

WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT SALVATION

A question that is often addressed to us is: “Are you saved?” There are those who delight in using this question in their Christian witnessing. It is really not a bad question, for it directs our thinking to an all-important subject. But repeated too often it can become overbearing. There is a story of a man at a baseball game who was looking for an opportunity to share his Christian faith. Finally someone spoke to him. “Is this seat saved?” “No,” said the man, “are you?”

THE THREE STAGES OF BEING SAVED

A very Godly bishop was walking down the street one day when a little girl, a very zealous Christian, no doubt, asked him, “Bishop, are you saved?” The bishop, a very kind man, smiled and said, “My dear friend, might I just inquire a little more exactly as to what it is you are asking me. Are you asking me, have I been saved? Or are you asking me, am I now being saved? Or are you asking me shall I yet someday be saved?” Well, that pretty well flustered the little girl. She didn’t respond. “Honey,” said the bishop, “All three are true. I have been saved. I am being saved; and I shall yet be saved.” You see, salvation is comprehensive. It has to do with our past—we have been saved from sin and death through baptism. This we call justification. It has to do with the present—we are being saved. This has to do with our daily walk and growth in the life of Christ and the Spirit. This we call sanctification. And salvation has to do also with our final glory in Christ. As Paul said, “When Christ Who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory” (Col. 3:4). That we call glorification.

Another bishop when asked the question, “Have you been saved?” replied “I have”. “And when were you saved?” he was asked. The bishop replied immediately, “On a Friday afternoon at three o’clock in the spring of the year 33 A.D. on a hill outside the City of Jerusalem.”

That is when we were all saved, but God will not force this salvation upon us. We must—each of us—accept it personally as the great gift of God’s love. We were saved in baptism which is our personal Golgotha. Baptism is the *tomb* where “we were baptized into His death” (Rom. 6:3); it is also the *womb* from which we were born anew receiving within us the life of Christ.

WORK OUT YOUR SALVATION

We were saved at baptism but we must continue to “work out” our salvation for the rest of our lives by daily serving, loving, obeying and following Jesus.

When you stand before God’s altar to be married, you are pronounced man and wife in the Lord. You are married right then and there. No one can argue that point. But it is equally true that you will work out your marriage from that moment on until the end of your life together. As two wills seek to become one, your marriage becomes what God ordained it to be.

In Jeremiah 3:14 the Lord said to His people, “I am married to you.” Our relationship to God is like a marriage relationship. More than anything else God wants our love, our heart. He wants us! In the Christian life, as in marriage, two wills are involved: God’s will and ours. Jesus constantly yielded His will to the Father. It was the last thing He did before He went to the cross. That kind of obedience is not easy. And it is not something we can do once and forget. It is a way of life—a constant yielding of our will to God’s will daily. Each time we choose God’s will we are working out our salvation. In the words of St. Paul, “Therefore, my beloved...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12).

DAILY CONVERSION

The great saints of the Church were humble men and women who radiated grace and love. They were not converted once. Nor did they repent just once. Their life was a daily conversion and a constant repentance. They were saved once on the cross at Golgotha, but they were also being saved daily in the yielding of their will to Jesus. Daily they sinned and daily they repented. Daily they fell and daily they rose.

We have been saved but *we are also being saved*. “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing but *to us who are being saved*, it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18).

In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, the proud Pharisee thought he was saved. His prayer was, “Thank God, I have made it! I am where I am supposed to be. Everyone else is below me on the ladder somewhere. I am not like other men. Would that they were all as good as I am.” It was that kind of spiritual pride that condemned the

Pharisee. The poor tax collector, on the other hand, was on a much lower level of spirituality and virtue, and he knew it. He acknowledged his sinfulness and, realizing the unlimited possibilities for growth, he moved on.

A CONSTANT MOVING TOWARD GOD

In Orthodox theology, salvation is not static but dynamic; it is not a completed state, a state of having arrived, a state of having made it, but a constant moving toward theosis, toward becoming like Christ, toward receiving the fullness of God's life. And it can never be achieved fully in this life.

The more the great saints of the Church grew in their knowledge of Jesus, the more they realized their imperfection and sinfulness. When a saint was told, "You are a thief," he would agree that he was. "You are a liar." He would agree that he was. "You are a fornicator." He would agree that he was. The saints realized that we can lie, steal and fornicate in thought as well as in deed. Like the sinful tax collector they prayed the Jesus Prayer constantly: "Lord Jesus, Son of God, be merciful to me a sinner." They were saved daily through repentance and the yielding of their mind, heart and will to God. And they looked forward to their glorification with Jesus at the Second Coming.

