

Do We Still Believe in Salvation?

Luke 19: 1-10; John 14: 1-10

Ask Jack Questions: Are we born sinners? How does Crossroads view salvation? How do I understand the words of Jesus from John when he says, “No one comes to the Father but by me?”

I was talking with a ministry colleague in the area not too long ago about challenges facing Christianity in our day. We discussed the resistance to full equality for women in ministry leadership within many churches and similar resistance toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people both in ministry and in terms of the full benefit of the sacramental offerings of the church such as marriage. We both agreed that these are challenging questions, but mostly in terms of the degree to which many Christians embrace them and the degree of comfort and acceptance they are slowly growing to have. Finally, we agreed that the greatest challenge the Church faces today involves the issue of salvation.

There is a clear and significant division within the Christian Church on the question: “Are some saved and others not?” In other words, “Do some people go to heaven and others to hell when we die?” A great many Christians say “Yes.” There is judgment. There is damnation and reward. All souls spend eternity either in hell or in heaven. Of these, most agree that the criterion for determining that eternity destiny is professed faith in Jesus as savior. It is the central tenet of faith.

A great many Christians believe that. Many others do not, yet even they think the scenario represents the central tenet of Christianity. As a result, many turn their backs on biblical faith and reject Christianity. As a lifelong Christian who embraces biblical faith, Jesus, and the Church while rejecting what might be described as traditional views of heaven, hell, reward, and damnation, I find myself asking, “Is there another way?” Yes, there is and that is the subject of this teaching today.

The “Ask Jack” question for today includes two sets of questions about *salvation*. The first question is, “Are we born sinners and how does Crossroads Church view salvation?” In other words, “Is there original, inherited, or inevitable sin and what is this congregation’s position on the sin/salvation question?”

Let me answer the last question first by reminding you that there is no Crossroads’ view on pretty much any theological question. The exception is this: we recognize *soul competency*, the belief that each individual is capable of interpreting scripture for her/himself with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the accountability of the community. There is no one answer that suffices for the entire congregation. That gives us tremendous freedom and the responsibility to weigh such questions as salvation for ourselves as individuals. I can help by giving you a general framework to guide your *weighing* process. The good news in all this is that, as far as I can tell, there is no final exam at the last judgment other than Biblical question, question, “What have you done for the least of these?” (illustration – George Richey “What have you done for me?”)

The second question about salvation involves how to relate to Christians who view salvation differently? How do we bridge that chasm within Christian community, between those who have very strong belief in judgment and eternal punishment and reward, and those who just don’t – who tend to believe in a universal salvation or who

don't believe in an afterlife at all. How do Christians on opposite sides of this divide relate to each other as sisters and brothers in Christ, as members of the mystical body of Christ?

What about non-Christians? Is Christianity the only way? Are those who don't profess faith in Christ just out of the equation? How can we understand the words of Jesus in the text of John's gospel, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me"? These are huge questions. My goal is to respond to them as simply and practically as possible and to address them with your help.

What is salvation? What does the Bible tell us about salvation? What does that term really mean for us? What is the Crossroads view of salvation? What is salvation for you? Do you and I really need to be saved in any sense?

The Bible never explains salvation. It proclaims it and, as a result, proclaims God. God is the one who saves. Salvation is what God does. It is the historical action of God in our lives in the past and the present. It is the eschatological hope of God's saving action in a cosmic sense and the reality of that hope in the world today. We cannot know God, in a biblical sense, apart from God's action in salvation.

The Old Testament uses many different Hebrew words for this idea of salvation including the words *enlarge* and *spacious*. They have the connotation of deliverance and freedom. There's also the word *redeem* as in to recover property or buy back. These words speak of deliverance from adversity, oppression, death, or captivity.

The Greek translation of the Old Testament (LXX), the one used by the writers of the New Testament, translates all the Hebrew words with the same Greek word – that comes to us in English as salvation. God was the deliverer in the Exodus from Egyptian slavery and through the Red Sea into the Promised Land.

