

# Are you saved?

## Paul and salvation

Tom Yoder Neufeld

**I**f we could ask Paul, “Are you saved?” I suspect he would respond, “How much time do you have?” Here I can do no more than sketch in rough strokes what Paul might have to say about salvation. But a sketch has several virtues: it gives us the outlines of what needs to be fleshed out more fully, and it leaves open that fleshing out in a way that respects the wide variety of contexts in which the gospel of salvation needs to be heard. Such sketching, incidentally, is exactly what Paul did in his letters, which were always context specific and thus serve as a model for us as we reflect on salvation in our contexts.

### Salvation’s wide horizon

Today terms such as *salvation*, *save*, and *saviour* carry largely religious meaning. Not so in Paul’s day: one might be saved by a saviour from disease, natural disaster, oppression, or war. When Paul himself uses *salvation* (*sōtēria*) and related terms, they are usually related to God, or more specifically to Christ, and sometimes even to his own activity as an apostle of Christ. But the term would have continued to enjoy rich and varied associations, thereby ensuring that salvation would have signalled a wide horizon to Paul’s hearers and readers.

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Several features mark out this horizon. As a Jew, even before becoming a messenger of Jesus, Paul shared a fervent hope that God would at some point act to bring this dark age to a conclusion and usher in the day of salvation (2 Cor. 6:2). As an apostle of Christ, Paul was convinced that salvation is indeed breaking in or out and will soon come in full. It will bring an end to sin, yes, but it will also bring an end to

oppression by the powers that are holding humanity in a sleeper hold. Finally, salvation will mark the end even of death itself (1 Cor. 15:26). What characterizes Paul's thinking most distinctly is the startling news that such liberation will benefit not only God's chosen people, Israel, but also non-Jews who respond in faith to that news.

Salvation is thus best understood against the background of a large tapestry of hopes and promises for the whole world, even as a closer look at the weaving shows that particular communities and individuals are caught up in God's grand scheme of salvation.<sup>1</sup> The answer to the question of what we are saved from becomes for Paul a wide-ranging one, because the world and its inhabitants are broken and enslaved in so many ways.

However encompassing and multidimensional salvation is, at the center of it is a saving God, and more specifically the agent and means of salvation, Jesus Christ. The decisive initiative in bringing about salvation is not *our* faith, as critically important as that is, but the faith—faithfulness—of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> This faithfulness encompasses not only Jesus' servant-like ministry (Phil. 2:6-11) but especially his self-offering for us, who were at that time still helpless sinners at enmity with God (Rom. 5:6, 8, 10). This faithfulness is nothing less than the strange justice<sup>3</sup> of God at work (Rom. 3:21-26).

Surprise is written all over Paul's account of God's saving initiative. The resurrection of Jesus is a shattering intrusion of hope into hopelessness, an invasion of the new creation into the old age marked by sin and corruption. But perhaps the most shocking of surprises is the cross. The cross was in Paul's day the symbol of Rome's state terror. Through God's inscrutable ingenuity, the torture and execution of his son at the hands of rebellious rulers (1 Cor. 2:8) becomes the power to save (1 Cor. 1:18). Human rebellion is transformed into God's own initiative to save and to reconcile. Or, as Ephesians 2:16 puts it, the stake on which Christ was hung became the means by which he lethally drove the stake through the heart of hostility and enmity. To cast that event as a legal transaction risks making it conform to the wisdom of this world's forensic calculus, empty of the moronic newsworthiness Paul sees in it (1 Cor. 1:20, 3:19). This event was and is always news—gospel.

For such creativity, one word will not do. Multiple terms and metaphors for salvation are found in the Pauline letters: ransom or manumission (1 Cor. 7:23; 1 Tim. 2:6); justification—not just forgiveness or a declaration of innocence but the transformation of the offender (Rom. 10:10; 1 Cor. 6:11); sacrifice or self-offering for others (Rom. 5:6-11); defeat of the powers or liberation (1 Cor. 15:23-25); even murder—Christ’s murdering enmity through his own death (Eph. 2:16). Some of these are combative, even violent, images of liberation. What is crucial is this: we are not saved from a violent and vengeful God; we are saved forcefully and decisively by a loving God. Whatever “wrath” means

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(and it does mean divine judgment), and salvation for Paul does include being saved from it (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10), it is salvation emerging from the heart of a sinner-loving God. We are not saved from God’s justice, but by God’s justice.

