

Salvation, God's Great Act

Have you ever seen one of those red neon signs that says *Jesus Saves*? They are not as common as they once were, but you can still see them occasionally on rescue missions in inner cities or maybe on a rural church building. Those signs have been the brunt of a lot of jokes over the years, especially the one next door to a bank. Some people thought it was advertising that Jesus had a savings account there and you should open one, too. Those signs have sometimes been an embarrassment to Christians who wonder if the average passerby has any idea what it means or if it cheapens something that should be counted very valuable.

Whatever you think of the signs, did you know that they are at least a little redundant? Do you know what the name Jesus means? Jesus' name had a meaning just as your name has a meaning. Have you ever looked up the meaning of your name in a baby book? I did once and was sorry I did. Leith means "broad place", which doesn't seem like a very good name to me. But if you looked up the name Jesus in a baby book you would see that his name is very good—it means "Jehovah is salvation". Jesus' name means salvation. Jesus and salvation mean the same thing. That's why in the Christmas story in Matthew 1:21 it says, ". . . you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Salvation is very important, very valuable, to Christians. Let me explain why. Christians value salvation because we were lost. In order to be saved someone first must be lost. We don't send out a lifeguard for an individual who is sunning on the beach or the rescue unit for someone who is at home watching television.

The Bible clearly communicates that every one of us is lost in sin. In Isaiah 53:6 we are told, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way." In order to be lost, we must be lost from someplace or someone. The Bible explains that we are all lost from God because of sin. That is both scary and serious.

I suppose each of us can remember a time when we were lost and scared. Maybe it was as a child in

a large department store getting separated from parents. Maybe it was on a camping trip in the woods and we didn't know which way to turn. Perhaps it was in the cold and darkness of a winter storm when our car slid into a ditch on a deserted country road. Or maybe we think of being lost in terms of illness or unemployment or divorce or bankruptcy.

For me it brings back a memory from some years ago when I took a little boat out into the ocean. I had just intended to go along the shore off south Florida, but then I realized that I had gone out too far and had lost sight of land. I remember how bad it felt to be lost. I remember how good it felt to be saved.

That is why Christians value salvation. We know what it was like to be lost from God, lost in sin, forever. And once we have been saved from that lost condition of sin, we forever value salvation.

Christians also value salvation because of who it cost. Luke 19:9-10 records a conversation in the home of a man named Zacchaeus: "*Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost.'*" Jesus here defines his whole purpose for coming down from heaven to earth; it was to save sinners. It wasn't easy. It wasn't cheap. The only way to do it was at

the cost of the life of God's Son.

As you page through the Bible it seems this message is on almost every page. In I Timothy 1:15 we read, "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*" Jesus' own words in John 10:15 tell us, "*I lay down my life for the sheep.*" St Paul says in Romans 5:8, "*While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" And in II Corinthians 5:21 we read, "*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.*"

There is much more written in the Bible about the cost of our salvation. Jesus' death paid the price for our sin in order to save us from eternal lost-ness and hell. But ultimately it is a wonderful mystery far beyond my full understanding. What I do know is that I value my salvation because I know it cost

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Jesus' life!

Carla Ardenghi died on January 25, 1993. She was 28 years old and she did not have to die. Carla Ardenghi had cancer. And she was pregnant. The physicians said they could save her life with chemotherapy or surgery but she would first have to have an abortion. She chose to die so that her baby could live. When she slipped into a coma her baby was taken by Caesarean section. He was only 23 ounces, three months pre-mature. His mother died eight hours later.

Question: When her son Stephano grows up do you think he will value that his life was saved? I think he will. I think he will value his life because it cost his mother so very much. In the same way, Christians value our salvation from lost-ness and sin and into eternal life because it cost so very much.

Christians value salvation because of the difference it makes in our lives. Salvation changes us. We read in II Corinthians 5:17, ". . . *if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*" In Romans 6:22 we read, ". . . *now that you have been set free from sin, and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.*" Likewise, I Corinthians 6:9-11 says:

Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

And finally, in II Corinthians 3:18 we are told that those who have been saved are "*being transformed into (Jesus') likeness.*"

The supernatural benefits of salvation are not only for some distant future in heaven. They are for here and now. God changes us through a supernatural process that makes us look less like lost sinners and more like Jesus Christ.

Some Christians struggle with that notion. We don't see it and therefore we do not fully value salvation. We are keenly aware of what is still wrong with us. We see more of what still needs changing rather than what has already been changed.

Please understand that this is a life-long pro-

cess that does not happen all at once. It is somewhat like restoring a wrecked and rusty old car into mint condition. It takes a lot of time and work. The good news is that God promises to completely restore everyone he saves.

We must not just compare the way we are now to the way we are going to be someday. We need to compare the way we are now to the way we would have been if we were not saved. Then we begin to realize the supernatural difference God has already made in our lives.

When I look at my own life I get impatient that I am not more like Jesus. There is so much in me that still needs to be changed. I have a long way to go. But then I think about what I would be like if God had not saved me. My life would be a wreck; sin would have taken over. I hate to think about it. God has made a great difference in my life, and that is one of the reasons I value salvation.

