

SALVATION IN MORE THAN ONE DIMENSION

SCRIPTURE READING: Romans 5:1-11

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.*

*More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.*

*While we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man -- though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.*

*Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. Not only so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation.*

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THE SERMON:

*"For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, **shall we be saved by his life**." English Standard Version*

What do we usually hear.

Saved by the blood. Saved by His death – “to know nothing but Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2) The Cross is what saves us. And that is true. But that is not the whole truth. There are many dimensions to our salvation, and many layers of the Christian Life. Perhaps the biggest gap – almost two entirely different “worlds” – is the reality before we have believed or been willing to receive the grace and love of God – and the reality after we have come to trust God. Everything looks, seems, and feels different between these two realities. The language is different; the hopes and expectations are different; the way we choose, and strive, and relate to others is different. Paul lines it out so clearly we cannot miss it. While we are enemies: alienated, rebellious, frightened, lonely, and lost – the Cross is the thing! After we have been reconciled, after we have come to trust His Love, the Holy Spirit is the thing! Our relationship with Jesus – the Presence and guidance of our resurrected Lord is our focus. The Cross has done its work, and we are saved by His life.

Some of you are just bursting to remind me that it doesn't stay all neat and tidy like this. We bounce back and forth between the two. We trust Him in one moment, and forget all about all the grace and mercy we have received in the next. And suddenly the Cross is essential to us again – or we cannot get back to the Presence of the Holy Spirit. And that is our reality. We are simultaneously saints and sinners (as my new Pastor loves to remind us).

In the first realm we are always “working” out of some kind of real or imagined fear. We must succeed, we must try to be more acceptable, we must achieve in order to become valuable. Everything we think or do is colored by this need to get safer – more secure. Behind it all is the unspoken principle, maybe if we get “good enough” they will keep us: maybe even God will keep us.

There are no “good works” in the second realm. There are only works of gratitude. How can you work to get love, or acceptance, or approval – when you already have more of these things than you ever imagined existed? If you make a mistake in the first realm, that is serious. You must hide it or fix it fast. If not you may get fired – or in religious language, thrown into Hell. At least it will be a mark against your record. You will have to work twice as hard to make up for it. - In the second realm, if you make a mistake... well, nobody likes mistakes. They hurt us and they hurt others. But we know that grace and forgiveness awaits us. We know that we cannot make a mistake so big that God cannot fix it. We repent and move on. Mistakes don't mean we throw life away, or stop trying. They don't mean we get thrown away either! They are only how we learn.

Of course people who still live in the first realm will not easily forgive us. Nor will they accept our forgiveness without making everything twice as hard as it was to begin with. But while we may sometimes invite them into the second realm, we do not live for them, or see life like they do.

Do you think I have gone off point? Am I not talking New Testament doctrine and New Testament freedom? Shall we say it straight out? The death of Jesus (brutal crucifixion) gets our attention. At least it gets mine! He doesn't just get killed. He walks into it! Jesus sets it up to reveal what the world is really like – how estranged we really are from our God. But in that horrible drama it is also revealed what God is really like. The forgiveness and mercy is also revealed – and under the most grievous circumstances imaginable. “Father forgive them!” If we are forgiven for renunciation, betrayal, and the cold-blooded murder in the cruelest fashion possible – of the Son of God: then measure the magnitude of all your other sins and mistakes in comparison to that! Without baptism, without dying to the old life, and going into this exceedingly new faith in God – in God's love – in what is going on behind the scenes – without going from past fear, and anger, and guilt and shame into this new revealing of what the heart and purpose of God is really like - - there is no possibility of the Christian Way – no chance at all for the Christian Life. God, in Christ Jesus, reveals himself and proclaims his love for us. But before it has a chance to take root or grow in our hearts (in our minds and our souls) – Satan trumps it with fear, guilt, and shame. We are truly unworthy, and undeserving. And so we let the love go – or set it aside: perhaps hoping that in some future time we can take it up again when we will have become more worthy.

