

Storytellers: Why Does Salvation Work?
By Jason Huff
October 10, 2015
Isaiah 43:1-13; John 12:37-50; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Friends, our final Scripture reading tonight comes from 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. May God add His blessing to these readings from His holy word. “Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them -- yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. Whether, then, it was I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.”

We don't have to understand how things work in order to use them and rely on them. Being a good auto mechanic doesn't make you a good driver, right? To be a good driver, though, you have to understand the rules of the road, even the unwritten rules, and follow them well. And the rules we follow as drivers in Detroit might get us killed in Bombay, London, or Tokyo. You have to know where you are, where you're going, and how to drive safely between those two points. Hold that thought for a minute.

This fall, we're learning the story of God's good news in a way we can share with others. We became lost because of our disobedience to God, but God finds us and rescues us. Through repentance and belief, we take hold of the lifeline God throws to us. Just because we take hold of the rope doesn't mean we rescue ourselves; it simply means that we, our minds and hearts and souls, participate in the process. God is the one who does the rescuing.

But how does our rescue happen? We know salvation is available, and we know what saving faith and repentance look like. But it's hard to trust God and obey Him when we don't understand how God made salvation possible. Just as you can drive safely even if you don't understand what's under the hood, we can be saved if we don't understand every mystery of salvation. But we need to know enough to hold faith tightly and believe that this is the way God has done it. We need enough of the “why” for our faith to have deep roots.

The “how” of salvation is important not just because it's a direct part of our faith needed for salvation. It's what separates this story from all others. You can't tell the story apart from any others without the “how.” Without the details, **Romeo and Juliet** is just a “boy meets girl” story, **Star Wars** is just about a young man rescuing a princess, and **Gone With The Wind** is just a romance set in the South during the Civil War. The details of the how and why of salvation answer our objections about God and show us the incredible goodness of God.

The dilemma of the story is our lostness – we have abandoned God, we have no way to find Him, and without God’s intervention, we’re going to stay that way. But God has always known this would happen, and from the beginning, He had a plan to bring us back to Himself and to provide for our salvation.

In Genesis 3, there is a subtle promise of a savior that will crush the head of the serpent that tricked them. Throughout the Old Testament, as we heard tonight in Isaiah 43, salvation comes from the Lord. In every time and place, God rescues His people from death and destruction. “Apart from me,” God says, “there is no savior.” “I have saved...not some foreign God among you...yes, and from ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand.”

We sometimes lose the plot of salvation in Scripture, though. God saves Noah’s family; then He pulls Abraham out of obscurity and makes Abraham’s descendants His chosen people. God gets Isaac and Jacob and Joseph out of jams He eventually orchestrates wonders and miracles to liberate His people out of Egypt. Lots of rescues out of impossible situations.

But then there’s the Law, and we get messed up. We think that somehow God, by giving His people the Law, instituted a means for salvation. Many of the Jews thought so too. In Deuteronomy 28, God promises huge blessings for following His law and huge curses for ignoring it. Throughout the books of the law, God gives a detailed sacrificial system for atonement, a system where God says, “If you give certain animals to me at the temple, I will overlook your disobedience in certain matters.” God promised forgiveness to the Israelites when they made their sacrifices. And so they thought they were safe. They thought that by keeping God’s law, avoiding the sins that an animal couldn’t cover (like murder and adultery), and making the appropriate sacrifices of atonement for their other sins, they were good to go.

But really, they missed the plot. They missed the purpose of the Law. The Law points out a few key things – that God is forgiving, for example. But it also points out that forgiveness only comes by sacrifice. Because God is perfectly just, His justice must be satisfied; otherwise, He would not be perfect. No sacrifice, no substituting something in our place for our sin, no forgiveness. The Law also shows that animal sacrifices were never enough. As Hebrews 10 tells us, the same sacrifices were repeated endlessly, year after year. They covered up sins, God no longer punished them, but they didn’t get rid of sin.

