

DO ALL NEED A SAVIOR?

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

John 3:16-21, 36

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A pastor was flying home from a conference. When his seatmate found out who he was, he said to him, “Pastor, I believe there are many ways to God; it is just like our situation here. There are many ways to our city.” The pastor answered, “I hope our pilot doesn’t agree. I hope he believes there is only one way. I hope he obeys every word of the flight controller as if his life and ours utterly depends on it. I hope he is convinced that there is only one way.”

Is there only one way? Jesus said in the 14th chapter of the gospel of John, verse 6: “***I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me.***” Did Jesus mean that he is the *only way*, the *only truth* and the *only life*, and that there is no other means to know and relate to God? In other words, do all people need to be delivered by Jesus Christ?

When I served as a student chaplain in a Kentucky state hospital, a psychologist cornered me. One of the staff was killed in a car accident. She was a devout Buddhist. “Is she in heaven or hell?” he asked. “Don’t wimp out on me,” he baited; “Answer the question. Where is this kind, devout woman?”

We live in a very diverse world. Wonderfully sincere people worship all kinds of spirits and gods, and some wonderful people sincerely believe in no God. Do all of these people as well as us need Jesus Christ as savior?

If Christianity was simply moral teaching, I might say “no.” Some believers are far more destructive in their attitudes and actions or far less sterling in their character than some non-believers. In fact, some refuse to come to Jesus because of the actions of believers, or so they say. If salvation was primarily about morality, then I might say “no.” However, Christianity is not about good and evil. Morality is not why people need a savior. When Jesus said “I am the way,” he was not focusing on morality. He pointed to a relationship with his father, our creator. Even though Christianity impacts morality, it is all about relationships, especially the most pivotal and far reaching relationship there is, our relationship with our creator.

Jesus revealed that people both belong to God and belong with God. We were made to relate as God’s children and partners in ruling the world. But like a sheep separated from its shepherd, like a coin separated from its owner, like a son separated from his father, we are lost and we also are valued. Beginning with Genesis 3 we find that our separation from God is the determined work of malevolent spiritual beings that oppose God. People, all people, are in need of rescue. We also find that God has been on a rescue mission since the events of Genesis 3.

Listen to how Jesus characterized his mission:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it. (John 3:16-17, NLT)

Jesus came to our world because of God’s love and concern. He came because people were in danger of perishing. He came not to judge this world, but to save it.

Some years ago, a little 2 year old from my church wandered away from his mother into a cornfield. It was terrible. The child was separated and lost. Worse, wild animals, the temperature and even human predators endangered him. The toddler would perish if not found. That is our horrible human condition, and it produces the pain we see all over the world.

Deceiving spiritual predators prey on God's beloved but separated children. That's why Christ came.

One of the most poignant moments in the Bible depicts Jesus crying out to his father about his coming execution. "Please father," he prayed, "I don't want this. Take this cup from me." "If there's another way, father," he asked, "remove it."

If there was another way to God, do you think Jesus would have died? If there were other ways, we wouldn't see love in the cross. We'd see child abuse. If there are many ways to recover a life-restoring relationship with God, then the cross is abuse rather than a desperate, loving and costly rescue. The cross doesn't tell us only about God's immense love; it also speaks of how terrible our predicament is. It speaks of our desperate need.

When the Kentucky psychologist insisted on an answer, I told him that Jesus died for every human being and that Jesus called his followers to share this news and offer of life with everyone. Moreover, even as Jesus did not come to judge, Jesus did not send me to judge. I told the psychologist that it is not my mission to assign judgment but instead to point people to Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life for everyone.

Brothers and sisters, helping people come to Christ is the most urgent business conducted on earth. Separated from God, we all find ourselves imprisoned in condemnation and destruction. "Condemned already" is what Jesus said. You and I know that is true because we feel the guilt and fear. We may we escape that feeling for a spell by rationalizing our deeds and demeanor, but guilt and fear revisit us even when we are oblivious to the consequences of our sin. Indeed, we only see the tip of the iceberg of harm our actions cause. Yet God has the power to melt icebergs and bring healing.

Moments ago we sang the hymn **O Zion, Haste**. Written in the late 1800s, this hymn declares the urgency of our mission. It calls us to bear good news in a lousy situation. It tells us to speak of God's love and salvation in every language; it tells us to publish these tidings in every land. The song pleads with us to tell people that God does not want one soul to perish. Yet, it declares, "*Behold how many thousands still are lying bound in the darksome prison house of sin.*" In our hymnal is the song, **Rescue the Perishing**. It rallies the church to action. We are to rescue people from the grip of spiritual and eternal death.

When that 2 year old got lost, people stopped what they were doing. They left their work. They left their comfort and slowly began to walk the fields searching for that precious life. The parents wept and prayed, grateful for every volunteer. When the child was found, there was tremendous celebration. That is the picture that Jesus paints again and again. That is an uncomfortable picture to many, yet it is the story of the Bible.

A week ago, I was stunned by some news. It slipped past me until one of our leaders, Gary Collins, leaned over to me and whispered about it. We at Bethany are part of the United Methodist Church family. We've been led by God's spirit into a covenant with around 9 million people worldwide; and four of us attended a meeting where representatives from congregations in Minnesota met. Gary pointed to the statistic that our Minnesota congregations lost eleven percent of our members or 12,000 people in two years. No big deal was made. Even worse that loss is reflective of most churches in America. The percentage of Americans who attend church is declining; and as it does, our culture grows more violent, broken, and ill. Historic Protestant churches are dwindling and nearly all denominations aren't keeping pace with the population. I researched this in my doctoral work and found several reasons. One important reason is that believers have lost Jesus' perspective, urgency and priority in mission.

Do you think about the truth that your neighbors, associates, friends and family, whether good or bad, all need a savior to rescue them from spiritual predators and the consequences of their sin? Do you see them just as vulnerable as that lost 2 years old? We rarely think or speak in those terms. It is risky. None of us want to be considered as judgmental or arrogant. Therefore, we invent new words that won't be so uncomfortable. We talk of reaching the "unchurched" not the lost, and what happens?

When we speak of people being "unchurched," we speak of no danger. We see our mission more as welcoming people than rescuing people. Denominational leaders talk of *Welcoming the Stranger* rather than rescuing the perishing. You don't put red lights and sirens on ambulances and race through traffic risking your life to welcome strangers, but you do it all to rescue the perishing. Jesus did not die to welcome the stranger. He died to rescue the perishing. His mission was not to welcome but to save. He came not as a greeter but a savior. His vision, goals, schedule, energy and prayers were all affected by the conviction that people are lost, and that his mission is urgent. That was true also of the Apostle Paul. Look what he suffered on his missionary journeys:

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (2 Corinthians 11:24-27, NIV)

Did St. Paul endure all that to simply welcome a stranger, or was his business and his sacrifice to rescue the perishing? When he became a disciple of Jesus, Jesus' vision caught fire in Paul. Has it caught fire in you?

The key issue in life isn't whether you are good as important as that may be, or whether you try to follow the teachings of the Bible as important as that may be. The key is have you been rescued and restored to fellowship with your loving Father. Are you filled with his love? Are you walking the fields with Christ to rescue his separated and lost children? That's why we at Bethany have one call: *Go and bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ.* We go everywhere. We go to everyone. We bring all the people we can to Jesus, and we help people put their trust in Jesus and receive more and more the freedom he won for us.