

THE SALVATION WE WERE NOT EXPECTING

Scriptures: Luke 1:67-79; Luke 19:1-10

In his book *Front Porch Tales* Philip Gulley tells of a man in his home town named Ray who worked for the sewer department. Ray married his high school sweetheart, and they lived in a small house outside of town, where as Philip Gulley says, “(They) slipped into the lifestyle Ray had come from—work, raise your kids, hope they turn out right, and pray to Jesus that Social Security is still around when you retire.” But then they had a daughter. Phillip Gulley writes,

Ray and his wife had a daughter who hit school like a cyclone. Made straight A’s, which startled the teachers, she being Ray’s daughter. ... Outhustled the doctor’s kid to become class valedictorian. But the halls of Harvard don’t overflow with sewer-worker offspring, so she was trying to get used to the idea of a career in fast food. Then a college in Ohio, scouting around for smart kids with gumption, offered her a free education, and her dream of being a psychologist drew closer.

Phillip Gulley says that when she went to college, the whole town was proud. He writes,

There’s a heap of people pulling for that young lady. Lot’s of folks who stop Ray on the street to ask how she’s doing. When she went to Ohio, she carried a passel of expectation with her. If she fails, the entire town will lose its will to live. Other than that, I don’t think she’s under much pressure (pp. 28-29).

If you think that is pressure, look at the expectations that are put on Zechariah’s son when he is born. Verse 68-69: “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.” Other than that, he is not under much pressure.

Notice especially the expectations for salvation. The word salvation is used three times in these 12 verses:

- Verse 69: “He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.”
- Verse 71: “... salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us”
- Verse 77: “... to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.

The birth of Zechariah’s son involves nothing less than the salvation of God’s people.

In the Old Testament, the word salvation often refers to deliverance or rescue from enemies or circumstances. Let me give a couple of examples. In Exodus 15 when the Israelites escape from slavery in Egypt and Pharaoh’s army is swallowed up by the Red Sea, Moses sings this song: “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation.” One of Israel’s first experiences of salvation is deliverance from enemies at the Red Sea.

Notice how this theme is picked up in II Samuel 22, verses 1-3:

David spoke to the Lord the words of this song on the day when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul. He said: The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation ...

In the Old Testament salvation often means being rescued from their enemies and adversity.

That is the kind of salvation the people of Israel were expecting or at least hoping for in the time of Zechariah. Zechariah picks up the same phrase David uses in II Samuel 22. Look on the back of the bulletin at verses 69-71. Zechariah says, "(God) has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us." Look also at verse 74: "... to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear..."

The salvation that Israel expected was deliverance from enemies and adversity. What they wanted and expected from God was to get rid of the Roman oppressors and to have a life of freedom, peace, and prosperity.

Isn't that what a lot of us are hoping for this Christmas? We want God to deliver us from terrorists and from bullies at school and from anyone who hurts us or treats us unfairly. We want peace. We want health. We want prosperity. We want to feel safe and secure. Isn't that we want from our new president? We want the kind of salvation Zechariah talks about in vs. 68-75.

But look at the kind of salvation God sends—verses 76-77:

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins ...

Do you see the shift? God sent Zechariah's son, John the Baptist, to prepare people for salvation. But the kind of salvation for which he prepared them was not salvation from their enemies but salvation from themselves. It was the people of Israel themselves who needed forgiveness. It was the people of Israel themselves who needed to be changed.

Interestingly, there is only one other place in the gospel of Luke where the word salvation is used. It is in the story of Zacchaeus, which we heard in our first scripture lesson. Zacchaeus was a tax collector, which means he had a lot of enemies, even back then. People grumbled at the idea of Jesus even associating with him. Zacchaeus could have asked Jesus to do something about all those people in the town of Jericho who disliked him. He could have asked Jesus to zap them with lightning or at least to make them nicer to him. But instead he said to Jesus, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." And Jesus says to him, "Today salvation has come to this house."

The *London Times* once asked a number of England's most popular writers to submit an essay on the topic, "What is wrong with the world?" I bet I could get some interesting answers

to that question, if I opened it up for discussion. But the shortest response came from a Christian writer named G. K. Chesterton. In response to the question, “What is wrong with the world?” Chesterton wrote, “Dear Sirs: I am. Sincerely yours, G. K. Chesterton” (quoted by Philip Yancey in the introduction to G. K. Chesterton’s book *Orthodoxy*).

The salvation that God sent to us in Jesus begins not with the destruction of our enemies but with the transformation of ourselves. That is the kind of salvation for which Zechariah’s son prepared us. John the Baptist who prepared us for Jesus’ coming by preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins—our own sins!

There is an old comic strip character named Pogo who said, “We have met the enemy, and they are us.” It may not be good grammar, but it is terrific theology. The kind of salvation Jesus brings, the kind of salvation for which John the Baptist prepares us, begins not with the transformation of other people but with the transformation of ourselves.

Let me finish the story about Ray’s daughter. Ray’s daughter went to college carrying the hopes and expectations of the whole town. Philip Gulley writes,

Some people would crumble under her heavy weight of expectation. But what would crush others seems only to enliven her. What I’m betting is that ten years from now she’ll be charging a doctor’s kid two hundred dollars a session to help him get his head on straight. He’ll moan about how his parents expected too much, and she’ll tell him to grow up and get a life—in a therapeutic way, of course, and with appropriate sensitivity. Then the next time she sees her dear old parents, she’ll give them a hug and whisper, “Thanks for believing in me” (p. 29).

God believes in you, friends, and that is why God sent a son to Zechariah named John the Baptist. God believes in you enough to know that salvation comes not from expecting God to change other people, but from expecting God to change you.

- Ken Onstot
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