### **What we are saved for**

For this reason, we must find vocabulary for salvation that expresses restoration, creation, enlivening, and empowerment. Then the focus moves from what we are saved *from*

(bondage, oppression, sin, death) to what we are saved *for*: new creation (Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17); participation in the body of the Messiah (1 Corinthians 12); living a life of justice, doing good works, practicing love and peace, being sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters of one another, at home together with God (Ephesians 2).

Nothing brings this restorative dimension of salvation into clearer focus than Easter. The resurrection of the one crucified by imperial power signals that the God of Abraham is acting to mend the world! The day of (full) salvation is getting nearer and nearer (Rom. 13:11; 2 Cor. 6:2)! Those dead in sin (Eph. 2:1-3) are being raised to new life! If Jesus was not raised, then all this talk of salvation is worthless; then we are the most to be pitied (1 Cor. 15:19). Paul views the resurrection of Jesus as the first instalment of an earth-shattering revolution that will climax in the recovery of creation. It will culminate in the resurrection of all the dead

and the full revealing of the Lordship of Christ, and finally the full integration of God with his creation (1 Cor. 15:20-28).

If any further proof were needed that this new day is dawning, that the new creation is already taking hold, Paul can point to the communities of Jews and Gentiles, which had been estranged and even hostile to each other, now together in one body, breathing the same breath of a saving God, the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12).

We refer to such communities as *church*, too quickly loading it with the burdensome freight of all our associations with the term. Paul sees these assemblies as communities of salvation. Here are Jews and gentiles, men and women, rich and poor, slave and free, learning to eat together, to pray together, to call one another brother and sister, and to confess Jesus as Lord together (1 Cor. 12:3). Here are communities, as vulnerable and weak as their Lord, who by their very existence, by their sometimes halting faithfulness, are informing the culturally, religiously, economically, and politically entrenched powers about who is boss (Eph. 3:10). That they suffer for their freedom from these powers is as predictable as it was for their Lord. They are participating in the divine craziness that transformed the suffering of Jesus into the means of reconciling a hostile world (1 Cor. 1:18-31). Paul knows about himself that power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9-10); he wants his cells of salvation to know the same (1 Cor. 1:26-30).

### **Salvation, grace, and works**

We can go further. Paul believed these communities of believers to be in some mysterious but real sense a part of the risen Messiah, his body (see Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12-14, 27), called to live out the newness of life (Rom. 6:4) in the midst of an old but passing age (1 Cor. 7:31), even as they eagerly await Christ's full appearing (1 Cor. 15:23). They are to let Easter take them to the cross.<sup>4</sup> To be members of the Saviour's body is not only to be recipients of hope, members of a community looking forward to the day of salvation. It entails being drawn into the process of salvation as that is already happening. How else can we understand Paul's instructions to believers to put on *God's* armour, including the helmet of salvation, worn by God (Isa. 59:17) to bring liberation to the victims of oppression?<sup>5</sup> Recall Paul's description of himself

as a coworker with God in spreading the good word about salvation (2 Cor. 5:18–6:2), or the startling phrase in Colossians 1:24 about completing what is still lacking in the sufferings of Christ.

This activity is not about earning salvation; it is evidence of salvation, and it is participation in salvation. It is not hubris; it is God's transforming salvation at work through those who are being saved (1 Cor. 1:18, 15:2; 2 Cor. 2:15). We are saved by the mercy of God for good works (Eph. 2:10). It is not of our own doing; it is for our doing! And there is no better work than participation in the activity of the Saviour. There is no higher calling than to be an integral part of God's saving intervention in and through Christ. We are, after all, members of that saving Christ's body. This body is alive, breathing with holy wind, the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 12; Galatians 5; Romans 8; Ephesians 4). If salvation is God's justice at work, we should not be surprised that Paul refers to us as the justice of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

Not only is Christ's faith (faithfulness) pivotal for salvation, but as those who are in Christ, our faith (faithfulness) is also pivotal.

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We hear the gospel and accept it in faith.

That is, we trust the news, thereby letting that salvation take hold of us and shape our lives, enlisting us in its global agenda. In Paul's view, as we have seen, our faith is inseparable from our faithfulness. Through our faithfulness we become part of the story of salvation.

Perhaps rather than claiming only that we have been saved, or that we will be saved, we should also say that we are being saved—as individuals, communities, peoples, indeed as world (1 Cor. 1:18, 15:2; 2 Cor. 2:15). We are works in progress, nudged and prodded by the one who works salvation in us (Phil. 2:12-13), and through all those who are in Christ.

