

How Are We Really Saved through Jesus?

There is a common evangelical model that runs through traditional Christianity, or at least conservative, traditional Christianity. The model starts with an acknowledgment that we are sinful people, often living our lives in ways that are not in accordance with how God would have us live (no argument there). The model then proposes that as a result of our sin, we deserve to be punished, or deserve death, or in particularly sadistic Christian circles deserve Hell, which is usually pictured as a place of eternal conscious torment (very different than "Sheol" or "Gehenna", the Hebrew words eventually translated as Hell). Christians who subscribe to this paradigm are quick to point out that this is not what God desires, but rather God has no choice because he is perfect and perfect love cannot coexist with our evil nature. In this model of atonement, often referred to by theologians as "substitutionary atonement", with its modern criminal justice twist, God extends his grace to us by sending Jesus into the world ultimately to be crucified, paying the price or penalty for the sins of humanity (in other words, taking our place on the cross) so that we can be reconciled to God. We are redeemed, reconciled with God, not by following the ways of Jesus, but rather by believing he died for our sins.

I simply cannot buy into this substitutionary atonement model. First, it appears to contradict everything that Jesus models and teaches about the grace of God. Jesus teaches us that God is like the prodigal son's father (Luke 15:11-32). The prodigal son is immediately re-assimilated into the family and accepted, without any need for punishment or sacrifice. The only requirement for his reconciliation is a willingness to turn from the destructive ways he was living (repent if we want to use a churchy word) and returning to his father. This type of grace is what Jesus modeled in his interactions with tax collectors, prostitutes, the adulterous woman, the Samaritan woman at the well, a Roman Centurion, and others. Their willingness to trust in Jesus, and his ways of living (Pistis-the Greek word for faith is better translated as trust rather than belief) was all that was required for their redemption.

The other reason why I do not embrace the theory of substitutionary atonement is that, in and of itself, it does nothing to transform people. In my opinion, it appears to provide people with a "get out of Hell free card" without truly requiring any change in behavior. Within this model, it would appear that as long as I believe that Jesus died on the cross for my sins I am good to go. This minimizes the life-changing mission Jesus undertook in his ministry. In his parables, aphorisms, and sermons, we see a Jesus who is truly trying to reshape the world into a place of radical love, compassion, forgiveness, and generosity. He is revolutionizing standard modes of behavior; changing our self serving focus into serving others; changing a perspective that views some people more worthy or acceptable than others and helping us understand that each and every person is equally valuable in the eyes of God. Jesus' ministry was not about providing an evacuation plan from this life or Hell, but rather providing us with a model for living in this life that would enable us to relate to God and each other in the way that God

intended. He called this the 'Kingdom of God'. It is the way the world would look if God reigned in our hearts. In his time, it is the way the world would look if God ruled instead of Caesar; if God was in charge rather than Herod and the Temple priests; if God defined societal norms rather than the Pharisees with their strict focus on the law.

Looking at Jesus from this perspective does him far more justice. As I gradually grow in ways that enable me to embrace the love, compassion, and forgiveness taught by Jesus, I begin to experience abundant life as he promised. I gradually die to some of my very human traits such as greed, selfishness, and being judgmental, and I am "born again" into the spiritual way of living taught by Jesus (described by the apostle Paul as "living in Christ") that embraces the kind of radical love described in 1 Corinthians 13. Living in this new way brings me to a place where I can now relate to God and other people in the way that God intended, and this is how I am saved through Jesus. From this perspective, if you asked me, "Am I saved?", I would have to say, "Yes, a little bit every day, and I am still working on it."

Looking at Jesus from this perspective does not diminish the sacrifice he made on the cross one little bit. Jesus knew that the ways he taught defied the political and social conventions of his day. He knew that his ways were not the ways of Rome or the Temple elite and that ultimately, it would cost him his life. His willingness to promote God's agenda for the world knowing full well that this would lead to his crucifixion is amazing. Viewing Jesus in this light also does not diminish the significance of the Resurrection, God's answer to those who rejected "the way" brought into the world by Jesus. Through the Resurrection God answers those who in crucifying Jesus tried to reject God's plan for the world. It is God telling us, "Your ways of living through violence, greed, and prideful judgment of people you think less worthy is not my way. Your enrichment of some people while oppressing others is not my way. Indeed, my way is that which was taught by Jesus. Know through his resurrection that the love, compassion, and forgiveness he taught are my ways for the world. Know that whenever you choose to turn from your destructive way of living and choose to embrace the ways taught by Jesus that I will be there with open arms to accept you, comfort you, and guide you. Know that my spirit will reside within you and enable you to live a life that is above and beyond (a more accurate interpretation of the Hebrew word for eternal life) whatever you thought you might be able to experience without my presence.

In conclusion, I think that the concept of being "saved" through the model of substitutionary atonement has been at least as harmful as it has been helpful. Most unchurched people that I know view it in a very negative light, seeing it as a mechanism that Christians use to divide people into worthy and unworthy categories. This is unfortunate since that is the antithesis of what Jesus taught. The next time someone tells you they have been "saved", I would suggest that you respond, "Already? That's amazing! Please tell me all of the ways that you have become more compassionate and loving, especially to those who appear to be unlovable. Tell me how you have learned to forgive those who do horrible things to you

and others. Tell me how you serve the poor and lift up those who have been marginalized by our society. Tell me how you have been able to promote God's agenda for peace in the world. Tell me how you have helped liberate the oppressed and embraced those who others reject. I really want to know because I don't feel that I am truly saved unless I can do these things and I struggle with them every day."

Amen