

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN PRO CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

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Scripture: Various

"Back to the Basics: Understanding the Foundational Principle of Salvation"

WHAT IS SALVATION?

What is salvation? Now that's a question we don't hear that often, maybe because it should be self-explanatory? Some years ago when we were part of the old church, the Episcopal Church, there was a discussion between a bishop and the clergy about the Anglican Church in Africa. And during the course of the conversation, the bishop said something like, "Well, we all know they (African Anglicans) are preoccupied with saving lost souls." As if to say that this really should not be the most important work of the Church. Indeed, there are many clergy in many churches who think it odd that we should be concerned at all with the salvation of people. They say that such things should not be our concern, but God's.

Well, let me just say that while God has the final word when it comes to salvation and it is His responsibility ultimately, we as believers have an obligation to get the Word out, to bear testimony to the truth and love of Christ, to point people through our words and actions to the reality of the Lord Jesus Christ and to pray for the salvation of our family members, friends, neighbors and co-workers. Right? This is why Jesus calls us to be the salt and light of the world.

"To be saved" in the Bible simply means to be saved from judgment for our sins and to be given eternal life rather than having our life end on this earth and face eternal separation from God. Now I don't know about you but I think this is a very important issue. We know from life itself, and from our faith that there is more to life than meets the naked eye. There is another realm. Creation itself testifies to this truth. It is why we read in the **Psalm 19:1** that *"the heavens declare the glory of God, the sky displays His handiwork."* And as believers we need to defend the faith, but before you can defend it, you need to know it and why it is true. Throughout this year I will be giving a series of apologetic sermons which will look at why we believe what we believe and how to make a case for what we believe.

However, before going into different aspects of the faith, we need to start with the basics. We need to look at the fundamental principle of salvation. And the reason I begin with this topic today is that our three appointed readings all deal with this issue. Normally they have some correlation but today they fit hand in glove. For in our first reading from Genesis we have the foundation for foundational principle of salvation. In our second reading from Romans we have its explanation, and in our third reading from John we have its proclamation. So there is the foundation, the explanation and the proclamation of the fundamental principle of salvation all in our three readings! Let's now begin with the foundation.

THE FOUNDATION

Here in **Genesis 12**, we have the call of Abram. God calls Abram to be in relationship with Him and promises Abram certain things. We call this the Abrahamic Covenant. God has Abram change his name

(which means "*exalted father*") to Abraham which means "*the exalted father of many*" to show the new relationship Abraham now has with God and the reality of the promises God has made.

You may remember during our first year at our new location I did a whole sermon series on the Covenants in the Bible. If there is one way to understand the plan of God which is actually the plan of salvation for humanity, it is to understand the covenants. A covenant is a binding agreement between two parties. It consists of a promise or promises, an obligation, a ratification (outward sign of the agreement) and a fulfillment. There are six covenants: the Adamic Covenant, the Noahic Covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant, and the New Covenant. In fact, *testament* is the old English word used for the Greek word, *diatheke*, that actually means "covenant." Hence, when we divide our Bibles into the Old and New Testaments, it really means the Old and New Covenants.

Now with the Abrahamic Covenant, God promises to bless Abraham and his descendants – and how will Abraham experience this blessing? Through faith. That's what we read later in **Genesis 15:6**: "***Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.***" To be righteous means to be morally pure. Now was Abraham morally pure? No. Was it because of anything he did "good" that made him morally pure? No. The only thing that He did was believe God, literally it means here to trust God, to take Him at His Word.

So what is the foundation of the foundational principle of salvation? God's grace. What is God's grace? It is underserved favor. It is all the good we receive in this life even though we don't deserve it. Do we deserve life? No. Did we have anything to do with our creation or existence? No. It was just given to us. Hence, it is a gift. The bodies we have - *fearfully and wonderfully made* - as stated in **Psalms 139**, our brains, heart, all of our organs, muscle and skin tissue, blood cells, skeletal structure, everything was given to us. We had absolutely nothing to do with it. And let's face it, how in the world does someone come up with the human body and make it? It is beyond human comprehension. And on top of that we have all the varieties of animal species, and plant life, and geography and planets and moons and stars.

But even besides such wonders we can see and know that we are more than just physical animated bodies. We have been made in our Father's image. We have a mind that thinks outside the body. That is, we can think of realities beyond what we simply can see at a point and place in time. We have minds that can communicate and reason and create. We have emotions that can feel the depth of the human heart. We have a will to make decisions and act on those decisions and know right from wrong. We have a spirit that can communicate with the divine and yearns to give glory and thanks to the One who made us. All of the above are gifts from God, they flow from His grace. We had absolutely nothing to do with them. So God gives us life. We don't have a choice but we do have a choice on how we use the gifts of life.

