

“Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord”

Essay 1 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

With this new year we begin a new series of essays. It’s all about salvation. It asks what it is to be “a people saved by the Lord,” a phrase drawn from Deuteronomy 33:26-29. Now salvation may be the topic most talked about in Christian churches that is least understood. Admittedly that would be a tough call. There are a lot of other topics talked about in a lot of churches that are at best only partially understood; some are downright misunderstood. But perhaps none are more important or at least more compelling than salvation. We want salvation. We look forward to salvation. But what is it?

How, for instance, did believers at first – back at the beginning in the days of Jesus and Peter and Paul and John – understand salvation? And it is here that we will begin, though this means we will first be looking at certain texts in Hebrew Scripture. This – what we call the Old Testament – was the scripture for Christians at first. So in our quest to understand salvation, we have to start with what salvation meant in the scriptures first used by the church.

Here are some of the early questions we’ll face: Saved from what? Saved for what? Two questions. Saved from what? Saved for what? First, we are saved from what? Here Christians have historically had an answer. We’re saved from hell. The great Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards stated it most memorably in his famous sermon of 1741 in Enfield, Connecticut, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” from which we take this excerpt: “The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment.” And that for many churchgoers across the centuries has been almost their only understanding of salvation. That’s sad. No joy there. Only the notion that for the vast majority of people, the story ends badly in the unquenchable never-ending fires of hell.

So what is salvation? What does it mean to be “a people saved by the Lord”? We begin our series with Deuteronomy 33 which depicts Moses just before he died saluting the people of Israel encamped on the plains of Moab ready to enter their Promised Land, with these words (Deuteronomy 33:29), “Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord?” He has just blessed the twelve tribes. May they live and not die. May their people be many. May the Lord defend their cause. May the Lord be their help against their foes. May their skills be blessed. May they rest secure in the Lord. May they feast on the abundance of the sea. May they live in safety in a land of grain and new wine, where the heavens drop dew. And all this leads to, “Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord?”

We are reminded then that before anything, salvation in scripture – σώζω (sozo) as verb, σωτηρία (soteria) as noun – means: preservation, being kept safe, rescue from danger, healing and well-being, and deliverance. It all comes from the Hebrew יָשׁוּ (yesu a) which originally meant “a moving out into the open,” “to be roomy or broad.” Only later, much, much later, as in the mystery religions, did it come to mean attaining a blissful state after death.

So we go back to our questions: Saved from what? Saved for what? Saved for what purpose? So that we might do what? Who’s saved? When does it happen? How? And could salvation be something much larger, much more comprehensive, than we have ever imagined? Could it involve creation itself? What then are we called to do? Could it be that we are saved not just from Hell or from the wrath of God but also from hopelessness, from the strange haunting sadness that afflicts the human condition, from shame, guilt, regret, fear and anxiety, from all the things that separate us from God, that separate us from the divine flow that is all around us, from all that traps us, all the places we get stuck, from all our bad choices, from all our wasted days, from all our wasted years? Even more importantly could it be that we are saved not just for resurrection and Heaven but also so that we might now experience the God in whom we live and move and have our being? So that we might now find comfort in our oneness with God? So that we might now learn to live in love and joy and peace? So that we might now be healed in all our broken places? So that we might now have life and have it to the full? So that streams of living water might now flow from within us? So that we might now be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God?

Let’s take just a moment to move way ahead to Romans 5 – 8, to excerpts from what Paul wrote there about salvation. Paul is so excited! This is really exciting stuff! “Christ died for us!” (5:8). “How much more shall we be saved through his life!” (5:10). “Grace reigns” (5:21). “Our old self was crucified” (6:6). “So [now] we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code” (7:6). “Therefore there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1). “The mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace” (8:6). “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship” (8:15). “[Indeed] the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay.” (8:21)

To Paul this is all spine-tingling insight! But for us ... Well, what about us? We read these texts or hear them read, and how do we respond? Maybe our eyes glaze over? Why? Well, for one thing, we’re pretty secularized. What excites Paul we no longer give much thought to at all. With enormous consequences. We are back to that strange, haunting sadness that now afflicts even the most affluent people the world has ever seen.

So one reason we don’t get what Paul got is we’re secularized. We have been substantially robbed of faith when we were not looking. But also time passed and the church soon after Jesus and Paul began to make mistakes. Large mistakes. And one of the largest was the decision of the historic church to define salvation primarily in other-worldly terms. Salvation, they decided, is what happens after we die. How did this ever happen? What went wrong?

Maybe it was that the church turned Greek or Platonic in its thinking. In the second through the fifth centuries it turned more to the thinking of Plato than the thinking of Jesus and decided that what really matters is the immaterial, the nonphysical, the Soul, not the body, not the here-and-now. Maybe it was that the church then took the world-changing notion of salvation and twisted it through the dark thoughts of Augustine in the fifth century around this little knot called original sin. And out of this came horrifying notions of predestination, of God damning vast numbers to hell, of God as a capricious tyrant. And even those of us who got past all this were still left focused on just our own personal salvation. Maybe it was that there then followed long, dark centuries when life was short, nasty and brutish, and all most people could hope for was something better when they died, and the church did nothing to dissuade them of this. It absolved the church of any need to contest violence and injustice here and now.

But everywhere in this story, in this false story, in this story in which people lose themselves, we catch a whiff of something Satanic, convincing us that salvation is for another world. It's for after we die. Not now. After we die. It's about our souls whatever they may be. Not our bodies. Just our souls. And it's only for a few. For the rest the story ends very badly. As dark as any story you have ever heard. All this bad news in church! All this bad news in the church Jesus intended to save, free and transform the world.

But what if salvation is not what we've often been told it is? What if it's bigger? What if it's better? What if it's now?

– Dale Pauls