

SALVATION OF THE LORD

Jonah 2:8-10

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But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD! (JON. 2:9).

During most of the centuries of the church, Christians have debated the sovereignty of God in salvation. In some periods those who emphasized God's sovereign grace have been called Calvinists and in other periods Augustinians; all have derived their doctrine from the sacred writings of apostles like Paul and prophets like Isaiah, and especially the teachings of Jesus Christ. At the same time, there have been others who objected to the idea of divine election in salvation. Some, like the Arminians, have contended for a rational doctrine of free will. Others, like the heretical monk Pelagius, have rejected the biblical doctrine of sin and denied the need for grace altogether.

In the story of the prophet Jonah, we may see considerable light on the question of God's sovereignty in salvation. In fact, as Charles Spurgeon saw it, the characters in Jonah 2:9-10 represent both sides of the debate. Jonah's "Calvinism" can be seen in his great exclamation: "Salvation belongs to the LORD." The Arminian position is represented by the great fish which had swallowed him. Spurgeon jested, "We know that the great fish was an Arminian. Because no sooner did Jonah pray, 'Salvation is of the LORD!' than the great fish spat him out of its mouth!"

Specifically, in God's dealings with Jonah and in the prophet's penitent prayer, we may see not only the general truth that salvation is of the Lord, but more specifically that salvation is of the Lord in its initiation, in its power, and in its successful conclusion.

THE INITIATION OF SALVATION IS OF THE LORD

The question of salvation's initiation is an important one both for individuals and for the ministry of the church. Does salvation occur because of what we do for God or because of what God does for us? Do sinners come to God for salvation or does God come to sinners in order to save? The Bible's answer is found in Jonah's prayer: "Salvation belongs to the LORD;" or, as some translations render it more simply, "Salvation is of the LORD" (Jon. 2:9).

We can see this, first, in God's plan of salvation. Spurgeon writes: "No human intellect and no created intelligence assisted God in the planning of salvation; he contrived the way, even as he himself carried it out."¹ This is the emphasis of the Bible. The apostle Paul tells us that we are saved "having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11). The plan of salvation originates in the counsel of God's will, according to his own purpose and by his predestination. The plan of salvation is of the Lord.

When we reflect on the gospel message we see how this must be so. For who but God could devise a way by which guilty and corrupted sinners could be approved by his relentless justice and accepted into his holy presence. Donald Grey Barnhouse exults: "He alone could have found the way to declare ungodly men godly and justified. He alone could have taken fallen children of Adam and made it possible for them to sit upon the throne of the universe with Himself. He alone could have taken those who were joined to the harlotry of sin and turned them into the pure bride of Christ."² For this reason, our salvation serves to display the glory of God's wisdom and especially of his grace. Nothing outside of God led him to devise the plan of our salvation, and no influence outside of his own glorious being led God to save us. Thus Paul writes that God's sovereign and eternal plan of our salvation is "to the praise of his glorious grace" (Eph. 1:6).

¹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Sermons*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1883, reprint n.d.), 3:195.

² Donald Grey Barnhouse: *Exposition of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,), 3:212.

This continues to be true when we consider God's accomplishment of salvation. All the work performed for our salvation is of the Lord. The Christian gospel does not consist in instructions for what we might do to achieve our own salvation. Rather it is the proclamation of what God has done for us. We see this from the start of Jesus' life on earth. When the angels heralded the birth of the virgin child, they were not calling on mankind to gather together for a great initiative. Rather, they proclaimed good news of what God had done: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk. 2:11). God sent his Son to be born under the law and so to fulfill it for us. God then directed his Son to the cross, to offer his life a sacrifice and shed his own blood for our sins. And God raised up our Lord Jesus from the grave that he might conquer not only sin but even death for us. And so it had to be if we were ever to be saved, for man could do nothing of his own to remedy the problem of sin. Man cannot offer his own sacrifice for sin, since every human being has his or her own sins to pay for and thus cannot pay for another's. Man cannot offer good works, for all our works are corrupted by the sin that pollutes our very being. But what we could never do, God has done for us. Salvation is all "of the Lord" in its initiation and achievement.

