

“Today salvation has come to this house” (Part One)

Reflection 13 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

One of the great salvation texts in all of Scripture is the well-known story of Zacchaeus the Tax Collector found in Luke 19:1-10. This story and what Jesus says on this occasion plants us securely back in the what of salvation. What is salvation? Not just what are we saved from – hell-fire, for instance – but what are we saved for? What is it to be saved? What is the experience of salvation? What does it feel like to be saved? What difference does it make? And when? When does it make that difference?

My views on these things have changed a lot over the years. I’ve come to see it as far less escaping from the wrath of God and from hell-fire. I will repeat that I believe in Hell, that justice in fact presupposes Hell in some form, that there are monstrous crimes, or more to the point monstrous wrongs, not criminal, not illegal but monstrously wrong, that nothing we can possibly do in the here-and-now can make right. The wrongs are too enormous. But now for me all that pales in the light of what God plans for people, what he wants for people, what he wants for all people.

I have, for instance, come to a far richer appreciation of life after death. I see it now, on the basis of Bible study, as a glorious life of high adventure in a restored Eden and a new Jerusalem, surrounded by the best of companions, surrounded by the presence of God, when all our deepest desires will be satisfied, when we will have spiritual bodies healed of the effects of aging and disease and sin, when we will finally get to do what here in this life we have only been preparing for. And it’s a glorious vision.

But there is something else about salvation that we must understand. And the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10 shines light on it. It tells of Jesus one day passing through the city of Jericho and encountering a wealthy man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector. Now Zacchaeus, make no mistake about it, is a moral mess. He’s a chief tax collector, and therefore he is fully implicated in the corrupt system of Roman tax farming. As always, the higher in rank you are the more responsible you are for the morality or immorality around you.

But this man wanted to see Jesus enough to risk ridicule and embarrassment. He was short and could not see Jesus because of the crowd, so he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him. Now there’s nothing dignified about a man of a certain age climbing a tree. But Zacchaeus is hungry for something more. He’s got money, but he’s still hungry, perhaps more hungry for knowing now that money doesn’t satisfy the hunger. So now he wants to see Jesus. Perhaps he’s heard of Jesus’ reputation as a friend of tax collectors and “sinners.” Here is a man, Zacchaeus thinks, who treats us with respect, fraternizes with us, enjoys us, and cares about us.

Jesus does not disappoint him. Looking up into the tree, he says to Zacchaeus, “Zacchaeus, come down. I must stay at your house today.” So Zacchaeus comes down and welcomes him gladly. But of course the people mutter. They’re bothered by Jesus dining with this tax collector,

because once again what Jesus is doing isn't tidy. It doesn't fit their notion of the way things ought to be. And so the people do what they do best; they start to mutter.

But meanwhile back at Zacchaeus's house, Zacchaeus is standing up and saying to Jesus, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." And based on Zacchaeus saying this, Jesus says the most remarkable thing, "Today salvation has come to this house." And it's that response by Jesus that I want us to notice. How, I wonder, would Zacchaeus have understood this? How would others listening in have understood it? How would Luke's first reading audience have understood it? And how would you go about figuring this out?

Well, I think we'd do well to start by remembering what "saved" usually meant in Jesus' day, and that means looking at what "salvation" means in the Hebrew scriptures. In Hebrew scripture it's the word עָשָׂה ("yeshu'a, from which comes the name Jesus), and it had an original meaning of "to be roomy or broad" as opposed to hemmed in, imprisoned or restricted. And it came to mean "to free, come to the help of, give aid to, deliver or rescue." As we have seen in this series, the prototypical salvation event in the Hebrew scriptures is the Exodus when God saved Israel from Egypt. So it's to be saved from danger, from harm, from disease, from evil intent or violence, and it's very much a hands-on, this-world, here-and-now, real-life understanding of salvation.

That's why in the Gospels "saved" and "healed" are used interchangeably. The Greek word σώζω means either to save or to heal. And in the miracle accounts, Jesus will say "You're faith has saved you" or "Your faith has healed you," and it's exactly the same thing. In fact, just before the story of Zacchaeus, Jesus has said this to a blind man in Luke 18:42. And in Acts 4:8-12 Peter will say of the crippled beggar healed in that story, "If we are being asked how he was saved (or healed!)", then know this, "Salvation is found in no one else [except Jesus] for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." So even that great classic proof-text, so often used in sectarian, excluding ways, is in a context of physical healing. To be saved is to be healed or made well or made whole.

All this is very "on earth as it is in heaven" salvation! Remember the Lord's Prayer! "Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). There is salvation on earth as it is in heaven. And the difference is to be on earth as it is in heaven. Now the story of Zacchaeus makes exactly this point.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week.