

How Can We Be Saved?

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[0:00] Amen. How can we be saved?

Are there many more questions more pressing or more important than that one? It's striking that all of the major religions in the world take that question up in one way or another.

However, even atheists, while they might reject the suggestion that it's an important question, have to grapple with it in some way. They have to grapple with the question of how we can or cannot be saved from death.

And the answer to them, sadly, is that we can't. In that worldview, death conquers everything. And everything that we've ever felt, everything we've ever loved, everything we've ever done, won't matter in the end.

But, the question, as I said, is one that comes up in every major world religion, even if some of them differ quite a lot on what it means to be saved.

[1:40] For Christians, of course, we believe that it means the forgiveness of sin. We believe that it means victory over death. We believe it means a right relationship with God and eternal life.

So, it's an important question for us. How can we be saved? You boil it down, and Christianity answers that question differently than any other religion.

Other religions, if they were to take on the question, how can I be saved, would really all agree on one central point.

Whatever else is involved, to be saved, I have to do my best to be a good person. And if I'm good enough, then, I will be saved.

And that's not all you ask many of the people in our culture who identify as spiritual but not religious, or even many people who identify as Christian.

[2:41] And they probably say essentially the same thing. God rewards people who are good, and I try to be a good person. That's what really matters, not all that religion stuff, but living a good life.

And a lot of the people who think that what really matters is being rewarded for living a good life will admit that they think that they're pretty good people.

And I've had this conversation with people more than once, and I don't remember talking to anyone who thinks this way, who admitted to me that they don't think they're a good person, and that God in some way will reward them for it.

Now, as most of you know, many of us in the congregation recently completed a course called Christianity Explored. One of the Christianity Explored sessions begins with a similar question. What would you say if God were to ask you, why should I give you eternal life? Now, on the one hand, this is the kind of hypothetical question that's simply designed to get us thinking.

[3:47] Thinking about what we believe about salvation or eternal life and how we get it. But on the other hand, it's a very real and a very pressing question. Because if Jesus is returning again to judge the living and the dead, we should expect that eventually we will really face this question or something like it.

How can we be saved? Why should God give us eternal life? Is it because we've done our best to be good? Is it because we've tried really hard?

Is it because we're nice? Is it because we're better than most other people, especially those really bad people? Is it because we're spiritual? We're very religious?

Is it because we went to church every Sunday and gave money to the church? Or for me, is it because I was a priest in Christ's church? Well, let me tell you, my brothers and sisters, if any of these things could save us, if any of these things could win eternal life for us, the miracle that we celebrate at Christmas, the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ, God becoming man, these things could save us.

That would never have needed to happen. We need it. This morning's gospel passage we read, the law was given through Moses.

[5:15] Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Now what's the significance of that? Why is this contrast given? Why is the law of God here being contrasted with the grace that came through Jesus Christ?

Because it's not as if the law is bad. God gave the law. God gave His commandments, revealed to His people what is pleasing to Him through His servant Moses. But yet in Galatians 3, a few verses before the passage we read a few minutes ago, Paul says this, For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse.

For it is written, Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law and do them. Everyone who relies on the works of the law is under a curse.

The curse of death, the curse of separation from God is under God's judgment. Why is that?

Because cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law and do them.

So much for that idea that I can be saved by trying really hard to be a good religious person.

Because if I have ever violated in any way any of God's commandments, then I am under a curse because God is holy and I am not.

[6:47] So let me ask you, have you obeyed all of God's commandments perfectly? Be honest here. I haven't.

I have no excuse. I was taught the scriptures from childhood. And you know what? I've still been disobedient. If I am to rely on my obedience to God's commandments, I have no hope because I haven't done it all.

Not even close. Galatians 3 we read, Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.

Held captive under the law. That is basically the story of God's people Israel in the Old Testament. God gave his law, God gave his commandments to Israel through Moses and said, Do this, you will be blessed.

Disobey, you will be punished. Obey, you will live. Disobey, you will die. And over and over, we see it in the pages of the Old Testament.

[7:59] People trying to keep the law with obvious zeal for the law. What would happen? Israel would be called back to obedience to the law by king, by prophet, by reformer.

And before you know it, they're disobedient and they're worshipping false gods again. The law they were given, they were not able to keep.

And if they weren't able to do it perfectly, why do we, so often, why are we so tempted to think that we can be good enough to deserve salvation?

But here's a puzzling question. Why in the world did God give a law that people were unable to keep? Why would he do that? Well, I was once doing some light reading in the works of the medieval monk Bernard of Clairvaux, who asked that very question.

Why would God give us a law that he knew we couldn't keep? Want to know the answer? So that we would know just how much we need God's mercy and just how much we need a Savior.