So we slug-on, or try to - in all the muck and darkness and despair that we have always known yet rarely admitted – even to ourselves. If we ever take an honest look at it, we fear that we would never get up again. (Never rise again.) Many humans produce an impressive *bravado* at this point: acting as if they have it made. They act like they are invincible; happy and positive; self-confident. An amazing display of denial that is only detected by strange quirks, and weird comments in un-guarded moments. At least early on. When I was in High School I actually thought some people were self-confident: self assured. They acted cool, and like they actually “had it all together”. It has been a long time since I was in High School! Some people never get tired of playing “charades”. They don't want to enter the fellowship of Sinners – and learn true friendship when judgment and criticism is so much easier. Well, God will forgive you even for that. But I won't. I get sick of it. You know better! Stay in Hell if you want to, I don't give a shit. I don't live here any more.

In many places the church seems oblivious to all of this – at least in our time. People don't want to be troubled with Sin or Salvation any longer. They want a religion that is sane and practical. Never mind Jesus as Savior: just give us the ethics part: “Love your neighbor.” Right! All 6 billion of them, and then you will be **SAVED**. Lots of church members still don't “get it”. How can they, when we are still so blinded by fear, on the one hand – or by some generic, automatic “unconditional love,” on the other hand? And in some places, even concepts of Grace are used in such a way that people feel more beat over the head with it – than freed by it. They think you are saved if you feed the poor – or fight injustice – or clean-up your life well enough. That is, it is not about God's love for us in Jesus Christ. It is about our kindness of heart; our good deeds; our love for others. Humanist love is an impossible love because it does not really count until we have eradicated all pain and poverty on earth. The “niceness” of the liberals is at least as vindictive and judgmental as the “lake of fire” of the conservatives. We are

never “justified” or encouraged for the six or seven people we have deeply and genuinely cared about. We are only condemned for the many thousands we have not yet helped. We do not need a Savior. There really is no Savior. We need to become the saviors.

If you still live in the “good works” realm – the Law realm – the realm before reconciliation with God – then you are never the sheep – always the goats: always on the left hand side of Christ where people never do enough; never give enough; never help enough to qualify for Life. And you are a sucker for every good cause, every kind notion, every sentimental idea that comes down the road: however truly worthy or unworthy it really is. And far sadder than that – it will leave you no time or resources for the gratitude response of true obedience to your Lord. Saddest of all, it leaves you in charge of your life, and of fixing things – including your self and other people. In the realm of grace, after the reconciliation, the reason we pray is because we are not smart enough – we don’t see far enough – we don’t understand how the Holy Spirit is coordinating all the efforts of all the other faithful servants: and so we no longer want to play God. It’s too hard! We go back to playfulness, and joy, and doing what the Spirit tells us on a daily basis – despite the mayhem going on all around us. I know it is American Heresy, but some things we have to leave up to God.

Not sure how they pulled it off, but in the hands of Luther & Calvin, “grace” was used to free people; to lift them up; to free them – not only from Sin, Death, Satan, and the Law – but also from a monolithic and Satanic tyranny being administered by the Pope and priests of Rome. Satan had twisted all the gifts and promises of God proclaimed in the Bible, back into a tyranny of fear and condemnation. The Reformation was dynamite because the Gospel was again freeing people from this tyranny and for a New Life in Christ Jesus.

When we walk into churches today, are people still elated with their new-found freedom, and the delight of a New and Different LIFE? Or has it been twisted all around again? You poor, ignorant, hopeless and helpless worm. You are worth nothing – you can do nothing. Haven’t you heard about the doctrine of Grace?! Here, have another slug of contrition and false hope that never frees. And while we are at it: don’t you know there are still people out there who are hungry and suffering? You aren’t much of a Christian – you don’t really “love your neighbor” as long as there are needs and problems in the world. Shame on you! Guilt on you! Especially if you are already grateful for anything – or already love anybody.

The Cross really is there to free us from the first realm. We really are not able to save ourselves – or the world. It really is necessary for God to switch us to a new and different Kingdom. But what happened to the power of light and love by which the Gospel once freed Christ’s people to face the might and power of the Roman Empire: and by which it freed Christ’s people in Luther’s time to face the might and power of the Holy Roman Empire? The truth is – grace or no grace – if the Son of God loves you enough to die for you, then by God you must be worth something! - If not to yourself, or to anybody else – at least to Him! And in fact, that worth is inestimable.

