

How Can Jesus Save Me?

John 3:14-21

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On my way to an early morning hospital visit this week, today's sermon flashed before my eyes. On the bumper of an old pick up truck there was this sticker which said, "Jesus Saves." Perhaps only in Nashville, the buckle of the Bible belt, can we find such statements on bumper stickers. The words immediately brought responses in my mind. On the one hand I found myself singing. *We have heard the joyful sound Jesus saves. Jesus saves. Spread the tidings all around. Jesus saves. Jesus saves.* The song was hardly off my lips when I found myself shivering. I still remember hot-eyed, buttonholing evangelists who had the ability to get up in your face, usually with bad breath, and shout, "Brother, are you saved?" in a zealous effort to carve one more notch on their spiritual pistol at the annual revival meeting.

My observation is that most people today respond to the affirmation, "Jesus Saves" by simply asking, "How is that possible?" "How could that be?" And so it is at the crossroads of salvation that I want us to think together today. "How can Jesus save me?"

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son." What does that mean? Why do we lift high the cross? How can we glory in this brutal means of capital punishment? What is the cross of the Church?

Some years ago a family decided to present a family history to their father for his 65th birthday. They hired a researcher to research the family history, but they found a criminal in the closet. In fact, Uncle Harry had been electrocuted for his crime. So the family asked the researcher if he could soften it a little bit for this festive occasion. The researcher came forward in the moment and wrote these words: "Uncle Harry occupied a chair of applied electricity at one of our more important government institutions. He was attached to his position with the strongest of ties and his death came as a real shock."

Through the centuries, we have softened the shock of the cross. We wear it as jewelry. We weave it into architecture. The old rugged cross, it is not so rugged anymore.

Let us remember, it was Rome's cruelest form of capital punishment. Let us remember, no Roman citizen would ever be sentenced to be crucified on a cross. However we dress it up, let us remember today, our Lord was tried in a kangaroo court and beaten with whips lined with metal, driven through a crowd like a common criminal, nailed down to a piece of wood, hung naked against the shining sky, jeered by the crowds, ridiculed by strangers, and forsaken by God.

Then we have the audacity to sing at church, *Upon that cross of Jesus, mine eye at times can see, the very dying form of One who suffered there for me.* How can these things be? As someone asked, “What keeps the cross from being divine child abuse?” On the surface it is puzzling.

So it is necessary to move beyond the obvious and begin to find in the midst of it more than meets the eye. At the Cross there is Divine love in action. Redemption is realized and death is swallowed up in victory. Unless we can get to the meaning, it stands as a scandal for all the world to see. Let us shine light on the cross, for it is the means by which Jesus saves.

At the Cross, divine love is activated. *God so loved the world that He gave His only Son.* That statement alone makes our religion unique. God is personal. God reaches for His very own to save us. He is involved with us. Not once does the Qur’an apply the word “love” to Allah.

Aristotle once said it would be eccentric for anyone to assume that Zeus loved them. The Bible reveals God’s reckless desire to get His family back. So, the Cross stands as a symbol of how far God will go to claim His own; that somehow God, Himself, is dying there for you and me.

Paul put it this way in Romans 5:8, *God demonstrated His love for us in this: While we were yet sinners Christ died for us.* Divine love is activated at the cross.

When our son Wes was 25 years old he had open heart surgery to replace the aortic valve. On the morning of his surgery, I stood by his bed. Wes was afraid. I was concerned. As we waited, I pulled him up into my arms in a fatherly way and gave him a hug of assurance and said, “O Wes, I wish I could take your place in surgery today.” And Wes replied, “I wish you would!” That is exactly what God has done for us. Charles Wesley exclaimed: *O Love divine what hast thou done? The immortal God hath died for me.* At the cross, divine love is activated.

At the cross, human redemption is realized. Somewhere along the tides of time, the plane of life got hijacked. While God directed its takeoff from the divine control tower, somehow the devil managed to get a boarding pass. When the plane had reached its cruising altitude, the devil produced his weapons, created chaos among the passengers, stormed the cockpit and took control of its destination. So the plane flew on fearfully through history from airport to airport until it landed on the tarmac of Jerusalem, an outpost of the Roman Empire, during the reign of Tiberius Cesar. There, the Son of God offered Himself as the sole hostage in exchange for the passengers and crew.¹ Jesus paid it all! All to Him I owe.

There is the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. In Jesus’ day, a relative had to pay off the bad mortgages of a family member. However you frame it and fashion it, you come to an understanding that somehow at Calvary, Jesus Christ bought back his own. Jesus saves!

At the cross, death is swallowed up in victory. As Tony Campolo likes to say, “Friday may be here, but Sunday is coming. Yea, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of Lent, let us fear no evil, for Easter is coming.” We walk through the valleys of death, but we are the people who believe in the resurrection. Even in the midst of Lent we proclaim the resurrection.

