

“The living God, who is the Savior of all” (Part One)

Reflection 30 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

Now in our series on “Salvation: The Quest” we come to a text in 1 Timothy, chapter 4, with particular focus on verses 9-10, which tells of the living God, who is the Savior of all, a passage which struck me with all the force of a thunderbolt when I first noticed it. Raised as I had been by “Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:14), I wasn’t quite prepared for what Paul is saying in 1 Timothy 4:10.

Let’s begin a little work with this text. It’s part of a letter, we believe, that Paul wrote to his younger colleague Timothy late in Paul’s life. Paul’s left Timothy in the great city of Ephesus responsible for the church there. But now in 1 Timothy 4, in the verses leading up to our text, Paul warns Timothy about a way of thinking that doesn’t work, specifically a way of thinking that limits and restricts life. He says (in verse 1) that a time is coming when “some will abandon the faith,” and he’s very disturbed by this. He calls it demonic! He calls those who think this way “hypocritical liars.” They will “forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods which God created to be received with [gratitude].”

Paul is specifically contesting here a deep skepticism about the physical and the natural. And the church was over time plagued by this so that four hundred years later Church Fathers like Jerome and Augustine had settled for a grimly joyless view of the world and foisted this dark vision on their world. In counterpoint, Paul writes in verse 4, “For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with thanksgiving,” that is, with mindful consciousness of the goodness of God. Then in verse 9, he writes in this same spirit of expansiveness, “This [what I am about to write] is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (and for this we labor and strive) that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all [people], and especially of those who believe.”

The living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe. It’s an astonishing statement. And it goes very much against my first understandings of salvation. When I was growing up, I thought that salvation was something that only happened within the walls of the little white church building where my family worshipped. Only we were Christian. And I understood salvation in largely otherworldly terms. It meant essentially that we got to Heaven, when all the rest of the world burned forever and ever in the fires of Hell. My understanding of salvation was primarily that I would escape Hell – by the thinnest of margins perhaps, but I would escape with those few people who thought and acted exactly like me. I came to understand eventually that there were a few more saved people in scattered places like Tennessee and Texas, but there were certainly none in our little town except those who worshipped in our little white church building. But slowly, over years, I came to see that there was something very wrong with this picture: that, in fact, it made us tragic, fearful people always worried about everything; that it reduced the whole earth from the skyscrapers of New York to

the towering Himalayas, with its billions of men, women and children, to an inconsequential backdrop for we few true believers; and that, in fact, it was this very attitude that helped to spread fear and distrust everywhere, that reinforced patterns of prejudice and discrimination, and that thereby increased the risk of violence worldwide.

And so, by the grace of God, my understanding of salvation grew and has continued to grow my entire life. I have learned that it's meant for so many more than just those people within the walls of the little white churches of my childhood. I have learned from Scripture, contrary to that one proof text, Matthew 7:13-14, which was wrenched out of its context in the Sermon on the Mount with no regard for its historical moment, that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him (John 3:17); that Jesus came not to judge the world, but to save it (John 12:47-48); and that the Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). I have learned from Scripture that Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2) and that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). I have learned from Scripture that we are to call no person impure or unclean (Acts 10:28) and that when Jesus is truly lifted up from the earth, he will draw all people to himself (John 12:32). I have learned from Scripture that one day the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9); that one day God intends to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under Christ (Ephesians 1:10); that one day a great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, tribe, people and language will cry out in a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God" (Revelation 7:9-10); and that one day the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into God's New Jerusalem, the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it, and the leaves of the tree of life will bring healing to the nations (Revelation 21-22). And I have learned that the living God is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe.

It's so important to remember over and over again (and this has been a recurring theme in this series on "Salvation: The Quest") that God is larger than we have ever supposed, probably larger than we are even able to suppose, and God's salvation is so much larger than we have ever supposed. Even the word "salvation" is larger than we have supposed. It's first the Hebrew word *yeshu'a*, from which comes the name Jesus, and it has an original meaning of "to be roomy or broad" as opposed to being hemmed in, imprisoned, or restricted. So in Jesus' day it meant "to free, come to the help of, give aid to, deliver or rescue," as in God saving Israel from Egypt. Primarily 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.

For this reason, in the Gospels *saved* and *healed* are used interchangeably. The Greek word σωζω (*sozo*) means either to save or to heal. So in the miracle accounts, Jesus will say "Your faith has saved you" or "Your faith has healed you," and it's exactly the same thing. And this is all very "on earth as it is in heaven" salvation, as the Lord's Prayer suggests in Matthew 6:10: "Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." There is salvation on earth as it is in heaven. And the difference is to be on earth as it is in heaven. It's not just fire insurance, some notion that some small group of people

will somehow escape Hell. So Jesus could say of the tax collector Zacchaeus, “Today salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:10) because the stingiest man in Jericho has just pledged to give half his possessions to the poor and to pay back anyone he has cheated of anything four times the amount, going way beyond even the law’s requirement for restitution (which was 20%). Now salvation had come to his house, to his family and servants, to the poor who became his beneficiaries, to all who may have been defrauded. Salvation, emphatically, is hands-on. It’s here-and-now. It’s holistic. It affects all of life. It changes everything and it changes everyone. It’s God’s vision for a new earth where his will is done just as it is in heaven.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week