Old Testament prophets affirmed God's past action and drew the conclusion of a future promise of salvation, deliverance, at the end of history. There would be a new creation and the ultimate redemption of God's people. The New Testament claims that this eschatological deliverance has already happened in Jesus. Biblical Christianity finds its self-understanding clearly within the framework of Jewish thought, despite the Church's rapid movement into a posture of anti-Semitism. Christians inherited from the Jews the sense of God as our special Savior for all eternity. We hold a special status in that we are chosen while others are not.

Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus is a story of salvation. Zacchaeus was "a chief tax-collector and was rich." Therefore he was hated. He met Jesus who invited himself to Zacchaeus' house for dinner. As a result, Zacchaeus stood there in front of the whole town, confessed his sin of cheating them and living badly, and promised to make restitution four-fold. As a result, his whole household was saved. Why? It was not because Jesus shared with him the four steps to salvation and had him pray the Jesus prayer.

Zacchaeus was saved because Jesus came into his life and invited himself to dinner. He was saved because he accepted Jesus' invitation. He was saved because he stood up in front of the whole town and confessed his sin: "I have cheated you! I have lived badly! I have valued money more than relationship." He was saved because he promised to make it right. This was more than just restitution. Zacchaeus promised to restore four times the amount he took and apparently he followed through.

Zacchaeus had lost his way in life. His life was meaningless. He was rich in money, but filled with scarcity. Salvation came to him and his family.

Salvation is not simply something that happens to you. It is something, as the apostle Paul reminds us to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2: 12),” that we engage in each day. It is a mistake for us as individuals to limit salvation to a religious transaction that only punches a ticket to heaven as our reward. It is a mistake settle for too narrow and limited an understanding of salvation. It is disastrous for the Church to restrict salvation to saying certain words or to joining the right group, even if its holy, even if it’s the Church. When we settle for too narrow, too limited an understanding of salvation and reduce it to a transaction to get into heaven, we miss the richness and depth of salvation the way Jesus lived and taught it. We miss the thickness of salvation the way Zacchaeus received and lived it. We miss the opportunity to encourage all Christians to embrace that rich, deep, and thick understanding of salvation that is much more than they think!

Now we move to the last set of questions: Is Jesus the only way to God? What are the implications of our answer in terms of relating to people of other faiths? Can we reconcile John 14 with interfaith-friendly theology? Let me add a couple of simple and important questions to ask of ourselves. What are we guarding or protecting by limiting salvation to Christianity? What might we fear in letting that limitation go?

John’s Gospel was written late in the first century or perhaps early in the second century (CE). This Gospel is very different from the other biblical gospels in format and content. Religious scholar Elaine Pagels suggests that *John* was written to counter the *Gospel of Thomas* and the growing influence of what would become Christian Gnosticism. The *Gospel of Thomas* includes this statement:

70. Jesus said, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you. If you do not have that within you, what you do not have within you [will] kill (destroy) you."

For *Thomas*, salvation comes from you bringing forth what is within you: realizing your potential, developing and investing your spiritual gifts, and using them for the benefit of others and, especially, for your own spiritual growth. For *John*, salvation is located only in identifying with and following Jesus. It might be said that salvation is more a matter of how you identify yourself than it is what you do.

These two books may well represent dominant poles of an early Christian struggle. The need to define and differentiate who was Christian and who was not seems to drive the *Gospel of John*. It’s very practical and very specific. It seems to reflect a lot of anxiety about outside persecution and institutional survival. The question for us is this: can we accept both. Are we in concert with Jesus’ in Mark’s Gospel when he said, “Those who aren’t against us are for us?”

Where does that leave things? Do we fear the ambiguity that results from questioning narrow definitions? What do we have to lose? Can we reject narrow views as incomplete without rejecting those who hold them? Can we do this without giving up our call to hold them and ourselves accountable? We know in part and we testify in part. We seek the whole. We worship the Whole who brings life-transforming power through people such as we.

In the Lord’s Prayer, we request, “deliver us from evil.” This is more than a plea to protect me and keep me from eternal meaningless. It is also – maybe “more-so” – a commitment to be an agent of transformation delivering all people from the oppression of evil, the dungeons of darkness, and the prisons of despair. This is the way of Jesus we

have to share. That why we're here. That's why Crossroads Church exists as a congregation.

The faith question is, "How will we choose to see the world: as scarcity or abundance, as hopeless or possible?" Do we come to life with self-defeating greed or with good news? It is a matter of faith.