

Source of Salvation

Revelation 7:9-17

Preached October 30, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Introduction. I have lived my whole life in the watershed of the great Tennessee River. When I was a boy, I lived less than a mile from the North Fork of the Holston River. I often fished, waded and swam in those waters. When Patty and I were first married, we lived in the Chatham Hill Parsonage which was about 70 miles northeast of my childhood home. The parsonage was located less than 100 yards from that North Fork (the best small mouth bass and red eye fishing in the region.) There we were within 15 miles of the source of that river. Today, we live near the main channel of the Tennessee River, and when the leaves fall from the trees, we will be able

to see the waters of the river from our deck. The river we see is fed from the waters of the North Fork, South Fork and Middle Forks of the Holston, the Clinch, the French Broad and Hiwassee Rivers. All of these tributaries are part of the Tennessee River Watershed.

There is a great stream of the Christian faith that we could call the "River of Salvation." Its watershed spreads wide and has many tributaries feeding the great river. All who are part of the faith community have drunk from and played in its waters. Its waters are available to all and all are invited to live in the watershed.

Many have lived their lives on only one of its tributaries and have little understanding of salvation's vastness and variety. For example, many think of salvation as a "ticket to heaven" when they die. Unfortunately, they have not experienced or known the richness of this great river. Over the next couple of months, Brian and I are going to explore this magnificent river in hopes that all of us will discover the fullness of salvation. Today we will search for the river's source.

With this water theme working, I want to share with you a joke I recently read. A five-year old granddaughter came into the hospital room to visit her grandfather. She said, "Grandpa, when grandma comes into the room make a noise like a frog." Puzzled by the request, he said, "Honey, why do you want me to do that?" She responded, "Grandma said that if Grandpa croaks, we will go to Disneyworld."

Salvation belongs to God. In our text, John shares a heavenly scene where an innumerable crowd of people from every people group on earth is standing before throne of God. This great ecumenical and inclusive gathering proclaims this message: Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb. This is our starting point in thinking about salvation – it belongs to God.

If you will allow me, I want to get technical for a moment about the translation: Salvation belongs to our God. The NRSV inserted the word "belongs"

which is not in the original Greek. The original contains these words "salvation" and "our God." "Our God" is in the dative case in Greek, which has no direct English case and is complicated case to translate (Luraghi, Silvia, *The Semantics of Greek Cases*, 63).ⁱ

This phrase could be translated by any of the following: Salvation by our God, Salvation in our God, Salvation to our God, Salvation through our God, Salvation of our God.

Bottom line for understanding this is "Salvation is about God and not us." It is from and of God, not us. God is the source of salvation. As the translators of the NRSV recorded, "Salvation belongs to God."

So God is the source of salvation. He is the "place" where the watershed begins. He is that spring located in the heart of the mountains that forms the stream that flows into the great river of salvation.

Earlier in Revelation, the writer records God's words: I am Alpha and Omega, who is, who was and who is to come. He is not claiming membership in a Greek Fraternity. God is the beginning point of this grand narrative of salvation and God is the end. God is the starting line and finish line. All of salvation rests in God. So salvation is God's idea, God's creation and is carried out by God.

What/Who can save? The message is clear: God is the source of salvation. This message rings clearly throughout the Bible. Hear some of the scriptures that give a taste of God being the source of salvation:

Psalms 37:39: The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; he is their refuge in the time of trouble.

Isaiah 43:11: I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior.

Hosea 13:4: Yet I have been the Lord your God ever since the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and besides me there is no savior.

Acts 4:11-12: This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else, for there is no

other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

James 4:12: There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy.

Throughout human history, people have looked to various sources for aspects of salvation that God alone gives. Some have looked to "gods," divine characters they believe held certain powers to make life better or to give them immortality. Others have looked to less supernatural things and depended upon resources they have had at their disposal or influenced their lives.

Ravi Zacharias, an Indian Christian apologist, tells a story he remembers from his childhood about a deeply religious Hindu in his community who sought the attention of the gods. This man would crawl on hands and knees for long distances and abuse his body hoping his actions would merit the favor of the gods. He thought the gods could make his life better.

The first two commandments in the Ten Commandments are a prohibition against serving and worshiping other gods. For the Hebrews, Yahweh claimed an exclusive place as the One and Only God. No other deity could save or deliver the nation.

Most of us have little struggle with the issue of "other gods" or have many encounters with people who believe there are other gods. We are probably more likely to encounter people who doubt or deny there is any God.

