

SALVATION AS HEALING

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Current concepts of salvation are very dependent upon legal images, primarily those of western justice. The courtroom scene is invoked to represent the way in which God “saves” us, primarily from the verdict and sentence of “Guilty”. Consequently the mechanics of the saving process centre on the payment of penalties, substitutionary punishment, and the adjustment of the accused’s legal standing (the blotting out of the Guilty verdict, satisfaction for sin, writing the person’s name in the “right” book etc.)

While the New Testament does indeed make use of legal and judicial concepts in describing God’s salvation of mankind, the stress on (and development of) such concepts and terminology obscures some other very significant understandings.

In both Catholic and Protestant thought theology has tended to concentrate on the question of legal forgiveness. How is it obtained? What is the process God uses to effect forgiveness? What happens if forgiveness is not achieved?

Why the stress on the need for legal forgiveness? Because mankind is conceived of as being criminally guilty, and thus under executive sentence of doom from God. If a person is not legally forgiven, then that person will suffer the penalty--usually expressed as enduring the torments of Hell inflicted by a vindictive God for all eternity.

Such a stress on the penalty of Hell explains the great need (especially in the popular mind) to ensure that this penalty is not applied, and that the individual receives legal forgiveness from God (or his representatives).

From a Catholic perspective the selling of Indulgences, paid Masses for the Dead, even the doctrine of Purgatory itself relate to this concept of being legally forgiven and paying for sins committed so that the awful penalty of eternal torture will not be enforced.

Man’s main objective is therefore to be forgiven, to know that legally you are not debarred from salvation. Hence the procedure of granting Absolution, the Last Rites and so on, which attempt to guarantee that the person is rendered legally “Not Guilty” in the eyes of God.

Protestant denial of such practices has not eliminated the basic drive--to acquire “divine absolution”, the “Not Guilty verdict. So while Luther rejected the means by which this divine legal forgiveness was achieved, he still viewed it as being the prime objective. Jesus Christ is therefore viewed as the legal payment for sin, as the substitute in the dock, and only through his blood is the penalty God will impose averted.

Once again the emphasis is on the individual's legal standing before God. The need is for legal absolution from the paying of the penalty. The appalling alternative is that one ends up in the eternal flames of never-ending torment--evidently a major incentive to ensuring a "Not Guilty" verdict is obtained from God.

Such a view of God and his salvation does not find expression in the gospel Christ brought. It was not a question of ensuring you were legally "without fault" before God, like a "no-fault" insurance claim!

Forgiveness is surely important, but not as a guarantee to avoid punishment. Salvation is not a question of making sure you have paid your premium for fire insurance! God is not to be viewed as a hostile Judge determined to sentence all the Guilty, and only allowing those who hold "Get out of Hell" cards ("the forgiven") to profit from his salvation. This highly-objectivized view of salvation ignores the personality of God and of us, and reduces God's salvation to a mechanistic kind of contractual process whereby when all the right actions are performed then salvation is automatic.

Jesus came to be God's salvation: primarily as he revealed what this salvation is. Not a mechanical process or some objective legal transaction, but the relationship of persons. Salvation is subjective in the sense that it applies to and inside of us, rather than somewhere "out there". (Those who view the salvation effected through the cross of Jesus as being concerned with taking care of our legal standing before God see the ceremonialism of the act. As someone who subscribed to this legal view once remarked, Christ's sacrifice on the cross could have taken place on the other side of the Universe and it would have had the same effect. But the truth is that Jesus died here on the cross. It was not some kind of rite or ritual that had to be undergone to provide for the legal readjustment of sinners before God. Only the contrary, the cross says and means something far different.)

Above all, God's revelation of salvation through Jesus is expressed in terms of divine healing of the sin-damaged individual. It surely is no coincidence that having been announced as the one who makes God known (John 1:18), Jesus spent the vast majority of his ministry in acts of physical healing. Jesus told those around him: "When he [a man] looks at me, he sees the one who sent me" (John 12:45 NIV) and "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him...Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:7,9 NIV)

In the announcement of Jesus' birth, the angel tells Joseph, "She [Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21 NIV). Salvation here is understood as meaning saved from sin. Now of course this could be taken as expressing the same image as the legal model mentioned above. But note first that they are saved from their sins. Not a prescription as to the judicial absolution of sins.

But there is something far more important here. As already noted, Christ's main method of demonstrating God to the world was through acts of healing. "Wherever he went--into

villages, towns or countryside--they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed.” (Mk. 6:56 NIV). All perfectly clear. A wonderful description of the healing emphasis in the life of Christ.

But that word “healed” in this text hides a greater truth. The verb is the Greek word *sozo*. Which is the exact same word as used to describe salvation! So Matthew’s description of Jesus noted above could be translated “Because he he will heal his people from their sins.” Why? Because in this case the word used for “save” is *sozo* too.

The insight that salvation means healing is essential to a proper understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus. When blind Bartimaeus shouts out to Jesus, asking to receive his sight, Jesus replies: “Go, your faith has healed you.” (Mark 10:52). “Healed”? Well, it could as well be “saved”--for the word is *sozo* again. For through his healing he was saved; receiving God’s salvation he was healed.

As Jesus walks towards Jairus’ house, messengers come to inform him not to bother continuing his mission. The girl has died. But Jesus turns to Jairus and tells him: “Don’t be afraid; just believe and she will be healed.” (Luke 8:50 NIV). The girl was dead, and Jesus speaks of healing? Yes, says Jesus, she can be rescued from death by Jesus the Life-giver, she can be saved from death. And in order to be saved, she would have to be re-made, made well again, totally healed. Healing is salvation again, as demonstrated by the word *sozo* being used once more.

