

2021-10-10 Reclaiming Salvation

Reclaiming Salvation

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Pastor Scott Austin

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Dan Proctor, reading from Luke 18:18–27]

Good morning. Luke 18, this morning, on page 853, for those of you who want to look at it in your Bible.

¹⁸ A certain ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁹ Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ²⁰ You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother.’” ²¹ He replied, “I have kept all these since my youth.” ²² When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money^[c] to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²³ But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. ²⁴ Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

²⁶ Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷ He replied, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.”

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Thanks, Dan. It's always good to have a theater person do our readings for us. [chuckles] I love it. So, a couple nights ago, I was downtown taking some photos. My older son, as it turns out, is a senior in high school, and I wanted to take his senior photos, because I didn't want to, uh, pay for his senior photos. So, I borrowed a fancy camera, we went downtown, and we were shooting photos at the Liberty Pole. And if you've been downtown, you know this place; it's a beautiful place.

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And while we were down there, there was a man preaching in that little look behind the Liberty Pole, there, right? Had a little portable sound system; was preaching. Normally, when I see street preachers I just pass them by, say this is not for me, and I keep going. But in this case, I really wanted to take some photos in that spot, so I ended up being there for ten or fifteen minutes, and so – unusual for me, when I'm around a street preacher – I got to hear a lot of what he was saying, which was... basically nothing.

Now, I've been going to church for a long time, so when I say I've heard sermons that are full of nothing, I have a lot of experience in this matter. And yes, yes, I'm sure that I have *preached* sermons that were full of nothing, but that's not the point. [laughter] It's not what we're talking about today; that's some other time. And believe me, I am not trying to just say, like, "Oh, I'm a preacher, I'm better than this other preacher." I have no interest in that; that's no good for anybody. But what was happening in this case is that this preacher was doing nothing more than just repeating Christian sayings over and over again. See, that the nature of street preaching is that it doesn't really have a beginning, a middle, and an end; it kind of just goes end, end, end.

So, he was saying, "Jesus died to save you from your sins. If you want to go to heaven, instead of hell, accept Jesus into your heart and he will save you." The problem that I saw with this is that, barring some true miracle above and beyond the conversion of a soul, the only way that people would have been moved by this sermon was for them to already agree with it before they got there. There was nothing compelling or winsome about it. I imagine it would be equally likely for someone to convert to a new religion after listening to a street preacher who was a character in a movie they were watching, because whatever salvation this person was talking about sounded completely uninteresting to me.

Today's sermon, which I hope has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and I hope is not a sermon full of nothing, is entitled "Reclaiming Salvation." And it's not about hell. More on that in a minute. When I started out preparing this series called Reclaiming Christianity, I was feeling kind of cynical and aggressive, like, kind of gung-ho about the whole thing, like, "Let's take back our religion from the fundamentalists who have hijacked it!" And as I continued to work on it – and especially as I started to preach it, and to be in the room with you and on Zoom with you, and see how it was landing – I became much less cynical and much more softened. I became much less aggressive and much more reflective.

And, even this illustration that I offered you about the street preacher, I hope it doesn't land wrong. It's not that I don't think our religion has been hijacked by people, including fundamentalists – I do still think that – it's just that it ended up feeling much more powerful to *me* to imagine a different way of reclaiming Christianity – to imagine reclaiming it not from a

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thief, but from a dusty shelf; reclaiming it from the box in the attic where we stowed it when we got bored with it, where it's all covered in mothballs and smelling kind of funny; reclaiming Christianity, perhaps for some of us, from the garbage dump where we dropped it off because we were truly done with it. I ended up, instead of wanting to be, like, this gladiatorial character that took it back from people who had stolen it from us – rather than that, I ended up kind of wanting to recover these most beautiful truths that have been made ugly, and to reclaim them for myself – not *from* somebody, but *for* somebody, for me – and hopefully to help you do that, as well, some of you. And then, lastly, in some sense to allow these beautiful truths, freed from their distortions, to *reclaim us*.

And so, reclaiming salvation is today's topic. And it's not about hell, per sé. I mean, what I mean is that it's not about it at all. It's not about being saved from it, and it's not about not believing in it, but it *is* about what good your faith would be without hell. For so many of us – definitely put myself in this camp – avoiding hell was the starting point of our belief. This was the impetus for our conversion, if we had one. Right? What did it mean, growing up – maybe this happened to you as an adult, but what did it mean to convert, if not “to be saved”, or “to get saved”? How many of you heard that phrase, right? And what could you imagine that you'd need saving from more than hell?

