

Loved To Love: Today, Salvation - Sunday 21st January 2024

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[0 : 00] Morning everyone. Good to see you again. As Rupa was saying, we've got this Love to Love series. It's the second week in three that we're spending. It's got a mini-series, I suppose, on this particular topic of salvation, which we kicked off last week and we'll finish up next week.

But this idea of salvation and what it means for our life and our faith. And the word salvation, it means to be saved. And if you were here last week or you caught up online, we looked at three different ways in which this idea of being saved can be understood. So just a very quick recap for us to catch up with where we were last week. So we saw firstly how a classic understanding of salvation is to see it perhaps as a transaction. You know, if we do this, then God will do that. If we repent and believe, then God will save us. Save us from our sins. Save us, above all, from death. And it's a pretty established kind of common view or understanding. But as we said last week, there are some problems with it as we think it through. For example, we could ask, why does God need to punish his own son, Jesus, in order for justice to be done when he calls us to freely forgive others instead of taking any kind of punishment or retribution for what's gone wrong? But also this transaction idea puts all the onus on us in terms of where we end up, you know, salvation becomes ours to earn rather than God's gift to offer. And so secondly, in contrast, another view that we looked at sees salvation not as a transaction, a kind of to and fro with God, but instead as a one-sided act through Jesus, God has already done everything necessary for us to be saved. And we, well, we simply receive it. And that means it's certainly good news, but it also feels perhaps pretty passive on our part. We can be perhaps reduced to bystanders in the face of God getting what God wants.

And so a third way that we looked at, perhaps the best way of understanding salvation, is to see it as a relationship between us and God. God saving us from our sins for a new life with him. And in the Bible, as the ring suggests, it's often pictured as an ideal kind of marriage between us and God, a mutual covenant of love, trust, and faithfulness, which is freely given and freely received. So it's not transactional, it's not one way, but it's life done and lived together with God. I appreciate that's a very brief recap of what took a good few minutes last week. But as we saw, all three of these different ways of understanding salvation, they can all be found in the Bible, which in some ways might seem confusing, that they're all in there, but they don't all seem to match up to one another. So you might think, what do we do with that mix of information then? But actually, I wonder if that's simply God's way of saying, look, here's some examples of how humans over the centuries have tried their best to make sense of things. So taking all that on board, but allowing my spirit to guide you further, let's continue to work out salvation together. You know, what I'm saving you from, but also what I'm saving you for. It's this kind of ongoing way of deepening our understanding of God and salvation.

And that to me is why salvation is such a exciting idea to explore, because far from it being restricted to what Jesus has already done for us in the past on the cross, or being restricted to what happens to us in the future after we die. Salvation is also about the present, you know, the here and now, life with God today. And the good news is that when we look at the life of Jesus, I think we see in him someone who not only understands the importance of life in the here and now, but who also ties it together with a much bigger understanding of what salvation truly is. For example, we're going to take a look at a story that you may have heard before, but it's a good one. It's a story from Luke's gospel, chapter 19, and it goes a bit like this.

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was

short, he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, Zacchaeus, come down immediately.

[5 : 50] I must stay at your house today. So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, he has gone to be the guest of a sinner. But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, look, Lord, here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount. Jesus said to him, today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham. For the son of man came to seek and to save the lost.

All right, now, for me, it's a cracking tale, maybe even a familiar one to us, especially if we've been at a Sunday school perhaps over the years and sung songs about little Zacchaeus and stuff over the years.

It's the story of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector in the city of Jericho. And the fact that he's the chief tax collector, well, that's significant, because that means he's in charge of junior tax collectors as well. He's got quite a business, quite a staff, which means he'll no doubt be raking in a pretty tidy profit, not just from his own collections, but from all those other tax collectors who were doing his dirty work for him. And it was dirty work. I appreciate tax, financial advice, all that these days, not dirty at all, I understand. But in Jesus' day, it really was dirty work. You see, whilst some taxes were collected directly by the Roman authorities, for more local taxes, think of like our council tax equivalent, that kind of thing.

In somewhere like Jericho, the Romans would auction off a contract to a local tax collector. This local tax collector, like Zacchaeus, would pay the Romans a flat rate from their own money for this contract, but then be able to collect and keep whatever taxes they liked from people.

So the Romans were happy. They got a hefty lump sum up front and avoided the hassle of having to collect local taxes. But local tax collectors were happy because it meant they could charge people whatever they liked. And so once they'd covered the initial cost of their contract and probably paid for whatever muscle they needed to enforce collection and keep themselves protected, it was all pure profit for them. The only limit being what they felt they could get away with charging.

[8 : 50] Of course, these days, I'm sure we can't possibly imagine a government awarding contracts to people who could make vast profits from them simply in exchange for being committed supporters. But corruption was rife in Roman times. All of which means that Zacchaeus would have been absolutely hated by the locals, by his neighbours. And what's more, because he was a short man, the average height in Roman times was about six inches less than it is today. So Zacchaeus was probably no more than four foot something. You know, no wonder the crowd took the chance to elbow him aside when Jesus came travelling through. And yet for whatever reason, Zacchaeus is desperate to get a glimpse of Jesus. And so he decides to run ahead and climb a nearby, we're told, sycamore fig tree to try and get a better view.

