

THE MIRACLE OF PEACE
UNLIKELY RESTORATIONS
PSALM 85

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A popular prayer on the e-mail circuit goes something like this: So far today God, I've done alright. I haven't gossiped, haven't lost my temper, haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, overindulgent, or told anyone to mind their own business and to stay out of mine. I'm really glad about that. But in a few minutes God, I'm going to get out of bed, and from then on, I'm going to need a whole lot of help. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Here we are just 17 days away from Christmas 2002. If you find yourself needing a lot of help, then you have come to the very spot to find the wondrous resources of a God who fails us not. I'd like to talk about that today.

It has been said that if our greatest need had been for information, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been for money, God would have sent us an economist. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need is salvation, so God sent us a Savior. Simply stated, Christmas for Christians is this: Christ our Savior is born. Even the psalmist could foresee it. So let us never forget it. The real miracle of Christmas is that God and sinners are reconciled.

BECAUSE WE HAVE A SAVIOR, PARDON IS PLENTIFUL.

Lord, you showed favor to your land. You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin (Psalm 85:1-2).

In the movie, A Christmas Story, some kids on a school playground trick a child by the name of Flick into sticking his tongue on a frozen flag pole. Sure enough, the awful happens. Flick's tongue sticks to the pole. The bell rings. The kids rush to class. Finally the teacher is forced to call the EMS to release Flick. Sensing that Flick has not acted alone the teacher says to the class, "I am sure the guilt you feel in this room is far worse than any punishment you might receive. So that is all I am going to say about that."

Ralphie, who put Flick up to it in the first place, leans over to his friend and comments, "Adults love to say stuff like that, but kids know better. Kids know it's always better not to get caught than to admit anything."

If we had no savior, all of us might be better to stuff our sins, keep a straight face, and defend our innocence all the way home. If all that juggling is making you tired, I have good news for you. Christ the Savior is born. *If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all*

unrighteousness (I John 1:9).

As I sorted through some of my father's belongings this week in moving him to a nursing home, I thought about a story Bishop Arthur Moore used to tell about his own father and in so doing learned the pardoning love of God.

Bishop Moore said, "When I was a boy, I used to stop at the neighborhood store every afternoon after school and get a snack. I was told by the proprietor that I could have anything I wanted. I soon learned that anything I ordered was absolutely free. It was such a good deal that I began to invite my friends to come, as well, and so sometimes there would be a whole group of us. We ate and drank whatever we wanted and all of it was absolutely free. It was one of the best deals anyone could imagine. For years I just accepted it."

"It wasn't until my father died and I was sorting through his belongings that I discovered in the back of his sock drawer a whole stack of receipts from that neighborhood store. On each one was listed everything I had purchased at that little store. Across each receipt was stamped in bold, red letters **Paid in Full.**" "That day," said Bishop Moore, "I began to understand what salvation meant." Salvation is free but it is not cheap. *Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation* (Psalms 85:7).

BECAUSE WE HAVE A SAVIOR, FAITHFULNESS IS FEASIBLE.

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground (Psalm 85:10-11).

In a *B.C.* cartoon, the pre-historic lady, standing at the Rock of Advice asks, "What do you give a person full of empty promises?" "An empty box," replies the pre-historic advisor. With that the lady waddles over to the gift rock and says, "I'd like an empty box. Would you gift wrap it, please?"

If life were just, a lot of us would get some nicely wrapped empty boxes for Christmas. We have left undone those things we ought to have done and made more promises than we are capable of keeping. Trying to save ourselves we have sunk ourselves in over-commitments, soaked ourselves with anxiety, and filled our lives with things. No wonder we have trouble being faithful. In our rush to keep up, we neglect the things that are really important.

When I was first learning to use a computer, I completed my first sermon on the word processor and proceeded to erase the whole thing about 11 p.m. Saturday night. In an expression of exasperation, I explained my plight to the IBM executive who had set me up with the thing in the first place. With a twinkle in his eye, Norm said, "Oh, Howard, I forgot to tell you. At IBM we install a special chip for pastors. When they write sermons too poor to deliver, the computer automatically erases them."