Last, but certainly not least, Christians value salvation because of our eternal destiny. We are saved from hell to heaven, from death to life, from the eternal consequences of sin to the eternal pleasures of God. According to John 3:36, "*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.*" And in John 10:28 Jesus said, "*I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.*"

If you were to die today, do you know for sure that you would go to heaven? Anyone who is a Christian, who has experienced this salvation the Bible talks about so frequently, can know without a doubt. God says so. God promises it. That is valuable beyond price!

I try to imagine what life would be like without this assurance. I would be afraid to drive a car on the highway for fear I would be hit and killed and not know if I would go to heaven. I would be afraid to have medical care. I would want to stay home all the time. But then I could not go to sleep because the house might catch fire and I might die.

But I don't have to worry about eternal life at all because it comes with salvation in Jesus Christ. It's a sure thing. So I have the freedom to live life with the assurance that heaven is guaranteed through Jesus Christ. It's no wonder Christians value salvation!

Yet, having lots of reasons to value salvation

isn't enough. True value requires a response. And the number one response to salvation is gratitude.

Have you watched the responses of television game show guests when they win big prizes? They go wild with gratitude. They jump up and down and say, "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" They often kiss and hug the host. All because they have won \$25,000 or a trip to Tahiti or a car they never wanted, anyway.

So, how does someone say thank you for salvation? With the wildest gratitude possible!

Several years ago my brother stopped by the side of the road to help a lady who had been in an accident. No one else had bothered to help her. She not only thanked him then, she sent him a gift and still calls and sends gifts every year because he helped her.

The obvious response to salvation is to thank God over and over again. Thank him every day. Give him gifts. Sing. Shout. Praise him. Show gratitude.

It is unimaginable that a drowning swimmer who is rescued by a lifeguard or someone trapped in a burning building who is rescued by a firefighter would fail to thank the lifeguard or the firefighter who saved his or her life. And it is unimaginable that any Christian who has been saved from sin and eternal death would not want to thank God. Colossians 1:12-14 says:

... giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

And in II Corinthians 9:15 it says, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"

The second response to the value of salvation is faith which is a bit harder to understand. You see, faith is trust in something or someone, like a bridge or a bank or a boyfriend. If you trust a bridge you will drive your car over it. When you trust a bank you are not afraid to put your money in it. You trust your boyfriend so you go out with him. That's faith. Salvation is received by faith. God does the work.

Put your hand in the hand of God and trust him for whatever is the issue or crisis of life right now.

God gives what is needed to save us. We just have to believe him and receive it.

Suppose you are drowning in the North Atlantic. The Coast Guard sends a rescue helicopter. A diver comes down a rope and reaches out and says, "Take my hand." What do you do? If you think he is trying to rip you off, you keep up the doggy paddle. If you think the helicopter is not airworthy you research its certificate. If you question the credentials of the diver you interview him. If you believe and trust him, you grab his hand and are saved. That is faith.

Faith is grabbing the hand of God. It is taking him at his word. Faith is believing God. It is the only way to be saved. Good deeds never saved any-

one. Neither did baptism or church membership or growing up in a nice family. Ephesians 2:8 says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith."

The bottom line is that it works! Have faith in God for salvation and you

are saved. It always works.

But just as we are saved by faith, we should also live by faith. If we can trust God to save us from sin and guarantee us heaven we can trust him with our jobs, our families, our health and everything else. Nothing is as important as our souls and no time is as long as forever. Romans 1:17 says, "The righteous will live by faith." It is a perfectly logical response to the value of salvation: live by faith! Put your hand in the hand of God and trust him for whatever is the issue or crisis of life right now. Faith is what the saved life is all about. The word "faith" appears over 300 times in the New Testament alone. It is the way to go!

A third response to the value of salvation is our lifestyle. Gratitude should be more than a few words; it ought to be all of our lives. It only makes sense to live in a way that reflects what happened to us—that we have been saved.

The movie *The Doctor* is the true story of a surgeon who was arrogant and insensitive to co-workers, patients, family members, everyone—until the surgeon got cancer and the doctor became the patient. Then he saw everything differently. Fortu-

nately, his life was saved and he returned to the practice of medicine, but he was very different because of what happened to him.

Colossians 3:17 says, “. . . *whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*” And Galatians 5:22-25:

. . . the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

It is a lifestyle of gratitude. We are different in the way we treat people, in the way we see the world and in the way we relate to one another. In other words, anyone saved from sin who really values salvation will adopt a lifestyle for the Savior and against sin.

A fourth response to the value of salvation is witness, telling someone else. Think of it this way: Suppose you had a painful disease with obvious symptoms and no known cure. You would be thrilled if you found a physician who cured you and saved your life. But what if you then met a neighbor or even saw a stranger with the same disease? Wouldn't you want to tell that person how her life could also be saved? Or would you say, “Sickness and doctors are very private. Two things I never talk about are politics and where to be cured of a terminal illness.”

Come on! Tell everyone who needs what you needed. Get the help you got to everyone else who needs it. Send everyone possible to the Great Physician who cures and saves the soul. Acts 1:8 invites all Christians to be witnesses. And II

Corinthians 5:20 says, “*We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.*”

Before we finish I want to be sure to ask the most important question anyone can ever be asked: Have you been saved? Do you have God's salvation from sin to eternal life? If yes, value your salvation. If no, receive your salvation. Pray to God right now and tell him about your faith. Tell him you receive his gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. If you are not sure, make sure. It is the most important decision and relationship of your life. And it lasts forever!

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faithmatters.fm
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