Have you ever had something foul in your kitchen or your bathroom? You get out the Glade, the air freshener, you start spraying and spraying. And if whatever caused the odor is gone, pretty soon all you smell is Glade. But if whatever caused the smell isn’t gone, if it’s in the trash can or the garbage disposal or whatever and you don’t get rid of it, once the Glade dissipates, the smell will only be worse! And that’s what the old system did: it covered up sin so that God would not punish the Israelites continually for their rebellion, but it never got rid of it.

In fact, Paul says that the law brought death and not life. In Romans 7, Paul says that the commandment – which is holy and upright and good – that was life, that promised life, brought death. Because we are sinners, always prone to sin, always prone to rebel, as soon as the law was given and we knew what pleased God and displeased God, we immediately chose the wrong path, and choose the wrong path over and over again.

God didn't make a way of salvation through the law in the Old Testament. God intended the Law to make us aware of our lostness and our need for salvation apart from following rules. If you are lost deep in the Appalachian mountains, miles and miles and miles away from anything you remotely recognize, the Law is like a signpost in that wilderness that says, "Tokyo – 3000 miles thataway." It should make you think, "My gosh, that's no help at all. I'm really lost if the only directions I have are towards someplace across the Pacific Ocean." But throughout the centuries, many people have looked at the signpost of the Law and thought, "Well, I guess we're heading to Tokyo!"

So why doesn't God make this more obvious? Why doesn't He say outright, "Trust in me, not this law?" Well, God does – in Isaiah tonight, God says that salvation is found in Him, not in His law. But the reason that God gives us the law and lets it stand for nearly 1,500 years is so that the impossibility of following the law would become clear. The Pharisees didn't understand that, but many of the people the Pharisees called sinners did.

God did it that way because some things we only understand through experience. You can talk all you want about what you feel when you fall in love or get a crush on someone, but until it happens to you personally, it's impossible to experience it or really believe it. I can explain how it feels to ride a rollercoaster or to swim in the ocean or to eat a piece of cheesecake, but it doesn't really let you in on the experience. And God is not just a thought; God is a being. To understand you cannot be saved through His law, you must experience the weight of trying to follow it. We throw ourselves on God's mercy when we experience the guilt of disobedience.

So we have a dilemma – we're lost. And God has a dilemma too, in a sense. He has proclaimed He will rescue many of us from our lostness. But His justice requires satisfaction. His justice requires repayment and restitution, not just a token sacrifice to cover up disobedience but a genuine reckoning of accounts. And here's the rub – even if we wanted to, even if God changed us to the point where we really wanted to somehow make up for our sins, we can't.

It's true in everyday life, too. If I steal \$100 from your wallet and you take me to court, I'm going to have to give back more than the \$100 I stole. I might pay a fine; I might even serve some jail time. Why? Because while I had your money, you didn't have it to use. You didn't just lose money, either. You lose trust, not just in me as a person but in other people too. You lose self-confidence. You might lose sleep over it. If you owed that \$100 to someone else and you couldn't pay your bill, there might be additional consequences.

No matter what I do, even if I give you back exactly what I took, I can't set things back the way they were. I can make up for it in a way that we agree makes things acceptable, but there's no way to erase what was done. It might not show up on a criminal record in a couple of years; it might be purged if I kept to the straight and narrow. But that offense is always there.

And if that's true in daily life, then think about what an offense against God looks like. There is no way for us to truly make it right. And while it's one thing to offend someone just like ourselves, it's another entirely to offend the holy King, the creator of the universe, and the One who made us personally. To sin is to commit treason, to say that God should not be ruler over us. Treason is a capital offense in earthly governments, let alone God's.

As mortal beings, we cannot pay God back. We do not have the right currency. It would be like trying to pay for your dinner tonight after church with Russian rubles or German deutschmarks. It doesn't matter if it's worth something to somebody else; all that matters is the person behind the cash register, and unless they take lira or Canadian quarters or whatever you have on you, you're going to be washing dishes for a long time.

No matter what we do, we cannot make up for our treason – and the fact is, without God's intervention, we don't want to do so anyway. The reason that eternal punishment never ends is because those who do not turn to God in this life cannot repay their debt to Him in the next, either. Despite their punishment, they would not desire to do so anyway.