Are we not saved by grace rather than works? Absolutely. But God's grace is so enormously gracious that it not only forgives bad works but also enables good works.<sup>6</sup> *Grace* must not be translated as impunity, as the Protestant heresy has it. Justification is not just a declaration of innocence but also transformation, rendering us capable of doing justice.

That said, grace is by its nature difficult to control. Paul knows enough not to calculate the reach of an enemy-loving God's grace in relation to sinners (Romans 5, 9–11), even as we have no right to presume upon grace or to undercut the certainty of judgment. Grace is love relentlessly at work to save, intended to restore us to full humanity and thus to living in keeping with the will of our creator.

### **Salvation, Jews, and empire**

There are, finally, two aspects of Paul's reality that have come into sharp focus in recent years: Jews and empire. What of Paul's fellow Jews? Does he think they will be saved? Put bluntly, Paul—a Jewish messenger of God to gentiles—cannot conceive of salvation as not including his fellow Jews, as much as the rejection of Jesus by many of them grieves him terribly. If salvation is about mending the rifts in humanity, between slaves and free, men and women, it must include Jews if it is to be true salvation (Rom. 1:16, 10:12; 1 Cor. 9:20; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). That is precisely what Paul addresses in the important central section of his letter to the Romans (chapters 9–11). God refuses to be counted out and even uses rebellion to serve salvation. Who could have guessed (11:32-33)?<sup>7</sup> Paul knows what Jonah knew about the gracious unreliability of God, only Paul thinks it's good news.

Paul could not, in his darkest nightmares, have anticipated the enormity of the betrayal of salvation in subsequent Christian history, culminating in the holocaust. What if Christians had shared the disposition of Paul, who was willing to be cut off from Christ for the sake of his people, if that would further salvation (Rom. 9:3)?<sup>8</sup> To ask this question is not to blunt the scandal of the cross, God's shocking generosity to gentiles, nor the call to faith and trust in Jesus as Messiah. It's just that Paul refused in his day to count God out, and so should we today. That is what it means to wear the helmet of the hope of salvation (1 Thess. 5:8).

Paul undertook his advocacy of salvation in the context of an omnipresent empire and the Hellenistic culture it had absorbed, led by rulers who arrogated to themselves the divine capacity to ensure true peace and salvation (1 Thess. 5:3). Paul's words about salvation must be heard as a direct challenge to these imperial pretensions. Pitted against this overweening reality are Paul and

his far-flung network of salvation communities—small, often poor, weak, socially diverse, and conflicted circles of adherents of the risen Jesus, preaching and living out a gospel of power through weakness, salvation through the death of a saviour who fell victim to state terror. How absurd to think these communities represent the beachhead of salvation and a challenge to the empire and its powers.

As sons and daughters of God (thereby denying that claim to Caesar!), these communities exercise this powerful weakness by publicly living an alternative to the patron/client, lord/slave violence patterns of their society. So they strut their stuff by walking humbly, chasing after their enemies with hospitality and blessing, and living peaceably with all, at least to the extent that it depends on them (Romans 12; Eph. 4:1-3). They exercise their emancipation by becoming slaves to Christ, to justice, and to one another (Rom. 6:15-19, 14:7-9; Phil. 2:3-4). In such socially subversive, culturally transformative, militant counterliving, salvation is invading the world of darkness (Rom. 13:11-14; Eph. 5:3-16). The powers have no idea that their callous act of violence in apparently terminating that insignificant troublemaker from Galilee is at the very same time their own undoing (1 Cor. 2:8). Nor are they able to appreciate the stealth with which salvation is invading their realm in these small messianic communities (1 Thess. 5:1-11). But Paul knows that for this purpose God has chosen what is not wise to bring to naught the wisdom of the powerful (1 Cor. 1:26-29). Weakness is God's subversive power at work to save (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Our Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition values discipleship. Discipleship, or as Paul likes to call it, Spirit-driven imitation of Christ, is nothing less than participation in salvation, even as such participation anticipates the coming day. It is willingness to take up our cross with Easter firmly in mind. Easter precedes our Good Friday, just as surely as we anticipate the great Easter to come (1 Corinthians 15; 1 Thess. 4:13-18).

### **What would Paul say to us?**

I suspect Paul would be sorely grieved by the business of salvation in our society. He would be shocked by the way his gospel of salvation has been taken hostage by an ideology that has severed

grace from transformation, mercy from the response of suffering love, forgiveness and justification from the good works they are intended to make possible (Eph. 2:10; 2 Thess. 2:13; Titus 3:8),<sup>9</sup> and salvation from social transformation. He would be baffled by our success in pulling the teeth of the gospel vis-à-vis our own imperial realities. He would be puzzled by how little we settle for and how little we expect of ourselves as the beneficiaries of salvation.