[9:16] That's the answer. Because my brothers and my sisters, if you have ever stacked yourself up against God's perfect, righteous commandments, you've seen just how much you fall short, just how wretched you are, and just how much you are cursed.

If this is the end of the story. That's why Paul says in Galatians 3, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.

Now, the word that's translated guardian here might also be translated as tutor. Basically, Paul is saying, the law was like the cranky old nun who wrapped us on the knuckles when we misbehaved in class.

The law served to identify and to punish sin. For what purpose? To prepare us for the gift of a Savior.

To prepare us to be saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. To prepare us to receive salvation is a free gift through trusting in Jesus.

[10:27] because that very law rubs our noses in the fact that we have no hope of salvation other than Christ. The law given through Moses could tell us what to do, but it could never give us the power to do it.

Because it shows us our failure. It shows us our need of a Savior. It shows that we can only be saved by grace, by God giving us what we don't deserve.

By Him giving us the salvation that we don't deserve. How can we be saved? Acts 16.31 Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

Here's what we celebrate at Christmas. Here's what it is. Our salvation is born and all who receive Him receive grace upon grace. Because we see if we were held captive, under the law, we were in sin and darkness with no way of saving ourselves.

Purse under the law because we had not been the people we were supposed to be. So what does God do? Galatians 4.4-5 When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons.

[12:04] that curse that we were under, the curse that we deserved for our disobedience, Jesus took it away.

He took the curse. Jesus was born under the law with the task of obeying the law, a task, of course, that everyone else who had tried had failed at. But He obeyed the law perfectly and died an ugly death on the cross, taking the curse of the law, even though He didn't deserve it.

Why? Fundamentally, He did it out of love for you and for me. He did it to save lawbreakers. He did it to save sinners.

He did it to accomplish what Martin Luther once called the great exchange. He took the punishment that our sins deserved. And He gave us His perfect righteousness so that when God looks at the person who is in Christ, He sees the perfect righteousness of His Son.

And He sees that our sin has been paid for. Praise God. And that means, on that day when God says to us, why should I give you eternal life?

[13:22] We have an answer. And it is a glorious answer, and it's this. Because of Jesus Christ, who died for my sins in my place and has given me His righteousness, who has clothed me in His perfect righteousness, He obeyed the law perfectly for me and paid for my sin.

That free gift received through faith, through trust in Jesus, is what the Gospel is all about, my brothers and my sisters. And it's something that the Church of Christ needs to proclaim in every generation, and something that we need to preach to ourselves every day.

Why? Because the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes. how can we be saved?

There is only one right answer. And the answer is this. Jesus Christ and what He has done. The grace upon grace that is found in Him and in Him alone.

And that is all that we need. The Anglican Bishop J.C. Ryle once had this to say about the proclamation of the Gospel, the proclamation of Christ and Him crucified.

[14:48] Ryle says, It is enough for all the spiritual necessities of mankind. It is not worn out. It is not obsolete. It has not lost its power.

We need nothing new, nothing more broad and kind, nothing more intellectual, nothing more effectual. We need nothing but the true bread of life distributed faithfully among starving souls. Let men sneer or ridicule as they will. Nothing else can do good in this sinful world. No other teaching can fill hungry consciences and give them peace.

Now the Galatians that Paul is writing to in our epistle reading for this morning had fallen under the sway of false teachers who taught that Christ wasn't enough.

And that is an error that the church has had to confront in pretty much every age. This idea that we need Jesus plus something else. The Galatians had fallen under the teaching that, yeah, they needed Jesus, but they also needed to be circumcised to be saved.

[16:04] My brothers and sisters, I will say plainly, if our answer to why God should give us eternal life is Jesus plus something else, we need to repent. It's like saying to our Lord, it's great that you were born, it's great that you lived a perfect life for me, it's great that you died, it's great that you rose again, thank you for that, but it's not enough.

How dare we say that to Christ? Now it's true, the good works and obedience to God are always part of the Christian life, because if the Holy Spirit lives in you, of course the Holy Spirit is going to change you.

But our works will never be good enough to earn God's favor and win eternal life for us. Our good works simply flow from gratitude for the free gift of salvation in Jesus.

Our obedience flows from knowing God as our loving Father. Simply put, we do good works because we have been saved by grace. We don't do good works to win eternal life.

Only Christ, and Christ alone, can and has won eternal life for us. And from His fullness, we have received grace upon grace.

[17 : 26] How can we be saved? I think that the great Anglican evangelist, George Whitefield, provides a pretty good answer to how we approach this question.

Whitefield said, it was love that saved me. It was all of the free grace of God and that only. And I can say with Whitefield, it was love that saved me.

It was all of the free grace of God and that only. God's love for us, God's free gift of grace to us in Christ.

That, my brothers and my sisters, is what Christmas is all about. In the name of the Father, of the Son, of the Holy Spirit. Amen.