

GOD SAVES – Part 2 (Ezekiel 36:24-27; Titus 3:3-8) Becky Douglass

Review

Today, we come to the end of our series which has helped us to “Behold Our God”. Of course, we haven’t come to the end of getting to know God – that is the job of a lifetime! But I do pray that it has helped you to see Him afresh and appreciate and love Him more.

Over the past couple of weeks, we have seen how our good and loving God created this world in love and that it was all very good. He created a web of relationships that the Bible calls “shalom” – or the way life ought to be. These relationships bound humanity to God, to each other and to the rest of creation in order that all could find their place and purpose and thrive according to God’s good plan.

But then we saw that, surprisingly, humanity began to doubt God’s goodness and love and ultimately turned their back on him in order to seek self-determination and self-fulfilment. They didn’t want to just be God’s image, they wanted to be God. In this moment, even before they had taken a bite of the forbidden fruit, sin entered God’s good creation and began its destruction. Humanity’s relationship with God was broken and they hid from Him in fear. Their relationship with each other was broken and they turned to blaming and covering their sin. And their relationship with the rest of creation became hard work and less beneficial for both the earth and humanity.

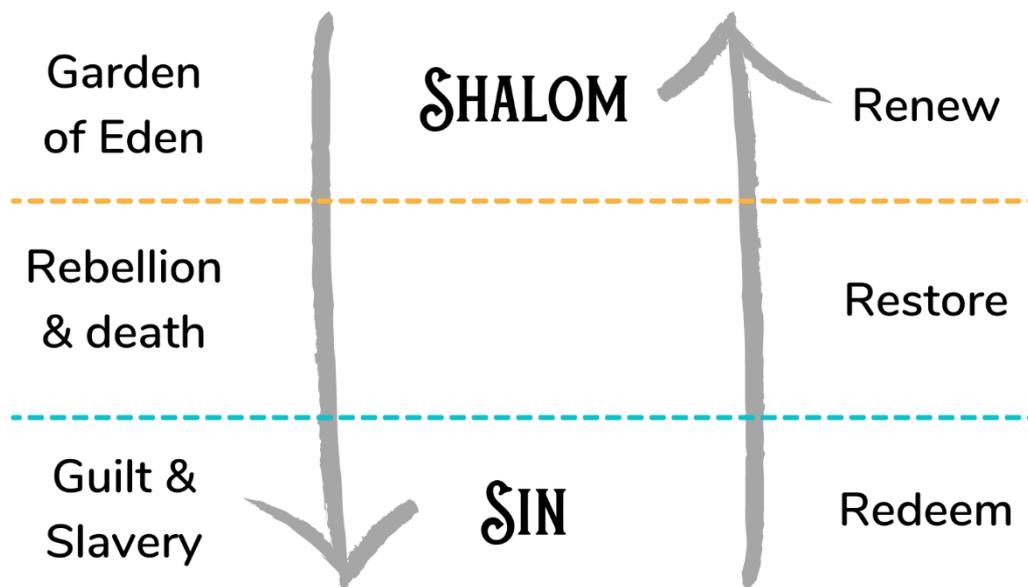
And above all, they were separated from the life of God and knew spiritual death. Paul says, *“When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam’s sin brought death. So death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned.”* (Romans 5:12) Humanity no longer had the life of God within them to guide them and enable them to live as God intended. They made their own choices about what was right and wrong, and this led them into sinful actions that went against God’s good law and they became guilty before Him and enslaved to the very things they thought would bring them freedom. The destruction of the good ‘shalom’ which God had created was complete.

And this is the situation in which we live today. Because of the destruction of sin, we are born into this world spiritually dead, without the life of God within us. We are relationally estranged from God and quickly discover that relationships with each other and the rest of creation are difficult at best and often painful and harmful. Because of the choices we make, based on what we think is best for ourselves, we stand guilty before God. And in fact, every desire within us leads us away from God for sin has enslaved us. We cannot do anything that is not tainted by our selfish, broken, sinful heart.

What a bleak picture this is! This is not what God created us for. But the glorious news of the Gospel is that, even though we have turned away from God, God has not turned away from us. The Bible tells us that from before the foundation of the world, God had a plan to save us from our own rebellion. He has never stopped loving us. He has taken the initiative to come to us and to call us back to Him, making a way to defeat sin, heal our brokenness, and restore us to that relationship with Himself which enables us to live as He intended. Just as Adam's sin caused our death, So Christ's death will bring us new life. (Romans 5:18,19)

The two passages of Scripture that we read paint a wonderful picture of God's salvation. They are pictures of new life and hope. I was interested to see how much they echo each other – one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. This shows us the consistency of God's plan. God's initiative and our response in faith has always been His plan.

