

Loved To Love: Salvation From, Salvation For - Sunday 14th January 2024

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] As Ian was saying, we're starting a new little mini-series this morning called Loved to Love. It's three weeks where I'm going to do my best to help us explore a bit more the idea of salvation.

Salvation, I guess, is a word we'll have heard of and maybe have some understanding of. But as I hope we'll discover, there's a lot more to it than we, certainly I, might have realised.

And if we start perhaps with what salvation is usually reckoned to be about, it's to do, as the first few letters of it maybe indicate, it's to do with being saved. Saved or protected or rescued from harm.

And so in terms of our faith, salvation is tied up with the way God saves us. We've been singing a couple of songs about that already. You are the God who saves us, our God saves, as we've just been hearing.

So seeing God as saviour or someone who saves, it's an ancient, maybe familiar idea. It's an idea perhaps familiar even for some outside of church circles.

[1 : 08] I mean, I remember when I was growing up, when I was very, very small, sort of knee-eye to a grasshopper kind of stuff. There was this famous graffiti that was doing around saying, Jesus saves on a lot of walls around our way.

But then written underneath, and this is in the late 70s, someone had written, yeah, but Keegan scores from the rebound, you know, that classic. You know, whether we understand it or not, this idea of Jesus saves, of God saves, it is in our consciousness.

It is perhaps something which we may not understand fully, but we're familiar at least with the words of it. I guess we could say, saves us though from what? Well, again, the usual understanding is that God saves us from our sins, you know, or at least the consequences of our sins, bad life choices, which lead us away from God, and which again, so the understanding goes, leads to our decay and eventually to death.

And so most of all, we tend to think of salvation, you know, this act of being saved, as all to do with our eternal destiny, you know, being saved from sin, from a literal dead end, in order to live life with God in heaven.

Now, as we'll unpack hopefully over these three weeks, there's a lot more to salvation than simply life after death. But to get us going, what I'd like to do today is to think about three ways of understanding, three ways of interpreting perhaps how God saves us.

[2 : 46] So today's going to be a little bit different. It's going to set us up hopefully for the next couple of weeks as well. You might think by the end of it, it's a bit chunkier, should we say, in terms of concepts and theology.

But I hope what we cover today will set us up, as I say, for the next two weeks as well. Indeed, as we go through these three ideas which I'll share about how God saves us, might ask us maybe to pay particular attention to how they make us feel.

You know, what sits with us in our gut, in our mind, in our heart? How do they fit in with our concepts, our understanding of God? Because I think our response to perhaps what we hear might be quite revealing for us.

So, firstly, one classic way of understanding salvation and how God saves us is to see it as a transaction, as a transaction.

What's meant by this? In a nutshell, it's along the lines of, If we, then God will. So, it's an if and a then.

[3 : 56] There's a kind of a consequence to it. If we do this thing, or if we do that thing, then God will do his thing. It's a transaction to and fro, but it's a conditional one.

So, if we fulfill our side of a deal, then God will honor his side. It's kind of like a big cosmic economical or legal contract, really.

Some might call it a covenant. If we do this, then God will do that. And it's an idea which is pretty common in the Bible. You can see it in a number of places, particularly in the Old Testament in Hebrew Scriptures.

So, for example, perhaps most pointedly in 2 Chronicles, we read words which God is recorded as saying to King Solomon just after he's built a big temple in Jerusalem.

God said to say this. He says, If my people, there's an if, if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

[5 : 11] If you do this, then I will do that. And I guess this transaction idea is a bit like seeing God perhaps as a teacher you know, somebody who perhaps offers an end of term treat to their class.

You know, if you work hard, if you behave, then you'll be rewarded to an end of term trip to the park or whatever. You know, if we're good enough, we might say in our faith, if we don't sin, if we pray hard enough, if we give enough, then we'll be blessed.

But with this transaction idea, the flip side to blessing is also perhaps true because if we're bad or we disappoint or we let God down, then we're going to be in trouble because we haven't kept up our side of the deal.

So as well as being a teacher who might reward us with good behavior, it's also perhaps a picture of God as a judge in a courtroom, you know, someone who weighs up our deeds.

And if we haven't been good enough, then the implication is that we're sent down. You know, we're liable to be punished, not blessed, but cursed even.

[6 : 23] And so how does saving come to this? How does God save us from this curse, this punishment, this death? Well, if salvation is a transaction, then it's Jesus who pays off our debt.

It's Jesus who lives the perfect life in our place, who takes the punishment we deserve and who dies in our place so that we can be forgiven by God the judge and set free.

Now, justice still needs to be done. The deal between God and us still needs to be fulfilled, but Jesus does it perfectly for us.

But that's not quite all. Because by this understanding, in order for us to be saved, we still need to actually accept what Jesus has done for us.

There's still a condition, a transaction to be done. Even after all Jesus has done for us, there's still this transaction that says, if we repent and believe, then we'll be saved.

[7 : 32] If we don't repent and we don't believe, then we won't be. So that's the idea in a nutshell. Salvation as a transaction.