What I'm going to ask you to do today, if you call yourself a Christian – or something else; I know some people don't like that term, and I'm okay with that; I don't really care what you call yourself, but if you consider yourself on this path, together with me and with the people of Artisan Church, I want to ask you to do a thought experiment about your religious belief, which is this: If there were no such thing as hell, would you still be a Christian? Because, if the answer is no – if the answer is no, I want to ask you additionally to reflect very seriously on what the consequences of that are for you – the consequences for how you practice your faith, and maybe even more importantly, for how you view the world.

Some of you know the story of how, about ten years ago, a very well-known preacher wrote a book arguing against the traditional view – quote-unquote “traditional view” – of hell, published that book, and then when it was published another well-known preacher publicly disowned the first preacher from the faith, essentially saying, “If you don't hold this particular belief, you are not a Christian at all.” And I've wondered ever since that moment, what is it about this particular viewpoint that for so many people is considered non-negotiable and why is that?

Once again, this is not going to be a sermon where I try to convince you, or reassure you, anything about hell. If you, if you want that kind of convincing and reassurance, you can read David Bentley Hart, or you can read Rob Bell, or you can read at least half, probably more, of the

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early church fathers for the first few hundred years of Christian theology; you can get that elsewhere, is what I'm saying. But today, in the spirit of not replacing something – like last week, when we had a new confession, we weren't replacing the old confession, we were adding to it, we were expanding our understanding, and it's in that spirit that I want to ask you to think about what it means to be saved, to have salvation, if it's *not* about getting out of hell. And I think that's the last time I'm going to use that word this morning, because, in my view, that is such a tiny view of salvation.

There's so many other ways of thinking about what it means to be saved, ways that can enrich our lives and deepen our faith and increase our love for God and for each other. And after all, isn't that what Jesus said it was all about? I mean, he literally said that's what it all was about. All of the other stuff points to loving God and loving each other. And so, if your theology doesn't deepen that in you, you have not only permission, but probably the requirement to rethink it. So, what I want to do is offer this expansive view of what reclaimed salvation might be, and I'm going to suggest a few characteristics – characteristics that I personally find really compelling, and even healing, and I so hope that you will, as well.

So, here's the first thing: A reclaimed salvation – it takes place in the here-and-now, not just in the sweet by-and-by. [chuckles] Nobody writes old-timey hymns about the here-and-now [laughter] they're all about in the sweet by-and-by. But, reclaimed salvation is about both, but for now let's think about what it might mean in the here-and-now. In the Scriptures, the word “salvation” very often means deliverance, which very often has everything to do with physical safety, and with long term flourishing in the land of the living. I mean, look no further than the Book of Exodus, the whole story of God saving the Israelites.

This came up in our question-and-response session a couple weeks ago – by the way, we'll have another one next week to cap this whole series off, so if you are furious with what I'm about to say, you know, write down a question and come back next week and I will do my best to respond to it – but, I think it was Jesse, who was sitting over here, asked a question about the Passover, right? And if the cross isn't a picture of the Passover, then, you know, what do we got going on here? And my response then, which I'll kind of expand on now a little bit, is that – and apologies to any of you who don't know this whole story, I don't have time to retell all of it, but it's in the book of Exodus; it's pretty much the whole book of Exodus – the story of the Passover is this moment in time when the Israelites were freed by God, using Moses as the leader, from oppression and slavery in Egypt.

That was their *salvation moment*, but that wasn't all of their salvation in that one moment. As I said, it's the whole book of Exodus. The Exodus is the leaving; it's the going out. And this story is so much more than just the Passover moment. And, very importantly, it has little to nothing to

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do with what happened to the Israelites after they died. God saved the people, and it said nothing about their eternal fate, or any kind of afterlife. Their salvation was being redeemed from slavery in Egypt and taken out to the land of promise, where they could flourish as a people. That's a picture of salvation from the Bible.

