

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Great Salvation: Salvation

An SOS is recognised all over the world as a distress signal. It stands for SAVE OUR SOULS. It is only used when there is the danger of people perishing, for example, when a ship is about to sink. Being saved or salvation is also one of the great themes of the Bible. In the Old Testament God often saved His people from great danger. He saved Joseph from prison. When Joseph, as Pharaoh's prime minister, confronts his brothers who sold him into slavery, he says "God did send me before you to preserve life ... and to save your lives by a great deliverance" (Genesis 45:5 and 7). Later when He called Moses to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt, God said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. And I am come down to deliver them..." (Exodus 3:7-8) So, He saved the children of Israel from the land Egypt.

However, salvation means more than rescuing people from physical dangers. It also includes saving people from spiritual and moral dangers. It is this kind of salvation which the Bible teaches us most about. It is described in Hebrews 2:3 as a "great salvation". It is great for many reasons. Great because of what it cost: God's only Son. Great because of what it reveals: the love and grace of God. Great because of who it reaches: everyone. Great because of what it does: saves, keeps and takes us to heaven. This morning I want look at this salvation in relation to the past, the present and the future. What God has done: What God is doing; and What God is going to do.

WHAT GOD HAS DONE

As well as the recording the events in which God saved His people, the Old Testament also promised a coming Saviour. This Saviour would not just be a great prophet like Moses or a great King like David. This Saviour was the to be the Saviour of the whole of mankind. Passages like Isaiah 53 describe a Saviour who would come to die to deliver people from sin and its consequences.

It is in the New Testament that this Saviour of the world is introduced. He was, of course, the Lord Jesus Christ. In the very first chapter of the New Testament, in the Gospel of Matthew, the name of Jesus is immediately linked with salvation. "Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). In Luke 19:10 the Lord Jesus described Himself as the One who came to seek and to save that which was lost.

We can understand someone being saved from a sinking boat or a fire. But what does the Bible mean by being lost in a spiritual sense? It uses the term to describe our relationship with God. We are separated from Him by disobedience and sin. The story of Adam and Eve, in the book of Genesis, helps us to understand this. After they had disobeyed God, they hid themselves among the trees of the Garden of Eden. Their sin had broken their relationship with God. Effectively they were lost. When this happened God called to Adam, "Where are you?" God wanted to find them.

The New Testament explains this situation more fully. In the early chapters of the book of Romans Paul outlines the history of man's disobedience towards God and his inability to put the relationship right. Man needed a Saviour - someone who would deal with the sin which separates us from God and would also bring us into a new relationship with Him.

Last year I was in Switzerland and our apartment had a wonderful view of the Alps. One evening we saw several red flares fired into the night sky. These were distress signals from some climbers in difficulties on a glacier. Without the intervention of the emergency services, the climbers would have been lost. To save the climbers, the mountain rescue team had to go to where they were at considerable risk to their own lives. They were qualified to do the job and willing to put their lives on the line.

In the same way God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, has come to where we were. He was born as a homeless child at Bethlehem, as an infant He was a refugee and He grew up in all the poverty of Nazareth. During His ministry, He met the needs of thousands of people. He was qualified to save because of who He was. He was God and also He became man. Yet His life in itself could not save us. In order to do that, He had to go to the cross and die for our sins.

Rescue teams sometimes pay the ultimate price. Recently, a helicopter winchman rescued several seamen from a ship breaking up in high seas. In doing so, he lost his own life. The Lord Jesus said in the gospel of John 15:13,

“Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends”. He was willing to take our place in death and pay the penalty for our sins. He died to save us. He died so that we could have a new life.

But, like the climbers in the Alps, we have to recognise our situation if we are to be saved. They could have argued that they were experienced and did not need the help of others. But if they had depended on themselves, they would have died. We have to realise that we cannot save ourselves. We have to accept our sinful condition and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is an act of faith just like firing a flare into the sky. It immediately brings God to the rescue. He says, “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 13:10). In Acts 16, we find the story of the jailer from the city of Philippi. He sent out an SOS when he said to Paul and Silas, “What must I do to be saved?” (verse 30). Paul came to his rescue: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved” (verse 31). When we take this step of faith our sins are forgiven and we have new life. The mountain rescue team had everything that was needed to save the climbers. All the climbers had to do was to let the team know they needed to be rescued. The Lord Jesus Christ has done everything needed for our salvation. He died for the sins of the world and God responded to this sacrifice by raising Him from the dead. He is a living Saviour. And the resurrection of the Lord Jesus is proof of who He is.

God’s salvation is an eternal salvation. In other words; once we are saved we are saved forever. We will never be judged for our sins because Christ was judged in our place. Some Christians doubt that salvation is forever. But the words of the Lord Jesus in John 10:28-29 are so clear. “I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of my hand. My father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand”. It is very important to grasp the Lord’s teaching on this subject. He died to save us and He lives to keep us. Just as we cannot save ourselves neither can we be lost once we are saved. This is guaranteed by the word and power of God the Son and God the Father.

So, God’s work of salvation is complete. To be saved we look back to what Christ has done through His death and resurrection.

