

# How we see salvation: What difference does it make?

## A sermon

April Yamasaki

**I**'m what some people call a gas-and-go driver. I put gas in the car when the needle edges toward empty. I take it in for regular tune-ups. I clean the windshield when it's grimy. But most of the time, I just drive. And most of the time, that's enough. I don't need to know auto mechanics to get where I'm going.

When it comes to our relationship with God, for most of us, for most of the time, it is enough to know that we are brought into right relationship with God by faith in Jesus Christ. As Romans 10:13 says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." We don't really need to understand exactly how that works for it to be real in our lives. If we have faith in Jesus, "We

have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1)—whether or not we know how that happens.

Sometimes, though, knowing how a car works can make a difference in the way we use it. For example, because I understand that leaving the headlights on when the car is parked will drain the battery, I turn the headlights off when I park my car.

The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* says: "We receive God's salvation when we repent of sin and accept Jesus Christ

as Savior and Lord. In Christ, we are reconciled with God and brought into the reconciling community of God's people."<sup>1</sup> But how does that work? What is it about Jesus that saves us? We don't have to know exactly how salvation works in order to experience it, but knowing something about salvation can make a difference in how we live it. So let's think about how salvation works: What is it about Jesus that saves us? And what difference does that make in how we live our lives?

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There's no one place in the Bible that answers these questions. Instead, part of the answer is in the book of Romans, part of the answer is in 1 Corinthians, and other parts of the answer can be found in other parts of the Bible. So in the history of the Christian church, instead of simply saying, "Here—read the Bible; it's in there somewhere," scholars have explained salvation in a more systematic way by pulling together answers from different parts of the Bible.

As a result, we can identify three main ways of understanding salvation. Each one draws on scripture, each one makes a difference in how we ought to live our lives, and of course, each one has its own fancy theological title. To help us understand each of the three, I've also given each one a name of my own, drawn from the world of sports.

### **Pacific Classic**

I don't normally follow horse racing, but several years ago I saw on the news the Pacific Classic thoroughbred race at Del Mar, California. It was to be a historic race, because one of the horses—Cigar—was going for his seventeenth win in a row. That would have been a record-breaking streak for a North American-based horse in the twentieth century. The race took place before a record crowd of 35,000 people, with everyone's eyes on the favourite, waiting for Cigar to break the record winning streak.

It was an exciting race. Just past the half-mile pole, Cigar took the lead, and the crowd roared. He was still in front at the last turn, heading for home. But all of a sudden, from about fourth place, Dare and Go—a long shot—started to pick up the pace. He moved up on Cigar, drew even, and then went ahead to win by more than three lengths. For Dare and Go, the race was a struggle; it was a hard-run race that ultimately ended in victory.

This horse race helps me understand one of the oldest ways of thinking about salvation. I call it the Pacific Classic as a reminder that salvation is a drama, a struggle, a conflict that ends in victory. This classic theory, also called the dramatic view, was the most popular way of understanding salvation in the early history of the church, between the second and sixth centuries.

In this view, you and I are in a struggle with the forces of sin and evil. God sent Jesus to enter our struggle. From the Gospel

records, we know that Jesus faced temptation to turn away, and he met with persecution from those who opposed him. His mission was a struggle. And finally, when Jesus was arrested and tried and put to death on the cross, it looked as if he had lost the struggle. But three days later, in the final dramatic moment, God raised Jesus from the dead, and the victory belonged to Jesus.

In the Pacific Classic, it looked as if Dare and Go would never win, but in the drama and the struggle of the horse race, he came out ahead. In the classic or dramatic view of salvation, it looked as if we would never win over sin and evil, but Jesus entered our struggle. At first, it seemed that he would lose, too. But in the drama of the crucifixion and the resurrection, Jesus was the victor.

Now this classic or dramatic view of salvation appears throughout scripture. “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:57). In Acts 2:23-24, Peter says about Jesus: “This man, handed over to you by the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from the pains of death [notice the conflict and the struggle here], because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.” In other words, Jesus triumphed over death. There was conflict, and there was victory.

Understanding salvation this way should make a difference in how we live. When we struggle, we know that we are not alone, because in Jesus Christ, God has entered our struggle. We can be thankful, because Jesus took on that costly struggle for our sake. God took the initiative in saving us. We cannot be victorious on our own power, but because Jesus has already struggled and triumphed, we can draw on the power of Jesus’ resurrection as we struggle through our own lives. That’s what it means to be saved.