By the way, speaking of the words for salvation in the Bible, it's very interesting to think about the way that this word that we have in English – “salvation” – where it comes from in the biblical texts. So, it often means “deliverance”, but if you look at the Bible that the Apostles read – which was what we call the Old Testament, but translated into Greek – the same word for “salvation” is the word for “peace”, right? So, the Hebrew word *shalom* got translated as *soterios*, which means “salvation”. It's fascinating to me that our picture of what salvation means has come so far from the Hebrew text and the idea of *shalom* – being at peace and in right relationship with each other and the world.

So, reclaimed salvation takes place in the here-and-now, just as much as in the sweet by-and-by. Again, I'm *expanding* the view, I'm not replacing one with the other. That's the first thing.

The second thing — buckle up: reclaimed salvation is a communal experience, not just an individual experience. And if you want it to go even further with that, you might say a reclaimed salvation is for all not just for some, certainly not just for me. When I got saved, it was *only* about me. The next time I got saved, it was also only about me. And the subsequent 18 times that I got saved [laughter] at summer camp, it was all about *me*. Now I'm going to trigger some of you with this, but you know the phrase “with every head bowed and every eye closed” [laughter]. Some of you need to do business with God right now, right? It was so individualized that it was actually supposed to be private, a private moment that only you could experience. Everybody else was supposed to keep their eyes off of it, except for the times when you get invited to the altar so that everybody could see [laughs].

Here's a different picture of salvation from the Bible; Genesis chapter 12, “The Call of Abram.” Kind of the start of the whole story of God's people. There's a lot of stuff that happens in Genesis 1 through 11, but the stuff that seems a little bit more like history begins in Genesis chapter 12 with the calling of Abram, where it says: “The Lord said to Abram, go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.” Now that sounds very individualized doesn't it? You're going to leave your family group and go off on your own. But then the Lord goes on to say, “I will make of you a great nation,” a great family, a gigantic tribe. “And I will bless you and make your name great.” Why? “So that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you, Abram,” God says, “all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” The blessing of salvation, as

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pictured in the Bible, is not about one person having a specific experience. It's about a community of people being called into God's goodness and receiving God's blessing.

There's a phrase that also comes from the Bible that's tossed around in some circles, more often than in other circles, called "the elect." Christian people are the elect. It means the chosen ones, essentially, which is maybe consistent with the language of the calling of the Israelites as God's chosen people. But that doesn't simply mean the best people, or the most special people, or the ones who God has chosen to favor above everybody else. This always means — in the story of the Israelites and in the story of the Christians — ones who are called by God to invite others in. To lead others to safety. To take part in God's work of saving the world. And here I'll point us back to that first point, which doesn't necessarily mean saving their souls. Sometimes it means saving their bodies. By the way, for more on that I would encourage you to go back into the Artisan archives on our podcast and listen to a sermon that was given on Feb. 17 of 2019. This was not my sermon, it was by Pastor Don Schiewer, and he entitled it "Is Your Salvation Safe?" He talked with brilliance about how the Scriptures speak of salvation as drawing people out of danger and oppression into safety and freedom. And if you are one of the chosen ones, it's not because you have a better afterlife insurance policy. It's because you have been chosen to do good works in the world.

Artisan's life verse, I sometimes call it, is Ephesians 2:10. And I'll read it to you in context here by giving you verse nine in addition. It says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. It's good Protestant theology. "And this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not the result of works so that no one may boast." This is *really* good Protestant theology. And then it goes on to say, "For we are what he has made us." We are God's creation. We are God's poem, God's masterpiece, "created in Christ Jesus" — why? — "for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." These two verses just, like, completely mess with so much nice, tidy, clean theology. Salvation is about grace, not works. Yes, but it is *for* works. You're not saved *by* good works. You are saved so that you will *do* good works. And you are not chosen because you're special, you're chosen so that you can do those good works, which is what God prepared you in advance to be doing. Ephesians 2:9-10.