In chapter 15 of I Corinthians, Paul writes his thesis on immortality. He frames it in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He talks about the seeds planted and dying in the earth, then giving sprout and coming forth to new life. So he says, that you and I find life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Then he says, “If Christ has not been raised from the dead, your faith is futile and your sins are endless. We are to be pitied more than all people.” Then Paul says, “but death has lost its sting. Death is swallowed up in victory. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory.” So we make a sign of the cross on people’s brow saying, “Dust you are and to dust you shall return. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory.” Jesus saves. That is at the core of our faith.

The question that prompted the sermon today is, “How can I be saved?” “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but shall have everlasting life.” *Whosoever* surely means you and me. How can I experience salvation? Let me suggest some ways.

First of all, I can open the door. Christ Himself stands at the door of your heart and knocks, but fearing He is the landlord coming to collect the rent we do not have, we ignore His knocking. All along what He really wishes and desires is that we would open the door and let Him come in. God is a God of grace, generosity, and love. He is not going to storm your life. He is going to stand at the door and knock and knock and knock and knock. Why don’t you let Him come in?

One of my dear friends, Peck Hickman, is the former Athletic Director of the University of Louisville. It was under Peck’s leadership that the University became a major sports school. Peck invited me from time-to-time to go to the ball games with him. Often I was too busy. I would usually attend late, get my ticket and end up in the nosebleed section of Freedom Hall. Finally, one day after years of insistence, I said to Peck I wanted to plan a day apart from the church, no weddings today. I want to go to a ball game. His driver came to pick Sandy and myself up. We were driven right to the door. A policeman ushered us into a beautiful dining room where we had dinner together. When we finished, we were ushered to a suite where we had all the refreshments we wanted. It was the perfect place to watch a ball game. Sandy said, “Why haven’t we done this before?” I said to myself, “Why haven’t we?” Why haven’t you? Accept an invitation from Jesus Christ to simply open the door and let Him in. How can I be saved? I can let Him in.

How can I be saved? I can accept His grace. Paul Tillich used to say, “Grace is the acceptance of our acceptance.” It is sensing deep in our hearts that it is not what

we do, but by His gracious invitation that we are saved.

In the powerful musical, *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean is paroled after 19 years of imprisonment for stealing a loaf of bread. The years had been hard on him and had made him a hardened criminal. He, like people today, found it extremely difficult to transfer back into the community. Nobody wanted him around. Finally, the Bishop of Digne took him in, treated him with utmost hospitality, gave him a beautiful dinner, invited him to his finest guest room, turned back the bed and said, "My place is your place." Jean was not trusting of the Bishop's kindness, so he makes off with the silver in the middle of the night.

Before breakfast the next morning there is a knock at the door. The authorities have arrested Jean. They presented him back to the bishop. With a simple word he is back in jail for the rest of his life. The bishop, in a great act of mercy, grabs the candlesticks and says, "Jean, you forgot I gave you these, too. Take them and go." There, as the authorities leave, the condemned and the savior stand face-to-face. The bishop says to Jean Valjean, "My brother, you no longer belong to what is evil. You belong to what is good. I have bought your soul to save it from the black thoughts and the spirit of perdition. And now I give you to God." *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.*

Dolly, in a Family Circus cartoon, was at church with her family. She turned to her mother as the congregation sings and asks, "Exactly what is so amazing about grace anyway?" I will tell you what is amazing about it: it is unearned love, it is unmerited love, it is unconditional love. Grace comes right out of the heart of God Himself. Accept His grace.

How can I be saved? I can rise up and live by faith. Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. It is living on tip-toe in anticipation of something I believe down deep in my soul. To live by faith is to live in trust of God.

Perhaps the most powerful movie I have ever watched is *Saving Private Ryan*. Tom Hanks, as Captain Miller, along with a ragtag squad of soldiers in World War II, give their lives in search of Private Ryan so he can be returned to his parents. Private Ryan's parents had already lost their other sons in that terrible war that many of you know first hand. As they move in the search of private Ryan, they argue with one another and sometimes fight with one another, "Why on earth are we risking our lives for Private Ryan? He is probably not worth it anyway." Still, they push on. Finally at the big battle at the bridge, one by one, they give their lives for this no-named person called Private Ryan. Finally there is Captain Miller, laying wounded and taking his final breaths, looking up into the eye of the private, saying just two words, "Earn it."

The movie fast forwards and now Ryan is an old man. Once more he goes to the rows of crosses that help us remember the high price of our freedom. He finds the grave of Captain Miller and falls to his knees, saying, "Every day I think about

what you said to me that day at the bridge. I have lived my life the best I could. I hope that was enough.”

We do not live good lives to earn a reward. We live good lives in deep gratitude for the gift of life that has been given to us. We live good lives trying to get credits on the heavenly report card. We live good lives because God Almighty gave His life for us. Jesus saves. Jesus saves.

Give the winds a mighty voice. Jesus saves! Jesus saves!
Let the nations now rejoice. Jesus saves! Jesus saves!
Shout salvation full and free.
Highest hills and deepest caves.
This our song of victory. Jesus saves! Jesus saves!

Amen.

NOTES

1. William R. Bouknight, The Authoritative Word: Preaching the Truth in a Skeptical Age (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001)

