

Salvation, O The Joyful Sound!

by Glen Scorgie

"Salvation, O the Joyful Sound!"
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There ought to be no greater cause for joy, no higher reason for selfless service and spellbound adoration, than the fact proclaimed by the inspired psalmist: Our God is a God who saves (Psalm 68:20)! Surely there is no more wonderful experience in all the world than salvation. It pervades the pages of Scripture. It motivated the incarnation. It lies at the very heart of the Christian faith.

Not so very long ago the forest clearings and pioneer settlements of Canada rang with joyful shouts of salvation. Hardy and industrious immigrants, who had every excuse to ignore spiritual matters amid the urgency of taming the wilderness, were nevertheless smitten with concern for the eternal welfare of their own souls and those of their families. When circuit-riding preachers, propelled by the dynamic of the evangelical awakening of that day, proclaimed a simple gospel message in simple little meeting-houses, people responded with hunger and eagerness. Shouts of joy for their salvation rose upwards to God along with the chimney smoke from their scattered cabins. Such response was far from isolated or unusual; in fact, men, women and children were liberated and transformed on such a scale that it shaped the fabric of our nation for several generations.

Undeniably this is part of our heritage. Sadly, it is no longer a part of our Canadian experience on any significant scale. The joyful sounds of salvation have been all but silenced in the land. For the most part such exclamations of joy do not echo on our subway

platforms. They do not ring through suburban kitchens, nor reverberate across the courtyards of our high-rise apartment complexes. Never before have we been bombarded by so many words, yet the word salvation is so rarely among them anymore. The sounds of salvation have been replaced by a great deal of distracting and tiresome noise, a vast din that masks a more tragic silence.

No Christian who has personally experienced the wonder of salvation can remain unmoved by the disturbing reality that most Canadians today wolf hamburgers, fume in collector lanes, pursue happiness, scheme of early retirement . . . and all the while remain quite indifferent to the offer and indeed the very idea of salvation. It is no secret that the term has an antique ring in most ears. It is thought to belong with butter churns and other trappings of a bygone age. It is viewed as an item of religious jargon that can safely be dismissed as irrelevant.

The best corrective for such dangerous unconcern and disinterest would be another great evangelical awakening on the scale of those of previous centuries, when large segments of the population were deeply sensitized to spiritual realities and their own personal needs. During such awakenings eternity becomes at least as real in people's perception as everyday life, and consciousness of sin and liability for punishment becomes so intense that it threatens to crush the agonizing soul. Certainly such an awakening would be the ultimate solution, and we ought to

pray for one continually.

At the same time we must take to heart a very significant lesson from the history of Christianity. Awakenings invariably take place through the agency of Spirit-filled and Spirit-sensitized Christians. Awakenings are the result of the convicting and convincing influence of the Holy Spirit, yet the Spirit consistently chooses to accomplish His purposes through God's specially-appointed people, the Church. To explain further what I am suggesting, it should perhaps be added that the Spirit does not employ Christians as passive mouthpieces and mindless channels. It is His good pleasure to work through Christians who are exercising their God-given abilities with all their might and with all the perceptiveness they can muster, and who are willing to do whatever it takes to make the simple message of Christ crucified both convincing and effectual.

If salvation is ever to become a vital theme in our national life again, Canadians will have to regain a sense of urgent need for it. That being so, our first task must be the daunting one of fostering a sense of need and thereby getting people's attention. The Spirit will be able to work most effectively through those Christians who are able to persuade their complacent contemporaries that they desperately need to be saved. Deliverance means nothing to those unaware of their peril. It means everything to those who are.

The message of salvation derives its value from two assumptions which are not necessarily shared by the general population. The first assumption is that

every human being, without exception, faces an everlasting afterlife. The other one is that one's eternal destiny will be determined by the outcome of an inevitable and uncompromising divine judgment. Even the rationalistic Deists of the Age of Enlightenment still believed these things. It is one index of how far we have come that such assumptions can no longer be taken for granted.

If this analysis is correct, part of the challenge we face is to help our modern neighbours see that there is most surely an everlasting afterlife in store for them, and that to be prepared for it ought to be a matter of top priority. One of the many achievements of Jesus Christ was that He brought the fact of immortality to light (2 Timothy 1:10). Prior to His advent, even some of the Old Testament saints appear to have been at best only dimly aware of this momentous truth. Christ brought it out of the shadows and made it plain for all to see.

