

“Aye, but Not Strong Enough”
 Sermon for 10 September 2017
 Text: Ephesians 2:8

I watched the BBC video of a man rescued from the floods of Harvey after clinging to a tree for hours! Others survived clinging to trees and one man clung to a street sign. Many videos of rescue, many images of Americans assisting Americans, regardless of race, yes, regardless of color, creed or social standing, with courage, with persistence putting the obscenity of Charlottesville’s imputed racism behind us. Eclipsing the drumbeat of media degradation and negativity towards the president! Finally some real news, outside the envelop of politics, refuting identity politics and divisiveness. However, those who would be haters persisted twisting the news to suit their agenda. Everyone, except them, seemed relieved. Harvey reprehended, that is, rebuked them and put a momentary constraint on their opining. So welcome, refreshing. In the face of such devastating destruction, a proud moment of noble priorities!

Then it struck me: “salvation” has the effect of reprehension¹ in the life of the believer. But it does not have that effect if our view of it is either superficial or insipidly weak. I sense that some understandings of salvation are like tea made with a lightly dipped, or slightly steeped tea bag! Mostly boiled water, barely stained, marginally flavorful. Far from bold, or strong or bracing! We shall attempt to remedy any such deficiency today—reflecting on the text: **For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.** (Ephesians 2:8)

“Are you saved?” This, the most important question one can ask, or be asked, is made light tea, or trivialized in too many exchanges. Both by the questioner and by the one

¹“You should for that have reprehended him.”—Abbess (“The Comedy of Errors,” Act 5, line 57) Remarkably important line. It is, I think, right up there with, “Christ is risen.” The flood waters of “Harvey” reached in excess of five feet. “Christ is risen.” The peaceful demonstration went violent in Los Angeles. “Christ is risen.” Hurricane Irma is bearing down on southern Florida, a category 2 storm. “Christ is risen.” North Korea readies another ICBM for launch, more troops are approved for Afghanistan, another cholera outbreak is reported . . . oh, yes, and by the way, “Christ is risen.” Far above the most alarming, screaming headlines(!), it dawns on me, stands the amazing wisdom of Lesslie Newbegin’s retort, “Neither. Christ is risen.” That is to be our response to the swirling agitation of current events. “Christ is risen” is how we should reprehend the news! Reprehend means to seize, hold back, constrain by rebuke. Reprehend comes from *reprehend* (1300, Middle English for “hold back, restrain”)—it also means “mental apprehension,” or immediate understanding, a grip on things or grasp of the situation— and reprehend comes from the Latin *prehension* (1525) meaning to seize. Seize control, take the momentum back, make pause of the panic, or frenzy—take an emotional breath, breathe normally and so resume your composure. Why? Because the supreme fact of the whole of universal history is condensed in “Christ is risen,” the one thing that literally and entirely changes everything. But if you do not know it, if you do not know the impact of it, the significance and meaning of it, there will be no reprehension with you—no stick on the bank to seize upon and to secure yourself from the surging flood, the rip tide of panic, the new’s wildest alarms. Reprehension, a great word, a new one perhaps, but definitely one for Christians. It has impact of the word “Peace” spoken repeatedly by God, by the Lord Jesus, into all kinds of chaotic circumstances. It calms the terrified heart as it calmed the tumultuous Sea of Galilee, communicating calm to those in peril, fearing for their very lives. When Jesus rebuked the wind and wave, He reprehended the forces of nature—I think there should be more of that, more reprehension, more calm, more peace.

interrogated. Let's strengthen the brew. Salvation is not merely forgiveness of sin, nor merely a "free pass to heaven," or immunity from consequence (as in everlasting punishment and torment for rebellion, treason and sin). Salvation entails those things, yes, but even more. Salvation is deliverance from and deliverance to. First, the from: salvation is, most basically, rescue from peril and healing from disease. To enlarge on the figure employed above, salvation is the stick on the bank which, if seized upon "saves" you from drowning in the flood, the torrent of current which is sweeping all away. We get this literally, but figuratively the river is more than flood swollen waters. It can be social, economic and political chaos—of the sort that Venezuela is suffering at this moment, or of the sort that rain sodden Texas labors under. It can stand for your work, your employment in uncertain times. Your educational prospects, your relational world of family, friends and associates. It can be sexual confusion, moral anarchy, religious perplexity. Whatever it is, it's tough—scary, dangerous, you feel as if you are entirely at risk *if not perishing*. Salvation is rescue, or deliverance from that.

