

## **Savior: A Saved Life**

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Luke 1:67-79

*Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:*

*“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,*

*for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.*

*He has raised up a mighty savior for us*

*in the house of his servant David,*

*as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,*

*that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.*

*Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,*

*and has remembered his holy covenant,*

*the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,*

*to grant us<sup>74</sup> that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,*

*might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness*

*before him all our days.*

*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;*

*for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,*

*to give knowledge of salvation to his people*

*by the forgiveness of their sins.*

*By the tender mercy of our God,*

*the dawn from on high will break upon us,*

*to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,*

*to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Luke 1:67-79 (NRSV)*

Thank you, Credo, and Choir, and for all of last week. Last Sunday was awesome, and Friday. And on Christmas Eve they'll be singing! We're grateful for your commitment and your hard work.

Your sermon notes are there for you to take notes, but today the concepts are things I want you to remember, and I hope that maybe you'll write some down. It's important because this is sort of basic Christianity stuff and I think sometimes we miss it. I want it to seep in.

Let's pray together. *O God, open us up, open our eyes that we might see, our ears that we might hear your word that's in the midst of these words. Open up our hearts, God, that they won't simply stay in our minds but fall into our very spirits. Then, O God, open up our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

When I was a youth pastor in Duncanville, Texas just outside of Dallas, I was in seminary at the time. There were these sorts of old-fashioned things that were called caravans. Some of you may remember these in the old days. We would take some youth, some of the strongest youth, and some of our adult leaders and go from church to church. It was usually in the summer but sometimes other times of the year, maybe weekends. We would put on or lead an event, maybe a youth week, or sort of a revival for students.

In fact we have one coming up here at St. Luke's called D-Now that our leadership put on for our own church. But it's a weekend commitment in a time where we're trying to develop the spiritual journey of young people.

During the summer days we'd have fun games, go places and do stuff and build relationships. Then in the evening we'd have Bible studies and worship services. It would all culminate in a service at the end in which we would invite young people to accept Christ for themselves. To make that commitment of their lives, and if they'd done it before to do it again.

They would come forward and I sort of wanted it to be a Billy Graham moment. He had thousands coming, pouring down from the balcony but I never got there. But we would have some young people come forward. We'd pray with them and then meet with them afterward.

One of youth counselors was Mr. Murdoch and he was actually retired and older than most of our youth counselors. But he was lots of fun and he drove the van and the kids loved him. So when the kids would come forward from other churches, he would ask them their names and then he'd pray with them. Then he would say to them afterwards, "Well, son [he liked to call

people that] - Well, Johnny, you're a Christian and you have no idea what you're getting yourself into."

I thought to myself, "That's a really great thing to say." It's a little intimidating. That would not be what I'd expect to say. But that's the truth. I think a lot of us don't know what we're getting ourselves into. We talk about salvation, about being saved, and we have a picture of that that's kind of traditional and basic. But we really don't know what it means to say, "Jesus is our Savior."

We think that the picture is that through faith in Christ we accept Jesus, your sins are forgiven, and when you die you go to heaven. And that's it. It's as simple as that.

Well, that's a little part of it. But if you read Scripture, salvation or being saved is so much more than that. So what we've been trying to do during these four weeks when we talk about that single Scripture, "And you shall name him Jesus..." that comes from the Hebrew root meaning *to save*. "And you will name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins." But trying to talk about what that means and to expand on that understanding. So let me give you a little review of what we've talked about.

First, we said three weeks ago that salvation is not something *we* do. We didn't come forward and get ourselves saved. Salvation is something God does. There is nothing you or I can do to save ourselves. Our only hope is a Savior and we've been repeating that, to remind ourselves that the reason we celebrate at Christmas is because God decided to save us. Not because we made some decision but because God decided to save us.

Second, we understood that salvation is not just an individual thing but a corporate thing. When Jesus uses the prophet Isaiah as his mission statement, he says he's come to save *his* people, and that word is a collective singular noun like *family*. If you were here, you may remember we used the illustration of a family system that was broken, so you go to a therapist and the therapist says, "I don't just need to see Johnny, I need to see the whole family. Because the whole family works together."

It's the same with the human family. God's family is broken and all of us play our part, and Jesus came to save us. We talk about peace during the Christmas season because God came not just to save each one of us, but God came to save the world from our sins, sins which are playing out all around us.

Last week we talked about the word salvation *to save* in Greek, which is what the New Testament is written in. It's the same word as *to heal*. In the Bible where it says where Jesus touched him and healed him, the word is *sozo*, the same word that means he *touched* him and *saved* him. So sometimes when you're reading, you don't know whether he means he's forgiving the person's sins, or whether he means to heal him from his disease.

To long for Jesus to save us, part of what we're longing for is for Jesus to heal us. I will tell you that today there are people sitting in this congregation that when they pray for a savior at Christmas, they want to be saved from cancer. Or they want to be saved from a divorce that they feel is coming. Or from loneliness or from something that is a brokenness in their heart, that they're longing for. Salvation is not just a spiritual thing, but it addresses all of who we are.

