

4

Radical Rescue!

By Christ's purchasing redemption, two things are intended:
his satisfaction and his merit; the one pays our debt, and so satisfies;
the other procures our title, and so merits.
The satisfaction of Christ is to free us from misery;
the merit of Christ is to purchase happiness for us.

~Jonathan Edwards

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

Luke 19:10

FOUR

Radical Rescue!

God is in the business of rescuing rebels. As much as God hates sin, He loves and pursues the sinner. No, don't pass that statement by too quickly, as many in the church are in the habit of doing. God does indeed love the sinner, but He hates the sin with equal intensity. How much does God hate sin? He hates sin so much that He sent His beloved Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to His unimaginable death on a cross on Golgotha's Hill. Also, let us not forget that all it took was just *one* sin from Adam and Eve to plunge all of the cosmos into utter corruption and chaos. God loves the sinner . . . AND He hates sin!

God did not need to go after Adam and Eve after they willfully rebelled against Him. He could have simply started over with a handful of cleaner dust and a much better rib! But He did not. He chose to rescue them from their lost estate through the cross work of His precious Son.

How do we know Adam and Eve were lost? We know this by revelation as God asks a simple, yet straightforward question in Genesis 3:9—"Adam, where are you?"

At first glance it seems as though God was asking Adam a question about location, as if He was trying to find where Adam was hiding somewhere in the Garden. Of course, this is not what was going on at all. Omnipotence knew where Adam was at every moment of every day. The question was directed at Adam because it was clear that Adam didn't know where he was! He lost his way when he chose to serve the kingdom of self rather than the Kingdom of God. Instead of looking forward to walking with God in the Garden in the cool of the day, Adam and Eve were hiding in fear.

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. (Genesis 3:8)

Here we see the condemnation of the conscience seared by sin. From the day they were created, Adam and Eve lived in intimate communion with God. From the day they sinned, they lived in fear of God. This was not the "fear of the Lord" that the Bible holds in high regard. This was not awe and reverence for the Almighty. This was outright fear, the kind of fear every sinner experiences when in the presence of holiness. Adam and Eve were not only lost, they were on the run from the One they

should have been running toward. They should have cried out to God for His mercy. They should have fallen on their faces before their holy God. They should have confessed their sin through a veil of tears. But they did not. Instead they grabbed up some fig leaves and tried to cover their sin.

Christian man: when was the last time you took some “fig leaves” to cover some of your sin?

THE HOLINESS OF GOD

We hear a lot of talk these days about the love of God, the mercy of God, the grace of God, and the kindness of God, but we don’t hear much about the holiness of God. Yet no other attribute of God, throughout all of sacred Scripture, is ever delivered to us in threefold ascription.

And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (Isaiah 6:3)

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (Revelation 4:8)

To be sure, every word in the Bible is important. But when we find words or phrases repeated, that calls us to a higher level of attention, especially where it identifies our Thrice Holy God. In the today’s texts there are a number of ways to draw the attention of the reader to specific words or phrases: bold, italics, larger print, underline, color, etc. The writers of Scripture, laboring under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, repeated a word or phrase to signal the reader to pay special attention.

Beyond identifying holiness as an attribute of God, how are we to understand what holiness actually is? One of the best written statements I have come across regarding the holiness of God outside of Scripture comes from A. W. Tozer: “Neither the writer nor the reader of these words is qualified to appreciate the holiness of God. Quite literally a new channel must be cut through the desert of our minds to allow the sweet waters of truth that will heal our great sickness to flow in. We cannot grasp the true meaning of the divine holiness by thinking of someone or something very pure and then raising the concept to the highest degree we are capable of. God’s holiness is not simply the best we know infinitely bettered. We know nothing like the divine holiness. It stands apart, unique,

unapproachable, incomprehensible and unattainable . . . Holy is the way God is. To be holy He does not conform to a standard. He is that standard.”

The prophet Isaiah writes, “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:6-9). Isaiah sets forth a high view of God’s holiness, yet not so high that man is left on his own to care for himself.

