

“The Last Words of Jesus: #2 - Salvation”

καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ ἀμὴν σοι λέγω σήμερον μετ’ ἐμοῦ ἔσῃ ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ.

*Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).
Luke 23:35-43 ¹*

As you may know, *The Lord of the Rings* is a trilogy of good and evil in which two creatures called Hobbits are given the charge of destroying an evil, magical ring that threatens to undo their world. In the second movie, *The Two Towers*, these Hobbits, Frodo and Sam, become lost in an awful wilderness and are unable to find their way out.

Just as they’re about to give up in despair, they happen upon a wretched creature called Gollum, who was the previous possessor of this ring. Because of the ring’s evil power, Gollum has been consumed with desire for it, and he has wasted away into a horrible caricature of his former self.

Gollum agrees to lead Frodo and Sam out of the wilderness and to their destination, but Sam knows that Gollum’s real desire is to find a way to regain possession of the ring. Because he knows Gollum’s true motive, Sam is continually mean to him. Frodo, on the other hand, has more compassion.

After one such incident, Frodo asks Sam, “Why do you do that, calling him names and running him down all the time?” Sam replies, “Because that’s what he is, Mr. Frodo. There’s naught left in him but lies and deceit. It’s the ring he wants. It’s all he cares about.”

Looking at miserable Gollum, Frodo says, “You have no idea what it did to him. I have to help him, Sam.”

“Why?”

“Because I have to believe he can come back.”²

If we could travel into the dim recesses of the past and change that ring to a certain piece of fruit, we might hear a very similar conversation. As God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, stationing mighty angels to guard its gate, I can almost hear God saying, **“You have no idea what their disobedience has done to them. I have to help them. I have to make a way for them to come back home”** (Genesis 3:24).

That, in one sentence, is the story of the Bible. The Bible is the record of God’s making a way for you and me, as those who have inherited a nature twisted and nearly destroyed by Sin, to come home again to what God’s love had originally intended to give us.

Like Frodo and Sam, left to ourselves, you and I are lost in an awful wilderness, with no idea about how to get home to God. Sometimes, we’re so lost that we’re not sure we even believe in God at all, and our lives move in endless circles, “sound and fury signifying nothing.”³

This morning we turn to the second of Jesus’ “Words from the Cross,” the Word of Salvation. As we saw last week, it was by the blood of the Cross that God created a path by which you and I may return home to that for which we were made. The Bible says that

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on March 4, 2012.

² *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, New Line Cinema (2003), Directed by Peter Jackson.

³ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, scene 5.

“Jesus Christ, the Righteous One . . . is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

Why did Jesus have to die on the cross? Why was His death the price of our freedom? We’re not ever going to understand that on this side of heaven, but let’s think about it for a bit. The theological word for what Jesus’ death accomplished on our behalf is “atonement.” Much ink has been spilled on the idea of atonement, but to state it simply, the central issue in Jesus’ death is the resolution of a tension in God’s own nature, the tension between God’s passionate love for us and God’s righteousness, God’s moral law.

In Philippians 4:8, Paul wrote, *“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”* So how do we know what is “true and noble and right”? Well, how do we know what *color* something really is? We put it in the light of the sun, which is our definition of color. In the same way, we know what is true and noble and right by comparing it with God’s own nature, which is the definition of Truth and Goodness.

One of the reasons God gave us the Bible is to translate eternal Truth and Goodness into moral laws that we can understand and live by—a “God Positioning System” by which we can avoid running our lives aground. By their very nature, Truth and Goodness refine, remove, and burn away that which is not True and Good, rather as fire consumes anything that will burn.

While God does give us the awesome freedom to go our own way, God’s Truth and Goodness will eventually consume all that is not True and Good. Because every one of us has rebelled against God’s Truth and Goodness in many ways, this means that God’s Truth and Goodness will also eventually destroy us. The problem is that God loves us, and isn’t willing to destroy us. God’s Love says, *“I have to help them. I have to make a way for them to come back home.”*

In the wonderful mystery of God’s love for us, God chose to satisfy Truth and Goodness by taking the destruction of our Evil into God’s own Being on Calvary’s Cross. As we sometimes put it, “God paid a debt He didn’t owe because we owed a debt we couldn’t pay.”

Now exactly *how* the blood of Christ brings us God’s full forgiveness and restores us into our intended fellowship with God remains shrouded in mystery. When all is said and done, the Bible simply tells us that *“God made him who had no sin to **be** sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”* (2 Corinthians 5:21). We either believe this, or we do not.⁴

When we make the conscious choice to believe that Jesus gave Himself as the offering for our own personal sin, and ask God to forgive our sin on the basis of that sacrifice, the Bible says that we have received salvation. We’ve been “saved,” “converted,” “born again” (John 3:3, 16). As Jesus Himself put it, *“Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me **has eternal life** [present tense] and **will not be judged** [future tense], but **has crossed over from death to life** [past tense]”* (John 5:24). And that, my friends, is Good News. That’s Really Good News!