Human nature, however, is not easily moved from its old habits. Even those exposed to Christ's teaching often persisted in their neglect to make serious preparation for the afterlife. The negligence of such short-sighted folk moved Christ to plead and reason with them: What does it profit you to gain the whole world (assuming you could), if (despite all such acquisitions) you eventually lose your soul (Matthew 16:26)? People have not changed much since. They still seem determined, whether by postponement, rationalization, suppression or diversion, to evade the force of Christ's lucid question.

Our modern day differs from the past

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only in this—that the degree of indifference to the prospect of eternity is unprecedented. Indifference has always been around; seldom has it been so reinforced by the thought-patterns and values of global civilization. Marxism, in its desire to get people to concentrate their energies on the improvement of this world, denies immortality, and thereby seeks to lull to a most perilous slumber a large segment of the world's population. Closer to home, skepticism about the possibility of an afterlife has grown in proportion to loss of confidence in the authority of Scripture. The Bible proclaims that we are immortal; part of the fallout of lost confidence in Scripture is doubt about immortality.

That is only part of the full story. Such skepticism about the afterlife has been aided and abetted by an influential philosophical view that holds that any reality beyond our present time-space existence, is empirically unknowable. This philosophy stems from Immanuel (surely an ironic first name) Kant. Admittedly the average person knows little of, and cares even less about, such a philosophy *per se*. But such philosophies have a way of trickling down, through the opinion-leaders and the media, into the public consciousness. It is no accident, then, that the average person seems so confident that their destiny is unknowable that they will go a whole lifetime without making a single serious effort to examine the matter carefully for themselves. Meantime they are preoccupied by a smorgasbord of engaging activities. The entire culture

seems to have conspired to foster a complacency about eternity.

Something else contributes to this disregard for the matter of one's eternal destiny. It is the brash confidence that, if there is indeed a life after death, it ought to “pan out” as well for oneself as for the next person. How many times have we heard someone boast that they are prepared to take their chances on the afterlife? The main reason for this bravado appears to be that people do not reckon seriously on a judgment. They honestly do not expect to be brought to account for their earthly behaviour, much less to be dealt with severely because of it. It was quite different in the days of the Reformation. Not just Martin Luther, but whole nations, were gripped by the prospect of pending judgment. Eternal peril was assumed; the pressing issue was how to become right with God.

But today many modern theories have combined almost to suffocate, if it were possible, the inner sense of personal accountability. It is maintained that the system, the structures of society, the group at large, the situation in which one finds oneself, is really responsible. It is one's genetic inheritance, it is the social conditioning one has experienced in the past, that is to blame for one's misdemeanors. It is not the individual themselves. This attitude has been reinforced by a certain brand of theology that soothes unsettled consciences by “prophesying smooth things.” It says in effect that the concept of a future judgment (at least a severe one) is quite incompatible with the character of God as a loving Father.

In light of all this we have our work cut out for us. The task of convincing modern people that they are both immortal and bound for judgment is not an easy one. Our efforts will undoubtedly be sneered at. But if we are ever to hear salvation restored to the working vocabularies of our fellow citizens, and if we are ever to hear exultant shouts of salvation ringing through our land, these things, in the power of the Spirit, must be done.

There are no simple strategies, but it is a significant gain to at least be able to identify where we need to concentrate our energies and press our arguments with force. We need in our preaching, for example, to stress those portions of Scripture which affirm immortality and judgment. We need to trust the Holy Spirit to confirm the Word to the hearts of hearers, and at the same time to do what we are able to defend the trustworthiness and authority of that Word.

It is also important that we do what we can, and we support others who are gifted in the field, to dismantle the structures of unbelief and skepticism. There is a place for books like Hans Kung's *Eternal Life?* There is a place for patient, careful apologetic. Pursued in a godly spirit, such activities create a climate of receptivity for the truths revealed in Scripture. They too contribute to the conquest of darkness. Through all of this we need to portray our God as Holy Love, as one who in spite of all His uncompromising holiness is incomparably magnetic and attractive.

To do these things will not be easy, for we will be labouring upstream in the

current of modern notions. As we testify, however, we draw encouragement from the fact that the truths we proclaim touch authenticating chords within our hearers. Deep within each creature created in His image, God has planted a testimony to the rightness of His holy law and the wrongness of violating it, and along with that a hunger for eternity. Our efforts are incalculably worthwhile, for to foster an awareness of eternity and judgment will lead many to appraise with real interest the news of salvation in Christ. We will thereby achieve our first real objective: to gain the attention of people. So let it be.