Now, why does Luke make a point of telling us that it was a sycamore fig tree in particular? Why not just say, well, Zacchaeus went to climb a tree? Well, if you think about a sycamore tree, it's not like a sycamore tree we get in this country. And nor is a sycamore fig tree a normal fig tree either. Now instead, in the Middle East, a sycamore fig tree is one which grows a particular type of small fig. But because these mini figs weren't as nice as proper figs, they were known as poor man's figs, a budget, far less tasty variety that only the lowliest in society would choose to eat or work at picking. So, not only is Zacchaeus, the tax collector, hated locally, but not only does his height mean he'll be looked down upon, but he now finds himself scrambling up a tree which only the lowest, the most desperate in society would ever climb. And so you can imagine the heckling he'd have got, you know, the richest man in town now being shamed into climbing the poorest man's kind of tree.

And yet there's more. Because what's worth knowing is that the Hebrew word for sycamore is this word, shikmar, shikmar. We know we love some Hebrew here. So do you want to say with me after three, one, two, three, shikmar, shikmar. Yeah, excellent. You have to be careful how you say that one. But yeah, shikmar, it actually comes from the word for regrowth, for regrowth, because the sycamore fig tree was well known for sprouting new growth from even the shortest of stumps.

What's more, the modern Hebrew word for rehabilitation, which is shikum, that comes from the same root word too. So there's something about this sycamore, which is about regrowth, we might say rehabilitation even, that we're meant to associate with this story here. And so having gone out

on a limb of this sycamore fig tree to see Jesus, we then see Jesus choosing to do what a sycamore tree does. We see him choosing to rehabilitate Zacchaeus both as a person and in society. I mean, as we saw, not only does Jesus notice him, not only does Jesus somehow know his name, but he calls up to him saying this, Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today. It's a statement in the midst of all the context perhaps we've been looking at. That is one of beautiful, radical inclusion from Jesus. You know, far from joining the crowd's derision, instead, Jesus makes a point of choosing Zacchaeus out of everyone. It's almost, don't worry what all the crowd are saying about you. [13:26] You're the one whose home I'm going to stay in. And as we've said before, to have someone stay at your home, you know, to share table fellowship with someone, well, that was a real sign of honour and respect. And what's more, again, just as the name of the tree is significant, so too the fact that Jesus uses Zacchaeus' name would seem to signify something too. Indeed, the name Zacchaeus means pure or clean. So we could even hear Jesus' words say something like this, hey Zacchaeus, hey pure man, you know, you're clean, you're forgiven. Come on down and let's eat together.

And so no wonder the crowds, we're told, respond by grumbling amongst themselves. But then, I guess some people will always grumble when mercy is shown to marginalised people. But for Zacchaeus, well, his response is nothing short of remarkable. He declares there and then that he's going to give half his possessions to the poor. And if he's ripped anyone off, which he surely has, he'll pay them back four times that amount. I mean, talk about repentance. Talk about turning your life, your character, your conduct around. All it seems in response to the warmth, the inclusion, the attention, and the love that Jesus has shown to him.

And so that, between Jesus and Zacchaeus, that's the relationship right there. It's not a transaction between Zacchaeus and Jesus. Jesus doesn't say, if you, then I. No, there's no deal. There's no condition that Jesus puts before Zacchaeus. Likewise though, it's not one way. You know, it's not, I'll do this, says Jesus, but you, Zacchaeus, you do nothing. It's not that kind of thing. No, Jesus asks, he insists even on endorsing Zacchaeus' worth by inviting him to be his host.

Now instead, in one sentence, Jesus sets up their relationship. Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today. And in response to this proposal, we might say, Zacchaeus accepts that if he's to invite Jesus into his home, then he's also going to need to invite Jesus into his heart. A heart which is changed immediately, you know, in an instant.

[16:20] Changed, we might say, saved from a life of greed. Changed, saved for a life of generosity.

And it's all of that whole story which I think then makes sense of what Jesus says next. It's almost like a kind of mic drop moment from Jesus because we're told that Jesus said to Zacchaeus, today salvation has come to this house. Today salvation has come to this house. Not yesterday, not tomorrow, not when you die. No, today, Zacchaeus, you have been saved from yourself and your sin, saved for a new life with me, says Jesus. Saved, if you like, for a new adventure. A new adventure, which I imagine Jesus and Zacchaeus had a great time discussing together over dinner that night in Zacchaeus' home. And again, just as the meaning of sycamore and the meaning of Zacchaeus' name seem to have significance, so the meaning of Jesus' name bursts here with significance too. Because the name

