

Experiencing Salvation, Pt. 2

Our Family Values:

Titus 3:3-7

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Wesley J. Gabel

Bethany Church

Interview with Pastor Lorone Shephard:

Salvation involves at least two. It involves an individual, at least, who is in trouble; and it involves, at least, one individual reaching out to and rescuing whoever is in trouble. On the day of Pentecost, St. Peter pleaded:

Save yourselves from this corrupt generation (Acts 2:40, NIV)

Peter was not saying, “Work yourself into heaven.” He was saying, “Man, take the arm extended to you!” He was saying, “Take the hand that pulls you out of the mire, even if others decide to perish!” The key is welcoming what God is doing for you.

At 9 o’clock on Wednesday mornings I eat breakfast at Hy-Vee North with some men from Bethany. A couple weeks ago, Pastor Pat Thomas, from the Church of the Nazarene, on East Circle Drive joined us for breakfast. The Nazarenes are offshoots of Methodism. They separated from the main body of Methodism in the 1800s in order to emphasize one particular teaching of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Consequently, Pat and I and our churches share a lot in common including hosting other congregations. Pat shares his church building with a Cambodian congregation led by Pastor Sarasarith Chhumpum. Pastor Sarasarith joined us that morning for breakfast and told this story.

He was an officer, his father a high-ranking officer, in the Cambodian army when on Thursday, April 17th, 1975 at 9:37 a.m. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge took power. They ruled

for 3 years, 8 months and 12 days. During that time, Cambodia lost one-fifth its population to executions, malnutrition and disease. Between 1.7 million and 2.5 million people died, including 8 of Sarasarith's 12 family members. Sarasarith, his wife and child joined others in fleeing by foot to Thailand. As they progressed in this desperate journey of escape, Sarasarith nursed his emotional and spiritual hunger with marijuana. He had the weed, but no paper. He shot ahead of his wife looking for paper or a leaf so that he could roll the weed and smoke. In frustration, he sat down by a tree with large leaves perfect for his smoke. Caterpillars had stripped it bare. While sitting there, he spotted a piece of paper in the dirt. Would it work for him? He shook off the dirt. He was in luck. Before he rolled the weed, he had to do something first. He had learned a lesson when he destroyed some of his father's important papers without reading them, so he had to read the paper before he smoked it. He read about Jesus and how God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. The tract was produced in his language by the Gideons. When he finished, he rolled his marijuana in it and smoked it. Then with his wife and child, Sarasarith pressed on with the others toward the border. The last 20 miles they found themselves in fields full of land mines. Facing certain death if they turned back, Sarasarith's wife asked him, "What are we going to do?" Sarasarith prayed, "Lord Jesus, if you are truly God, get my family and me through these fields unharmed, and I will serve you as God." As they began this last leg of their escape, land mines began exploding about them. The sight was too horrific and gory to describe. (Actually, he described some of what he saw. I'm not going to.) They walked straight as an arrow, moving neither to the left or right, even while the carnage multiplied about them. Unhurt, they arrived at the Thai border and found rest at a refugee camp. The next morning, Sarasarith awoke early. Something told him to get up and go to a building at the edge of camp.

He wanted to sleep in. Words came to him, “Am I your God or not?” Unwillingly, he got up and walked to a chapel at the edge of the camp. A pastor had delayed leaving because “God told him a man was coming to see him.” He was waiting for Sarasarith; and when Sarasarith arrived, the pastor had him kneel. Sarasarith’s knees and legs began to ache with pain as he continued to kneel while the pastor laid his hands on Sarasarith’s head. In Cambodia, that is a humiliating act of submission. You don’t touch a person’s head, but for more than 30 minutes, with legs and knees throbbing and hands on his head, the pastor didn’t pray over Sarasarith. He preached the simple gospel of Jesus Christ, who was crucified, dead, buried and raised to life, fitting exactly with prophetic Scriptures. Thus began the new life for the pastor who in 2009 shepherds on behalf of Christ some Cambodian believers in Rochester, MN.

Now think of Sarasarith under that barren tree, focused on smoking dope. An arm is outstretched. The hand of God in the person of Christ Jesus is open to him. Now listen to the words of Scriptures, we read earlier:

Once we, too, were foolish and disobedient. We were misled by others and became slaves to many wicked desires and evil pleasures. Our lives were full of evil and envy. We hated others, and they hated us. But then God our Savior showed us his kindness and love. He saved us, not because of the good things we did, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins and gave us a new life through the Holy Spirit. He generously poured out the Spirit upon us because of what Jesus Christ our Savior did. He declared us not guilty because of his great kindness. And now we know that we will inherit eternal life. (Titus 3:3-7, NIV)

Can you see how Sarasarith was foolish and disobedient? Can you see how he was enslaved by wicked desires and evil pleasures? Do you understand the control marijuana had over him? Do you see the self-focused life he was pursuing? Was he rewarded for his righteousness? Was he saved because of the good things he had done? No, out of God’s kindness and mercy, the hand of salvation was extended to him.

Why was that tract laying in the dirt that day? Had it slipped out of a believer's Bible? Had someone handed it to a person who rejected its message and tossed it? Had others before him rejected the hand of salvation extended to them in the tract; and as a result, was he given an opportunity?

I know that I'm a teacher of the gospel, but today I'm not going to get too theological. I just want you to see the nature of our salvation in light of what God has revealed in the Scriptures and how it unfolded for this man.

When Sarasarith took God's hand of salvation, he knew almost nothing about Jesus. He had never read the Bible. He didn't understand sin, Satan, judgment or God. He was in need, and he had just received a message that God loved him. With faith as small as a mustard seed, he told God, "I will belong to you if you get my family and me through these 20 miles of land mines." In humiliation, hands on his head, and in pain, knees aching, he began to understand more clearly who was behind the outstretched hand and what all he was being saved from.

Brothers and sisters, the most critical value we hold at Bethany is this. This is life to us. This is our breath. This we hold above worship, witness, prayer, the Bible, service, fellowship, family and even love. You see... a person in mine field may value all of that, but there is only one thing immediate and critical. Rescue! Salvation!

Experiencing Salvation: We value Jesus Christ alone as Savior and Lord and His works that restore us to intimacy with God and creates a new life of obedience in the Holy Spirit.

With an outstretched hand God pulled Sarasarith out of sin, death and judgment. With an emotional sting and aching knees God began restoring Sarasarith to intimacy, and also creating a new life of obedience. The Spirit of God orchestrated this.

God may not have sent you a Gideon tract. You can be sure he has sent you people. Have you discarded their words? Have you listened and responded to the arm outstretched to you? Have you ducked God's early morning call to you, his divine appointment for you? Although it may be humiliating and painful, is there a word he's been giving you? Are you still trying to prove your own goodness, or are you responding to his voice in faith?

None of us escape judgment because of our goodness. We either grab the hand extended to us or we continue to our destruction. It is in kindness that God is giving you this message. It is in mercy that Jesus will follow through if you call on him. Have you recognized the hand? He is ready to save you and begin a new life with you today.