

# SALVATION: WHAT ON EARTH DO WE MEAN?

## *Introduction and Part 1—Liberation and Reconciliation*

Salvation! This is a word that is readily used in most, if not all, Christian denominations and groups; but what on earth does it mean? For the next four weeks we will be examining this question.

The first listing for salvation in *Webster's Dictionary* is '*the saving of a person from sin or its consequences, especially in the life after death.*' Many, including Webster, associate salvation with the after life. To many, the question 'are you saved' means do you believe you will go to heaven when you die. In fact, salvation as afterlife, is the primary reason that some state that they are a Christian. Some even go so far as to say if there is not an afterlife then why bother being a Christian.

Christians often speak of being saved through God's grace—God's unconditional love. In one moment we credit God with our salvation but then we talk about salvation, and particularly the afterlife, as if we have to earn it, through works or faith. We associate the afterlife, going to heaven, with requirements. This gets confusing does it not? If we are saved by God's unconditional love, by grace, why then do we attach requirements like faith or works to our salvation, to where we will spend eternity? We talk about afterlife as if it is a game, a game where we must gain enough points to win—to go to heaven.

I personally understand salvation as being far more than afterlife. Now certainly in this series on salvation we are going to talk about afterlife—but just briefly, and towards the end, because contrary to popular thought, afterlife is not the main focus of Christian salvation. In fact, I find it rather sad that there are people who get so focused on the after life that they miss what salvation really is. I agree with Marcus Borg when he writes, "*I am convinced that salvation in the biblical tradition has to do primarily with this {earthly} life.*" Hence, we have the title for this series—**Salvation: What on Earth do we Mean?** (Refer congregation to handout.)

Belief in an afterlife came very late in ancient Israel's history. The first explicit unambiguous reference to an afterlife is in the last chapter of the book of Daniel, which was written before the Common Era in 165. However, prior to that time, for 1500 years, salvation was spoken of and written about just not in terms of an afterlife. This is significant because what it tells us is that for most of the biblical period ancient Israel's life with

God was not motivated by hope of an afterlife. Ancient Israelites understood and experienced, in this earthly life, reason for relationship with God. We must reclaim that understanding and that experience.

The English word salvation comes from the same root word as salve—a healing ointment. Salvation has to do with healing—healing the wounds of existence. Friends, the wounds of existence are deep and many. Some of these wounds are inflicted on us, some are the result of our own doing, and some wounds we inflict on others. Salvation has to do with the healing of wounds.

The only way to adequately understand the biblical meaning of salvation is to examine the two pivotal events in the life of ancient Israel—the Exodus and the Exile. These two events are the foundational images of salvation throughout all of scripture—the Old and the New Testaments.

The Exodus story is about bondage and liberation. The Hebrew people were slaves in Egypt—they were in bondage. They were politically and economically oppressed. God chose to use Moses to bring the Hebrews out of slavery, out of bondage, and into liberation, into salvation. The story of the Hebrew peoples Exodus from Egyptian slavery is clear that God is the initiator of their liberation.

Paul, in the Christian era, writes of people being slaves to the ‘law.’ Paul is indicating that some people tend to trust in religious law, in doing and believing the right thing, for their relationship with God, for their salvation; rather than to trust in God’s unconditional love for their salvation. It is Paul who writes, “*For by grace we have been saved through faith, and this is not our own doing: it is the gift of God...*”

People, in any era, are in bondage to many things. Some are in bondage to cultural messages and belief systems. For instance, believing that if you live a particular way that God will bless while if you live another way that God will not bless; yet, the scripture reads that it rains on the just and the unjust. As with the ancient Hebrews, some people are in economic and political bondage. Others experience psychological and spiritual bondage. Some have wounds from their childhood. And some, have addiction wounds. The wounds of existence are deep and many. And salvation, in the Old and New Testaments, has to do with the healing of wounds.

The story of the Exodus, from bondage to liberation, is a story about all of us. Luke records that in the synagogue in Nazareth Jesus read 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.*” This was Jesus mission—to heal wounds, to bring liberation, to bring salvation,

to those who are in bondage in this earthly life.

The Babylonian Exile is the other pivotal salvation image event in the life of ancient Israel. The defeated Hebrew people were taken from their land, by their captors, and exiled into Babylon. They were separated from that to which they belonged. Their prophets wrote of them weeping when they remembered Jerusalem; when they remembered home. They felt estranged from God because they believed that God resided in their land. They were in mourning and grief. They were alienated from all that felt safe and comfortable.

Exiled people experience oppression, powerlessness, grief, sadness, anger and hostility. Exiled people feel cut off from their center of meaning. The experience of estrangement for the ancient Hebrews is one that most all people can relate to at some point in their lives—feeling and living as if exiled to a foreign place.

After a period of time the ancient Hebrew people were freed from their exile in Babylon and they returned to their land. The story of the Exile is about estrangement and reconciliation. It is a story of salvation in this earthly life. It is an account of wounds being healed. The salvation image of the Exile is one of a people being reconnected with God.

Reconciliation! In Christian terms it is what we call repentance. Paul writes, “...*in Christ, God was reconciling the world unto Himself, not counting the people’s trespasses against them...*” Friends, just as it was with the Exodus image of salvation so it is with the Exile image of salvation, it is God that invites, encourages and empowers the peoples return. The ancient Hebrew people understood this—they knew that it was God that freed them from slavery and returned them to their land. And further, they understood their liberation from slavery and their reconciliation with their land and with their God as salvation! They understood that God works in this life. They understood that God works to heal earthly wounds.

Salvation—What on **Earth** do We Mean? We mean that God is not an absentee landlord. God is not just waiting on us in an afterlife. God desires to liberate us in this life. God desires in this life to be reconciled with us. Salvation! Do not wait for heaven—experience liberation and reconciliation today!