A Deepened Concept of Salvation

There is something else, of equal importance, that we need to do if we hope to hear the joyful sounds of salvation ring from one end of our nation to the other. We need to deepen and widen and enrich our conception of salvation. Our vision of salvation needs to become, to borrow a term from the coffee advertisers, more full-bodied. We will not need to wax heretical to have this happen either. We will simply need to bring our conception of salvation back in line with the glorious biblical understanding of it.

When we use the word salvation, we generally mean one of two things. In some instances we use the term to denote, in a very general and vague way, the work of Jesus Christ in all its various aspects. We use it much like the theologians use the word soteriology. It is a piece of theological jargon, not exactly heart-warming or especially illuminating, but convenient. The danger

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here lies in the fact that our churches can wither up and die while we employ the word salvation in this sense. We need to hurry back to Scripture as quickly as we can. We find that the term is never used there in this bland sense. There it has a very moving and specific meaning, and a distinct place among the various biblical descriptions of God's work on our behalf. At times that work is called redemption; at others it is referred to as reconciliation, or adoption, or regeneration or propitiation. These are not mere synonyms. Each description is meant to shed light on a different facet of God's gracious provision for us. Each description complements the others.

The particular task of the term salvation is to convey the idea of deliverance from serious peril, either by escape from it or, in some cases, preservation in the continued face of it. The original Old Testament word for salvation communicates the idea of being brought out into a wide open space. One is saved when one is safe, liberated, free at last. Deliverance; escape, preservation—this is what salvation is all about. Salvation is in fact a dynamic motif, and when we get hold of it a rather dusty theological term suddenly takes on life and makes one's heart leap with hope and expectation. The point is not to retain the word itself necessarily; after all, it is only an English word. The idea of deliverance and liberation which it is intended to convey is the truly important thing to preserve. At all costs we must get the glorious idea across. Otherwise we will be just mumbling in our theological beards.

It was suggested that we usually mean one of two things when we use the term salvation. The other thing we often have in mind—dare I say it?—"fire insurance." Often we mean by salvation that experience of having been delivered, through repentance and faith, from condemnation at the Last Judgment and the fate of eternal punishment which would necessarily follow. Salvation is accepting Christ's atonement, and thereby escaping the fires of hell. Salvation is having made the necessary arrangements, and then to await the future with confidence.

Such a glorious deliverance is the last thing we ought to disparage. No one who has come face to face with the terrifying prospect of eternal condemnation can do other than live out their days in grateful praise for it. All temporal blessings pale by comparison. This is a most vital aspect of biblical salvation. The Apostle Paul gloried in the fact that Christ rescues us from "the coming wrath" (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Hallelujah!

Salvation from Sin

It should not diminish the significance of this aspect of salvation to remind ourselves that there is much more to biblical salvation than even this. It is helpful to stop and reflect on what exactly it is that God is committed to saving His people from. Happily the biblical answer is not buried in some obscure text. It is not shrouded in ambiguity or mystery. It is given plainly and profoundly, for example, in the angel's instructions to Mary's bewildered fiancé Joseph concerning the baby to be

born to them. "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). There we have it. What a great deal there is in this brief remark. The Son of God came expressly to be a Saviour. This name Jesus (Joshua, literally "God is salvation") was chosen to reflect that mission. And—this is the most important point—His purpose was to save people from their sins.

Often people grow rather uninterested and bored when they learn that God is only in the business of saving people from sin. They would prefer that he addressed some of the more pressing problems of the troubled globe instead. What they fail to realize, of course, is that God is not callously indifferent to humanity's real problems at all, nor does he turn a deaf ear to human need in its manifold forms. It is simply that God has diagnosed sin to be the root and source of all that is wrong with humanity and human experience. To provide a way of escape from sin is the most radical and comprehensive form of salvation possible. The divine strategy cuts deeper than all felt needs, and even symptoms of disease, to the malignant tumor itself.

Why should we think of sin as so serious? Sometimes overlooked (and it is part of our work to ensure that it is not overlooked) is the rather obvious point that the thing that makes sin so serious is its consequences. Sin itself generally has a certain appeal. Often it is downright attractive. What is so perilous is what follows from it: guilt (real liability for punishment), bondage to its control and every imaginable evil and

pain. These are the consequences of a wilful determination to live contrary to God's expressed will. The good news of full salvation is that Christ has resolved to deliver us, not only from God's wrath upon our guilt, but also from the power and ultimately even the tragic evil effects of sin.

