

## **“Because he will save his people from their sins” (Part One)**

### **Reflection 9 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”**

Now in our series on “Salvation: The Quest” we transition to discussing sin. To this point, we have focused on salvation as rescue. We have focused on salvation as deliverance, as being saved from danger, from harm, from destruction, from tragedy, so that through the Exodus, the narrow escape of the Israelites from the armies of Pharaoh, “the Lord saved Israel” (Exodus 14:30). Now that does become and remains the archetypal meaning of salvation – that God rescues us, that God sees us safely through the challenges of our lives, that God leads us through our darkest days, when need be, through the valley of the shadow of death. But then attached to the birth of Jesus we read that Jesus “will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

Sin we do not want to talk about. There are reasons why. For much of its history the church obsessed over sin, even exaggerated sin, certainly misdefined it as man-made lists created over the centuries by churches in the interest of churches. And it was all reinforced by hell-fire-and-brimstone preaching.

At least partly for this reason, we have quit talking about sin. In church we have quit talking about sin. And in our private lives we have quit thinking about sin. And that’s been fun. Sort of. Or it would be fun except for the fact that not talking about sin doesn’t make sin go away. It still happens. With consequence.

So we’re like that warren of rabbits in Richard Adams’ classic tale *Watership Down*. They’re secure and well-fed. They know no danger. They feel they have no natural enemies. They aren’t afraid of anything. But something is wrong. Rabbits disappear, just one or two at a time. And no one talks about it. But here’s the truth. Here’s what’s happening. A farmer has discovered that he doesn’t have to keep rabbits caged up if he just feeds them enough, if he can just keep their lives comfortable, convenient and pain-free. Then he can snare a few from time to time, but not enough to frighten them away. So the rabbits grow big and forget their survival instincts. The snares are all around them, but no one talks about them. And one by one they are taken.

Now, doesn’t that sound a bit familiar? There are snares all around us. But we don’t talk about them. And so we forget our survival instincts. And one by one we disappear. Something comes into our life, maybe even someone, and becomes for us a craving. We become increasingly preoccupied with it, and we take greater and great risks to get back to it. We find ourselves more and more powerless to say “No” to it. It impairs our thinking processes, and it makes us more and more dysfunctional in all the other areas of our life, more dishonest, more secretive, more fearful, more isolated and cut off from others. We find ourselves further and further away from what is truly loving. We are deep into a downward spiral. And all of this becomes a state of mind, a state of soul, and a state of body, that leaves its dark shadow deep down on cellular level.<sup>1</sup> Over time, it

changes us down on the level of our cells. Over time, it rewires our neurological networks to support, sustain and protect sin. And all of this true.

For long stretches at a time we can ignore all this, but usually at the price of our God-given joy, usually at the price of the state called beatitude. And there comes into our lives a strange, haunting sadness. But we are so used to it, we confuse it for life itself.

Then one day the realization breaks through that we have done wrong, and we have done it over and over, and now we feel humiliated, embarrassed and ashamed. We can mask these feelings, often through addictions. We drink too much. We do something. We waste our lives in riotous living. Or conversely we run and run and run. And so we distract ourselves for a time. But sooner or later these feelings re-surface, stronger than ever, but now with consequences we never anticipated.

From the words of Paul in Romans 3:23, we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. There are things we should not have done that we have done. We have broken our word, betrayed, discouraged and demoralized the best people in our lives, taken what it was not ours to have, lusted for what it was not ours to have, found ourselves stuck in self-destructive habits, given our life force to things that are not worthy of ourselves or of God.

And there are things we should have done that we have not done. We have passed the needy by in pursuit of our own interests, taken important people in our life for granted, taken faith and church and the things of the Spirit for granted, and wasted much of our time in soulless consumption and self-indulgence. We have given first little thought, and then no thought, to the salvation of the world, and so we have lost our own souls. One way or another, to one degree or another, we have all done these things. And so we find in ourselves darkly unworthy thoughts, stunningly mean-spirited criticism, a forced jauntiness when we are bent on doing what is wrong, sometimes sudden inexplicable rage. Over and over we get sidetracked from our best intentions. And over and over our deep neediness leads us to do what we know is ridiculous and irresponsible. And still all of this seems like life. It's not. It just seems that way.

Behind it all is always this dark power we eventually feel helpless to overcome – Satan Scripture names it – seducing, confusing and distracting us, and then leaving us with our souls torn in tatters. Maybe Satan perhaps means a little bit more than we have supposed. Stephen King at least gets it. In his TV mini-series *The Storm of the Century* he gives one of the most convincing portraits of personalized evil ever crafted. A stranger, André Linoge visits an island community off the coast of Maine as a winter blizzard bears down on the island. Linoge is strong, reasonable and convincing, menacing, yes, but also logical and charismatic. He is utterly persuasive. And what he says over and over again to the increasingly terrified residents of the village is, “If you give me what I want, I’ll go away.” And that’s it, and he means it, “If you give me what I want, I’ll go away.” Often when we have no sense of Satan, could it be that he’s already gotten all he wants?

And life continues to spiral downwards. We then need something, we need someone, to save, rescue and deliver us from our sins.

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<sup>i</sup> Indebted to Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace*, 64-90.

– Dale Pauls

***Part Two (of two) next week.***