The example of Jonah provides a choice example of God initiating salvation. As we look on the prophet turning his heart back to God and praying in renewed faith, we ask, "What has Jonah done to save himself?" "What has Jonah contributed to this story?" The answer is that Jonah contributed only his unbelief, his rebellion, his folly, and his sin. When Jonah was thrown into the waves, there was nothing he could do for his own salvation. But God had willed that Jonah would be saved and therefore God "appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah" (Jon. 1:17). When Jonah arrives in Nineveh to preach God's message of warning, it will be because he was saved by God's sovereign grace. Apprehending this sovereign initiative in his deliverance, Jonah thus prays from the belly of the fish, "Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

THE POWER OF SALVATION IS OF THE LORD

Some astute observers may reply: “Yes, Jonah was saved because God sent the great fish. But Jonah still had to turn to the Lord in faith. After all, this chapter begins with Jonah telling us, ‘I called out to the Lord.’” Here, we consider the application of salvation to the individual sinner. We have seen that the plan of salvation and the accomplishment of salvation are initiated by God. But what about the application of salvation to the individual? Arminians will argue this point especially. “Yes, God has offered salvation by his own initiative. But we must take the initiative in receiving this salvation in order to be saved.” “Isn’t it true,” they will argue, “that when God gave Jonah one last chance by sending the great fish, Jonah responded to this grace by changing his heart to turn back to the Lord?” What would Jonah say to this? We know what Jonah said, and it applies not only to the offer of salvation but also to the power to receive it: “Salvation belongs to the LORD!”

Indeed, we could not say that salvation is wholly of the Lord if salvation required that we take the lead in exercising our wills to believe the gospel. Instead, we would have to say, “Salvation is of the Lord in its offer, but in terms of its receipt salvation is of the sinner’s own will.” But that is not what Jonah says. Speaking of his whole deliverance, he insists, “Salvation is of the LORD.”

When we understand the Bible’s teaching about man’s condition in sin, we see why this must be the case. Jesus said, “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (Jn. 8:34). This being true, our wills are not free to turn to God but our nature is bound in the chains of sinful corruption. The apostle Paul made this clear when he wrote: “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). The apostle stresses not only that the unregenerate sinner *does not* accept God’s Word but also that he *cannot*. In Ephesians chapter two, where Paul outlined the doctrine of salvation, he began by describing the unsaved as “dead in... trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). So if salvation requires the sinner to bend his own will to receive the gospel, and man’s will is enslaved to sin and man’s spirit is dead to God, then it is impossible

for man to be saved. This is why the biblical gospel is such good news, for as Jesus said to Peter, “What is impossible with men is possible with God” (Lk. 18:27). Therefore, even in receiving the gospel, the power to believe is “of the Lord.”

Charles Spurgeon reflected on our need for God’s regenerating power during a visit to the famous Carisbrooke Castle on the Isle of Wight. This is where England’s King Charles I was held prior to his execution after the English Civil War. On one occasion an escape attempt was arranged. Everything was provided for Charles’ escape: his followers were waiting outside the wall and boats were ready to take him to safety. All the fallen king had to do was get out the window of his room. But Charles could not get the window open and all the efforts on his behalf came to nothing. Spurgeon writes:

So with the sinner. If God had provided every means of escape, and only required him to get out of his dungeon, he would have remained there to all eternity. Why, is not the sinner by nature dead in sin?... And if God does require of the sinner – dead in sin – that he should take the first step, then he requireth just that which renders salvation as impossible under the gospel as ever it was under the law, seeing man is as unable to believe as he is obey, and is just as much without power to come to Christ as he is without power to go to heaven without Christ. The power must be given to him of the Spirit.³

This was a major point of debate in the Protestant Reformation. The Roman Catholic apologists argued against salvation by grace alone by arguing the point of free will. The great answer was given by Martin Luther: “Free will, after the fall, exists in name only... For the will is captive and subject to sin. Not that it is nothing, but that it is not free except to do evil.” Luther showed that this was not a new debate, but quoted St. Augustine in his earlier struggles with Pelagius and other heretics. Augustine wrote, “Free will without grace has the power to do nothing but sin... You call the will free, but in fact it is an enslaved will.”⁴ Instead, we are saved by the power of God at work in the soul through the effectual call of the gospel. Jesus called to his dead friend, “Lazarus, come out!” and the dead man rose and came (Jn. 11:43-44). Jesus approached Levi the tax collector and called,

³ Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Sermons*, 3:197.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Basic Writings of Martin Luther*, (), 39-40.

“Follow me”; the tax collector came forth as Matthew the disciple (Mt. 9:9). Likewise, Christ calls to sinners today in sovereign power through his gospel, and as the Holy Spirit gives new birth to the soul the sinner believes and is saved. This is why the apostle Paul described even faith as “the gift of God” (Eph. 2:9), and why Jonah cried in the deep, “Salvation belongs to the Lord!”