There are many words used to describe the holiness of God that can help us get a handle on what it actually looks like: majesty; perfection; purity; without spot, wrinkle or blemish; transcendence; moral perfection; otherworldly. The Scriptures often identify God as the Holy One. The word “holy” is used more often as a prefix to God’s name than any other attribute. In the most basic understanding of the holiness of God, we can understand it as the absence of evil and the presence of only perfection. Jerry Bridges writes,

God’s holiness then is perfect freedom from all evil. We say a garment is clean when it is free from any spot, or gold is pure when all dross has been refined from it. In this manner we can think of the holiness of God as the absolute absence of any evil in Him. John said, “God is light, in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). Light and darkness, when used this way in Scripture, have moral significance. John is telling us that God is absolutely free from any moral evil and that He is Himself the essence of moral purity.¹

Rightly understood, the holiness of God is a great comfort. The perfect holiness of God demands, by virtue of His nature, perfection and holiness in all that He does, including all that He does with sinners like you and me. God is never capricious or unjust in dealing with us; God is never unfair in dealing with us; He is never unloving in dealing with us. It is easy to survey the circumstances of our lives and conclude that God is unconcerned, uninvolved, or unloving when we are enduring trials and sorrow.

“Where is God in all this?” we ask plaintively. During such times we must always look past the circumstances of our lives and focus on the character of our God. Because of the absolute, unwavering

truth of God's holiness, we should be living epistles of John's heavenly vision: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."

Charles Spurgeon wrote, "To me the greatest privilege in all the world would be perfect holiness. If I had my choice of all the blessings I can conceive of, I would choose perfect conformity to the Lord Jesus, or, in one word, holiness."

THE SINFULNESS OF MAN

Without any legitimate reason whatsoever for rebelling against the One who created, called, and cared for them, and every reason for obedience, Adam and Eve chose the way of disobedience. They chose to serve themselves rather than God. They chose to serve their "little" kingdom instead of God's "BIG" Kingdom. Because of their cosmic rebellion, Scripture delivers a number of stinging and damning indictments of every child of Adam

There is no one who does not sin. (1 Kings 8:46)

If God places no trust in his holy ones, if even the heavens are not pure in his eyes, how much less man, who is vile and corrupt, who drinks up evil like water! (Job 15:15-16 NIV)

The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one. (Psalm 14:2-3)

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. (Psalm 51:5)

The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies. (Psalm 58:3)

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way. (Isaiah 53:6)

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. (Isaiah 64:6 NIV)

The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. (Romans 8:7-8 NIV)

Clearly our sinfulness—including the sinfulness of infants—is confirmed throughout sacred Scripture. As a father of four, I can testify to the sin nature of these so-called “innocent” children. Kim and I have watched in amazement as our children would commit sins long before they were old enough to learn it from others (Dad and Mom in particular) or had been corrupted by their environment.

And yet, deep down inside of us, we don't really see ourselves as being all that bad! We adopt the viewpoint of Rabbi Harold Kushner in his 1981 best seller, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*—we see ourselves as basically good. Sure, we do some things that are not good and right, but at the end of the day, we believe we are basically good.

The Scriptures cited above make it clear that we are in no way “basically good,” regardless of how much good we may think we are doing. We are, in fact, totally bad because everything we do we ultimately do for our own glory. Theologians use the term “total depravity” to describe the utter bankruptcy of our fallen human condition. The term does *not* mean that every human being is as bad as they could possibly be. To be sure, we could be much worse than we actually are at any given moment in time. Is there any sin you are not capable of committing at any given time? I THINK NOT! “Total depravity” means that every human being is affected by sin throughout every aspect of our being. We are corrupted to our core—spiritually, physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and relationally.

Martha Beatrice Webb (January 1858 – April 1943) was an English sociologist, economist, and activist who made a number of important contributions to political and economic theory. She was one of the early architects of the modern British welfare system. Along with her husband and other friends, she founded the London School of Economics. She was in the habit of keeping a diary; after she died it was discovered. Here is an entry from 1925, which looks back to something she wrote in her diary of 1890 which is stored, along with other papers, among the Passfield archive at the London School of Economics:

“I have staked all on the essential goodness of human nature. But now 35 years later, I realize how permanent are the evil impulses and instincts in us and how little they seem to change, like greed for wealth and power, and how mere social machinery will never change that. We must ask better things from human nature but will we get a response. No amount of science or knowledge has been of any avail and unless we curb the bad impulses, how will we get better social institutions.”²

Here is someone who was considered an expert on the subject of social change, and she acknowledged that there was something so radically wrong with humans that no amount of education, science, or social machinery could change it. She was right. Nothing in the created order can cure the corrupted creature. Only the Creator Himself has the cure, and His name is Jesus Christ.