What do you reckon? How does that make you feel? How do you feel when I'm laying it out like that? How does it sit with you? I mean, it's an understanding which can be found as we've seen in the Bible.

It's an idea expressed in a lot of Christian music and hymns and in many ways it's the classic way in which the cross of Jesus has been explained.

I guess some would say on the plus side, it certainly takes God, certainly takes life seriously, it takes sin and it takes the need for justice seriously.

There's no shortcuts in this. There are clearly life and death consequences for how we live and what we believe. And in terms of our eternal destiny, it seems the ball is very much in our court.

[8 : 36] Whether we're saved is up to us really and our response to God is the ultimate take it or leave it kind of deal. However, perhaps on the downside, other considerations might be that in this transaction idea, it doesn't seem to be much love in this way of understanding.

I didn't mention love in that. Indeed, it seems Jesus' death is primarily to satisfy God's sense of justice, not an expression of his love.

But then I got thinking, well, if forgiveness, as Jesus says, is about not taking revenge, not seeking retribution, why does God therefore need to punish anyone for sins, let alone his own son?

Doesn't God say elsewhere that he values mercy, not sacrifice? Is God's justice really an eye for an eye, our sins for Jesus' life perhaps?

Sins must be punished, or might God's justice mean something quite different entirely? equally, if we see salvation as being a transaction between us and God, we could see it as a pretty risky deal for us to enter into, but a deal that has perhaps been forced upon us simply by nature of being born. [10:06] None of us ask to be born. We're obliged though to enter into a transaction which has eternal consequences, whether we want to be here or not, and that doesn't quite seem fair.

Likewise though, going back to the idea about the teacher rewarding us, you know, if we do manage to live a largely good life, but then things still go wrong for us, if God doesn't seem to bless us, then that doesn't seem fair either because it doesn't seem that God's upholding his side of the bargain.

But perhaps most of all, seeing salvation as a transaction seems to make our relationship with God dependent on what we do and conditional on how we respond and not really dependent on God's grace at all.

Maybe hold those thoughts about salvation as a transaction in mind though, because a second way to understand salvation and how God saves us is quite different, it's quite different.

Indeed, this view sees salvation not as a transaction but as a one-sided action from God to us, a one-sided action from God to us.

[11:28] What's meant by this? Well, again, in a nutshell, it's along the lines of God does everything and we do nothing.

So, whereas salvation as a transaction arguably puts too much responsibility on us, you know, a one-sided view of salvation says, no, we are saved by God's grace and God's grace alone.

It's not about us at all. In fact, it would say that God doesn't need our obedience or even our faith to offer us his saving love.

Now, he's already done it before we even realise that to be the case. And that's a view which, again, has a lot of basis in the Bible. So, for example, there's this from Paul's letter to the Romans where we're told this, that God demonstrates his own love for us in this.

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And then, in an even stronger sense, we're described elsewhere as receiving God's forgiveness even when we're effectively dead.

[12:38] It says this in Ephesians, as for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.

It is by grace you have been saved. So, in this understanding, God, therefore, initiates every saving work prior to our faith or love for him.

It's been done without us needing to do anything. Indeed, some theologians talk about this kind of salvation as being irresistible to those God chooses to save.

God gets what God wants. He has saved us in that. So, again, the idea of irresistible grace, if you like, how does that sit with you, this idea of salvation being a one-way, one-sided act from God.

I guess on the plus side, again, it's great news, it's great news, because Jesus has already done and won everything we need to be saved from sin and death.

[13:59] And there's perhaps a sense of relief from that. It's not a test, perhaps, that we have to pass. Maybe we might therefore feel grateful. There's a gratitude to it that unlike with a transaction, we don't actually have to do anything.

It's grace. It's a freely given gift. And yet the risk, perhaps, with this focus on all that God has saved us from, sin and death and so on, is that it means that we're forever focusing on what God has done for us already.

in the past, if you like, before we even knew God. And why might that be a problem? Well, let's think about some worship songs, for example.

Now, in a good number of songs, the focus is primarily often on Jesus' death on the cross and what it saves us from. But, and here's a problem, I think, with this one-sided view of salvation, salvation, in some of the songs that we sing, there's sometimes very little focus on what Jesus' death, even his resurrection, not saves us from, but saves us for.

Yes, we've been saved from sin, from death, and that's great to sing about. But to what end? To what have we been saved for?

[15:30] And one answer to say is, well, we've been saved for heaven. And in many ways that's true. But for a lot of songwriters, it sometimes seems as if Jesus' relevance is restricted to either his death on the cross or our future with him in heaven.

But, since Jesus is alive today, and has been alive since the cross for 2,000 odd years, I wonder if we'd do well to have some more songs about what Jesus is up to now.

How is this world, how are our everyday lives different because Jesus is alive? In other words, let's maybe think about, let's maybe sing about the things that we have actually been singing in today's songs and we will sing more of.

There is stuff in there about what this life is about in the here and now with Jesus and that's great, but I wonder if we could maybe sing and think more about what Jesus has saved us for, not simply what Jesus has saved us from.

