or implies commitment. Thus, the "Holy One of Israel" means God "committed" Himself eternally to Israel. Our "sanctification," or our growth in maturity in salvation, depends on a willful, ever-deepening commitment to Jesus, to God's will. We commit ourselves, our time energies and resources, our skills, our very lives even, to living as the Word of God prescribes. We're not free to live as we please. Forgiveness of sins and assurance of eternal life based on belief in Jesus does not free us from a commitment to Jesus. On the contrary, belief in Jesus, if it's biblical belief, includes committing oneself to Him and the sacrifices such a commitment involves. Commitment is not merely a frame of mind; it's not something that two hours on Sunday morning can satisfy. Rather, it's the desire and will to actually be and do all that Jesus expects, in real life. If commitment is absent, and the obedience and servanthood that flows from commitment, so perhaps is salvation itself.

(7) Now, let's think carefully. If we treasure our salvation, what exactly does it *mean*? It means that God is really, *really* serious about condemnation because of sin and the judgment that His justice demands. So serious that the Son had to suffer humiliation and the agonies of torture and death to deliver us from the wrath that really is coming. So hell is real; it's a place of ghastly horrible never-ending punishment for those who, for whatever reason, don't have salvation. Do we not care? Doesn't our salvation demand that we expend our lives doing all we can to extend the offer of salvation to others?

If people are hungry due to famine, and one of them finds food, does he stuff himself and hide the rest of what he found for himself, indifferent to the gnawing hunger of the others? If he's so selfish, was it just that he, now a monster of a person, should eat and live while all the others die a terrible death? Salvation imposes on us who experience it an ineluctable, compelling moral obligation to share it with others everywhere. As surely as God exists, so must hell exist. Let's therefore express God's salvific love by joining Him in His great outreach to humans everywhere to be with Him instead of spending eternity alienated in a hideous, dreadful place. Let's not be superficial or careless about our salvation.

(8) Not only is sanctification an essential component of salvation, so is mortification. The two go together. We're to put to death our sin nature at the same time that we're pursuing righteousness or godliness. We must know what sin is, in all its ugly manifestations, and consciously, willfully, forsake it. The world is anathema to God, so we must recognize what worldliness is and forsake it. We must discern the wicked strategies of the Serpent and, not only eschew them but, refuse to participate in them. Salvation is not merely basking in the forgiveness of sin available by the atoning work of Christ, it necessarily includes our zealous pursuit of holiness. Why? To be like Christ. "Without holiness, no one will see the Lord." (To be clear, lest anyone suppose I'm teaching error here: Repentance from sin, along with good works, is not a condition for salvation, but a consequence of it.)

(9) Salvation is being a Kingdom citizen. Jesus came preaching, "Repent, for the Kingdom is imminent." He is the Messiah/King, and the promised Messianic Kingdom was on offer. It still is! We're here to continue Jesus' ministry of calling and constituting people for the Kingdom. The Kingdom is here now proleptically; it will be here in reality, in its fullness, when Jesus returns. Unlike any human kingdom, the Messianic Kingdom comes to earth from heaven, which is why all Kingdom citizens on earth are raptured at the end of this age, so we can return with Christ the King. So all Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom that fill the synoptic Gospels apply to us today. We dare not ignore them supposing they aren't relevant to us in the Church. Amillennials and today's resurgent postmillennials have unfortunately nullified Scripture's promise of a Kingdom by spiritualizing it. So we obsess over "Church" and ignore that salvation is deliverance *from* Satan's kingdom *to* the Messianic Kingdom. Of course, Paul doesn't use the word "kingdom" for that would arouse the jealous wrath of Rome; Paul uses instead the term "church." Yet Paul clearly teaches that the goal is a new creation, a radically new existence. I repeat: Salvation doesn't merely restore the old (which is what is assumed if salvation is only having sins forgiven), it is entry into a radically new existence. We're to live in that new, now.

Dear Reader: Christianity isn't a veneer of piety and religious talk. We desperately want it to be that because . . . well, because we still have in us that wicked sin nature. But the Son of God has made strong demands on us, righteous demands, and He will enable us to meet them if in love we make the effort. This isn't legalism or "works" salvation. It's Scripture.

In James Chapter 2, we read about Abraham and Rahab. Both had to express in real life their belief in God when tested. Abraham might have lost his only son, the one for whom he'd waited a life-time and for whom God had made many great promises; he had to trust that God would somehow restore him to life. Rahab might have lost her life as a traitor to her people. Imagine, if you can, what kind of faith they had! We're being tested too, all thru life. God wants to see that our faith is genuine. So, is it?

We dare not be indifferent to all that salvation means, as if it were just an abstract concept that bestows on us impunity. That would be presuming upon God, something no sentient being should ever do. We need to be as sincere and faithful, regardless the consequences, as the Son was in coming to save us.