As always, the world seems bigger than Jesus. Poverty, and ecology, and terrorism, and all the vast old/new problems around our globe have all of us in “overwhelm”: no matter how we beat the drums. Everywhere people live in fear and terror of things we cannot control. Never mind the doctrines of fear, condemnation, and Hell that Conservative Christian establishments are using to win friends and control people. There is little “grace” left in most main-line churches. We have gone back to a new Law – a thinly disguised version of the same old Law. It is up to us. We can make a difference. We can save the world if we just get together and appeal to everybody to be nice – good – and enabling. And hordes of people are “falling for it”.

The Cross is the utter defeat of all our pride – all our programs – if we think we can fix things by our own good intentions. There are no “good works” in the Christian Life. There are only times when in gratitude and thankfulness we respond to the love and grace we have ourselves received. Having found ourselves cherished instead of condemned, our hearts have been changed. There is no way we can keep from wanting this true

cherishing to become known – to be received by others too. For indeed, most of the human race is still blind to the heart of God. And only the Cross of Christ rips the veil away so clearly and powerfully that it reaches down into us and changes our hearts and souls. Lots of counterfeit grace – lots of lip-service being given to the “love of God” – by people and organizations that have never known the Cross. But it is paper thin, and blows away under trial or hardship. (Why am I so easily and quickly hated by people who believe in unconditional love?) - “I hate everybody who doesn’t love everybody.” Why are so many pacifists so war-like? Guess they miss the good old days.

First steps are first steps. There is no Christianity without the Cross. But Paul is not one-dimensional. Is the Cross the end of the story? If you listen to most of the churches – most of the time – you could easily get that impression. Either there is no Christ, no Savior – or we are saved by His blood. That’s it – the whole story.

Not according to Paul. After the Cross – a whole new Way of Life opens up. After we are reconciled, things get really interesting. The Cross is for openers – not the end of the story. Much more! MUCH MORE, shall we be saved by His life. Why isn’t that phrase also ringing in our ears – proclaimed from the house-tops – or at least under all the steeples. **We are saved by His Life!!!**

According to Paul, there is even a third salvation: Romans 8:24 – *in this hope we were saved*. We are not only saved by faith, but also by hope – or at least in hope?

For once, could we try not to isolate “salvation” from the rest of the story? Let’s try not to pretend it happened at some arbitrary whim as God snaps his fingers – and presto – we are saved. There is a reason death could not hold Him. There is a quality of life, and a relationship that God can connect to – or death would have had its way with Jesus just like it does with us. He saves us from Sin, Death, and the Devil by incredible power – and if we separate this from who He was, and how He lived, and who backed Him up: the baptism, and the wilderness, and the healings, and His anger, and the Cross, and all of it: then we get Christianity American style – bunnies and bonnets and tinsel and pretty lights on dead trees.

For the most part, Salvation (and even Conversion) in our time is taken out of context. It is a great climax without a story: A great ending without a plot: A great solution without a problem: A great victory without a war. Over and over I run into people who hear the Christian Message, but have no awareness of the substance beneath and behind it. They think the whole thing is slightly phony because they only see the building and think that is the church. Or they see us advertising a program, or a meeting – and think that is the Life we are talking about. Or they get invited to join us, and think it is a numbers game – or that we want them to come into the church for our benefit – not for theirs. His Kingdom is not of this world – and most of what we care about is unseen. Oh, not unreal! – just unseen. “The things that are unseen are eternal.” (II Corinthians 4:18)

We were taught in seminary that there are only two real limitations in life: time and space. All our problems stem from one of these limitations or the other. But an old saint said to me: “Don’t you know that important things never come in *twos*?” “So there is a third limitation?” I asked. “Yes,” he said. “It is as important as the other two, but it is very subtle: **Timing**. Right timing is one of the surest marks of the Holy Spirit. Even when our hearts are right, and our motives are true, if we don’t pray - we act “out of time” and no good comes from it.”