Jesus’ second Word from the Cross, the Word of Salvation, was spoken to the very first person who ever placed his faith in this Crucified King—a criminal who was being crucified

⁴ Kenneth Kantzer, “Why is Easter Unattractive?” *Christianity Today*, March 18, 1983, pp. 8-9.

at that very moment himself: “**Truly I tell you,**” Jesus said, “**today you will be with me in paradise**” (Luke 23:43).

Jesus told the criminal on the cross beside Him that his sin was forgiven and that his impending death would take him to the same place that death would soon take Jesus. Since that’s where death will also take you and me if we’ve been born again, it might be good to ask ourselves what “paradise” Jesus was talking about.

The word translated “paradise” means “park” or “garden,” and it appears only two other times in the New Testament. The first of these is in 2 Corinthians 12, where Paul wrote, “*I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. . . . And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to **paradise** and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell*” (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). The other occurrence is in Revelation 2:7: “*To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the **paradise** of God.*”

These passages suggest that paradise is a wonderful place, a place where God is, and a place where we will once again have access to the Tree of Life. You may remember that it was to prevent access to this tree that the angelic guardians sealed off the entrance to Eden (Genesis 3:24).

Jesus’ word to the repentant criminal on the Cross indicates that we enter paradise when our physical bodies die. Conversely, Jesus’ parable about the rich man and Lazarus seems to indicate that those who die without being born again enter immediately into a state of torment rather than paradise (Luke 16:19-31).

That’s what happens when we die. But something even more wonderful is going to happen at the end of time. Paul put it this way: “*Listen, I will tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed*” (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

When the final trumpet sounds, when God says, “Enough!” those who are in paradise with God will be transformed one more time, and the born-again persons who remain on earth at that time will experience this same transformation. And at that time, the Bible says, God will create a new heaven and a new earth in which God will choose to live among His people in the way that was originally intended. At that time, “*There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away*” (Revelation 21:4).

My friends, from the very moment that the Garden of Eden was sealed, God’s purpose of love has been to make a way for you and me to come home again to what we were created to be. There, is, however, only one way back, and that’s by the Way of the Cross.

According to Paul Harvey, Alexandra Flynn of Fremont, Nebraska, was really looking forward to the 2002 homecoming dance. She left home in high spirits, but she forgot to bring her high school ID with her, and the security guard wouldn’t let her in without it.

Alex went home to get her ID, but she couldn’t find it, so her mother went back to the dance with her to provide identification. Even then, with the homecoming tickets in her hand and her mother by her side, Alex was refused admission to the dance. Even though Alexandra Flynn was President of the Student Body, played cello in the Allstate orchestra, was on the Honor Roll, was the school’s number one cheerleader, and had spent hours decorating the gym for the Homecoming Dance, she was still not admitted.

Did I mention that Alex was also the Homecoming Queen? But she never did get in. In a similar way, getting into heaven isn't a matter of good deeds and accomplishments. Jesus said, "*No one comes to the Father except through me*" (John 14:6). Without Jesus, my friend, you have no ID to get into heaven.⁵

Two hundred and thirty-seven years ago this month—on March 26, 1775—Henry Alline placed his faith in Jesus and was born again. Here's his description of what happened next:

*At that instant of time when I gave all up to him to do with me as he pleased, and was willing that God should rule over me at his pleasure, redeeming love broke into my soul . . . with such power that my whole soul seemed to be melted down with love; the burden of guilt and condemnation was gone, darkness was expelled, my heart humbled and filled with gratitude, and my whole soul, that was a few minutes ago groaning under mountains of death, and crying to an unknown God for help, was now filled with immortal love, soaring on the wings of faith, freed from the chains of death and darkness, and crying out, My Lord and My God; thou are my rock and my fortress, my shield and my high tower, my life, my joy, my present and my everlasting portion.*⁶

That sounds pretty good, doesn't it—to be released from all guilt and condemnation, to be filled with love and gratitude, to be freed from the fear of death, and to experience deep and enduring joy? And that's just *part* of what God intends to give you in the time between your spiritual birth and paradise!

So the question this morning is "Do you have your ID"? My friend, there's only one thing that can wash away your Sin, only one thing that can make you whole again, and that's the perfect blood of Jesus. It doesn't matter what else you do. If you don't have Jesus, you won't get in.

At the same time, the Really Good News from Jesus' Second Word from the Cross is that it's never, ever too late to trust your life to Him. As Henry Alline put it, "At that instant of time when I gave all up to him to do with me as he pleased, and was willing that God should rule over me at his pleasure, redeeming love broke into my soul."

Have you made that decision? Do you need to know for sure? Why not come to Jesus . . . now?

⁵ *Paul Harvey News & Comment*, December 3, 2002.

⁶ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Theology delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902, foreword by Jacques Barzun (New York: Mentor Books, 1958), p. 178.