A CRY FOR SALVATION

People today are not running to church with the question: "What must I do to be saved?" But when they run to psychiatrists, when they take large doses of drugs, when they drown themselves with alcohol, when they try to resign from the human race, when they complain that life is not worth living and try to commit suicide, what are they doing but confessing a need—a need to be saved from themselves, from the sin and death of their daily existence.

AN INNER SALVATION

The salvation we are looking for is not to be found in education or politics or economics but in Christ. It is a spiritual, an inner salvation, which in turn produces an outer salvation. Changed people produce a changed society. The peace and the fulfillment we are all searching for can

be found in a relationship to God that only Jesus can bring. "Peace I leave with you," He said, "my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you (John 14:27).

Jesus did not come to condemn us because we had become enslaved to sin. He came to save us by breaking the bonds of sin and death.

Recall the words of St. Gregory of Nyssa:

Our nature was sick and needed a doctor.

Man had fallen and needed someone to raise him up.

He who ceased to participate in the good needed someone to bring him back to it.

He who was shut in darkness needed the presence of life.

The prisoner was looking for someone to ransom him,

The captive for someone to take his part.

He who was under the yoke of slavery was looking for someone to set him free.

"WHO WILL SAVE ME...?"

A great scientist asked once, "The wild universe may yet be tamed; but the inner world of man's life, with its ignorance, prejudice, bitterness, instability, passion and sin—who will tame that?"

Years before this scientist, a great saint asked the same question in a different way:

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me... Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7).

Who shall deliver me? Thank God for Jesus Who came not to judge me but to deliver me from this body of sin and death!

YESTERDAY SAVIOR—TOMORROW JUDGE!

Years ago a young lawyer, as the risk of his own life, grabbed the reins of a runaway team of horses and saved a man's life. The wagon turned over but the man was not seriously hurt. He dusted himself off and thanked the lawyer.

The scene has changed. More than twenty years have passed. The lawyer is now a respected judge. The place is the judge's courtroom. A man has been tried for murder and convicted. Prior to formal sentencing the judge asks the accused if he has anything to say. He indicates that he does.

He comes close to the judge's bench and says, "Judge, don't you remember me?" The judge replies, "No, I don't remember having met you prior to the trial." "But, Judge," the man answers, "don't you remember saving a man's life by turning a team of runaway horses twenty years ago?" "Oh, yes," replies the judge, "I remember that as though it were yesterday."

"Judge, I am that man," the accused states, "you were my savior then, can't you be my savior now?" The Christian judge dropped his head and when he had regained his composure he said, "*Yesterday I was your savior, but today I must be your judge.*"

Jesus did not come to judge the world but to save the world. But one day He must come to judge the world. Today He is our Savior. Tomorrow he will be our judge. How shall we meet Him at the end, as Savior or Judge?

WHAT ARE WE SAVED FOR?

Jesus came to save us from sin. Once saved, sin becomes an incident in the life of the Christian—not a practice. Love becomes the practice, not just an occasional incident—the love of Jesus. We are saved from sin *for* love. The non-judgmental, accepting, forgiving love of Jesus must flow through us to others. "Above all, put on love which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col. 3:14).

Secondly, we are saved *for* fruit bearing. The purpose of the True Vine (Jesus) and the branches (the members of His Body, the Christians) is the same: to bear fruit for God, to carry God's saving love to the world. Every branch that bears no fruit, He takes away. This is what we are saved for. We are made branches on the True Vine, members of Christ's Body, that the head (Jesus) may have us to carry out His saving work in the world today, that through us Jesus may bring life to all. We are saved not in order to sit around this world as ornaments. We are saved to love, to serve, to bear witness, to confess Jesus, to bear the fruit of the Heavenly Vine for dying men and women to eat and live.

WHAT IS SALVATION?

What does it mean to be saved? What is salvation in Christ?

Salvation is freedom—freedom from the tyranny of self-centeredness, freedom from the bondage of fear and death.

Salvation in Christ is being freed from myself so that I can become the person God created me to be and intends me to become.

Salvation is God lifting us up in Christ Jesus. It is God giving us hope. It is God working an unrelenting work in our personalities, in our characters, in our lives. It is God not giving up on us.

Salvation according to Orthodox theology is not the state of “I have arrived. I have made it. I am saved.” Rather, it is the state of “I am on the way. I am moving. I am growing in God, for God, with God, and through the power of God.”

Salvation is Christ overcoming for us our greatest enemy which is at the root of all our insecurity, the fear of death. God does not remain aloof in the heavens while we suffer and die. He takes on a body and by His death destroys our death so that now death becomes a doorway through which we must all pass to enter the splendor of His glorious presence.