As we look at salvation, we quickly discover a collection of multi-syllable words used to describe what God has done – words like revelation, justification, propitiation, atonement, penal substitution, imputation, emancipation, reconciliation, regeneration, adoption, sanctification. Some of these you may know, but others are not words we would use every day! However, to get the big picture of God's saving work, I'd like to focus on just three simple concepts. When God saves us, He redeems, restores and renews us. I think these three ideas show us how God has dealt with sin and its effect on us.



Redeem

The end result of turning our back on God is that we are now in slavery to our sinful desires and guilty of failing to reflect God's goodness and love. Titus says: *"Once we, too, were foolish and disobedient. We were misled and became slaves to many lusts and pleasures. Our lives were full of evil and envy, and we hated each other."* (Titus 3:3)

But in this desperate state, God redeems us. This is not a word we use a lot today. We might think of redeeming frequent flyer points – although there aren't a lot of places we can fly these days! The biblical idea of redemption is explored in several stories which help us to understand it. The first one is God's redemption of His people from slavery in Egypt. He

rescued them from oppression so that they could be free to follow Him as His people. In the story of Ruth, Boaz acts as her redeemer when he rescues her from poverty, takes her as his wife and gives her a place in society. In the Law we have a picture of someone who has a debt they can't pay and so they become the slave of the person they owe. They are redeemed when someone else pays their debt and frees them from their slavery. It is the idea of paying a price to free someone from whatever enslaves, threatens or oppresses.

This is what God does for us, initiating our salvation, not because we deserve it but because He loves us. According to Titus, because of His *"kindness (goodness or benevolence) and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy."* (Titus 3:4,5) In Ezekiel, God says, *"I will gather you up from all the nations and bring you home again to your land"* and later in the chapter He makes it clear that it isn't because they deserve it!

First, God deals with the guilt of our sin. Both Ezekiel and Titus tell us that He does this by washing away our sins, cleansing us from the sinful things we have done. Theologically speaking, we would say that he has justified us, or *"made us right in his sight"* (Titus 3:7) as the New Living Translation puts it. Because of this, our sins no longer separate us from God and we no longer face the penalty for what we have done.

Secondly, through Jesus' death and resurrection, the victory was won over sin and death and Satan. This means that He has broken sin's power over us and we are no longer slaves to it. We are not only free from the penalty of the sinful acts we have done, but we are also free from the power sin exerts over us so that we are now free to choose what is right.

Restore

Once God has dealt with our sin problem, we are restored in our relationship with God. This reverses our rebellion and death. Paul in Romans 5 says *that "... our friendship with God was restored by the death of His Son ... so now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends with God."* (Romans 5:9,11) Sin entered the world when humanity chose to turn their back on God. Now God has made a way for us to turn back to Him and have that relationship restored.

This restored relationship comes through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who is the one who brings God's love to us. He is God's presence in our lives who enables us to understand God's word and applies it to our lives. He also brings new life, a restoration of our life in God. In Ezekiel, God says, *"I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart."* (Ezekiel 36:26) What a beautiful picture! Our whole attitude towards God will change and we will be open to Him and responsive to His love and leading. Our rebellion and enmity will be replaced with tender love and a willingness to do what God wants. Titus similarly talks about us having a *"a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit."* (Titus 3:5) What once was dead is now alive. What once was hard is now soft towards God. We are new creations.

Renew

This transformation is wonderful. Many of us can remember the moment we turned to God and experienced His love for the first time. We knew our lives were different. But if we are honest, we also must admit that this did not immediately stop our sinning. Even after being a Christian for over 50 years I cannot honestly say that I never resist God's leading in my life or that I go through any day without sinful actions. Why is this and what is the remedy?

When we become a Christian and turn towards God, we are freed from the power of sin and are then able to make a free choice to obey God. His life within us also draws us to him and empowers us to make the right choice. In a very real sense, we are new creations. However, we still live in a body which has been broken and damaged by sin. We have sinful habits of behaviour. We have deeply ingrained reactions and attitudes which have been shaped by sin – either our own or another’s behaviour towards us. We also live in a world which is still ruled by Satan and which is shaped by his rebellion and desire to pull people away from God.

All these things mean that it is often easier for us to ‘go with the flow’ and act sinfully than to follow God. We are no longer enslaved by sin, but we are still affected by it. Often, we say and do things without any conscious thought – we just do what comes naturally, and what comes naturally has been programmed by the sin in us and around us.

The Christian life is the process of allowing God to change those natural habits, to heal our minds and hearts so that what we do is shaped by the love and goodness of our God rather than sin. God wants to heal our brokenness from sin so that we know the wholeness of ‘shalom’ and can act with holiness which reflects God’s character. Again, the Holy Spirit is key in this process. In Ezekiel, God says, *“I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.”* (Ezekiel 36:27) Titus talks about the Holy Spirit’s presence which leads to good works.

