



Words that transform: salvation

Matthew 19:16-30

I commend a further word in this short series of words that transforms life for us—and that is the word ‘salvation’. There is no doubt that this word encapsulates the most profound Christian truth. One Christian writer has described any discussion of salvation as “a complex and demanding undertaking”.

One thing that most people agree on is that self-salvation is impossible—and that follows on from the earlier word ‘grace’. We recognise that only Jesus Christ is able to offer salvation, by his grace alone.

If I were to define salvation, I would turn to one of my teachers who called it, “The application or administration of redemption purchased for all at the cross.” It is, therefore, a work of the Holy Spirit.

There may be large numbers of people who are seeking to present themselves to God by their own effort:

- this is invariably through the pursuit of noble actions
- this may well be in the cultivation of various expressions of spirituality.

Salvation is a word of enormous importance and fully-comprehensive in all that it means for the Christian. In seeking to define it, I would have to begin by describing it as God’s work from beginning to end.

Many people have talked about the fact that salvation has three tenses: past, present and future. Because of this, John Stott was quite right when he contended that if someone were to ask him “Are you saved?” there is only one correct biblical answer that you can give: “Yes and no”.

- “Yes” in the sense that by God’s grace and mercy through the death of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, he has forgiven our sins, justified us and reconciled us to God.
- “No” in the sense that we are still a distorted people who live in a fallen world and are longing for the salvation that is brought about by God’s final completion. There is an incompleteness and imbalance that remains until His final gift is manifest to us all.

The New Testament is about what God has done in Jesus Christ. It is the proclamation of all that he has achieved. It heralds a salvation that is complete in Christ.

We are looking at a series of passages in Matthew’s Gospel and, on this occasion, Jesus meets a man who comes to him with a question:

“Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, ‘Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?’”(Matthew 19:16).

Actually, this incident is found in all the Synoptic gospels and is often described as ‘Jesus and the Rich Young Ruler’. In point of fact, it is Matthew who tells us that the rich man was young and Luke tells us he was a ruler. The question he asks is typical of people of a religious disposition.

Michael Green comments on this question being the kind of enquiry that would be perplexing to the Pharisee of the day. However, we must ensure that we do not restrict the matter to the time of Jesus and the Pharisees, for it is just as alive and well amongst many today.



Here is a person who is anxious to know how to inherit eternal life and, in the idiom of the gospels, inheriting eternal life seems to be synonymous with entering the kingdom of God. It is in the same spirit as receiving salvation and entering into what God has offered in the past and is always offering to us through the work of Jesus Christ.

It is interesting to explore the way different writers address salvation. Salvation is the manner in which we experience the provision of God for our deepest human need—and also addresses the emptiness of life without God.

In Matthew, the story of the rich young man has a very distinctive function. It serves as something of a commentary upon the way Jesus has generously welcomed little children who have done nothing to earn his love. Rather than calling Jesus “good” as in Mark and Luke, in Mathew he is reported to have asked what “good deed” he must undertake.

As Jesus deals with this man, he gives us insight into what it is that God offers to us. It all happens as part of Jesus’ teaching on discipleship on the road to Jerusalem. If we see it in that context and the wider setting, we note:-

- it begins with a dialogue with this man about eternal life—v.v.16-22
- it continues with a lament over the challenge raised for rich people—v.v.23-26
- it finishes with a response to Peter about the rewards of discipleship—v.v.27-30.

As with the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, it ends on the same note: “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first,” (albeit slightly shorter).

By placing the emphasis upon ‘good thing’ Matthew shifts the issue to a question about salvation. We know we can do nothing to earn God’s salvation, but it is clear that Jesus allows the man to talk on his own terms.

By illustrating how hard it is to have riches and enter the kingdom of God, Jesus offers a striking image that has lasted the test of time. Not surprisingly, FF Bruce included in his book *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, his comments about the camel entering through the eye of a needle being easier than the rich entering the kingdom.

In exploring the Bible, we discover the writers do not actually refer to salvation as an abstract notion appealing to the intellect, or even to the heart.

God saves not in the abstract, but in the specific acts of history and, supremely, in the act of God in the Person of Jesus Christ upon the cross.

Jesus’ response to the man is to refer to the commandments of God and adds the summary command to love one’s neighbour. The man brashly declares he’s kept them all: “All these I have kept” (v.20), but he recognises he is lacking something. Imagine his demeanour!

Then comes the crux of the matter, for the concept of ‘perfect’ is introduced (v.21). Jesus tells him he must sell his many possessions and give to the poor. This is not salvation by works, but reveals to the man (and us) how futile are all attempts to gain salvation by ourselves.

Seeing our real need may take a lifetime. Sometimes experiences occur that make things transparent. At other times, we cover them up. But underlying all sound Christian theology is the doctrine of sin,



which unequivocally points to the fact that something is wrong. This expresses itself not only in wrong deeds, but also in terms of lostness, emptiness, boredom, frustration and even fear.

As we look at this word Salvation, I refer back to the encounter of Jesus and the man; it gives us pointers as to how we can understand salvation today.

Salvation brings liberation

In the Old Testament, God saves his people through what he brings about in their history. In the New Testament, salvation is found throughout the life of Jesus Christ, who becomes part of this world and acts for us supremely upon the cross.

There is no doubt that the account of the Exodus in the Old Testament has much to say about God's deliverance – or liberating power: "I will sing to the Lord, for he has risen up in triumph; the horse and his rider he has hurled into the sea. The Lord is my refuge and my defence, he has shown himself my deliverer," (Exodus 15:1-2).

We can't have an intelligent appreciation of the Old Testament without acknowledging that the concept of deliverance is so much a part of the consciousness of the Jewish people.