### **National Hockey League**

Around the end of the eleventh century, another view became important, and today this view has become the most popular among evangelical Christians. Scholars call it the satisfaction view. To help us understand it, I will call it the National Hockey League view. The NHL has a lot of rules: rules about being offside or onside, about icing the puck, about fighting, about how many players can be on the ice at one time. If a player or a team breaks

a rule, a penalty is called—a two-minute penalty for slashing, for example, or a five-minute penalty for fighting. Now if the goalie breaks a rule and gets a penalty, he doesn't actually sit in the penalty box. One of the other players on his team serves the penalty for him. That other player didn't do anything wrong. That other player didn't break any rule, but he takes the goalie's place anyway. He satisfies the penalty.

In the satisfaction view of salvation, life is full of rules that you and I have broken. Sin is seen not so much as a struggle with the forces of evil—that's the classic view—but as a set of rules that we have broken. We need someone to take our penalty. And the only person who hasn't broken a rule is Jesus. He's the only one qualified to take our penalty. Only instead of sitting in a penalty box, Jesus was nailed to a cross and put to death. He took that penalty for us. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet. 2:24). According to 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin." Jesus as the sinless one took the penalty for us.

This view of salvation also makes a difference in how we live. It takes sin seriously, and so should we. It emphasizes salvation as a free gift from God. We don't have to do anything to earn God's forgiveness. All we have to do is accept it.

### **Inspired spectators**

Like many other Canadians, I'm looking forward to the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, British Columbia. I won't actually perform in the figure-skating competition. Or fly down the slopes on a pair of skis. And neither will you, unless you have a hidden talent I don't know about. But you and I might still participate in the Olympics by watching our athletes and cheering them on.

Many spectators are inspired by the Olympics. Talented young athletes are motivated to train harder. Amateur and recreational athletes gain a new appreciation for their sport. One of my friends says watching the Summer Olympics inspired her own running. She'll never be in the Olympics. She doesn't even race competitively. But watching the Olympics inspires her to do her best.

There's a third view of salvation that dates from the beginning of the twelfth century. Scholars call it the moral influence view,

and I call it the inspired spectator approach. In this view, Jesus came into the world to show us God's love and to demonstrate how God wants us to live. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus' example is so inspiring that it awakens a response in us. It has a moral influence on us, inspiring us to repent and change the way we live.

In Romans 5:8, Paul writes: "But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Or 1 John 3:16 says: "We know love by this, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." In other words, in Jesus Christ, God shows us such great love that we are inspired to follow the example of Jesus. We are spectators of a divine demonstration of love that can change our lives.

This third view of salvation also makes a difference in how we live, because it emphasizes salvation as following Jesus' example

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and living as he did. Salvation is not just having our sins forgiven; it is also living a new life.

### **Why we need more than one view**

I've used three sports to describe three views of salvation: the illustration from the Pacific Classic emphasizes salvation as Jesus' victory over evil in his resurrection; the illustration from hockey emphasizes salvation as Jesus taking the penalty for our sin by his death;

the illustration from watching the Olympics emphasizes salvation as the example and inspiration of Jesus' life.

Now some sports fans may insist that horse racing is better than hockey. Or that playing hockey is better than any spectator sport. In the same way, some theologians and Christians prefer one view of salvation over another, contending that the classic view is better than the satisfaction view, for example. Or the satisfaction view is better than the moral influence view. But these views of salvation are not better or worse than one another. They're just different. And they are all biblical. In fact, we need all three of them—and more—to understand salvation in its fullness.

For example, the satisfaction view of salvation, where Jesus takes our penalty, may be the most popular view of salvation

today. It emphasizes salvation as a payment for sin, and that's important, but it focuses so much on Jesus' death that it says little about his life or his resurrection. It says little about God's power to change our lives or about how we should live once we're saved. On the other hand, the moral influence view says a lot about how we should live out our salvation: we need to follow the example of Jesus' life, because salvation means living like Jesus. But it says little about Jesus' death or resurrection. The classic view says a lot about the power of Jesus' resurrection. That's not really there in the satisfaction view and in the moral influence view. But it's important—because Jesus didn't just live and he didn't just die, he also rose again. And now that Jesus has shown us the way to live, now that Jesus has paid our penalty, in him we also have the power to live a new life.

So we need all three views of salvation. In fact, if we were really to do justice to the richness of the biblical teaching, we wouldn't stop with these three views of salvation. One author identifies eight different views. Another identifies ten.<sup>2</sup> The three I've outlined here are broad summaries, and they're the ones that have received the most attention throughout history.

So what is it about Jesus that saves us, and what difference does it make? In the life of Jesus, God demonstrates great love that inspires us and calls us to live like Jesus. In the death of Jesus, God takes the penalty for our sin so we can experience forgiveness. In the resurrection of Jesus, God triumphs over evil and grants us the power to live a new life. That's what happens when we put our faith in Jesus, who lived and died and rose again by the power of God. Amen.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Salvation," Article 8 in *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995), 35.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983) and John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986).

## About the author

April Yamasaki is lead pastor at Emmanuel Mennonite Church (Abbotsford, BC) and the author of several books.