I appreciate that's a little bit to get our heads around. Does that kind of make sense? Yes, we've been saved. Yes, we might believe Jesus died and rose again and yes, we believe in some time in the future he'll come again in glory and we'd love other people to come to that kind of belief as well. [17:06] But beyond knowing it, beyond receiving that truth if you like, what difference does that belief, what difference does this newfound freedom, this saving love, this living faith, mean for us with God, with Jesus, now, what are we saved for?

And that's a question I'd suggest which leads us on to a third and final way to understand salvation and what it means to be saved, which is to describe it as this, of it being a loving, two-way, ongoing relationship.

Salvation is a relationship between us and God. So God saves us from the ultimate consequences of our bad choices, our sins, by defeating the power of death, yes.

But God also saves us for a new life with him, in other words, a relationship. And I appreciate this word relationship, if the idea of us having a relationship with God sounds a bit touchy-feely or sort of intimate perhaps for our kind of liking, I get that, and we might want to prefer to call it perhaps our connection with God or something.

And yet, if we don't particularly like this word relationship with God, it's tricky because the Bible actually goes much further than simply describing us and God as having a connection or a relationship.

[18:44] Now, amazingly, in both the Old and the New Testaments, the Bible describes the way we're intended to relate to God as being like a marriage, like a marriage.

Now, why a marriage? Well, at its best, a marriage and a picture of a marriage is a relationship that's rooted in mutual love, in trust, and in faithfulness, you know, qualities which God freely promises to us.

And invites us to freely offer back to him. Nothing forced, nothing coerced, nothing transactional, nothing one-sided.

No, love, trust, and faithfulness which are to be freely given and freely received. And so, in the Bible, in terms of our love, we're told this, we love because he, God, first loved us.

God's love has always been first. But in appreciating and responding to that love, that proposal, if you like, God gives us the freedom to say yes and love him back.

[19:58] Or on trust. Well, God has placed enormous trust in us to look after his world and care for one another. And so, in response to God's trust, Jesus invites us, in turn, to trust in God and to trust also in me.

Or on faithfulness. God has proved time and again that he never gives up on us even when we've turned our backs on him. And so, we too are invited to respond accordingly.

Have faith in God, says Jesus in Mark's gospel. So, love, trust, and faithfulness. Three qualities which are central to a marriage, three qualities central to how God relates to us and how we're invited to relate to him.

Again, I appreciate the idea of marriage as a metaphor for how we're to relate to God. That's not going to be everyone's cup of tea, especially if it doesn't feel particularly relevant for us in our lives, or if our experience of human marriage in this life has been a negative one.

I get that. I get that. But the good news is, firstly, in the Bible, it's us collectively who are described as the bride of Christ.

[21:25] It's not like we as individuals are married to Jesus or anything. It's not a personal marriage to Jesus. That would be a bit weird, you know, especially if like most marriages, much of the conversation with Jesus centered around, have you put the bins out, or whatever.

Do you know what I mean? It's not that kind of idea we're talking about. No, it's a corporate, collective idea, perhaps along the same lines as us describing ourselves collectively as the body of

Christ.

It's not like my individual body in Jesus' head. No, together we are the body of Christ. Together we are the bride of Christ. But then secondly, the Bible primarily uses the picture of marriage as a way to help us understand what salvation really is.

not something conditional like a transaction, not something one-sided where we're a silent partner, but salvation as a relationship in which we're saved from life without God for life with God.

And so just as marriage is more than just a wedding day, so to God's salvation is much more than just the day that we realized we were saved or we committed ourselves to him.

[22 : 39] To go back to what I was saying before, yes, Jesus' death on the cross is crucial and it warrants being remembered and celebrated just as a wedding day is crucial for a marriage and it warrants being remembered and celebrated.

But just as a marriage needs to move beyond its wedding day in order to build a life together, so too Jesus being alive today and giving us his spirit means I'd say that we too need to move beyond simply focusing on the cross and what Jesus has saved us all from if we're to embrace the life that Jesus has saved us all for.

Again, to ram home the point almost, that's what salvation is, being saved from death, saved for life. Life with God, which the Bible describes as being like an ideal marriage, a truly covenantal ongoing relationship of mutual love and trust and faithfulness.

Or if you put it another way, salvation is all about the way we are loved to love. So how do we love in light of the salvation, the love, we've received?

[24 : 02] How do we put all this theory from today into practice? How might we imagine what it means for us to be married to God and what does that look like day to day now? That's what we're going to look at over the next couple of weeks starting next Sunday by focusing on the kind of salvation we see lived out in Jesus.

As I say, today was kind of trying to set us up, I suppose, and our understanding for that. So all that's to come. But I guess just until then, and as we consider what God has saved us from but also saved us for, my prayer is that as we weigh up our response, your response to this idea of it being perhaps a transactional thing or a one-sided thing or as I would suggest primarily a relationship, marriage kind of thing, as we weigh up salvation, my prayer is that we would grasp afresh just how loved we are by God, saved from death and darkness, but also saved for his light and his life.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.