The convert embarks on a pilgrimage which can only culminate in the conquest of sin and the end to all its terrible consequences. The promise of this ultimate deliverance has not yet been fulfilled. We wait in hope. But our hope is not sheer hope; while we wait we are consoled and encouraged by evidence that the process of deliverance from the power and consequences of sin has already begun. It is our privilege to experience solid and substantial degrees of deliverance from these things. The process will remain uncompleted in this life, but it has been inaugurated. Salvation is meant to be a present and daily experience. Truly we are being saved.

Perfected salvation is what Paul had in mind when he assured the Roman Christians that "our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed" (Romans 13:11). Nevertheless, it is God's will that we experience a generous portion of salvation here and now. It is always an impoverished and declining church that is unable to give testimony to God's deliverance—God's salvation—in its present experience. It is a dismal religion indeed that postpones every desirable thing to the last day.

We will do well to consider some of the ways in which believers are privileged to experience dimensions of

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God's salvation in this life. One glorious aspect of our salvation comes immediately to mind. It is that we can, right now, be *delivered from the fear of death*. We are not guaranteed exemption from physical death, but we can know liberation from the fear of it. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews was evidently convinced that the people of his day were held in psychological slavery all their lives by this very fear (Hebrews 2:15). There is every indication that nothing has significantly changed since. It is indeed a curious thing that in spite of widespread skepticism today about pending judgment and personal immortality, the fear of death is very real and lurks just below the surface of open acknowledgement. People are not skipping blithely to their graves. Death is a very indecent conversation topic. What is it that induces this anxiety and dread? Perhaps in some cases it is the disturbing thought that perhaps the Christians just might be right about what is in store. But at least as often it is the constricting fear of the unknown, and for those convinced that there is indeed no afterlife at all, the terror of non-existence and nothingness.

The Good News is that we can be—and not just once, but repeatedly if necessary—delivered from this stalking fear. There is a possible soul calm that is absolutely priceless, yet well-known to Christians. Such peace is beautifully expressed by John Carroll, an old Methodist preacher who, recalling his teenage conversion many years later, wrote: "When I laid my head on my pillow at night, it would have delighted

me if I had possessed the assurance that I should never open my eyes in this material creation again." Unbelievers cannot fathom such a remark. It is foreign to their experience. They know what it is to fear death, and we may be sure that they long to be delivered from it. We need to stress the fact that they can.

Another wonderful dimension of our present experience of salvation is *release from the tyranny of guilt feelings*. If anything, modern psychology has helped us to appreciate more fully the significance of this liberation by exposing the extent to which our personality and outlook of life can become distorted by a consciousness of guilt. Guilt feelings punish. Guilt feelings drive one. They dog mercilessly. Conscience, designed to be a link with God, burns and torments within.

Jesus Christ delivers us from guilt feelings as well as objective guilt. The superficial liberal assurance that God is prepared to tolerate our sins will never bring peace to a deeply troubled conscience. James Denney, a great evangelical theologian of the last century, had the discernment to see that such a peace can only come from the assurance that a costly payment in full has been made. Only the preaching of the cross dissipates guilt feelings. Yet the offer of forgiveness is difficult for us to believe. For some of us it takes a lifetime of growth to feel ourselves fully accepted, clean and just as though we had never sinned. It is no small thing to be able to raise one's face towards God without self-consciousness, or to look one's neighbour in the eye without

shame. But it is possible . . . because of Christ.

Some people see the Church as an institution quite adept at laying "guilt trips" on people. The temptation is certainly there. Guilt is, as we suggested, a remarkable motivator. But the temptation must be resisted. The Church must be a place where burdens are lifted and release is found; and not just once, but time and time again, as the need for it arises. This is indeed Good News. How can the guilt-crushed world help but be drawn to the proclamation of it?

God meant for our present experience of salvation to include *deliverance from the tyranny of our sinful instincts and compulsions*. Again it is the Apostle Paul who writes, describing his own experience of liberation in this area: "The law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2). At this point our discussion may appear to have moved beyond the proper bounds of salvation to sanctification. The statement we are considering is, after all, the very key to the sanctification process. But notice Paul's words "set me free." This is the imagery of liberation, of salvation. To be set free from the tyranny of having to give in to the wrong, and hating yourself for it, is also part of our salvation "charter of rights." People long to start over. They know they keep shooting themselves in the foot. It is an awful thing to be in helpless bondage to oneself. Christ provides a way of escape—in this life.

In addition to all this, there are a host of undesirable consequences of sin from

which God intends and determines to deliver us. Sin sets in motion a perverted chain of events and evil influences that thwart people's drive for happiness and fulfillment, destroy relationships, set up barriers of misunderstanding and prejudice, foment corruption and injustice, leave people scarred, embittered and lonely, cause pain and suffering, war and torture, set the teeth of the natural order on edge, and drag every person down, against their helpless resistance, to death. The Good News includes the fact that God is committed to breaking this cycle and delivering us from the tragic consequences of sin. All these things fall within the range of God's saving agenda.