The Galatians passage further explains that as Christians we have a choice to either follow the desires of our sinful nature or tendencies or to follow the Spirit’s desires. The Spirit desires to teach us new ways of living, new ways of responding, new ways of relating to others. It is not so much about trying harder as allowing the Spirit to do His work in us and trusting Him to change us.

While we are in this life, we will always experience the affects of sin, and we will never have complete healing. We will always carry the scars. But we can know substantial healing. I was reminded of this recently when we spent a couple of days on the south coast. As we drove through the fire-affected areas, we could see where the fires had burned – often right up to the road on both sides. It must have been terrifying trying to get out. However, what impressed me the most was the re-growth we saw. Only one year later and the bush is green again! I was struck by the power of renewal that life brings. As long as there was life in the trees, they would grow again. They would always bear the marks of the fire, they were being renewed – healed. But only those trees still planted were re-growing. Some trees had been uprooted and cut off from their source of life in the ground. They were dead. But the trees which still stood would recover. This is like us – as long as we are connected to our source of life – God – we can overcome the devastation of sin in a substantial way.



And one day – one day God has promised that our salvation will be complete, and we will have a new body, mind and heart that is untainted by sin. One day we will live in a new heaven and earth which is undamaged by sin. One day we will walk with God and nothing will come between us. We will know perfect ‘shalom’ again. I remember hearing Joni Erikson Tada say that she is looking forward to heaven because she will have a new body which will be unbroken and able to dance and run – however, she is looking forward even more to having a new heart which is unbroken by sin and able to love God and others as she was

made to love. It is this hope which encourages me to draw close to God and trust Him to be changing me here and now.

Response

So how do we respond to such a great salvation? We have focused on all God has done in saving us. What must we do to receive this salvation for ourselves?

First, we must turn to Him. Some of us can remember when we first turned to God. It might have happened all at once, or it may have been a gradual turning over a period of time, but we know when we decided to turn from our sin and to God in repentance and faith and moved from death into life. Others of us may feel we have always believed in God and sought to follow Him. We don't remember a time when we didn't consider ourselves a Christian. Whatever our past experience, I believe it is helpful to periodically ask God to show you the state of your relationship with Him and what next step He is calling you to take. God often calls us to a new level of walking with Him that requires a renewed turning to Him and committing one's life to Him. I can think of several such times in my own life.

As we turn to God – whether in an initial commitment to God or in a subsequent decision to follow God in a new way – we are opening our hearts to Him and allowing Him to work in us through His Spirit. On our own we can't produce *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”*. (Galatians 5:22,23) It is only as we have a soft heart towards God and allow the Spirit to change us and our natural tendencies and desires that we will reflect God's character in these ways. As I was staying with my dad a few weeks ago, I was impressed again with His openness to God. He is 87 and dealing with the ravages of Parkinson's disease on his body and mind. Still, the prayer of his heart is “God, show me how to walk by faith in You – day by day, moment by moment.” His heart is soft towards God, open to whatever God wants to teach him. I see God continuing to change him into His likeness even now.

And finally, we need to step out in faith and trust God to be at work. We may not always see immediate changes. But He is at work and we can go forward trusting that He will do what He says He will. Just like we trust Him for our initial salvation, we can trust Him for His continued work of salvation in renewing us and making us more like Him. There have been many times in the past year that I have wondered what God was doing and how He could possibly use me in this situation. I am fully aware of my own sinfulness and how very ordinary I am. There have been many days when I have turned to God and said “I can't do this.” And He has always replied “No, you can't, but I can. Trust me. I am at work in you to renew you and I will work through you in each situation you encounter. Trust me and move forward in faith. My Spirit is in you. You are filled with my life. I will do what you cannot.” I am so glad it depends on His faithfulness and not mine!

As we come to the end of this series, I'd like to encourage you – to challenge you – to take some time this week and ask God to show you what next step He is calling you to take. Open your heart to Him and trust Him to be at work. Maybe you have never really turned to Him and accepted His salvation. You've been around the church and God all your life, but never made the decisive commitment to turn from your sin and turn to God and accept His salvation. Maybe you can look back on a time when you were in a close relationship with God, but now you feel like you are just drifting along, taking it easy. You need to deliberately turn back to Him and open your heart to what He wants for you. Or maybe you have been growing in Him and seen Him at work, and now, as you listen to Him, you realise that He is calling you to a new step of faith. Maybe, as you listen to Him and see what He has been doing in your life, you need to turn to Him in thanksgiving as continue on the journey with Him.

God's salvation is a continuing work in our lives to renew us in his image and restore our relationship with Him, others and the rest of creation. One day we will know the fulfillment of this in the new heaven and the new earth, but even now, we can know substantial healing and '*shalom*' as He works in our lives day by day. We have an amazing God. Our God saves!