Salvation is:

*liberation from evil,
the defeat of the devil,
the transfiguration of humanity,
living authentically,
putting on Christ,
the restoration of the image of God in man,
participating in the life of God,
restoration of communion with God,
incorruption,
receiving the Holy Spirit,
becoming temples of the Holy Spirit,
forgiveness of sins,
ascending to the throne of God,
participating in the kingdom of God,
becoming by grace what God is by nature,
the destruction of death,*

*seeing the light,
being in a process of growth that never ends
living life the way God meant it to be.*

This is the salvation the Lord Jesus offers us.

POSITIVE SALVATION

The Orthodox Church has always emphasized the more positive aspect of salvation. Salvation for the Orthodox Church has not meant only justification or forgiveness of sins: it means also the renewing and restoration of God's image in man, the lifting up of fallen humanity through Christ into the very life of God. Christ forgives man and frees him from sin that he may proceed to fulfill this destiny, which is to become like God.

Christ came to save us from sin for participation in the life of God. This exalted vision of the Christian life was expressed by St. Peter when he wrote that we are invited "to become partakers of the Divine Nature" (2 Peter 1:4). It was also affirmed by St. Basil the Great when he described man as "the creature who has received an order to become god." The whole emphasis of the Orthodox way of life is on "putting on Christ" and receiving the Holy Spirit through prayer and the Sacraments so that we may begin to live a new life in union with Christ and in communion with the Holy Spirit.

THREE CONVERSIONS

In his book *The Year of Grace of the Lord*, a monk of the Eastern Church writes about the three conversions that should take place in the life of an Orthodox Christian according to God's plan of salvation:

... in spiritual life three stages can be discerned, which are comparable to three conversions. The first conversion is the meeting of the soul with our Lord, when He is followed as a Friend and as a Master. The second conversion is a personal experience of pardon and salvation, of the cross and... resurrection. The third conversion is the coming of the Holy Spirit into the soul like a flame and with power. It is by this conversion that man is established in a lasting union with God.

*Christmas or Epiphany, then Easter, and finally Pentecost correspond to these three conversions.**

SAVED BY GRACE

St. Paul assures us that we are saved by grace through faith. Let us examine first the word grace: What is it? Grace is a gift rather than a wage we earn. It cannot be deserved. Sin gives wages. God gives grace. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8).

There is a story about a man who went to heaven. He was met at the pearly gates by Peter, who said, "It will take 1000 points for you to be admitted. The good works you did during your lifetime will determine your points."

The man said, "Unless I was sick, I attended church every Sunday, and I sang in the choir."

"That will be 50 points," Peter said.

"And I gave to the church liberally," the man added.

"That is worth 25 more points," said Peter.

The man, realizing that he had only 75 points, started getting desperate. "I taught a Sunday school class," he said. "That's a great work for God."

"Yes," said Peter. "That's worth 25 points."

The man was frantic. "You know," he said, "at this rate the only way I'm going to get into heaven is by the grace of God."

Peter smiled. "That's 900 points! Come on in!"

In this world we get what we pay for, people say. Do we? What can we ever pay for the grace of God? What can we ever pay for His love? What can we ever pay for His sacrifice on the cross?

Grace is the unlimited pouring out of God's mercy. It is God's unconditional forgiveness offered to the unworthy. It is God accepting us as His children in Baptism, filling us with His Holy Spirit in Chrismation, and then sending Jesus to live in our hearts through Holy Communion. It is God loving us when we are unlovable. "But God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

THROUGH FAITH

We are saved by grace *through* faith. What is the role of faith in God's plan of salvation? Faith is saying "yes" to God's gracious gift of salvation. It is the humble acceptance of God's gracious gift. It is the hand that takes the blessing. It receives what God gives, not as something we deserve, but as a gift of His grace. It is the marriage of Christ—the Bridegroom—to the bride which is my soul. Faith is the handle by which I grasp God's power and apply it to my weakness. It is remembering when I feel utterly worthless that I am the one for whom God gave His Son. Faith is the eye by which we look to Jesus; the hand by which we lay hold of Jesus; the tongue by which we taste the sweetness of the Lord; the foot by which we go to Jesus. Faith is *Forsaking All I Take Him*. F-A-I-T-H. Faith is man's hand reaching up to grasp the already outstretched hand of God's grace. "By grace you have been saved *through* faith" (Eph. 2:8). When man's hand (faith) grasps God's hand (grace), there is reconciliation and salvation.