I don't know about you, but I've pushed a lot of wrong buttons in my life. Have

you? God is in the restoration business. When we hit the wrong key eliminating all we hoped to be, he restores our soul.

When Microsoft developed their Millennium edition, they inserted a new feature called Systems Restore. Now when your computer crashes taking the sermon with it, you can simply push a button and restore it immediately.

The grace of God is like that. When things crash for you and you would give anything to have it back, you can find God's grace sufficient for every need. When steadfast love and faithfulness meet, you and God start working for good even when things are bad. *Faithfulness will spring up from the ground and righteousness will look down from the sky. The Lord will give us what is good* (Psalm 85:11-12).

BECAUSE WE HAVE A SAVIOR, RIGHTEOUSNESS IS REACHABLE.
Righteousness and peace will kiss each other (Psalm 85:10).

Woody Allen once said in a speech, "We stand at the crossroads. One path leads to destruction, the other path to annihilation. Let us pray to God that we make the right choice." Is that our destiny?

Americans and Europeans spend 17 billion dollars a year on pet food, 4 billion dollars more than the estimated amount needed to provide basic health and nutrition to everyone in the world. Europeans spend 11 billion dollars a year on ice cream, 2 billion dollars more than the estimated cost of providing clean water and safe sewers for the world's population. American men and women spend 8 billion dollars a year on cosmetics, 2 billion dollars more than it would cost to provide basic education for everyone in the world.

Let me make it clear, I like pets, I love ice cream and most of you look better with a little make-up on. But there is something wrong with a world where the distribution of goods is so disproportionate.

We tout our lifestyle as the model for the world without understanding if everyone enjoyed our way of life we would all be doomed, because we would consume it all in a generation. Righteousness becomes reachable when there is a Savior in the midst. *O, Lord, will you not revive us again?* (Psalms 85:6).

E.T. is back in a theater near you. This frog-like character, that invades our planet from another world, has a heart that glows and a finger that heals. Discovered in a garage, he stirs the love of children and the anger of elders. So he is hunted down, killed, only to rise again and ascend to the heavens. Now he is coming again. I remember walking from the first showing of E.T. saying to myself, "Wonder where Spielberg stole his plot? I think I've read it before."

Someone greater than a fictional character has invaded our world. He, too, was born in an unlikely place and managed to enlist both the love and hate of

humans. Salvation is not magic. Salvation is miracle. Christ the Savior is born. In his own words, Jesus said: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, the release for the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor* (Luke 4:18). Because there is a Savior, pardon is plentiful. Because there is a Savior, faithfulness is feasible. Because there is a Savior, righteousness is reachable.

BECAUSE WE HAVE A SAVIOR, PEACE IS POSSIBLE.

I saw this sign in a place of business presumably put there by employees.

We intend to have a nervous breakdown
Immediately following the holidays.
We've earned it, we deserve it.
And frankly, we are looking forward to it.

In a Hank Ketchum cartoon, Dennis the Menace is digging furiously through his father's work bench. When Dad asks Dennis what he is doing, Dennis replies, "I'm looking for some rope. Mr. Wilson says he is just about at the end of his."

Some of my best advice on life came from a country doctor in the little town where I served right out of seminary. I was 27 years old, pastoring a 250-member church, stretching a 25-hour work week into 65-70 hours most weeks. I started having chest pains, so I went to see the town doc. He did an EKG, poked around on me for a few minutes then sat down on a stool and said, "Reverend, you don't have heart trouble, you've just been eating too much fried chicken. Besides, I have watched you scurrying around town. You think you are Jesus, but I need to tell you that you are not Jesus. You are just one of the boys, so relax, live, try to accept people where they are. You'll feel better if you do." Where is there peace for you this Christmas?

We recently got some new equipment around the church. If one of my sermons throws you into cardiac arrest, we can now shock you back to life, provided those of us trained remember how to use the thing.

I am grateful for the new equipment, but the reviving we need most will not be accomplished with medical equipment. Spiritual revival requires a Divine miracle of love and grace. So let us leave with this prayer on our lips. *O Lord, will you revive us again, that we may rejoice in you? Amen.*