If there was ever a picture of man dead in sin, then Jonah within the great fish is such a picture. This is true not only of his external situation but especially of the inward state of his soul. He had hardened his heart to God’s command, fleeing “from the presence of the LORD” (Jon. 1:3). So bound was his will in cords of sin that when God’s wrathful storm was crushing his ship, even then he did not repent and turn his heart to God. “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea” (Jon. 1:12), was the only counsel his bitter spirit could offer. Now, when Jonah finally reckons with God in the darkness of his deep tomb-like experience, and he is able to say, “When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD,” how does he explain the change in his heart? “Salvation is of the LORD!” he exclaims.

When we remember that Jesus labeled his own death with “the sign of the prophet Jonah” (Mt. 12:39), we see how important this statement is to the Christian gospel as a whole. For the power animating both Jonah’s deliverance and Jesus’ death and resurrection is “of the Lord.” And Jonah’s words at the moment when he was typifying Christ are a motto for the whole of Christ’s saving work: “Salvation is of the LORD!” It is not the power of man that accounts for salvation at any point, but only the power of God. And just as it was God’s power that turned Jonah’s heart in the darkness of the fish’s belly, it is God’s power that turns sinners’ hearts to faith today in the shadow of the cross. The cross of Christ, like Jonah’s great fish, is a sign to the world of the sovereign grace of God. “Salvation is of the LORD!”

THE CONCLUSION OF SALVATION IS OF THE LORD

From the moment when Jonah turned to the Lord in repentance and faith, he was saved. We see this in that Jonah never asks God to rescue him from inside the great fish, but instead thanks God for the deliverance he has already gained: a deliverance from his folly and sin. Yet Jonah’s salvation would not have been complete had he

remained inside the fish's belly. Likewise, our salvation will not be complete until we are delivered out of this dark and evil age to arrive safely onto the shores of heaven.

The last question to ask, then, is who will ensure that our salvation is successfully concluded? Having been saved by sovereign grace, do we remain saved by our own efforts or by that same sovereign grace of God? Jonah, again, provides a model, for his resurrection from the grave of the fish's belly was not the result of his own labors. Rather, in its successful conclusion, as in its initiation and its application, he rejoices, "Salvation is of the LORD!" Jonah's thankful confidence in God was well rewarded, for "the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land" (Jon. 2:10).

This does not mean that Christians are inactive in their faith. Having first been saved by a faith that receives – we might refer to it as a passive faith – we advance in salvation by a faith that works – that is, by an active faith. Moreover, it is absolutely necessary that Christians persevere in faith. Those who think that they may rest upon a fleeting spiritual experience of belief in Christ, apart from a life-long walk of faith in the Lord, are tragically mistaken. Paul states this plainly: "He has now reconciled [you]..., if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard" (Col. 1:21-23). For this reason, the only solid ground of assurance of salvation is a present, active faith in Jesus Christ.

Yet even this is "of the Lord". For God's people do not persevere in their own power, but in the preserving grace of the Lord. The Bible teaches that our perseverance is the result of God's on-going grace in our lives. Our salvation will be successfully concluded because God the Father refuses to forsake his dear children. Paul writes, "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6). Peter adds that "by God's power [we] are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:5). Our salvation is also secured by our faithful Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand" (Jn. 10:27-28). Finally, our perseverance in faith is guaranteed by the

Holy Spirit's presence in our lives. Paul comments, "When you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, [you] were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:13-14).

In our earlier study of Jonah's prayer, we noted the influence of the Book of Psalms on his spiritual awakening. It should be no surprise, then, to learn that his statement that "salvation belongs to the LORD" is a quote from Psalm 3.

This is one of David's affliction psalm, attributed to the time of the rebellion led by his son Absalom. "O LORD, how many are my foes," David begins (Ps. 3:1). David, not unlike Jonah, finds himself in a desperate situation, beyond the hope of human salvation. So he lifts up his heart to God: "You, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head" (Ps. 3:3). David's enemy has overwhelmed him, and while can find no hope in himself or any other man, he knows that God is able to deliver him from his troubles. David concludes: "For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked. Salvation belongs to the LORD; your blessing be on your people!" (Ps. 3:7-8).

