

Sermon: What is salvation

1 Tim 1:12-17

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A few years ago I was staying at the Christian retreat center Anafora – on the desert road between Cairo and Alexandria. The bishop who owns that beautiful place likes it to be as natural as possible, and for that reason he does not allow bright lights to be used in the evenings. Light bulbs are not stronger than 30 watt – you cannot read with that light. Quite amazing in a society where neon-lights in the living room are considered romantic.

In Anafora the nights are jet black. No light-pollution. So if at night outside you lay on your back to watch the skies you see stars. Millions of stars. That is an absolutely amazing experience for us who live in the light- polluted environment of the city.

The sky was pitch black and against that very dark backdrop the lights of the stars seemed especially brilliant. For the first time in my life I saw falling stars – one after another. It was amazing.

1. Saved from sin

In the verses we have read from the Apostle Paul to Timothy, Paul speaks of his own pitch black past. **'I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man'**. Against that backdrop he speaks of the bright salvation that God made available - for him and for all humanity.

Throughout the centuries in all churches in all cultures, Christians have rejoiced in this *salvation* and it the fact that they have been saved. But allow me to confess... sometimes how people use the words 'I am saved', makes me feel uneasy - even though it is surely biblical language. So for my own sake, let me share some thoughts about being saved, and salvation.

In daily speech we use that word save in different contexts. Someone can be saved from a house that is on fire. We also use it in the sense of preservation - we keep our money safe by putting it in a safety box for instance. This is the difference between being saved from something, and being saved for something.

Paul tells us what he was saved from. He points to his past behavior - when he was a persecutor of the early Church and a violent man. He was saved from those sins and from its eternal consequence of separation from God.

He had been the bounty hunter for the Jewish leaders who wanted to destroy the Church of God. Not for the money, but because he really believed he was serving God by killing Christians.

Serving God by killing people... what an absolutely horrendous idea. But there is hope, even for such people, and Paul is the prime example.

Paul describes that dark period in his life as one of **ignorance and unbelief** – in Arabic we would call that his own time of jahilliya and kufaar. Every person on earth, if not reconciled to God through Jesus Christ lives in that state. Far away from God.

But Jesus Christ himself intervened in Paul's life by revealing Himself in a bright light, on the road between Jerusalem and Damascus.

Paul summarized that crucial moment in a few words: 'I was shown mercy [...] and the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus'. Now that is salvation. Something that goes far beyond forgiveness of sins.

Paul speaks of magnificent mercy given to him. Very real God-size mercy. Much more powerful than the wicked past of the apostle, even though he calls himself the *worst of sinners*, or the *chief of sinners*.

If you meet with God and the size of his mercy, you also begin to understand the size of your sin. If Christ had to die for us, how bad must our sin therefore be. But God's grace is always bigger, says Paul. Just look at his own example.

For Paul, the fact that God intervened with grace - even in his awfully bad life – was clear proof that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

As long as we're in this world we're sinners. There's no use putting up a clean false front and pretending as if we never trip on our journey. And there's also no reason to be afraid of that fact. The truly sensational news is not that we have sinned but that we have been saved by grace to be eternally linked to God.

What an encouragement for us. Paul's example of his wicked pre-Christian life is great comfort to people who feel that they have messed up so badly that salvation is not for them.

It can be a great comfort to people who feel that they have tested God's patience one too many times and are certain there is no hope left.

It can be a great blessing to those who feel that the experiences of their life has left them as "damaged goods" and unsuitable for any worthwhile use.

Christ picked Paul, the chief of sinners to demonstrate to us today what his mercy and power can do in our life as well.

We must never belittle sin. Modern society may make fun of the Biblical concept of sin - and in a sense that is not strange. Paul only realized his sin and the eternal magnitude of it **AFTER** God has shown him his mercy.

Likewise, we begin to also realize how deeply we are infected with this poison of rebellion against God **AFTER** we have met Him in the face of Jesus Christ. In the light of Christ we see better how dark our darkness is. And because of the darkness we see how bright His salvation is.

Not everyone has such a dramatic story to tell as Paul - but most Christians can tell stories of the grace of God overflowing for them. How He forgave their sins.

But this forgiveness of sins is not equal to salvation. It is not all there is. Maybe we could say, it is the door into the life of salvation. And we must regularly look back at this entrance into the life with God - but we must focus more on what God wants to give us after we have obtained entrance to life with him, after we first believed.

