

“What must I do to be saved?”

(Part One)

Reflection 17 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

The question we now consider in this series is a big one: What must I do to be saved? Perhaps of all the questions that might be raised about salvation, this is the one most urgent, certainly the one that feels most urgent. The question comes from the Philippian jailer’s cry of the heart in Acts 16, but sooner or later this question arises for each one of us. We are faced with the fact that we have sinned, that we have done wrong, and that maybe there is nothing we can now do to make it right. And we cry out, “What must I do to be saved?” Or we realize that something wrong has come into our life that we now find ourselves increasingly unable to say ‘No’ to. We become more and more dysfunctional in all the other areas of our life. And we cry out, “What must I do to be saved?” Or we find our lives falling apart, our families falling apart, our friendships falling apart, our dreams falling apart, and we know that we are lost, existentially lost. And we cry out, “What must I do to be saved?”

Maybe we have no idea what salvation even means, no more idea than the jailer that midnight could have had. We only know that something’s broken and we have no idea how to fix it. And it’s then that the value of Acts 2 comes in – offering us perhaps the clearest answer we have in Scripture. It’s a text that tells of that extraordinary Day of Pentecost seven weeks after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus in the city of Jerusalem. You may recall how early that morning there had been an eruption of sounds from heaven and of wind. The wind that blew at creation (in Genesis 1) is blowing again, once again bringing something new to life. Always that wind. That Spirit. That breath of God. And there were tongues of fire and then tongues of speech. As the text goes on, Peter tells this early-morning crowd that this Jesus of Nazareth whom they crucified has been resurrected and that has changed everything, “Let all Israel be assured of this (know this for certain): God had made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Messiah.”

The Jerusalem crowd is stunned. When this awful truth sunk in, when the people heard this, their hands still wet with the blood of their own Messiah, they were cut to the heart, completely overwhelmed. The blackness of crucifixion Friday seeped into their souls again and they asked Peter and the others, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Now they are responding to a very specific dread, and it’s not “I had dirty thoughts last week,” or “I snuck off to a movie when my parents weren’t home.” And they are asking a very specific question, “How do we get the blood off our hands?” We waited for him for hundreds of years; and then when he came, we killed him! How can we ever make it up? Make it better?

They have come to that awful moment when they realize that what they have done is inexcusably wrong and it has done enormous damage and there is no real way to take it back. This can’t be undone. And Peter’s answer is what? Repent! Start over. And be baptized! And you can be

forgiven! Even of this, Peter says, this most monstrous crime against God. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. God will pour out his Spirit on you.

It was an astonishing day. An astonishing crime. And astonishing forgiveness. You can be forgiven. You can start over, clean again. There is nothing you have ever done that cannot be forgiven. And you, you who stood at the cross and hurled insults at Jesus, you who cried out for his crucifixion, you who sat home that Friday content and comfortable just letting it all happen, you can receive the Spirit of God. It's a gift. So to everyone God comes promising salvation.

You can start over. Repent and be immersed, and know my forgiveness. Feel it deep in your soul. No, feel it down inside your body, down on cellular level, from the top of your head to the tips of your toes. Feel the forgiveness. Feel the divine flow. Feel waves of the loving presence of God washing over you. Sense again the Spirit of the living God in whom you live and move and have your being, as close now as the air you breathe, no, even closer.

Now, notice that this baptism – this quintessential rite of passage – is not so much a demand as a gift. I grew up understanding baptism as a demand. And teaching it that way. The first disciples saw it more as a gift. They had no problem referring to those as-yet-not-baptized as disciples or brothers. They never really drew the hard-and-fast lines I once drew. In Acts 9:17-18 the “Brother Saul” of verse 17 got up and was (in verse 18) baptized. And many of the finest leaders in our own religious heritage, in the Restoration Movement, have always from the beginning pulled back from drawing hard-and-fast lines on baptism. Wisely.

So it's a great gift from God, this moment when in baptism we invite God to enter us, to come to us from the north and the south and the east and the west and to enter us body and soul, to fill us, to heal us, and to save us. And it's such a great tragedy that in all the debates, the fears, all the angst, all the twisted pain that surrounds sectarian discussions of baptism, the simplicity, the rightness and the beauty of it are lost. In all the heat, the light is gone. Consequently people do not see that baptism is this marvelous gift, offered in freedom and offered not because God needs it (even to save us) but because every human soul needs it.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week