How Much Now?

But how much deliverance from such evils can we expect in this life? This is the question which tends to divide Christians, and the challenge before us is to chart a course of sober faith between demanding more than is our due in this groaning, imperfect world and a *de facto* loss of conviction that God will make any practical difference this side of eternity. There is real danger in drifting towards either extreme. There is plenty of religious utopianism around, fueled by selfish and materialistic desires. Some are too impatient to wait for the Second Coming. They want it all and they want it now. There is, therefore, a solid market for "health and wealth" preaching.

But allowing for all such naivete, it seems the greater danger is that we will move in the direction of less and less .

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expectation that God will intervene in our lives in saving ways. The truth is, the Christian life is vastly superior to every alternative way of life because God does provide substantial deliverance from the evil consequences of sin. Christ taught us in the Lord's Prayer to ask that we be delivered from evil (Matthew 6:13). We may therefore be sure that He intends to answer this request when it is voiced in obedience to His command.

It should not take anything away from the glory of God's salvation to acknowledge that many times He delivers us through the natural results of obedience to His revealed will and holy laws. God did not establish rules just for His own benefit. They are for our best too. Faithful adherence to God-given values, priorities, attitudes and principles of conduct almost always has beneficial effects in the long run. Missiologists speak of a "social lift" phenomenon among converts in many parts of the world. There are, of course, notable exceptions to the rule. There are other parts of the world where Christians suffer greatly for their faith. All things being equal, however, Christians are spared much evil and many a pang simply by following the ordained way. Blessings and honour tend to come as by-products of obedience. Here, it must be added, the challenge is always to be willing to relinquish these things, when necessary, in order to follow more perfectly the one who, for the sake of others, voluntarily gave up everything to become nothing (Philippians 2:5-11).

There are still other evils from which escape does not seem possible through

obedience to the divine will. In such cases we must believe, if we take the Word seriously, that the Father often intervenes personally and supernaturally on behalf of His needy children. He reserves the right to act in this manner as He wills. He is known to deliver His own from the oppression of the enemy of their souls, from deeply-entrenched habits and unhealthy psychological orientations. This too adds to the glory of salvation.

It is remarkable how much of the evil, pain and suffering a person endures stems directly from their own sinful folly. The connections are often direct and obvious. But how insensitive and blind we would be to suggest that this is the whole story. Often one person endures the effects of another's sin (e.g. the abused spouse or the victim of a drunken driver). Individuals suffer from the corporate sins of large groups (e.g., a nation pursuing an unjust war policy). All of us suffer from the effects of sin upon the natural order (e.g., floods, droughts, disease and illness): No amount of personal obedience is a sure protection against such evils as these. The godly are not exempt from such afflictions. But the principle we must uphold here again is that God often does deliver His chosen ones from such evils. The eye of faith will often be able to perceive the hand of the loving Father, providentially orchestrating the apparently incidental and coincidental events of our lives in such a way that we are sheltered from a great deal of evil. Often (though not always) it is His good pleasure to deliver us from illness, from dangerous circumstances and from

the plots of our adversaries. He does all these things and more, because our God is a God who saves.

Conclusion

I have suggested ways to more effectively accomplish the task of announcing salvation. First: to continue, against all opposition, to stress the eternal dimension of salvation, and the realities of eternity and judgment which make that dimension so precious and important. Second: to check to make sure that our view of salvation is in harmony with the biblical concept of it. That concept is both full-bodied and encompasses our present Christian experience. It is both rich and relevant to the present.

It would greatly boost our sense of praise and our consciousness of present salvation if we developed the habit of reflecting upon how much evil we are continually being saved from—either by

simply living our personal, family and professional lives in conformity to God's will, or as a result of His supernatural intervention on our behalf. It is absolutely imperative that a deep consciousness of such realities (akin to that granted to Elisha's servant), and a genuine expectation of more and more of them, be nurtured in our churches. Such discernment and expectation is essential to our spiritual vitality and to the attractiveness of the salvation we proclaim to the world.

It is an incredible thing that the Lord should have assigned to us the task of proclaiming the message of His salvation. It is an awesome assignment. It is rather as though a magnificent symphonic score had been assigned to a swampful of croaking frogs. Yet by God's grace, and His working through us all, glorious songs of salvation may resound again across our land, and echo to the far reaches of the globe.