On the other hand, as his Corinthian correspondence illustrates, Paul would not give up on us. Like an apostolic coach at halftime, he would give us sharp, critical, and at the same time enabling and empowering exhortation. He would demand of us that we neither reduce the cross to a formula nor dismiss it out of embarrassment. Salvation was, is, and will be costly in the extreme. He would further urge us to remember Easter as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12).

Paul would exhort us not to turn away from evangelism, however much it was and is vulnerable to hucksterism and trivialization and thus insulting to the grandeur and scope of salvation. He would ask us, as recipients of salvation, to gratefully and enthusiastically recover its wonder, its scandal, its foolish power, the weakness that vanquishes the powers of enslavement and oppression. Evangelism is nothing less than participation in salvation (1 Cor. 9:16-23) by finding and using the language, lived and spoken, that communicates the wonder and ingenuity of God's salvation in Christ.

Paul would want us to wear the helmet of salvation (1 Thess. 5:8; Eph. 6:17), not for ourselves, and not against blood and flesh (Eph. 6:12), but as a weapon of liberation, wearing it into the trenches of oppression, violence, and alienation from God. That such a helmet leaves the participants in God's salvation vulnerable—as vulnerable as was the archwarrior of salvation, Jesus—is being illustrated at the time of this writing by the four members of Christian Peacemaker Teams being held as hostages in Iraq.<sup>10</sup> The power of such weakness is being demonstrated with equal clarity as people of diverse faiths and political persuasions are finding a common voice in pleading for their release.

Paul knew that the heart of the gospel is the power of salvation only because it proclaims the crucified Saviour, and because it engenders communities of new creation, who themselves imitate



their crucified and risen Lord in living humbly and courageously the way of suffering love in a broken world; who live a Jesus-like justice that reconciles, restores, and remakes human life, and do so subversively at the heart of an arrogant, power-hungry world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Nowhere is the sweep of salvation more visible than in Paul's letter to the Romans, culminating in chapters 9–11 with Paul's musings on God's unsearchable strategies of salvation that intend the reconciliation of sinners to God, the healing of the rifts in humanity, and indeed, the restoration of creation. For an excellent recent treatment of this theme in Romans, see John E. Toews's Believers Church Bible Commentary, *Romans* (Scottsdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> *Pisteōs Iēsou Christou* (Rom. 3:22 and Gal. 2:16, 3:22; see also Rom. 3:26) is often translated as "faith in Jesus Christ." I agree with those who translate it more carefully as "the faith(fullness) of Jesus Christ." See Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983). So also Toews, *Romans*, 108–111, and the literature cited and discussed there.

<sup>3</sup> Biblically, "justice" and "righteousness" translate *dikaiosynē* equally well.

<sup>4</sup> See my article in the first issue of *Vision*, entitled "Anastatic Anabaptists: Made alive and empowered to preach peace," *Vision* 1 (Fall 2000): 57–65.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Thess. 5:8; Eph. 6:17. See my 'Put on the Armour of God!' *The Divine Warrior from Isaiah to Ephesians* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 86–91, 141–42; and *Ephesians*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2002), 302–303.

<sup>6</sup> This point is the whole burden of Eph. 2:1–10. See also Romans 6 and "slavery to justice."

<sup>7</sup> See worshipful celebration of this divine strategy in Eph. 2:11–22; see Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians*, 106–37; and my essay, "For he is our peace": Ephesians 2:11–22," in *Beautiful upon the Mountains: Biblical Essays on Mission, Peace, and the Reign of God*, ed. Mary H. Schertz and Ivan Friesen (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2003), 215–33.

<sup>8</sup> See John Howard Yoder's efforts over the years to grapple with this possibility. Some of his essays are collected and responded to in *The Jewish Christian Schism Revisited*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> The likelihood that these cited passages are found in later, quite possibly post-Paul writings does not invalidate their faithfulness to Paul's own understanding of the relationship of grace and "works." See Romans 6! Paul the Jew could not have imagined immunity as sufficient good news for sinners. That is why *justification* means more than a declaration of innocence; it means being made capable of doing justice, that is, the will of God (Rom. 8:4).

<sup>10</sup> Members of a CPT delegation to Iraq, Briton Norman Kember, Canadians James Loney and Harmeet Singh Sooden, and American Tom Fox were abducted in Baghdad on November 26, 2005.

## About the author

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