But we do readily encounter the notion that various things in our world can bring a measure of "salvation" in our lives. This is not new to our age. The people of the Bible experienced this as well. They looked to many physical sources for salvation.

In recent months from the debate over Health Care Reform, my ears have heard echoes from human history of people looking to certain resources for "salvation." On one side of the debate, there seem to be those who believe or want to believe that government can solve the problems and deliver to the American people a system to meet all of their health needs. On the other side are those who seem to believe that the answers lie in the free market system. One side seems to see government as

the "savior" while the other sees wealth and our economic system as the "savior."

Toward the end of the period of the Judges in ancient Israel, the people began to cry out for a king. They thought if they had a king like all the other nations, then they would be secure and prosper. They sought salvation through a government ruled by a king.

A wise and wealthy man wrote in Proverbs: Those who trust in their riches will wither (Proverbs 11:28).

Government and free enterprise can play a role in either improving or harming our health care system. There are many other players that must contribute to improvement: individuals taking more responsibility for health, the medical profession, health insurance companies and the legal system. Significant improvement rests in all of these places. But any one individually or all corporately are not the "savior" in bringing health and wholeness in life. While God may use many tools, including these things, ultimately only God is the one who provides health and wholeness.

The list of things in which people trust to improve and make their lives complete is long – government, the military, wealth, technology, science, education, etc. While all of these can play a positive role in our world, none can be the "savior" of humanity. One of my favorite Proverbs reads: Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight (3:5). A few verses later we read that this will bring healing and refreshment.

Salvation belongs to God. He may at times use these to some degree but they can only serve as God's tools for salvation.

The One and only plan. "Salvation is the grand narrative God has written throughout human history."

Salvation is central to our faith. Bishop Scott Jones in writing about United Methodist doctrine said "The central theme in United Methodist doctrine is saving grace." Without this theme, there is no Methodism. It is part of our DNA. But I believe it is not only the core of Methodist doctrine but also Christian doctrine.

Bishop Will Willimon in *Who Will be Saved* asserts that salvation is what God does from the beginning, starting with creation. There God moves over the chaos and brings order. From the very beginning God is saving the creation (4, 17). Salvation is not something that arises after human beings sin. From the beginning, God writes the story of salvation.

In a similar line of thought, NT Wright (Justification) declares that God had one and only one plan – to bless the entire world through Abraham's descendants and to take care of sin once and for all. God did not have one plan – creation and paradise, then after the fall - giving the law and obedience and then Jesus Christ. Rather all are part of God's grand design in history.

Robert grew up in an average middle-class home. His parents took him and his sister to a small rural church. During his teenage years, he began to drift spiritually, which intensified during his college days. Robert was a good student and had a knack for business. He went on to get a MBA. He married and it looked as though life was good. He was hired to teach business at a small liberal arts college.

Eventually his life began to unravel. Alcohol was gaining greater control in his life and his marriage was failing. Eventually his marriage ended in divorce and he began to drag bottom. Robert had a sister who loved him and prayed for him daily. She recruited a prayer partner in this great task.

While at the bottom, Robert began to seek the Lord. He found a Bible his church had given him as a child. He began to read. He started watching the 700 Club. One evening, he prayed to receive Christ. He called his sister to tell her what he had done but he did not want her to tell her preacher husband.

Well that event took place nearly 20 years ago. Today Robert is the Preaching and Executive pastor of one of Kingsport's largest churches. He is also the brother of your senior pastor's wife.

Drinking from the spring. How are we to respond to this great message that "Salvation belongs to God?"

We can find an important clue from what the great crowd in Revelation did. John records: For this reason they are before the throne of God and worship him day and night within his temple.

Those who knew salvation belonged to God and to the Lamb, submitted themselves to God. They were “before his throne,” where God directed their lives. They lives with God as their master and king.

They lived out their lives in worship, expressing their appreciation for the great work God has done through bringing salvation to creation and to them.

So we are called to submit – yield our lives fully to God and to worship the Savior. This morning you can begin these activities or can continue them.

Benediction. With joy, let us draw from the well of salvation

ⁱ This case can indicate an indirect object “I say a word to the apostles, location – “in the sea,” source of origin or cause – “they were raised up by God,” the respect which something exists – “being known by face” and in relationship to time – “healed on the Sabbath” (Machen, J. Gresham, New Testament Greek for Beginners).