Today I want to deal with some basics of what it means to say individually that we're saved. John Wesley is the founder of the people called Methodist and one of the unique things to say about Wesleyan Christianity is that we view salvation not as a moment, but as a process.

John Wesley wrote 44 standard sermons which are the basis of our doctrine and our doctrinal standards. Ultimately those were expanded into 52, but 44 are still the ones we call our doctrinal standards. All Methodist pastors have memorized all of those ... well, apparently not all of us have memorized all of them. But some of us have - just not anyone here today.

By the way, Sermon 44 is called "The Use of Money" and you ought to go look at that one.

But Sermon 43 is called the "Scripture Way of Salvation." He talks about what it means to be fully saved and what it means to come into full salvation.

Today what I'd like to do is take this passage from Zechariah as an example of how when the Scripture talks about salvation it talks about it in this holistic way, this process that God works in our lives. You can look at your Scripture there and look at verse 68. It says in your Notes verse 67 but I meant 68. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us." Then he goes on in verse 72: "He has shown mercy."

Remember, salvation is something God does, not something we do. Wesley calls this *prevenient grace* and by that he meant that this grace, this salvation that God reaches out to us before we even know about it. Notice that this is in the past tense. I used this illustration a few weeks ago. If someone asks, "Can you tell us the day and hour you were saved?" You can say, "I don't know exactly but it was on a Friday afternoon about 2000 years ago."

So God did that. You didn't do that - God did it. And God did it while you were still a sinner. God did it before you were born. And since you were born God has been at work in your life to save you.

When we brought these children for baptism today what we said is, "God is working now to save this one." We like to say, "We want to be sure we get the order right." God chose us before we chose God. God has been at work.

When I look at my life, God had put parents in my life, God put other adults in my life, God worked within the church body to continue to call out to me, to draw me to him. So anything that I do that is in response to that began with God. Prevenient grace says that salvation doesn't begin with you or me; salvation begins with what God does. You can say, "Yes, I was saved - a long, long time ago before I was born."

Now the second thing I want you to see though, is that he goes on in verse 77: "To give knowledge of salvation to the people by the forgiveness of their sins." This is what we would think of more traditional version of saying "I am saved." We might say, "There was a moment where I accepted Christ." Or maybe it wasn't a moment. Maybe it happened over a period of time when that faith grew within you, but that God has reached out and forgiven you of your sins. For me, I was an adolescent when that happened. I was in high school and was in a group of young people at a time in my life when I was dark and sad. There was a lot going on and I felt angry most of the time. This group of people loved me into the Kingdom of God. They didn't preach me in, that I know of. They loved me into the Kingdom of God. I realized through their witness and from what had been done in my life that I was accepted, I was loved, I was forgiven, just as I am. I didn't need to carry shame around anymore, and that I didn't need to be angry and sad. I could rejoice in salvation that God had loved me and accepted me just as I am.

We call this God's *justifying grace*. All through Scripture Paul talks about being justified. That means, "to be made right." It's like on a computer document I justify a margin, it's on the right-hand side of a margin, it's all made right. God's justifying grace to free us from the guilt of our sin.

Now there are lots of images that the Bible uses for justifying grace. Sometimes it uses a judicial image. It's like that there's a penalty for our sin, and Jesus pays the penalty, pays the price, serves the sentence so to speak. "The wages of sin is death" it says, and Jesus died on our behalf. That's one image.

Another image in Scripture grows out of the Jewish understanding of sacrifice. They would sacrifice to God, make sin offerings to God. So when you read that Jesus is the "Lamb of God" whose blood takes away the sin of the world, that picture is of a sacrifice, and that Jesus is the final sacrifice so that no more sacrifices need to be made.

Both of those are images and there are others. Yet, the one that speaks most to my heart is much simpler. Both of those are hard for me to really internalize as much as this simple image that I have a relationship with God that was broken. That because of my sin, I broke that relationship and this wall was established between us, and God reached out through Jesus to reestablish and reconcile. Not because of what I did. I didn't reach out to God and say, "Let's get back together." Jesus reached out to me and repaired that broken relationship.

I heard Credo sing on Friday night in Christmas in the Chapel. They sang a hymn you all know, "Good Christian Men, Rejoice" and it's by Heinrich Suso who was a German nobleman who wanted to be a priest. This was before the Reformation, so he had a dream that he was dancing with angels because Jesus had come, and he could be in communion with God in Christ. He could be with Christ and it was so joyous. He felt that all of the Christian music at that time was so drag so when he woke up from the dream he said, "Not only do I remember the dream, I remember the song." So he wrote it down and he did so in German instead of Latin which was the language of most of the religious music at the time. He wrote, "Good Christian Men, Rejoice, with heart and soul and voice." There's the line, "He has opened heaven's door" - we are no longer in a broken relationship so we're full of joy that we are accepted and loved.

So I can say, "I *am* saved. I *was* saved. I am saved from the guilt of my sin."