And if we choose to use them unwisely, then God has to hold us accountable. Adam and Eve chose unwisely. We now all have that same predisposition. We do wrong and the only way that our wrong can be covered is for God to forgive us and the only way God can forgive us is to have some one take the fall for us, the basis for that forgiveness there has to be payment. And we can pay it ourselves or let God pay it for us. For we are not simply talking about doing a few bad things, we are talking about a heart issue - my way or God's

way. Do we want to be like Frank Sinatra and sing "I'll do it my way," or do we want to be like the Son of God who said the Father, "Not my way, but your way be done."

Eternal life is no different. It is simply a continuation of the gift of life. The truth is we were not created to die. Death came into the picture because of our rebellion against God's gift. And so God provides a way out and we now have another choice. And this way out is the result of his mercy which is another expression of His grace. For if grace is getting what we don't deserve, mercy is not getting what we deserve.

And so this leads us to the explanation

THE EXPLANATION

Here in our second reading in **Romans 4**, the Apostle Paul is quoting from **Gen. 15:6**, and he clearly explains why it is by grace that we have everything including salvation. Paul writes, *"What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. ⁵ But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, ⁶ just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:⁷ 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, And whose sins have been covered.'⁸ 'Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.'"*

So you see if salvation was based on what we do, then we can get credit. But since everything comes from God, then we can't really boast before God because He already gives us everything we need to live and be in relationship with Him. Moreover, we don't even get all that we deserve in light of our sin and wrong doing. Note how Paul then in **verses 7-8 (see above)** quotes David from **Psalms 32:1-2a**.

Then Paul writes, *"For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; 15 for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation". 16 For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, 17 (as it is written, "A father of many nations have I made you") in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist."*

So what Paul is saying here is that if Abraham was justified by God *BEFORE* the giving of the Law how can people say that keeping the Law of God is the basis for our salvation? They can't! But that's what many Jews had come to believe and that is what many still believe today but not just Jews, but also Moslems, and Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormons, and even the Eastern religions of Hinduism and Buddhism because it is all about doing good to get a better standing before their so called god or gods.

God’s Word, however, is clear. *Ephesians 2:8-9* sums it up, “***For by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourselves it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, that no one should boast.***”

So *the foundation* of the foundational principle of salvation is that life is a gift that flows from the grace of God and so too eternal life as it is simply a continuation of this life but in a transformational way and that this gift is received by faith. And *the explanation* is that it has to be this way because otherwise we could boast before God and the truth is no one can boast before God because He gave you everything in the first place and on top of that everyone has rebelled against God and His ways and done wrong, so even if they do lots of good they still have the self-centered problem the Bible calls sin.

Are good works and keeping of the Law still important and necessary? Yes. But rather than forming the basis for our relationship with Him, they show the transformation that *God* is doing within us and they flow from our relationship with Him. Hence, the Apostle James says in **James 2:26**, that “***faith without works is dead.***” True faith will produce good works, but good works don’t produce true faith. And now this leads us to the proclamation.

THE PROCLAMATION

What is the proclamation of the foundational principle of salvation? To let the world know that we need to be born again, and that *the means* through which we are born again and receive salvation is through God’s ultimate act of grace and love – the giving of His only Son, Jesus Christ. So in our Gospel lesson from **John 3:1-17**, Jesus tells Nicodemus that one must be born again in order to enter the Kingdom of God. In other words, there needs to be a spiritual rebirth in order to be in right relationship with our Father in heaven. And this spiritual birth has not only been made possible because of Jesus but it is only through faith in Him - acceptance and trust in what He has done - His death and resurrection, and in Who He is, the only Son of God - that eternal life can be experienced. Otherwise, we are cutting ourselves off from the very One who gives us life in the first place.

In fact, when Jesus says we must be born of water and Spirit, this is a reference to our baptism. And baptism literally means to be fully immersed. The water represents the Spirit of God. Like water, it is the Spirit of God that cleanses us from sin and gives us new life. And we go under the water of baptism and then come up, these actions reflect the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are fully immersed in the Spirit of God and in the work Christ has accomplished for us. As a result we are new people, sons and daughters of the Most High. And so now this message of truth and love must be proclaimed to all people. Or how else will they find out about it? Jesus said, “***For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.***”

This, my brothers and sisters, is what we proclaim, this is why salvation is such an important issue. And it is the only thing that can change lives because it points us to the only true life changer! In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!