

SALVATION: WHAT ON EARTH DO WE MEAN?

By Grace Through Faith

Today we continue our four part series *Salvation: What on Earth do we Mean?* I have borrowed this title from Marcus Borg who writes, “*I am convinced that salvation in the biblical tradition has to do primarily with this {earthly} life.*” For many of us this is a new, even strange and confusing, concept. Why? Because we have either learned or assumed that salvation is primarily focused on the afterlife—on the question “Are you going to heaven when you die?” I agree with Borg that the benefits of and the motivation for salvation are primarily about this earthly life. We will consider the afterlife next week.

The ancient Israelites did not have an understanding of an afterlife; yet, they clearly spoke and wrote about salvation—relationship with God. The importance of this is that their motivation for being in relationship with God was focused on this life. Their Exodus from Egypt was about liberation from slavery in this life; and their return from Babylonian Exile was about reconciliation with God in this life; they understood these events as salvation.

The English word salvation comes from the same root word as salve—a healing ointment. Salvation is about healing the wounds of human existence. Jesus understood this when he identified his role in salvation, in healing the wounds of human existence, when he read publicly in worship from the scroll of Isaiah, “*The spirit of God is upon me...to bring good news to those who are poor...to proclaim release to those who are captive...to bring sight to those who are blind, and to let those who are oppressed go free.*”

Last week we examined five biblical images of salvation.

Enlightenment—moving from spiritual blindness to spiritual sight; seeing God, others, and ourselves differently. **Forgiveness**—we are accepted by God with no ifs attached. **To experience God’s love**—Through the prophet Isaiah, God said to the people, “*You are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you.*” To know that one is not worthless but precious, not loveless but beloved by God, is a true salvation experience in this life.

Resurrection—Jesus resurrected to this life not to another. In this life there is hope for positive healthy change in our lives. We can experience resurrection from our grief and our loss. We can experience resurrection from our bad choices. Our final salvation image from last week is **knowing God**; to be in relationship with God as individuals are in relationship. John

records Jesus praying these words, *“This is eternal life: to know God.”*

So how does this happen? How does salvation, on earth and in the afterlife, come about? How do we participate in salvation? In the letter to the church at Ephesus Paul writes, *“For by **grace** we have been saved through **faith**, and this is not our own doing; it is the **gift** of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”* Salvation is by grace through faith! Salvation is a gift, not a reward!

Grace! Grace means that salvation comes from God—period! Salvation is God’s gift to His human creation. God’s acceptance of us is apart from our own works or effort. Grace is unconditional—there can be no ifs with grace. Salvation comes through God’s divine initiative. God led the Israelites out of Egypt. God empowered the return of the Israelites from Exile. God is the source of all enlightenment. God takes the initiative in forgiveness. God gave Jesus the strength and spirit to die for what he believed in. God is the source of resurrection—new life and hope!

Faith! Faith is the human response to God’s grace. Before we begin explaining what faith is we need to squelch a common misunderstanding about faith. Faith is not what God wants from us in return for salvation. If this were the case then faith becomes a work; something that we do that makes us right with God. But this cannot be, because salvation is a gift and not a reward.

Faith, as the human response to God, in the historical, biblical and Christian traditions has three primary dimensions of meaning. The first is **faith as fidelity**, or faithfulness. To have faith is to be faithful to the relationship with God—not to cheat on God. This is the meaning of the greatest commandment as reinforced by Jesus, *“You shall love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.”* Faith as fidelity is the giving of one’s whole self, at its deepest level, to God.

Often times we understand doubt to be the opposite of faith, but that is not the case when we understand faith as fidelity. The opposite of fidelity is infidelity—cheating, putting someone, or something before God. Infidelity in human relationships is adultery; infidelity towards God is idolatry.

The second dimension of meaning is **faith as trust**. Just as with faith as fidelity, faith as trust can best be understood in terms of human relationships. To have faith in somebody is to trust them; to have faith in God is to trust God. Imagine for a moment what a human relationship would be like without trust. Now consider what a divine-human relationship would be like without trust.

The opposite of faith as trust is anxiety. Jesus linked these two when he

asked, “*Why are you anxious, O people of little faith?*” To the extent that we are anxious, we lack faith in God; growth in faith means becoming more trustful of the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

The third dimension of meaning is **faith as belief**, but only in a general sense—faith as belief in God. Faith as belief does not mean believing a particular set of doctrines or biblical statements to be true—faith means believing enough to respond to God’s grace. Faith as belief is not about passing a test of doctrinal purity. Faith as belief is not about church or even the Bible. Faith as belief is about responding to God’s grace. Here is where doubt, uncertainly, enters the picture. The opposite of faith as belief is doubt.

In regards to salvation; faith is fidelity, trust and belief. But here is the irony—faith is not simply a matter of choice. Consider the times in your life when doubt has caused you great turmoil. Is it always possible to be rid of doubt just by willing yourself to believe? If so, there would be a lot less doubt, and a lot more belief. Further, if we could get rid of our anxiety, like Jesus spoke of, simply by choosing to be trustful, surely we would do so. For who in their right mind would choose anxiety over trust?

Faith, my friends, is not just a matter of will, a matter of choice. We are led into faith. It grows. Faith is a life-long process. Faith is not a requirement that we are to meet but it is a quality that grows as our relationship with, our response to, God deepens. It is God who initiates our relationship. It is God who pursues. Our relationship with God is based on God’s unconditional love. So how is our will, our choice, involved? It is by faith we decide, we choose, to take our first step, to make our first response, towards God; just as the ancient Israelites responded to God’s grace by taking the first step out of Egyptian slavery and into liberation.

Friends, God provides us with the ability to have faith. Just as salvation is a gift from God, so is our faith, our response, a grace gift from God. I agree with Martin Luther, the great church reformer, when he wrote, “*I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to him; but God has called me through the gospel and enlightened me with His gifts.*”

Salvation: What on Earth do We Mean? We mean God healing the wounds of human existence. We mean liberation from sin, shame and guilt. We mean reconciliation with God. We mean enlightenment, forgiveness, experiencing God’s love, resurrection, and knowing God. When? In this earthly life, as well as in an afterlife. How? “*For by **grace** (no ifs) we have been saved through **faith** (fidelity, trust, and belief), and this is not our own doing; it is the gift of God....*”