Now here's the deal. It seems like with so many Christians that is where it stopped. That's salvation. But listen to what the Scripture says here in verse 74: "But we being rescued from the hands of our enemies might serve him without fear and holiness and righteousness all of our days." Then it says, "To give light to those who sit in darkness and shadow of death to guide our feet in the way of peace."

My youngest daughter Caroline is getting married in June, so there's been lots of talk around the house about weddings, flowers and all the stuff. There's talk about the cake, and money - that stuff. So I'd like to have a "wedding-free zone" around me sometimes.

Weddings are awesome. The young man is named Bobby and we love him a lot. They're going to be married in June and that's going to be a marvelous, wonderful, incredible day.

Now let me ask you something. Is the most important thing about a marriage the wedding? No, we all know that's not it. The wedding day is awesome and great fun. It's going to be wonderful. But the real power of marriage isn't in the wedding day, it's in a life together, where your values and your mission are aligned. Where you work side by side for things. Where you suffer things together. Where you rejoice through things together. Where you shape one another in faith.

I kind of want to say to Bobby what Mr. Murdoch said to those kids. "Son, you've got no idea what you're getting into. She's going to train you... train you... train you!"

Here's why I share that with you. It's that coming to Christ isn't about that moment. Coming to salvation is about a life together.

Wesley says that salvation is everything from the moment God begins to work in your life even before you're born. Two thousand years ago on the cross all the way through to the time when you come into a relationship through faith. All the way through what is called "sanctifying grace." Salvation is "sanctifying grace."

Listen, not to just free us from the guilt of our sin but to free us from the power of our sin. And it isn't that we have to do that on our own. It's not that he says, "Okay, now you've come into a relationship with me, now be a good boy! Don't you do those bad things anymore!"

A pastor friend of mine told me this great story. It seems that an employer at Christmas time wanted to do something nice for his employees. Ordinarily he gave them a Christmas ham, but this year he said he wasn't going to do that. Instead, he said, "I'm going to give them cash." He called the bursar and told him, "Write a \$100 check to every single one of our employees." Then he went and got some Christmas cards and wrote a hand-written note in each one. He called them by name, saying, "You are loved, you are appreciated. Thank you so much for all you do. Now go and buy yourself something nice for Christmas." Then he distributed those to the employees.

After Christmas he came back and found that his employees all seemed grumpy and were whispering to one another. He couldn't figure out the problem since he thought they'd be so happy that they'd been given this nice Christmas gift. Then he opened his desk drawer and saw the stack of checks that were there. He then realized that he hadn't put the checks in the envelopes. So everyone got a card that said, "You are loved, and appreciated - now go buy yourself something nice for Christmas."

I'm thinking of doing that for all of my kids. That will be a good deal. I can say, "We love you, love you, love you. Now go buy yourself something nice for Christmas!"

Well, we don't have a God like that. We don't have a God that says, "Look, I want you to be great, now go do it!" No, God works within us. It's the Holy Spirit, the presence of Christ alive in our hearts that changes us, that transforms us, that sets us free from the power of our sin.

It's like God doesn't just want to save you spiritually so one day you go to heaven. God wants to set you free from the envy, and the anger and the bitterness from your pursuit of all of the false idols that take hold of us. Our chasing of success of money, of fame or whatever it is that seems to take hold of you and drives you. Or your comparing yourself to other people.

All of those sins that just take hold of us, God wants to set us free from those. As the great hymn by Charles Wesley says, "He breaks the power of cancelled sin." So our sin is cancelled with justifying grace, but the power of sin is broken through God's sanctification, and that takes time. In fact it continues until we die. All of that is salvation.

One more image before we close. John Wesley liked to talk about salvation as a house. He said that prevenient grace, God working in our lives, is like being on the porch. Jesus stands on the porch of the house and looks out to us. He says, "Come on in! Please come in!" Then he'll even go down off the porch and get hold of us and try to get us to come into the house of salvation. He said that justifying grace that comes by faith through grace is the doorway. But it's just the doorway, and yes, you have to go through the doorway to get into the house.

But the real goodness, the power of salvation, is that once you're in the house. And sanctifying grace is the living room, the dining room, the kitchen and everything else that changes us once we've come into that saving power of Jesus.

People will ask me, "It's Christmas time again and you're going to preach the same kind of sermon you do every year." And that's true. I'm going to say, "Come, Lord Jesus." And you might say, "Jesus came to me a long time ago when I was 16 years old. Why do we need to keep talking about 'Come on, Lord Jesus, come.'?" It's because we're not finished being saved yet. We still need a Savior to come and set us free from the power of that sin.

So, yes, I was saved, Yes, I am saved. And yes, I am being saved.



Let's pray together. *Come, Lord Jesus, come and save us. We confess that too often we claim the forgiveness you offer without the transformation. We resist the grace that you offer to change our lives and to set us free from all of the sins and false idols that we pursue. Forgive us, and take us over one day at a time, one piece of our lives at a time. Until we might find ourselves shaped and living and loving just like your Son Jesus Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.*