So how does God set this right? How can salvation even occur? How can God let down a lifeline to lost people who don't want to be rescued? How can the unpayable debt be paid? God Himself makes it possible. God Himself provides the currency.

All three persons of the Godhead – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – are involved in salvation. The Father sends the Son into the world to make salvation happen; the Son accomplishes everything necessary for salvation; the Holy Spirit then applies salvation to our hearts. And because God is not limited by time, Jesus provides eternal salvation for everyone throughout history who has put their faith and trust in the one true and living God, including those who came before His incarnation in historical time.

The payment for sin, for treason, is death – death of our physical body eventually, and then eternal death separated from God. But Jesus makes payment for our sins on our behalf. He is the sacrifice made on our behalf. If you will, Jesus is the right currency; He can pay the debt we can't pay. In the Old Testament law, God established that He would overlook sin that was covered by a sacrifice. Jesus follows that same pattern that God established at the beginning.

But Jesus' sacrifice is different from the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament in the perfect way. The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was perfect. He is unique – He is fully God and fully man, and fully perfect in both those aspects. Because of that unique perfection, He is “unlike the other high priests [because] He does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.” He appears in the presence of the Father to offer Himself, Hebrews says, and “He has appeared once for all...to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.”

In His suffering and death, Jesus has provided perfect payment for us – He has substituted Himself in our place and in His death, death loses its power over us. Salvation occurs because of this beautiful exchange – His life for ours. Because Jesus is fully human, He fulfills God's original conditions on humanity to be perfectly obedient, and thus inherits eternal life.

And because He is fully God, He bridges the gap between God and us and bestows upon all who having saving faith in Him eternal life with God. Through fulfilling all that had to be done, He extends us the tow rope to safety out of our lostness; in fact, for all of His people, all the faithful, He not only extends the line but comes down and wraps it around us, securing our salvation. It's God who does the saving.

For all we do know about how salvation works, there are parts we don't. How can Jesus' gift of His life cover the sins of billions? How can a day of suffering translate into an eternity of joy and new life for all believers? That we don't know. All we know is that when the infinite God who is beyond time enters into time to save us, He is not bound by anything we can comprehend, not even time. We cannot fully understand what it is for a perfect being who is not under the curse of sin to suffer and die to rid us of that curse.

What we do know from Hebrews 10:14 is that through His sacrifice, all of us that He has saved, are being perfected and share in His perfection. When we reach eternity, we will have His perfection so that we are fully acceptable to enter God's Kingdom. Why does salvation work? Because the Father has deemed it so, that through the death of the Son, all who turn to Him will be saved, perfected, made whole, and returned to life after death.

Jesus' resurrection is proof of this truth. We are not saved through Jesus' resurrection; instead, it shows that He has overcome death and that salvation is a reality. What He experienced in resurrection, we will also experience. He died for us so we can die to ourselves and our sins and live for God; He lives again to show that we will live again with Him. Jesus' resurrection is assurance that while we are still being helicoptered out of the lostness of the woods, the lostness of this life, He knows the way home and we are guaranteed to reach it.

And while it is hard to trust that Jesus returned to life after His death, as Paul tells us over and over again, His death and resurrection were "according to the Scriptures." We don't believe it just because of the testimony of the women who saw Jesus at the tomb, or the disciples, or the 500, or Paul. We believe it because when we study the Scriptures carefully, when we examine the Old Testament and its promises and prophecies, we see that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection fit perfectly with the hundreds of clues God had left throughout the centuries about the coming Messiah and His ability to save us from sin.

Friends, we might get bogged down in the details of the Bible – the genealogies, the rules, the poetry, the lists of kings and all the places that we can barely keep track of in our minds. But the core story, the way that the Father has rescued us from lostness and brought us back to Himself through the work of His Son and the power of His Spirit, is always compelling, always amazing, always what we preach. Learn this part of the story well, and no matter who you tell the story to, it will be full of truth, full of hope, and full of life. Whether they accept it or reject it, know that it is the truth by which you are saved, and the real, historical evidence that salvation awaits all of us who repent and believe.