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SALVATION

by

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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It is well known that the Christian religion is a religion about salvation. The New Testament is full of the idea of being saved, while the most characteristic title of the Lord Jesus Christ is Saviour. Yet nowadays it might be difficult for a complete stranger, to gather from what we Christians thought we were being saved. For modern sermons and modern books about Christianity have a lot to say about the blessings of Christianity - full life that the Christian lives, life with a capital L as it were, and this of course is true, but there is very little said in any down to earth way about what we are being saved and rescued from. The talk is about extra blessings rather than about salvation or rescue from some fearful situation in which we are involved. Yet salvation has no meaning unless we realise what the situation is which the person being saved is involved in, and what his fate would be apart from salvation. The benefit that Christianity offers is more radical than mere additional blessings which are so often spoken of and which of course in themselves are true. For the essence of the Christian Gospel is salvation, not merely improving our situation.

It was to save men from the terrible and eternal consequences of sin that Christ died on the cross. It was no slight matter which brought Him from Heaven. It may seem extraordinary that so little attention is directed in Christian pulpits to Christianity

as salvation from an awful impending doom. But the Bible gives us the clue to this, for it says that we are all by nature blind to our real situation; and of course unless we see ourselves as we really are we cannot appreciate the urgent need for salvation; and so we soft pedal salvation and think and speak about other aspects of Christianity. We are rather like a man asleep in a boat drifting towards a water fall. Our doom is certain but we are quite unaware of it. This blindness, the Bible says, is the result of the activity of the Devil. In 2 Cor. 4:4 St. Paul says "The God of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ", and in John 12:40 we read "He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; lest they should see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and should turn, and I should heal them."

The fact is that the Devil blinds the natural hearts of us all so that we do not see the truth about God and in particular are blind to the awful situation which we are in. We cannot discover the true picture from our own resources it is necessary for us to learn the truth from God Himself in His Word. The Bible makes clear that because of our sinfulness we are under God's condemnation and wrath, so that unless our sins are forgiven through Christ, we must undergo the full severity of God's just retribution

against rebellious creatures. Jesus described the place for which we are heading as God's rubbish heap. St. Paul described our position as being enemies of God, sons of disobedience, children of wrath. This is not a reassuring description but as I say, we are by nature blind to our situation. And secondly, we are also blind to our own incapacity to help ourselves. So that even if we glimpse the truth, the methods we adopt to save ourselves and put ourselves right with God, are hopelessly inadequate. Even when we begin to see the awfulness of our situation we still have to learn the truth about our incapacity to help ourselves, for by nature we are prone to think that all we need to do to be saved is to bestir ourselves, and turn over a new leaf. But again the Bible makes clear that this is impossible for us to do apart from the saving or rescuing power of God. He must completely recreate us spiritually. There could not be a clearer passage on this matter than Eph. 2:1-10 where the Apostle tells the believing Christians at Ephesus "God has made you alive when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the power of the prince of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind and so we were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind, but

God who is rich in mercy out of His great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses made us alive together with Christ. "By grace you have been saved and raised up with Him". Notice how twice over St. Paul emphasises that before conversion we are dead, spiritually. A dead man cannot help himself. It is when we recognise this two-fold truth, that on the one hand we are in great need of salvation and on the other that we can do nothing of ourselves, that being dead spiritually, that the Christian Gospel becomes meaningful, and its message that God will save and save completely all who come to Him in Christ, becomes very relevant. The Apostle goes on in the passage I have just quoted saying, "For by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing it is the gift of God, not because of works lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

We are by nature blind to our situation and blind to our moral incapacity. It is only by the clear teaching of Scripture that we can correct the natural inclination to regard ourselves as having some ability to assist in this process of salvation. Unfortunately, this natural inclination has invaded Roman Catholic theology which denies man's total moral incapacity to contribute to his own salvation.

It affirms that the falling into sin of our first parents has not radically affected human nature. It has involved the loss of certain privileges; but our nature remains intact and still intrinsically good. Thus, for example, Pope Clement XI in his Bull Eugenitus section 48 denied that "without faith, without Christ and without love a man is but darkness, confusion and sin". This Papal denial is in direct contrast to the ancient faith of the church, as expressed for example, in Canon 22 of the Council of Orange of 529 and which stated just the opposite, namely, "No-one has anything of his own save untruth and sin" and more importantly it is out of keeping with the teaching of the Scriptures, where St. Paul in Rom. 7:18 states "I know that in me, that is in my flesh dwelleth no good thing". Or as the prophet Jeremiah put it, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked".

The Bible teaches that as a result of sin, our natures contain within them a sinful principle, namely inordinate desire which theologians call concupiscence. This constant desire and pull towards what God has forbidden, which we all experience even after conversion, Paul calls sin, describing it in Romans 7:20 as "the sin which dwells in me". Since it is always present infecting more or less everything we do, it follows that everything we do comes short of God's perfection and needs to be covered by God's forgiveness, even in Christians.

Therefore, no action of ours can be said to merit salvation, for everything needs to be covered by the gracious forgiveness of God. But as you know, merit is an essential feature of the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation. Consequently, the Council of Trent was obliged to deny the Apostle's description of this ever present concupiscence; in Session 5 The Council of Trent states: 5: "In those who are born again there is nothing that God hates ... concupiscence, which the Apostle calls sin, the Holy Synod, declares .. it is not truly and properly sin in those born again, and if anyone is of a contrary opinion let him be anathema!". The Apostle Paul, however, was of the contrary opinion, describing this evil desire which he detected in himself as sin. He made clear that its presence was hateful to him - and how much more hateful therefore to God - but he rejoiced that though sin was present, it did not lead to his condemnation, but it was covered by the forgiveness in Christ, and he looked forward to the day when he would be as free from sin in heaven as was his Saviour.

We see then that the Bible teaches that the effect of the fall of our first parents into sin is that men are now the enemies of God, and by nature actively engaged in hostility to God and His will. We are led about by the Devil, who has blinded us to our true state and we are under the impending wrath of a Sovereign God Who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity.

This is our true situation according to God's Word; and it makes meaningful the offer of salvation. It also makes clear why it is that salvation must be the work of God, for apart from Him we are dead to spiritual things. The Bible knows no concept of being only half dead. Those who are dead need that power of God to bring them alive again which brought them into existence in the first place and of which the physical resurrection of our Saviour Christ is the symbol. We believe in a God who raises the dead, the spiritually as well as the physically dead.

Inadequate concepts of our desperate situation and of our powers of moral recuperation lead to an inadequate doctrine of salvation, which mingles our own efforts with the work of the Saviour. But the Bible is clear that our salvation is God's work from beginning to end. This salvation through forgiveness is offered to us in the Gospel and we should thankfully embrace it and so begin to experience God's power to recreate our spiritual lives which will reach its completion when we see Him face to face.

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