

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

Reflection 31 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

Jesus, you see, is about a whole lot more than just saving our souls from Hell. He’s about saving the world, the flow of history, the majesty of creation, the wonder of the universe, the whole thing, the whole process from beginning to end, the unfolding of the story from beginning to end. Yes, he’s about saving souls, O.K., but he’s also about saving this planet and the people on this planet from destruction. He’s about the redemption of the cosmos, the stars in their galaxies, the plants and animals, the rivers and seas, the forests and fields. The coming of Jesus is about cities with rivers of crystal-clear water flowing through them.

So salvation is not just individualistic. It’s not just about me. In the words of the John Greenleaf Whittier poem, “The Meeting,” “He findeth not who seeks his own. The soul is lost that’s saved alone.” Salvation has global implications. It’s about saving the planet from greed, from fear, from lust, from hypocrisy, from leaders lying to their peoples, from prejudice and discrimination, from violence and racism and war. So that even God’s wrath may be, in a very real way, part of his salvation. At first, that seems crazy. But think about it. It’s God’s coming in judgment on greed and lust and arrogance and discrimination and deceit and violence that saves this planet and the people of this planet from greed, lust, arrogance, discrimination, deceit and violence.

Salvation is always so much larger than we suppose. It’s larger than it looks from any one church’s perspective, or from any one nation’s perspective. It’s larger than nineteenth- or twenty-first century thought can grasp. It’s larger than either you or I can grasp.

And here’s how it works. When Paul writes of the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe, he is pointing to a truth known in all times and in all places, that those who empty themselves, who become poor in spirit and pure in heart, that is, intensely focused on God, become in their consciousness one with God. In God they live and move and have their being. They reach out beyond the confines of their own egos, that narrow little construct of “I,” “me,” “my,” and “mine” from which they once tried to operate. They stretch out to others, to their families, into their communities, into God’s creation, reaching out, stretching out, expanding into all that is, and thereby being filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

They encounter over and over again the presence of God in the food they eat, the work they do, the people they meet, the struggles they face, the fun they have. They feel God filling them body and soul, healing them in all their broken places, God’s light shining within them, God’s love pouring into them, joy and vitality pouring out of them, the stress, the fear, the shame, the guilt, all washed away. And now they feel able to do far more than they ever previously imagined. Now they can feed the hungry, give the thirsty a drink, give the homeless a room, give the shivering clothes, visit the sick, and bind up the brokenhearted, because now they are fully open to the divine flow, fully released from the past, released from their dark, little preoccupations with self, made new,

mindfully aware of the Spirit of God within them. As Jesus said, now streams of living water flow from within them. And I love how Paul frames this – “the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe, especially of those who get this! Because for such people, eternal life, forever life, begins now. Salvation begins now.

And now we can work toward: beating swords into plowshares; an earth filled with the knowledge of the Lord; God’s kingdom – his reign of love and peace – filling the earth; a world brought together under Christ where little boys and girls growing up in Tehran grow up trusting little boys and girls growing up in New York City; a world in which no one is judged on the basis of birth; and a time when all men and women everywhere – regardless of who they are or what they have done – will know that they can start over, be reborn, be forgiven, and then discover within themselves the Spirit of God. And it is to this future that this church is committed, yes, a church family, but so much more than that. So much more than that.

Maybe the next time some of you are on a plane flying back into New York late at night you could look out the window down at the lights, and think of the millions of people below, in their houses, in cars on the highways, working late in the office, on commuter trains, eating out in restaurants, taking night classes, going to the theater. See them as God sees them, with love, in all their flawed outrageous humanity, black and white and Asian and Hispanic, liberal and conservative, gay and straight, Christian and Muslim, flawed, frightened and fragile, all desperately needing a world saved from greed, fear, lust, anger and hatred. Maybe instead of trying to persuade them by exclusion, by shutting the kingdom of God in their faces, we would be far more true to the spirit of Jesus by inviting them in by our spirit of inclusion. Maybe we need to be saying to the people God brings into our lives: God loves you. God accepts you. Can you accept that? Can you trust that? Can you let go and trust God and realize that this living God is the Savior, the rescuer, the deliverer, of all people?

“This 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.”

An amazing verse! Are there boundaries around it? Of course, God will not tolerate what is evil and hateful. There is much that is evil and hateful, and God will not tolerate that. And that too is part of salvation, an absolutely necessary part of salvation.

May streams of living water flow from within you. May you find your way from the tiresome preoccupations with the self to entering in to the wide expanse that is the salvation of our God. May you stretch out to others, into our communities, into God’s creation, out into the whole earth, reaching out, stretching out, expanding into all that is, being filled in just this way to the measure of all the fullness of God. May you see that

God is not well-hidden. May you see that the living God is everywhere, and that this God is the Savior of all people and especially of those who believe.

– Dale Pauls