2. Salvation for the future

Salvation is that we are fully and strongly tied to God. Being with him is life. And if salvation means being tied to God, it is per definition eternal. Because God is eternal.

In the New Testament, salvation is therefore not something that happened in the past only. It also has a present, and a future aspect.

The past aspect relates to the once-and-for-all moment when we first believed. **We have been saved** - past tense - when we trusted in Christ; as a consequence of that bond with God through Christ, our sins are forgiven and we are engraved in the palm of God's hand forever.

It is forever indeed. When eventually Jesus Christ renews his whole creation, we will also be fully renewed. **We will be saved**, - future tense - eventually. This world will be saved, and if we are part of God's ark, the church, we know for sure that the salvation that is coming for the world, is ours as well. We will participate in it. Salvation is not: I am forgiven and I go to heaven. It is: God will renew the universe, and we are assured that we will be part of that new world.

The apostle Paul describes in Romans 8 that the whole creation waits for to be saved from the bondage to decay, and we grown, together with all of creation, for that liberation.

What a complete radical makeover that will be, when all things will be made new. That is salvation - the salvation that is to come.

But presently - we live in the middle... between that first moment when we put our trust in Him, and the moment when He will make all things new. And in this middle we experience the third aspect of salvation – in the here and now. We have been saved, we will once be saved, and presently – while we groan with all creation for renewal, even presently **we are being saved.**
Present continuous tense.

Paul admonished the church in Philippi with these words: Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

This means - salvation is also related to what we do with our life today. Paul has an important lesson for us in this context: He says that God saved him **so that he would serve God. And that is our vocation as well.**

3. Salvation in the middle

We are saved from sin and its consequences and kept safe in God's hands for eternity... But we are also being saved for something TODAY. That is, for serving Him NOW. God takes our life, broken, full of problems, and wants to use it NOW for His service. As we are. He saves us from idleness, to make us his servants.

Our present life, not just forgiveness of sins and our eternal fate, our present life is part of God's interest. His interest is in renewing us, and the world around us, and He wants to do that now, and that is why He calls us to working out our salvation today.

We must be very careful not to carry our modern society's individualist notions into the church and into our understanding of the Gospel, as if for God all that matters is my personal relationship with Him and as if it is all about my soul.

Contrary to what our culture emphasizes, we are not a self-contained, self-sufficient entity. We are social beings - that means, we can never be independent. We are interdependent. We are part of our families, of our societies, of the nations we live in... of our church.

When God pours his grace on us he does not pour that grace on me as an individualized soul but on me as I stand in all my social relationships. And this is the arena where the ongoing aspect of salvation has to be worked out.

Salvation is deeply personal, but it is not individualistic. It hinges on my personal faith-relationship with God but it is for serving our Lord and other people; it is to care for creation; to develop our societies; to bring something of God's eternal plans for the world, into the here

and now.

It entails forgiveness and eternity and my soul, but we are called for a life of worship and service for our Lord ... in church, society, in the country where we live, in the nations we come from.

When people receive Christ they are born again - they wake up into his kingdom and must seek to spread its righteousness in the midst of our unrighteous world.

It is impossible that salvation given to us through Christ by the Creator of heaven and earth, it is impossible that this does **not** deeply impact all of our life, all of the people you meet, your political choices, your private family life, your voice that speaks up for human rights.

It must impact your relationship with the soil, with animals, your interest in environmental issues – **and** your personal Bible reading...

Your support for the poor and your struggle against the exploitation of people – **and** your efforts to speak of Christ to your friends...

That is the one full gospel – a gospel of real eternal salvation for the soul – and a gospel of hard work in this world.

Conclusion

Just as God will one day renew the whole of creation, he wants us to implement that future salvation in our present personal life and in our whole social and national environment.

Paul's example shows:

No-one is unworthy for being used by God.

No-one is beyond repair.

No - He wants to use all of us for repairing our life – and that of others and of the whole world we live in.

This is the great impact of being connected to Him by faith. It unleashes a dynamic of faith and love in our lives that is strong and unstoppable – as long as we are connected to Him.

Paul did not focus too much on his own wicked past, but he focused on the mercy of God that ensured his future with God, and that surrounded him from day to day for service with faith and love.

Amen

