

PREFACE

Jesus, remember me

In his final moments on earth, the thief on the cross had one simple plea: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus replied, “today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:42-43, 2011 NIV)

Were that all there is to be said of salvation, we could conclude that grace is as simple as it is amazing. But that is not all there is to be said. For two thousand years Christians have been proposing their own additions to this story of grace. It isn't enough to have a simple plea for mercy, they've said. You also need to adopt a specific set of theological beliefs and you need to reject another specific set; you need to worship in a particular way and carry out particular actions; along the way you need to avoid certain sins and certain questionable behaviors. To top it all off, once you've finally got everything sorted out, you'll discover that for every Christian who agrees with your account of grace, there will be many more who disagree. And many of *those* folks will even question your very salvation.

It turns out that while Jesus' words to the thief may have been simple, grace is apparently more complicated . . . and *confusing* than we ever imagined.

In a sense, my story of salvation begins like that of the thief, with a simple, ignorant, and faltering request, my five-year-old

equivalent of “Jesus, remember me.” From there I have spent the better part of forty years acquiring further additions to this story of salvation: doctrine by doctrine, principle by principle, discipline by discipline, my vision of grace has grown so complex that I have been left at times to wonder whether salvation might be possible for *any* of us.

Have you ever gotten lost in a strange city only to discover hours later that somehow you ended up back where you started? In some key respects, that captures my story. After all those years journeying through the labyrinth complexity of two millennia of Christendom I somehow managed to work my way back to where I started. Now, as a Christian for forty years and a theology professor for fifteen, I find myself again standing on familiar ground.

This book tells that story of moving from the naive innocence of a child’s faith, on through layers of doctrinal and ethical complexity, wrestling with the fear of ultimate failure, and finally arriving at an abiding trust in the God who is infinitely greater, wiser, more merciful, and more loving than I could ever be.

Looking back I can now find no better way to introduce that journey than by returning to the familiar words with which it all began: Jesus, remember me.

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be saved?

Throughout my life I've been told that the Gospel is beautifully simple, so simple that it can be understood by a little child. That's funny, because I've been trying to understand it since *I* was a little child and in many respects I find myself more perplexed than ever. To be sure, I get the basic notion of Christ's incarnation, atonement, and resurrection. The *general idea* of the Gospel may indeed be beautifully simple. I'll happily concede that point. My problem is that the simplicity evaporates the minute you apply that beautifully simple idea to the life of a specific individual in space and time. Once you do that, the matter gets very complicated very quickly.

What does it mean to be saved? Do you need to believe particular things? If so, *what* things? Do you need to disbelieve other things? If so, exactly what are those things? Oh, and do you need to undertake particular actions in order to be saved? If so, then what precisely are the actions you simply *must* do? And are there other actions you absolutely, positively must *refrain* from doing if you are to be saved? If so, what exactly are those things—mortal sins, you might call them—that you absolutely, positively must refrain from doing?

The questions continue. Are all these demands the same for everyone everywhere? Or do they change over time and place and with respect to particular individuals and their knowledge or

abilities? Did God make different demands in the second or third century after Christ than he makes today? Does he expect something different from a five year old than a fifty year old? If so, how are we supposed to figure out what *our* exact requirements for salvation are? And what *is* salvation, anyway? Is it pie in the sky by and by? Or does it consist of a revolution of the social order in the here and now? Or could it be something else entirely?

And why isn't any of this clearer?

I started asking these kinds of questions when I was five years old and I'm still asking them now, almost forty years later. Yeah, you read that right: *forty years*. Given that span of time, you'd be forgiven for thinking I'm a bit neurotic, obsessed with trying to get every little theological 't' crossed and every minuscule theological 'i' dotted. Time to move on, right?

But in my defense, I'd say that given the stakes at play, my concern for greater clarity and maximal precision on matters of salvation has been perfectly reasonable. Think about it like this: imagine a deadly virus begins to spread through the region where you live. The governmental health authority responds by developing a vaccine against the virus. Once they start distributing the vaccine, you can jolly well bet that folks will insist on being perfectly clear on what they and their loved ones need to do in order to benefit from its protection. That's not neurotic, is it?

Well, as serious as a deadly virus can be, the topic of *my* concern is orders more important. We're not simply talking about the loss of a mortal life here (as significant as that may be). In this conversation the stakes are raised exponentially: we're talking *eternal* life and *eternal* death. That's the difference between a blissful forever with God and his redeemed community or never-ending unimaginably horrible alienation and anguish in hell. Needless to say, it is desperately important that we get these answers exactly right.

With that in mind, let me be blunt. Even if my concerns about the details of grace and salvation might seem a bit obsessive, a tad compulsive, a smidgen neurotic, I make no apologies. The fact is that I want—no, I *need*—to know *exactly* what is required at my end to be saved.

I need to know it for myself, for those I love, and for everybody else too!

So yeah, this book summarizes that story, a story that encompasses my forty year journey of attempting to figure it all out. Starting off with youthful confidence and naiveté I leave the dock as a child, moving out into the great unknown. Then as the shore disappears from view I find myself sailing into a bank of gray clouds of confusion. Gradually the wind picks up and the waves begin to crash over the bow and I find myself caught in the midst of a storm. But eventually I spot a steady light cutting through the gloom, a light that promises to guide me home.