Jesus means the Lord is salvation. I am salvation and today salvation, Jesus has come to your house, Zacchaeus. I mean, talk about layers of meaning. I'm not sure the kids song perhaps unpacks it all for us all those years ago. If you notice though, Jesus' name means the Lord is salvation. Present tense, you know, salvation in the here and now. Yes, the Bible tells us that Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever and he's eternal. But the emphasis in the very name of Jesus is that God is salvation in the here and now. And the good news, the good news is that this same salvation is on offer to us in the same way that it was to Zacchaeus. You know, a relationship with God to save us from our sins for a new life together with God. And why is that the case? Well, because as Jesus concludes, he says this, for the son of man, kind of title that Jesus gave himself, the son of man came to seek and to save what was lost. So Jesus seeks us. You know, as illustrated perhaps in his parables about the lost son, the lost coin, the lost sheep and so on, God does everything possible to find us when we get lost or we go astray, either for our own bad choices or simply through the pressures of life that can overwhelm us. But then having found us, having brought us back to himself,

Jesus then sets about saving us, saving us from the things he knows are spoiling our ability to thrive and saving us for the things that he knows will bring us joy and peace. So with Zacchaeus, for example, we see the way Jesus sought him out. As we're told, you know, when Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, Zacchaeus, come down immediately. It's almost like a sort of game of hide and seek.

You know, I found you, Zacchaeus, you're up the tree, come on down, gotcha. There you are, there you are, come on. But then having found him, Jesus doesn't just say, come on down. He then saves him, saving Zacchaeus from himself and his particular weakness of greed, saving him for this new life.

[20 : 27] Again, new life characterized in Zacchaeus' case by this new emphasis on radical fourfold generosity. Now, we don't know, we're not told how God brings this transformation about in Zacchaeus.

Could be through his conscience getting peaked. Perhaps it was just simply the act of meeting and seeing Jesus' face. Perhaps it was that through Zacchaeus recognizing the fact he was just exhausted from carrying the guilt and the insecurity and the hatred which comes with corruption. Perhaps he thought, ah, I don't need this. The money's not it. You're it, Jesus. Maybe that's what brought about is change. In whatever way God does it for Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is saved from himself for this new life with Jesus. And then, so, for us then, for you, I wonder in what ways we might be able to imagine that Jesus is particularly seeking us out, particularly longing to save us, to save you today.

How do you imagine Jesus, for a start, seeks you out in life? What might that look like? When do you find yourself perhaps suddenly aware of or thinking about God? You know, what prompts that? What moments do you think, okay, there you are, God? What is it in your life that prompts that? Perhaps we could think, who might God be working through to find us, to find you. Those he prompts perhaps to get in touch with you, to encourage you, to take interest in you. God might be seeking you out through other people.

Equally, in what ways might God be seeking, might be speaking to you? Whether through something you read, something you see, you hear, whether in church, whether in conversation. You know, however we think it might happen, the promise from Jesus is that he says, I will draw all people to myself. And all means all.

That's you and me and everyone to himself. But then alongside his seeking, the flip side of the same coin, if you like, is Jesus promises to save us, to save us firstly from the things that aren't good for us in our world. So for Zacchaeus, money was clearly his weak spot, his Achilles heel. I wonder what you would say your weak spot is. You know, the thing which tends to lead you astray from God, most of all.

[23 : 23] Have a think. What's your weak spot with God be? I'm not going to ask you to share it with the person next to you, so don't worry about that. But I wonder, if you were brutally honest before God, what might that be? The thing that you can't seem to get rid of. Could be deep-seated anger, could be hidden lust, could be the obsessive pursuit of money, could be the love of gossip, could be someone else entirely. But whatever our weak spot is, I'd say they're all things that God could be calling us, could be calling you and me to put down, if you like, to be saved from.

Equally though, our weak spot could be something far less intentional on our part, but just as troubling. Our weak spot, our weakness, could be a rock-bottom sense of self-worth, could be a particular fear or phobia, could be that emotional barrier that we put up between ourselves and others.

I don't know. But whether our weak spots are, we could say sins that need stopping or scars that need soothing, Jesus comes to save us, to rescue us from ourselves. And I wonder what could you and I offer to God today, asking him to save us from. But then best of all, I wonder too, what you might imagine God longs to save you for. You know, in an ideal world, if you think about it, what would you love to do?

What would you love to be involved in? What fires you up? What gets you excited? What moves you? What activity do you find yourself completely losing track of time when you're doing it? You know, whatever our passions, whatever our joys, our hopes, they may well be the unique purposes God longs to release us into, the unique purposes that God has saved us for. Not in any way as a pressure to pursue or a burden to balance, but as a blessing through which we can find wholeness and purpose. You know, I'm sure Zacchaeus found Jesus' words that it's more blessed

to give than receive to be true. If you look at his face, look at him. He's found that generosity, generosity brings us as much, if not more joy than keeping stuff, yes, but also it brings us more joy to give almost than it does for the one who receives from that. Zacchaeus discovered that blessing. And so again, I wonder today, we might perhaps offer to God those things which we love, those things which inspire us and ask for God to bless what we offer for the benefit of others. Because as we refresh others, so we ourselves will be refreshed.

[26 : 44] I'm going to press pause there today, because next week we'll round off this little series by looking at the ways in which Jesus ultimately saves us and our world for an eternal, ongoing future with him. But until then, for today, my prayer is a simple but profound one that you and I may know that today salvation has come to us through the loving presence of Jesus, the one who is salvation.

Amen. Amen.