A WORD ABOUT GOOD WORKS AND OUR SALVATION

The person who has accepted Christ, been baptized and received the Holy Spirit begins a new life which is expressed in love through works of love. A person is not saved by faith alone but by faith which expresses itself through love as St. Paul writes. St. James asks, "What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has no works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled', without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works is dead" (James 2:14-17).

NOT MERITORIOUS

The good works that we do, do not earn us any special merit points in heaven. We can never buy God's love with them since Jesus specifically tells us: "So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty'" (Luke 17:10).

Our good deeds do not put God in our debt. It is God's love in Christ that puts us forever in His debt. Our good deeds are a grateful response, a feeble attempt on our part to show appreciation to God for what He has done for us. We can never fully accomplish all that we should do, but neither should we stop trying. Love will not let us. "The love of Christ controls us," says Paul (2 Cor. 5:14).

CREATED FOR GOOD WORKS

Paul writes in Ephesians 2:10, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." This verse seems to contradict the one just before it: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). One verse says: "You have been saved...not because of works," and the next says: "Created in Christ Jesus for good works."

A NEW CREATION PRODUCES NEW WORKS

Far from contradicting each other, these verses give us the Orthodox Christian position concerning good works. Good works do not produce salvation, but salvation produces good works. We are not saved because of good works, but we are saved for good works. Christ makes each one of us a new creation, a new being. The new being, through the power of the indwelling Trinity, produces new works. Christ does not begin by changing our deeds. He begins by changing us. The good deeds flow by God's grace out of the new person.

COUNTERFEIT WORKS

Only those good works that are done in the name of Christ are the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Good deeds—even the best—are worthless in a person who does not believe in Christ. A work is good only insofar as it is done in Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. For the Christian there is no good work apart from this.

A story is told of a ten-dollar bill that got into circulation and did a lot of good. It helped buy coal for a needy old woman; it helped buy medicine for a very sick child; and even showed up in the collection plate in church one Sunday morning. Then it fell into the hands of a bank teller who spotted it immediately as a counterfeit. The test is not how many good deeds we claim to our credit, but rather, can they pass inspection in the sight of God? Were our good deeds done in Christ and for Christ? Or are they products of pride: trying to parade our goodness or to buy God's favor and place Him in our debt?

We are created for those good works that are done in Christ and for Christ. All others are counterfeit; they cannot pass inspection in God's sight.

A SHOWPLACE OF GOOD DEEDS

The early Church was a showplace of good works done for Christ. Having been made a new creation in Christ, those early Christians began to produce new deeds that astounded the pagan world.

In one of the earliest apologetic works preserved, Justin the Martyr (d. 165), writes:

We used to value above all else money and possessions; now we bring together all that we have and share it with those who are in need (cf. Acts 4:34-37). Formerly we hated and killed one another and, because of a difference in nationality or custom, we refused to admit strangers within our gates. Now since the coming of Christ, we all live in peace. We pray for our enemies and seek to convert those who hate us unjustly (1 Apology XIV).

Tertullian (160-220) said:

It is our care for the helpless, our practice of loving kindness, that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. 'Only look,' they say, 'look how they love one another' (Apology XXXIX).

"And let people learn to apply themselves to good deeds, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not to be unfruitful." These words of St. Paul found eager expression in the lives of the early Christians who as we see from the history of the early Church:

1. gave alms to help the destitute (even poor Christians were urged to give through fasting);
2. supported widows and orphans;
3. supported the sick, the infirm, the poor, and the disabled (even establishing hospitals in many cities);
4. cared for prisoners and slaves;
5. found work for those who were unemployed;
6. cared for those who journeyed;
7. cared for the victims of great calamities.

SUMMARY

Summarizing what we have said on the subject of salvation:

1. We have been saved from sin and death through baptism which is our personal Golgotha (justification).
2. We are being saved daily as we repent of our sins and continue our walk with Jesus yielding our will to Him in humble obedience (sanctification).
3. We shall be saved at the end of time. When Jesus comes again we shall share in His glorification.
4. Salvation is constant growth in the life of Christ, a dynamic movement toward theosis (becoming like Christ, receiving the fullness of God's life).
5. He Who is our Savior today will be our Judge tomorrow.
6. We are saved *from* sin, *for* putting on Christ, *for* love, *for* fruit-bearing, *for* serving, *for* confessing Christ among men, *for* becoming partakers of divine nature.
7. We are not saved *by* good works. A new person in Christ produces good works in and by the Holy Trinity for God's glory. We cannot earn salvation through good works. They are our grateful response to God's love.
8. We are saved *by* grace (Salvation is God's gift) *through* faith, which is man reaching out to accept God's gift.