Or, it is healing from sickness. If you are physically ailing, sickness is no fantasy. But salvation is not merely limited to physical distress, and physical distress can range from mild afflictions and accidents to life-threatening conditions. Sickness can be scary and extreme, and so can the treatments. Even recuperation or recovery can be overwhelming, daunting stuff. Someone said, sickness is God's way of getting you to slow down, to take some time to reflect on how you are doing overall, to consider some changes of habit and life-style. I am sure that there is some biblical warrant for those insights—but my point is this: salvation is healing from the universal sickness of sin! We aren't just sinners, nor even miserable sinners—we are sick sinners. As such we are encouraged by Jesus' role as the Divine Physician. We have no problem relating to our need, our true, deep need for a healing visit from Him. He intercedes for us, He prays for us and we, if we have our wits about us, are open and welcoming for all of that.

So, we are broken beings: weak, crippled, blind and deaf and halt. But, our need is deeper than physical. The tea is getting stronger. Salvation is the binding up, the soothing and helping and making whole again.

Jesus **saves His people from their sins**
 Jesus saves us **from the wrath to come**
 Jesus saves a **soul from death**

And this forms a perfect transition. Let us pivot, and move from deliverance from, to what we have deliverance to—salvation is minimally reprehension of death. It is a resurrection from death and the creation of a new creature **in Christ**. ***I mean to emphasize that once we are saved, the life of Christ is implanted in us—it is, so to speak, our pacemaker.*** He smooths out the beating of our heart, purifies the blood that courses through our arteries. With every beat, the purity of Christ, the goodness of Christ, the holiness of Christ, even the light and power and glory of Christ courses through our rejuvenating veins. It is no wonder then that others marvel at our change. Our new identity is in Him—not in what we were, not in what we've done (or are doing), not even in what we hope to do. Away with history, down with pride, may aspiration be sanctified! Guilt and shame are rendered obsolete—we have figures for how far they are removed, how deeply they are buried and how entirely they are forgotten *not merely forgiven*. By being obsolete, I mean, they are no longer serviceable to us and we would do well not to seek either their repair, or their replacement!!

Yes, we remember Paul saying **We were dead in trespasses and sins** (v.1). We were sin traffickers. **Walking in the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air . . . living in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.** (vv.2-3) BUT because we are saved, pivot, we are no longer what we were! These are the **former things** which, by virtue of our salvation, we leave behind: 13 **Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,** 14 **I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.** (ESV, Philippians 3) Salvation brings with it a remarkable change of agenda—it comes with the new loves of the new creature! And, personally, I find it very helpful that Paul emphasizes that this new life is a matter of “getting it,” on top of having received it. There is a settled portion to salvation (the stick in the bank) and a progressive, or growing aspect to this business of being saved (the hanging on!).

The beauty of this swollen river metaphor for life is obvious. But, the stick doesn't actually just happen to be there. It is a branch extended to us by means of which we are extricated from the danger. It wrenches us to safety. We hold on, Jesus reels us in. Yet salvation is more than shelter, more than an escape! Salvation is the introduction of the good, no, the infusion of the good. It is the expelling of bad blood with the transfusion of good blood! It is an act of endowment, of empowerment. So to pardon is added favor, and to purity is added blessedness, and in the offing lies the surety of overwhelming glory still to come, yet to come. **To have everlasting life** and to **enter the Kingdom of God** are expressions for the same, our salvation.

Listen, nothing less than Christ's gift of Himself will every meet all the necessities of true, real human life. Neither wealth, nor power, nor education nor culture, nor anything else man-made, or generated by human inventiveness can obtain our peace for us. There are a thousand schemes abroad for how a man may help himself, plans for enhanced potential, the utilization of more of the brain, altered states of consciousness and patterns of self-reliance. But they all fail, fall short; they founder on this truth: “Every man as his own redeemer will not work.” That is the fatal flaw in psychological approaches to self-redemption! It privatizes our experience—it encourages us to look within. There are no sticks on the river bank of the human psyche! Far, far less is there a Savior extending the branch of salvation to us in that great abyss within. No, if that were all we needed, God would have supplied a couch instead of a cross! A therapist instead of a sacrifice! The talking cure is but another attempt at self-salvation. Frankly how you feel about yourself pales in significance when compared to knowing how God feels about you—it is the love of God, the grace of God, extended to those who will take, seize, grasp and accept it (truly that is the meaning of saving faith), that matters finally. Indeed both finally and forever.

Salvation by grace is the gift of God. It is the kiss of God on the brow of the son who has turned his heart back home. It is the embrace of the forever which, though it walked among us for a season, awaits us now. Do not try to deliver yourself, either from or toward. Do not try to heal yourselves—put self-help and self-reliance in their proper place and let Jesus be Savior, and Lord and King and Prince of Peace to you, for you, in you.

Amen