WHAT GOD IS DOING

But what about now? You might be thinking, “I’m a Christian. How does God save me now?” Let us go back to the example of the children of Israel. God had saved them from Egypt and they set off on the journey to the Promised Land. There was no doubt they were saved. They had come safely out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. But the journey before them was to be a long and difficult one. They needed God to be with them. So God instructed Moses to build a tent, which was called a tabernacle. It was like a mobile temple. When it was finished, the glory of God filled it. In the tabernacle, God was always present with His people. He also decided when and where they should move and they followed in obedience. In addition, God gave the people a high priest. The first one was Aaron, the brother of Moses. It was Aaron’s job to represent the people in the presence of God. In the book of Hebrews the Lord Jesus is described as our Great High Priest. After His resurrection, He returned to heaven. There He lives for us. And He is able, in the words of Hebrews 7:25, “to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them.” It also explains in 4:15 that Christ sympathises with our weakness because He was “in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin”. The writer goes on in verse 16 to encourage us to “come boldly to the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” So, we are encouraged in times of need confidently to come to God in prayer in the name of the Lord Jesus. And we have the promise that the Lord Jesus, who lives for us, will act on our behalf. How many Christians have learned this down the centuries! At times of crisis and difficulty, what a privilege to come with confidence into the presence of God and experience His saving grace in our circumstances! I knew a Christian friend whose boss did not like him much and thwarted an opportunity he had for promotion by giving an unfair report to another manager. My friend was tempted to make an issue of the matter but read about the Lord Jesus in 1 Peter. It reads in 1 Peter 2:23, “When He suffered, He threatened not; but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously”. He realised that the Lord had been treated so unjustly when He went to the cross. So my friend prayed that he might be able to respond as Jesus did by accepting the circumstances and trusting God to make matters right in His time. Several months later, he was seconded to work for the manager who had received the bad report. Within six months, he had been promoted to a more senior job than the one he had missed out on.

God wants us to experience His salvation day by day. The Lord Jesus lives for us in heaven so that we might do this. He sympathises with us in all the trials of life. We are able to approach God the Father in His all-powerful name. If we fail, we can confess our sins and be restored (1 John 1:9).

In addition, we have the word of God, the Bible. It is described as able to make us “wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15). The next verse tells us that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

The word of God has been given for our guidance and obedience. By putting God's word into practice in our lives through faith and obedience, we can experience God's present salvation. It is our responsibility, in the words of Paul in Philippians 2:12, to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure." As we apply the word by faith to our circumstances, so we prove the will of God and experience His power in our lives.

To help us do this we have the Holy Spirit indwelling us. Just as the Lord Jesus intercedes for us in heaven, so the Holy Spirit intercedes for us on earth. Romans 8:26 says, "Likewise, the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." A teacher I know explained this verse in this way. He told me that sometimes there is a knock at the staff room door at his school. Outside will be two children. One is very distressed and crying. When you ask what is wrong, the child is so upset that he cannot explain his problem properly. So you ask his friend who has come with him. The other child explains the situation perfectly. In the same way, the Spirit's work is also linked with our need. He acts on our behalf when we cannot pray clearly, so that we can experience God's salvation in the many circumstances and trials of faith we face.

WHAT GOD IS GOING TO DO

We know our sins have been forgiven. We can know the power of God's salvation now. But what about the future?

To return to our mountain climbers - they were saved by the mountain rescue team. If you like, that is a picture of the first part of salvation. We are saved. But then they have to get down the mountain - a long and often difficult journey. The secret of a successful journey is to do exactly what the rescuers tell them to do. Provided they trust their rescuers they will be safe. Each part of the journey will be successfully completed and the team will do all they can to help the climbers down. Can you imagine a party of climbers being found by the emergency services and then saying, "Thank you very much. We can find our own way from here". Unfortunately, Christians have a habit of acting like this with God. "You saved me but I think I can get on all right by myself now." If we think like that, we need to think again.

But what about the last part of the journey - getting safely home? The idea of being brought safely home is a very strong one in the Bible. The Lord Jesus spoke about bringing the lost sheep safely home. He told the story of the prodigal son being brought into the Father's house. More directly, He teaches us in John 14 that in the Father's house, which is heaven, there are many mansions and He has prepared a place for us. He also added that one day He would come and receive us to Himself so that we might be where He is. In other words, we might go to be with Him in heaven. If we are Christians, we will go to heaven in one of two ways. First, by death - the Lord told the dying thief that he would be with Him in Paradise (Luke 23:43).

The second way is as living people. This is a more uncommon teaching but nevertheless it is in the Bible. In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul describes this to us. In a coming day those who have died who are the Lord's and those who are alive when Christ returns will be instantly raised, changed and taken into heaven. This has been called the rapture and is sometimes called the salvation of the body! 1 Corinthians 15:50-51 teach us that we shall not all die but we shall all be changed. Paul explains this further in his letter to the Philippians 3:20-21. He writes "For our conversation is in heaven, from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, Who shall change our lowly body that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things to Himself."

The final part of our salvation, then, is when the whole of the people of God will be gathered together, given glorious bodies like the Lord and enter into heaven, the Father's house.

It is the Christian's hope to be with and like the Saviour. The Bible uses the word 'hope' in a different way to the way we use it today. When we use the word 'hope', it is in the sense of wanting something to happen but knowing there is a possibility that it will not. It is uncertain. The Bible uses hope in the sense of a future event which is absolutely certain. In the words of Hebrews 6:19 it is a hope which is "an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast".

So, we can see that God's salvation is comprehensive. It deals with our sin and separation from God and brings us into a new relationship with Him. It is an eternal salvation. Once we are saved, we cannot be lost. In addition, everything we need to experience God's saving power day by day has been provided. We just need to trust and obey. Finally, Christ is certain to return to change us into His likeness and take us home to heaven. That is a "great salvation".

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