So it's communal, not just an individual experience. Here's the next characteristic of reclaimed salvation that I love and I hope you will love, too. This kind of salvation spreads by transformation, not just conversion. Romans 12 says, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind." And it says, "In that way, you will become a living sacrifice." Now, if you don't have a whole lifetime of Second Temple Judaism, as your religious practice, that phrase "living sacrifice" isn't going to hit very hard for you. But if you were raised in a context where your religious belief led you to understand forgiveness and so many other aspects of religious life as being centered around the act of sacrificing an animal (in other words, killing it/ending its life

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ritually) and then you're told that you should be transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you can become a living sacrifice? That is a pretty enormous modification to the religious understanding. The sacrifice, one assumes, is a moment in time that flips some spiritual switch when the animal dies. But a living sacrifice requires an ongoing process of transformation, of being changed. Not killed, but changed. And I gotta tell you, transformation beats conversion every day of the week, twice on Sunday. I'm actually not really interested in making converts. You can fire me if you want to [laughter]. I'm really not interested in making converts but I am very deeply, unendingly interested in helping people experience transformation, the power of the Spirit of God.

By the way, Jesus had something to say about conversion. Do you know what it was? You've memorized Matthew 23 I'm sure, but let me just say this little bit of it for you for those who haven't heard it. Jesus says, "Woe to you hypocrites, for you cross land and sea to make a single convert and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves." Jesus said it that time, not me [laughter]. I can't tell you how clear it was to me in my church experience that getting people converted was the most important thing in the whole world. The most important thing in the *whole world*. And Jesus says, you go on a short term mission trip across the sea to make a single convert and you turn them into twice as much a child of hell as yourself. You colonize them, he might have said, but let's not open that can of worms today.

I've got one more for you. This won't be new to anybody who's heard me preach. But a reclaimed salvation, it seems to me, is a process, not just a moment. It is a process, not just a moment. Interesting to me: in both of his letters to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul used the phrase, "those who are being saved." Now, notice he doesn't say "those who have gotten saved." He doesn't say "those who *were* saved" and he doesn't say "those who *are* saved." The verb tense matters. He says, "those who are being saved." If anything, verb tense matters like 40 times more in Greek than it doesn't in English because there's so many of them. I remembered, like, two of them [laughs] (seminary was a long time ago). Those who *are being* saved. I love this phrasing because it doesn't assume that the work is complete.

Now, I have to be honest and disclose to you the type of person I am. I might just be drawn to this. I had to take the Myers Briggs test in one of my grad school classes this past week. I've taken it before, but it confirmed for me that I am a P, not a J, on the Myers Briggs Type Indicator. Now, you might not know what that means but if you do know what it means, you're probably chuckling because you're like, no kidding, I've had a conversation with you, Scott [laughter]. But what that means is that I actually kind of prefer things not to be finished. I like things to be ongoing. I don't like things to be closed off too much and finished up. So to me, it's actually very attractive to think that salvation is something that is still happening to me. Although, part of the purpose of those personality and temperament inventories is to understand each other better. I

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do understand that some of you might be more comfortable with the idea that it is finished; it is done. At the risk of frustrating you further, I think both things are true [laughter]. Again, think of the Exodus story, the Passover only happened once. That was a dramatic experience, a moment in time. But the exodus took 40 years. And it doesn't do anybody any good to go back to the Passover every time you want to have an experience with God. Remembering it and commemorating it is beautiful. Limiting your understanding of salvation to it is not healthy.

Alright. So these are my characteristics of a reclaimed salvation: It takes place in the here and now, just as much as in the sweet by and by. It's communal, not just individual. It spreads by transformation, not just conversion. And it's a process, not just a moment. All of this meaning and purpose. Maybe you were able to completely forget about the idea of an eternal conscious torment. The problem is that this idea, this understanding of salvation, does not fit in a street preacher's sermon. It does not fit on a bumper sticker. I could barely fit it into a 25-minute sermon. I have 45 seconds [laughter]. But it moves my heart so deeply and I hope and trust that it moves your heart in some way as well. And then what I think would be perhaps a great irony, but also very profound; I hope that someone hearing this today or in the future will get saved. I hope that someone hearing this, freed from the expectation to understand salvation in a particular way, will find a doorway into the house of God, or maybe just a cracked window.

I'd like to pray for you and for us to that effect. God, as always, today my prayer is that anything that I have said that you want to drive home would be received and remembered, and that anything that's other than that would be missed and forgotten. I pray that you will call each one of us into a salvation that is deep and rich and true. And that for those of us who need to let go of some other understanding, that we would be given the grace and the courage to do that. So that we can truly be safe, not just saved. So that we can be part of your work, not just one of your works. So that we can be in community, with you and with each other. Save us, O Lord, we pray. Through Christ our Savior. Amen.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).