That's the story. It's an account of trying to understand salvation, of seeking to clarify redemption, and of attempting to figure out once and for all what's so confusing about grace.

PART ONE

Conversion

CHAPTER I

Dear Jesus, please come into my heart.

Amen

The story begins when I was five years old. I still remember it like it was yesterday. Isn't it funny how particular experiences which do not seem that extraordinary in the moment still somehow stamp themselves on your long-term memory, searing themselves into your consciousness and becoming the headers for the chapters that make up your life story?

This was one of those moments.

Had you been there, you probably wouldn't have guessed it. The setting was terribly mundane. My parents were driving down Lakeshore Road in our brown Oldsmobile on a sunny afternoon much like any other. And then it happened: we were just passing Gyro Beach when my mom turned around in her seat and started talking to me about Jesus and the devil and the importance of making a decision, of needing to *choose* between them.

I was immediately resistant to the idea of choosing. After all, I was a *peacemaker* at heart. (At least that's how *I* viewed myself; admittedly my brother might remember things differently.) The long and short of it is that I didn't want anybody mad at me. And I definitely didn't want to have to *choose*. Then, after a moment's reflection I lighted upon what seemed to my five year old mind to

offer a rather ingenious way between the horns of my dilemma. In that moment of penetrating inspiration I concluded that I could be friends with both Jesus *and* the devil. *Maybe* I could even get them to be friends with each other.

Brilliant!

I fully expected my parents to agree that this was the best way forward and to commend me for my out-of-the-box diplomatic vision. I could envision my dad looking back over his shoulder and beaming proudly: “Well done m’boy! I didn’t even think of befriending *both*! You’re a smart kid!” Why not? If I could be commended for being the peacemaker between a couple neighborhood kids, perhaps I could reconcile Jesus and Satan too. So far as I could see, it made perfect sense.

Needless to say, I was caught off guard when it became clear that my mom shared none of my enthusiasm. Instead, she looked at me sternly and solemnly shook her head. “You *can’t* make them friends,” she said firmly. “*You have to choose.*”

Gulp.

Well, once she had put it in those stark terms, the matter was all but settled. It was now time to make a decision. So which would it be? Jesus . . . or Satan?

After a couple years of Sunday school I knew enough to know that Jesus was my friend. That much had been drilled into me through the venerable flannel-graph which told stories of Jesus healing and performing miracles and kindly inviting kids like me to sit on his knee. At that time, I understood the Bible to be a collection of children’s stories akin to Aesop’s Fables with a pious twist. And Jesus was both the master storyteller and the hero.

As for Satan, he was a snake, a liar, a roaring lion, a bully, and a creepy goat-man hybrid that hid in the shadows and whispered evil thoughts in your ear. I couldn’t remember anybody having a good word to say about him.

In retrospect, Jesus had this one locked up from the beginning. Satan was never really in the running. And so, later on that afternoon I walked into our backyard while my brother was watching *The Six*

Million Dollar Man on TV. As the late afternoon sunlight streamed through the ponderosa pines, I knelt down on the soft earth and prayed a simple prayer just as I'd been taught: "Dear Jesus, please come into my heart. Amen."

Salvation was available to all who believe. And *what* do they believe? That Jesus is their friend and the devil is not. And you get to be friends with Jesus by inviting him into your heart.

So I prayed.

And as I finished and looked up at the skies above, the clouds parted, a beam of light from heaven illuminated my countenance, and the angelic choirs began to sing.

Well, maybe not exactly. But the sun was shining, and the birds were chirping, and the wind was rustling the pines.

And I was saved.

Digging Deeper

1. Can you remember having a conversion experience? If so, what was it like?
2. How young do you think a person can be and still make a meaningful decision to follow Jesus?
3. Some Christians believe a person needs to be able to identify the day on which they were saved. Do you agree?

A minister of the Gospel

I started kindergarten a few months after the day that I was saved. Early in the year the teacher asked us to share what we wanted to be when we grew up. Not surprisingly, the answers quickly broke down along gender lines. (After all, the year was 1979 and women's lib and other social reform movements hadn't yet reached the kindergarten.) So the girls mostly wanted to be nurses and teachers while most of the boys wanted to become policemen or firemen.

Yawn.

Unmoved by such tired visions of masculine vocation, my vision was different. "I want to be a minister of the Gospel!" I proclaimed with the spiritual fervency of a prophet.

My teacher wrote down all our future vocations on a sheet of paper with a flowery script and invited us all to decorate our page with an inspired vision of our vocational future. I quickly scribbled out a bold red cross and a crudely rendered stick figure preacher bellowing from behind a pulpit.

And so my destiny was set. I would be a preacher full of spit, vinegar, and the Holy Ghost to boot.

If that sheet was any guide then it would appear that my new friendship was going well. And when I brought that piece of paper home, my parents couldn't have been prouder.

Digging Deeper

1. Have you ever sensed a divine call on your life? If so, how did it work out?
2. Some Christians have claimed that being a pastor is a higher calling. Other Christians insist that the one highest calling is to follow Christ in whatever life circumstance we find ourselves. What do you think?
3. What do you think is the best way to discern whether God has placed a special calling on your life?