Other examples could be added. Perhaps the point is best made by the woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. In Luke’s account it is noted that “No one could heal her.” (Luke 8:43). Here the word *therapeuo* is used--from which we get “therapeutic”. She’d been to the doctors, but without getting any therapeutic benefit. The idea here is more the idea of being medically treated.

Then after the miracle she is discovered and so “In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed.” (Luke 8:47). Now the word for healing becomes *iaomai*. Meaning: to be cured of an illness, to be delivered from ills. So she is specifically referred to as having received a cure for her particular health problem.

But then Jesus says to her: “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.” (Luke 8:48 NIV). Here at the climax of the story the word for healing is *sozo*. Not merely medically treated. Not just healed from a particular illness. No: this woman experiences the transforming power of God that brings salvation-healing. There would seem to be no reason to use these different words for healing unless the writer (Luke--a doctor!) wanted to reveal some kind of different meaning to the healing that is shown as the incident progresses.

This essential meaning of salvation as healing is further demonstrated by those words of Jesus to the healed woman: “Your faith has healed you. Go in peace.” Just one chapter

previously Jesus is recorded as saying to the woman who anointed his feet: “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.” (Luke 7:50 NIV). In the Greek, Jesus’ announcement to the two women is identical, since it uses the word *sozo* which is translated as “saved” or “healed” as the context dictates.

Consequently, that famous verse in Ephesians 2:8 which describes God’s salvation could have the word “saved” replaced by “healed”: “For it is by grace you have been healed, through faith...” Or in other words, “by the graciousness of God you have been healed by trusting God.”

That is what Jesus Christ came to do. To win our trust so that because of his gracious nature he could then heal (save) us. This nature and desire is illustrated by the many miracles of healing, restoration and cure that Jesus did during his ministry--revealing God as the one who wants to heal us, not just physically, but spiritually.

Understanding this provides another insight into one of Jesus’ miracles that produced such opposition. In Luke 5 (and the parallels in Matthew 9 and Mark 2) a paralytic man is lowered through the roof into Jesus’ presence.

Jesus does not say: “Be healed,” or “Get up and walk.” Instead he points out the healing significance of salvation by saying “Friend, your sins are forgiven.” (Luke 5:20 NIV). Salvation is the healing of the sin damage.

But the Pharisees are incensed, and ask “Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Luke 5:21 NIV).

True enough. Only God can forgive sins. But as Jesus wanted to point out, their view was one of the need for legal forgiveness in order to receive God’s blessings. An exterior kind of work, a ritualized concept of salvation.

But Jesus points them back to what salvation really is by saying to them: “‘Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins....” He said to the paralyzed man, “I tell you, get up, take up your mat and go home.”” (Luke 5:22-24 NIV).

In the Pharisees’ minds which was easier? To heal or to forgive sins? Obviously they could handle Jesus as “just another miracle worker who heals” but not as someone who went around forgiving sins. They, the Pharisees, had developed a very meticulous set of rules and regulations for achieving forgiveness. Their idea of salvation was of strict observance to the ceremonies and rituals. So when someone comes around saying he is able to forgive sins, that “blows their minds”.

For salvation as healing is not part of their concept of how God works to restore people to himself. Salvation, they think, has to come “through the proper channels”. There are rigid

requirements to achieve this salvation, and which, if legalistically obeyed, will ensure success. So how can this “faith healer” promise forgiveness of sins?

How? Because he is God, and because his salvation is healing, not rigid observance of outward requirements. An inherently non-legal process. Blasphemy to those who saw the achieving of legal forgiveness as the essential part of salvation!

Which is what led to Jesus’ death. He “bucked the system”, he “blasphemed God”, and it was “better that one man die for the sake of the people” (see John 11:49) than the whole national system of achieving salvation be destroyed.

Jesus spoke so often to these religious systematists of their problem. He called them “whited sepulchres” (Matthew 23:27) because they carefully followed the salvation rules on the outside, but inside were full of corruption. What Jesus wanted to do was to salvation-heal them from the inside, so that then they would be genuinely right on the outside. He told them they were blind. And because they thought they could see, their sin remained. (see Matthew 23:16ff, John 9:41). Why? Because their arrogant claims to 20-20 vision meant they would not come to him for salvation-healing. That’s why Jesus pronounced so many woes on the scribes and Pharisees--for they, the religious leaders, had failed to understand the truth about God’s offer of healing, a spiritual healing that would transform them from being sin-sick rebels to healthy trustworthy friends of God.

So what happens to us if we fail to see salvation as healing? Well, if we only see it as fixing our legal problem, of rectifying our legal standing before God, of being a contractual process by which our legal guilt is expiated, then...

As Jesus said to the religious systematizers of his day, preoccupied with judicial, forensic salvation: “Your sin (that fatal sickness) remains.” A preoccupation with legal demands, legal payment and legal consequences leads to the worse kind of legalism: the making legal of the cross of Christ. Even the Pharisees didn’t manage that!

Concentrating on the legal and judicial, the guilt-payment and expiatory penalties means that we fail to see the cross as the remedy for sin as an attitude, rather than some legal compensation for sin as an external action. For if we do not come to him who can heal us, if we do not accept his gift of sight, and if we remain blind guides leading others and all falling into the ditch (see Matthew 15:14), then how can God help us?

As God said to his people of old, “I am the Lord who heals you.” (Exodus 15:26). This is his salvation--healing all the wounds of sin, curing the sickness of evil, and restoring us once more into full spiritual health: remade into his glorious image. This is his salvation, so fully and freely demonstrated in Jesus and made available to all who will. This is his salvation: brought to us by God himself, as he hung there on the cross.

Salvation is healing.

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