In the New Testament, writers see the death of Jesus as the ultimate liberating and delivering work of God. Paul speaks about Jesus Christ having made 'a public spectacle' (Colossians 2:15) of the 'cosmic powers' on the cross.

Liberation for the rich man (and for all of us) comes as we abandon attempts to gain favour with God by our works, however decent, and benefit from the grace offered to us—and live by this alone. The consequences are discovered in a complete handover of our life to him.

The word 'teleios' typically translated 'perfect' does not relate to unswerving and total obedience to law. After all, the rich man has incorrectly claimed to have achieved this. Rather it refers to God's complete work in his life and ours. That which is perfect requires nothing additional to bring completion. It is not something we do, but it is that which he does through us. It is not only refreshing, but also liberating.

God's gift of salvation is spelled out in Romans 5:6-8: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Salvation affords rescue from meaningless

It could be argued that nothing is more characteristic of our generation than a sense of meaninglessness. In Jesus Christ, we are rescued from "inauthentic existence".

Our Christian Mission is charged with the task of giving:

- meaning to life, especially to those in despair
- hope in the midst of suffering and disorder
- positivity to those without direction and purpose
- an alternative community of compassion.

In the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes, we read:



“Meaningless! Meaningless!”
says the teacher.
“Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless.” (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

Salvation, as we find it through Jesus Christ, brings meaning to life and spells out possibility to lost people. It is a costly business, but it is God’s free gift to us.

We might consider this to be a reorientation of life and personality at an individual level and the grand vision of something better in the larger scheme of things.

Friedrich Nietzsche criticised Christians for their lack of life and vitality. He wrote, “The disciples of Jesus will have to look more saved if I am to believe in the Saviour they talk about.”

Evelyn Underhill, the writer on spirituality, reflected: “This is the secret of joy. We shall no longer strive for our own way; but commit ourselves, easily and simply, to God’s way, acquiesce in his will and in doing so find our peace.”

Salvation offers freedom from sin

For the rich man, the encounter with Jesus becomes an opportunity to display how decent he is, even though he appears to be short of something fundamentally ‘good’ in order to gain eternal life.

Our Christian world view cannot take shape without an understanding of sin. The new beginning that Jesus Christ brings about comes as we look to him—and then turn away from sin. The Christian life begins when we learn to repent and exercise faith, which needs to be unpacked in a confused and often self-obsessed world in the early part of the twenty-first century.

The heart cry of the Psalmist says:

“Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgression,” (Psalm 51:1).

Mercy is the love of God for sinners! In one study on the biblical picture of salvation, we read: “What are human beings for, anyway? It is only when we know our purpose that we can recognise our problem and begin to seek an answer.”

When Martin Luther posted his famous ninety-five Theses in Wittenberg, the first stated: “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ... willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.”

False remedies abound for every illness under the sun. Some are simple and many are strenuous. Repentance is not just “sorrow for sin” which can be penitence for the fact that we have been found out! Repentance must involve the total changing and turning of spirit, mind and will – and good people need it equally as much as bad people.

Repentance is distinct from conversion, and precedes faith. It was a prominent theme of the preaching of John the Baptist, Jesus Christ and the Apostles.



The New Testament Greek word is 'metanoia' which occurs 23 times as a noun and 34 times as a verb. It leads to:-

- a change of mind—thought processes are involved
- a change of heart—an emotional response occurs
- a change of will—an essential change of purpose
- a change of direction—a total reorientation.

When we begin to grasp this, we find that God wants us to be saved from our illusions. It is only then that we discover we may have “life, and have it to the full,” (John 10:10).

Salvation from dependence upon things

It should not surprise us that salvation has become a great theme (albeit in a particular form) for Christian liberation thinkers around the world. We must have a realistic picture of what drives them. Jesus is certainly not a first-century freedom fighter. However, his message definitely has revolutionary aspects, particularly the way ‘things’ are viewed.

- In his teaching, Jesus turned values on their head.
- Jesus gave salvation, which takes us beyond ‘the material’.

The man who came to Jesus was rich, upright and moral. When I consider the account we are exploring and also the corresponding passages in Mark and Luke, I am brought to the conclusion that he was an impressive human being and his riches had brought him respectability in the local community.

Leo Tolstoy wrote a short story, *How much land does a man need?* It tells of a man who wanted more land. The Bashkir people live where Eastern Europe meets North Asia and they have much land. Their chief informs a man that for a thousand roubles he can buy all the land he can circle from dawn to sunset. So he runs and runs and, as the sun is setting, he runs very fast to get back to the starting place. He makes it, but then drops down dead. The land is his, but he only requires a six foot grave to be buried in!

There is an early nineteenth century painting by Heinrich Hoffman which hangs in one of my favourite churches, the Riverside Church in New York City. It is entitled *Christ and the Rich Young Ruler*. There are four people in the painting—an older man, probably ill; a young woman, perhaps his daughter on whom he is leaning; a young man dressed in the best of clothes; and, in the centre, Jesus.

The young man looks disappointed, the woman looks worried, and Jesus is plain and modest in expression. In the painting, his hands seem to reach out to the poor, sick and worried.

God's saving work, his saving love and his saving presence, is offered to all who are in any way in need. For the self-confident, their way will never satisfy.

Whole generations before us have spent their lives seeking to better themselves. This has involved money, possessions and the like. Now many have all these things, but are trapped by them. Countless numbers of people have thought possessions would set them free, but we need God's salvation to free us from such a grip.



The young man found Jesus' teaching too demanding (v.23). Jesus is not seeking to give the impression that to be saved is all about our sacrifice; it is our knowing we cannot buy his favour by intention, works or mighty deeds.

The result of all this focus upon salvation is that life is given a new beginning through no goodness of our own.

This truly is good news!