

5 February 2023

Stumbling Blocks: Salvation
“What Must I Do to Be Saved?”

Acts 16:25-32

In Acts 16, we read how Paul and his companion Silas took the gospel for the first time to Europe, arriving in the Macedonian city of Philippi. As often happened, they ended up in jail. We read what happened then in Acts 16, verses 25-34:

²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. ²⁷When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul shouted in a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.' ²⁹The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' ³¹They answered, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

“Saved.” Now there’s a word that every English-speaking Christian has heard. Even among non-Christians, it may be the single word most often associated with Christianity. So it’s interesting that you don’t find it much in the gospels themselves. Or rather, when you do, it doesn’t mean what we think it means. In the gospels, the Greek word for “saved” is almost exclusively used to refer to healings. When Jesus heals a leper, for instance, or casts out a demon, and then says, “Go, your faith has made you well,” the text literally says “your faith has saved you.” So in the stories of Jesus, “saved” simply means “delivered from something that’s oppressing you,” whether that’s an illness or an evil spirit or whatever it might be. But starting with Acts and Paul, we begin to see the word used in a more limited sense, for salvation from sin. Paul says in Ephesians, “By grace are you saved, through faith,” and of course in this story from Acts we see the Philippian jailer asking the archetypal question, “What must I do to be saved?” To which Paul replies, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.”

Fast forward two thousand years, and in the evangelical church at least, that later definition has become the standard. There, everything is about getting “saved.” In fact, “saved” has become for many a synonym of “Christian,” a way to divide the world into two categories. There are the Saved on one side of the eternal border and on the other side are the Unsaved, or even just the “Lost.” And what’s the difference? Well, in evangelical circles, you become saved by “giving your heart to Jesus,” by “accepting Christ as your personal Lord and Savior,” by “asking Jesus into your heart,” by “making a profession of faith.” What? Still puzzled? You mean that didn’t help? Fine, I’ll spell it out for you. To be saved means that at one time in your life you have knelt in prayer (technically, the kneeling is optional, but it’s recommended) and have said “The Sinner’s Prayer,” which goes something like this: “Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner, but I believe that you died for my sins, and today I give my heart to you.” There are longer and shorter versions of the Sinner’s Prayer, depending on which tract you’re using, but

that's the gist of it. Also, when you say the Sinner's Prayer, it's good to cry. Again, crying isn't *required*, technically, but most authorities consider it good form.

Anyway, *that's* how one gets "saved." It is an event at a particular point in time, when you intellectually assented to the propositions that you are sinful, and that Jesus died for you. That's the moment when you passed from death to life and were saved, and therefore that moment is crucial. Many Christians will say that if you cannot remember and name the precise moment when you were "saved," then you probably aren't. I was certainly told that in my youth group. And this understanding of salvation as a decision that happens at a precise moment, gives the church its purpose: to bring people to that decision. Again, note that this faith is an intellectual matter. It's making the right choice. So, whatever means of persuasion are necessary to bring people to that point of decision are to be used: mass marketing, high pressure sales tactics, threats of hell, emotional manipulation. All are justified, because the goal is godly.

You think I'm making that up? I once had a conversation with an evangelical friend – one of the finest, most dedicated Christians I've ever known, but definitely from a different faith camp than I – who described for me a weekend he had spent in a city neighborhood with an evangelistic team, knocking on doors and offering salvation. I asked what kind of response he got, and he said, "Well, most people just slammed the door in my face, but I can't blame them. I hate it when people knock on my door like that, too." I replied, "So why do we suspend the Golden Rule for evangelism and do unto others exactly what we hate them doing to us?" He looked surprised for a moment, then replied, "I guess it's because the stakes are so high." See what I mean? Do what you need to do, say what you need to say, just get them through the turnstile from unsaved to saved, and the end justifies the means.

Now those of you who, like me, grew up in conservative evangelical circles are nodding along, recognizing the mindset I've described. You probably also remember some strong and good things from that evangelical world, and you're right. There is much we can learn from our more conservative brothers and sisters. But this piece of evangelical theology, this definition of "saved" is probably the top reason that I am no longer of their number. For starters, it wasn't true for me. Remember I said that I was told that if I couldn't name the exact moment when I was saved, then I probably wasn't? Well, guess what? I can't. For me, my faith in Christ has been a gradual process of question and doubt and affirmation, a process that continues today.

But even more than that I have rejected the understanding of salvation as an event of the mind, a one-time decision to give intellectual assent to a few required doctrines. This is not how Jesus, or even Paul, understood salvation. In fact, *nobody* understood salvation that way until the 18th century, when the Enlightenment and the Protestant Reformation combined to define humanity in terms of our minds and faith in terms of correct doctrine. That was when "to believe" came to mean, "to accept these statements as true." But that's *not* what "believe" means in the Bible. In both Greek and Hebrew, "believe" means "to place one's dependence on someone or something." Or, to put it in a single word, to "trust." That's not the same thing. There is a difference between *believing* that a rope bridge will support you and actually stepping out on it. The first may be belief; the second is trust. God asks for trust, and when we are talking about trust, we aren't talking about ideas: we're talking about taking actions. Trust that is never acted on is not trust.

This matters, for two reasons. The first is theological. Remember a couple of weeks ago, when I was talking about atonement, I said that every theological idea ought to be required to

pass two tests: the first test is, “Does this describe the same God that we see in Jesus?” and the second test is, “Is this good news?” This evangelical understanding of salvation passes neither test. It makes zero sense to say that God loved the world so much that he emptied himself, taking on humanity, and even dying for our sake, and then – in the next breath – to say that that unimaginable gift of overwhelming grace is only available to those who say the prayer on the back of a tract. Why would God channel his rushing river of love through such a narrow and arbitrary bottleneck? When did God get that small? Nor does it make sense to make salvation a factor of agreeing with doctrine. Let me ask you this: name one doctrine that Jesus taught. Go ahead, take your time. I’ll wait. He didn’t. Jesus taught how to live. He taught generosity, self-sacrifice, compassion, acceptance, love. His concern was not with whether we had right ideas, but whether we had right lives. This God is not one who divides the world into “Saved” and “Unsaved” based on ideology.

And the second reason that this matters is practical. This smug salvation attitude that Christians have the answers and are going to heaven and only those who agree with us can come along has become a huge stumbling block for people seeking faith. David Kinnamon, president of the George Barna research group, writes in his book *Unchristian: What a New Generation Thinks about Christianity*, that one of the major stumbling blocks for young adults is the perception that all Christians care about is getting others “saved.” They want to be treated as people, not as prospects for “soul-winning.” They want to be treated the way that Jesus treated people. Why is that hard for the Church?

Is there another way to think about salvation? One that is consistent with the loving nature of God, as revealed in Jesus? One that focuses on trust rather than agreement? I think so. I understand salvation as a transformed life in relationship with God. Seeing salvation as a relationship opens the door to more than one kind of experience, because not all relationships are alike. Some begin suddenly – love at first sight, and all that – while others begin before we can even remember. But whenever and however a relationship began, what matters is not the starting point, but the way it is lived and renewed and strengthened. No relationship is a one-time event. Nor is salvation.

And no relationship is just about sharing the same opinions or ideology. That may be where it starts, but a genuine relationship involves the whole person – heart, soul, mind – and is lived out in our actions. Because salvation is from God, it is – like God – deeper, richer, and kinder than all our theologies. And that, I believe, is good news. *The good news.*