That is precisely why we are also saved in HOPE. We are always waiting for the right time: which will always be as soon as God knows it is possible. That is why “patience” is the second highest virtue of the Christian Life. Nevertheless, if the hope is **real**, we do not have to be afraid or impatient any more. We know it is coming. Even now God is maneuvering toward it. But we do not want it ruined either. We wait for it so it can be real, and

true, and genuine. Patience is precisely because we do not want truth, or beauty, or love – minimized. We wait for the fullness. Don't just do something – stand there! Wait for it. Wait for HIM!

Our Faith is for the realities – not for the special moments we try to carve out and keep away from the damage and harshness of real life. You understand? Almost everybody who attends worship services today is going to say or do something they will not be proud of – will not be happy about – before sleep time tonight. Is that incredible? You know it is true. I am not talking about a great crime, or even ruining the day. But most of us will not make it through this day without thinking, speaking, or maybe behaving in some way that will feel wrong to our own souls. A glitch, a hasty moment, a careless thing – we will tell ourselves. What good is our Faith if it cannot help us make it through even one day as the saints should be living – and as we truly want to live?

Of course true Faith is not trying to be "good for something" - it just is. We thought He was dead, and then we began to encounter Him alive. We have been encountering Him alive ever since. Good may or may not come of that - but it is what it is. And because we encounter Him alive, we gather in faith families to express our gratitude, and our allegiance. It has become clear to us that our time here goes quickly. We will be "out of here" very soon, now. So let us live for Him while we may. Earth-life is short, but we are not impatient because Eternal Life is long. And once awakened, we are about as grateful for the brevity of the first, as we are for the length and quality of the second. **Just as long as He will be with us.**

So, we do not get relieved of our Journey here: nor taken out of our problems: nor put in a world which is no longer battling all the marks of alienation - from pollution of resources, to pollution of relationships, to pollution of the soul.

Eternal LIFE does not cancel out Death, it illuminates it. We are still saved by His death. We are still called to die with Him - to die daily. The Resurrection is not a repeal of all that we have learned and known and watched and felt. Resurrection means the dying is not in vain - but it does not cancel out the dying. What Resurrection does show and shout is that the dying is worth it: and that life goes on beyond death: and that we do not have to be afraid of our dying any more. And it is because we are also saved by His Life.

After the Cross, after our death to this world and all its false ways – there comes joy. There are many promises, but one of them is that we shall have LIFE – and it will not end.. Have we reduced "life" – even "life in Christ Jesus" down to such a mundane and pathetic affair that it does not lift our hearts, and fill our souls, and leave us singing with our whole being? He is Risen – and so therefore are we. This is no longer just a salvation from the past – or in the past. It is a salvation for now, and for all the things I am facing right now. And it is a salvation full of hope and promise for tomorrow – and for all that is to come. *"And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."* The final words of the Gospel of Matthew (28:20) But they are not the end of the story, they are its true beginning.

As we used to say: until we know how partial, brief, and inconsequential this life really is – we cannot see how beautiful, grand, and important it truly is. What is true for us here, will also be true for us there. And so the veil between this realm and the next is not as thick as it seems. Nothing is over. There is much to come. Whatever our trials, endless new dimensions are yet to break open. That also is our faith, and it is full of hope, and joy, and rejoicing.

Oh yes! Much more, now that we are reconciled: much more we are saved by His living Presence with us – by His Life.

*BENEDICTION: (the tune from "Lillies of the Field" the words from me)*

"AMEN"

Jesus to the Jordan  
Then a dove descending  
Mighty God was in Him

Out in the wilderness  
Fighting with temptation  
Satan couldn't trick Him

Preaching to the people  
Putting it in parables  
Eager minds seeking it

Healing on the Sabbath  
Praying through the dark hours  
Choosing His disciples

All the rules are changing  
All the rulers flaming  
Lots of plots to kill Him

Made it to Jerusalem  
Stormed into the temple  
King on Palm Sunday

Jesus in the Garden  
Looking for a way out  
Not His Way to cop-out

Hanging on a cross-beam  
Showing Love's credentials  
Word of Grace & Mercy

Jesus is the High King  
Though He came a low thing  
But He rose on Easter!