Just as David sought his only hope for the future in God, and as Jonah looked up from the deep with hope in the Lord, so also should we rest our hopes of deliverance into the blessed realm of glory in the sovereign grace of God. Martin Luther comments of Psalm 3: "It is the Lord alone that saves and blesses: and even though the whole mass of all evils should be gathered together in one against a man, still, it is the Lord who saves: salvation and blessing are in his hands. What then shall I fear?"⁵ "Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

THE BELIEVER'S RESPONSE TO SOVEREIGN GRACE

Having considered the doctrine expressed in Jonah's prayer, we should conclude by reflecting on our response to the sovereign grace of God. Verses 8 and 9 serve as a sort of postscript on

⁵ Martin Luther, cited in Charles Spurgeon, *A Treasury of David*, 3 vols. () 1:32.

Jonah's prayer, capturing the lessons he learned in what Spurgeon referred to as the "strange college" of "the whale's belly."⁶

When Jonah turns to God in his despair, he realizes afresh the vanity of the idols of the world. He says, "Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love" (Jon. 2:8). In the presence of the true and sovereign God, the idols are unmasked and Jonah looks upon them with repulsion.

This is a valid application for us as we reflect on the sovereignty of the one true God. Peter Williams comments:

The essence of idolatry... is anything that commands the central place in our lives, and to which we give the loyalty and devotion, which rightly belongs to God alone... For some people money is their god, and the pursuit of materialistic goals dominates their lives... But we can make an idol of anything, sport, sex, drugs, politics, career, even home and family. Anything that nudges God out to the perimeter of our lives can become idolatrous.⁷

What is the result of idolatry, as Jonah learned? William says, "They become worthless 'lying vanities', and will always let man down, because – however much he tries to manipulate them for his own happiness – they will always fail to deliver in the long run on what they promise."⁸ In contrast, those who turn to the Lord as God receive a "steadfast love" that will save them in the end.

Secondly, that same verse reveals a change in Jonah's attitude towards a lost world. The whole point of Jonah's rebellion against God's command was his loathing of the idea of preaching to the pagan Gentiles that he loathed. But now he laments over them, knowing that in their idolatry they "forsake their hope of steadfast love."

What is it that will cause us to look on the world with new and merciful eyes? Jonah's example suggests that it is a glorious vision of God's grace. We realize that our own salvation is "of the LORD" – we were saved by sovereign mercy, which pitied us in our darkened state of sin. Paul reminds us that "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). From that

⁶ Spurgeon, *New Park Street Pulpit*, 6 vols. (), 3:193.

⁷ Williams, 63.

⁸ Ibid.

point of view, the vilest, most offensively unbelieving sinners – even those who pose the most danger to ourselves – are looked on as those in dire need of the same mercy by which we were saved. We will pray for the lost, preach the Word, and witness the gospel, realizing that by their unbelief sinners “forsake their hope of steadfast love.”

Lastly, Jonah expresses the response of a heart that is newly yielded to God: “But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay” (Jon. 2:9). This was the end to which God in his grace was working; Jonah’s salvation bears the good fruit of a willingness to follow God’s call in his life. His intestinal education could end now that Jonah combined mercy for the lost with a will that was obedient to God’s Word. So the Lord responded by directing the fish to disgorge the prophet back into the world.

Jonah could not know that his were practically the identical words spoken by the converted mariners after they had cast him into the deep: Jonah 1:16 says “they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.” That both the Gentile sailors and the Jewish prophet responded to God’s grace in the same way shows that this must be the universal response of all who are saved. Likewise, Christians are saved by relying on the atoning blood of Christ, and by our baptism we are covenantally pledged to bear the name of God in obedience to his Word.

Have you done this? Do you realize that the sovereign God of the universe has planned and achieved a single way of salvation in the sin-atoning blood of his only Son? No other offering can remove the debt of your sin and no other salvation has entered the counsels of the wisdom of God. In response, we offer a living sacrifice of thankful praise for the gift of his Son to be our Savior. And do you realize that when God saves you by his sovereign grace, he remains sovereign over our lives. Jonah confessed, “What I have vowed I will pay” (Jon. 2:9). What must you vow as a believer? The answer is that you must enter into a covenant of faith with the Lord, surrendering the rule of your life into his sovereign control.

Jonah shows that the sovereignty of God is more than a doctrine to affirm; it is also a commitment to be kept. Perhaps some of us, like Jonah, will need to renew their commitment to the Lord. Such a commitment will find expression not merely in our hearts or with our

mouths, but also with our hands. “In the end, there is only one evidence of a personal, saving relationship to the Lord – and that is the keeping of his commandments.”⁹ For if “salvation belongs to the LORD,” then those who are saved belong to him, too.

⁹ Gordon J. Keddie, *Preacher on the Run: The Message of Jonah* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1986), 62-63.