As totally depraved sinners we live purely horizontal, godless lives, seeking to satisfy our own selfish desires. Even when we are seeking the things of God we stain our good efforts with our sin-filled hearts, producing nothing more than “filthy rags” in God’s sight, as the prophet Isaiah declared (64:6). As one Reformer rightly observed, “Even our prayers need to be repented of.” It is not until we understand just how bad we truly are that we will begin to understand just how radical His rescue is. Here is one of the most stinging rebukes in all of Scripture:

[Men] are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers,

haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. (Romans 1:20-32)

This entire passage is crystallized in the words, "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie." This is what Adam and Eve did in the Garden. They exchanged the truth about God and His Word for the seductive lie of Satan. Created totally dependent upon God, they were seduced into believing the lie of self-sufficiency, self-rule, and self-sovereignty. Fallen man has been doing the exact same thing from that moment on.

And yet our God is in the business of pursuing rebels on the run . . . rebels just like you and me.

RADICAL RESCUE

Radical is the best word I can find to describe the rescue of God in the lives of sinners. It begins when we catch a glimpse of the chasm between God's holiness and our sinfulness. We didn't need to be rehabilitated. We didn't need to be restored. We didn't need to be reclaimed. We didn't need to be restarted. We needed to be rescued and that rescue could only come through the person and work of Jesus Christ. The One who knew no sin became sin on the cross for us and bridged that gap we could never bridge, no matter how hard we tried.

One of the most astonishing aspects about the rescue of sinners is the fact that sinners were not looking to be rescued! Like Adam and Eve, we wanted no part of the only One who could help us. The rescue of sinners is totally unsolicited by the undeserving, who is being pursued by the unobligated. Sinful man was in utter darkness and the desire for rescue was rooted in the heart of the Savior, not the sinner. There was no cry for help from the sinner, no prayer for deliverance from the lost.

Just as the darkness hovering over the primordial abyss in creation was marked by chaos and disorder, darkness hovers completely engulfs the lost sinner. Chaos and disorder reign until God moves and speaks the words of life into the darkness, dispelling it with His Light. Radical is really the only word that begins to describe what God has done on behalf of the sinner through the Light of the world.

Think about it: infinite perfection . . . infinite beauty . . . infinite grace . . . hanging on the cross, beaten, bloodied, and ultimately forsaken by His Father. Jesus took our place, our penalty, our punishment, with a passion that would not be denied. On the hill Golgotha we come to the crossroads where unconditional acceptance meets undeserving sinner. Oh, what a radical rescue! Tullian Tchividjian calls this “God’s demonstration to reverse the curse.”

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

(Titus 3:4-7)

The scope of this program does not allow me to unpack the profound theological truth contained in this passage. So I will sharpen my focus on three words which are the foundation upon which all of Christianity is built, “He saved us,” to show the radical nature of our rescue.

This simple phrase answers the most important question in both life and death, “Who saves sinners?” Answer: “God our Savior” saves sinners. Here we see the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit working in concert for the salvation of sinners—loving the lawless and rescuing the rebellious. That is simply astounding, when we recognize that God did for sinners what they could never do for themselves, no matter what they did and no matter how long they did it. To quote CS Lewis, “We have a strange illusion that mere time cancels sin. But mere time does nothing either to the fact or to the guilt of sin.”

God, in his infinite mercy and grace, chose to save sinners from the power, penalty, and eternal punishment of sin. His reason is clearly set forth in the Titus 3 passage: “So that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” This makes Christianity a radical rescuing religion, rooted in an unbreakable, eternal relationship with the Triune God. God does not *need* us for relationship. He has a perfect relationship in Himself—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God has simply set His heart on us for relationship, and He pursues us and rescues us “according to his own mercy,” and not according to anything we have done or will ever do. Our salvation is rooted in His mercy not our merit. It is all of God. 2 Timothy 1:9 confirms that “God . . . saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.”

Radical rescue turns into radical renewal of the Holy Spirit. Paul exulted, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17 NIV.) What a remarkable reminder of the renewal wrought by the power of the Holy Spirit! We are not rescued and then released. We are rescued and renewed to walk in the newness of life. We have, by God’s grace, been raised from death to life and put on the new man. A total transformation is taking place, from the inside out; it begins with God, it is completed by God, and it is carried out daily by the sustaining power of God. “The power of the Spirit is working in us mightily,” as we read in Colossians 1:29. This awesome, supernatural power helps us grow in our understanding of God’s holiness and our sin, which translates into a deeper appreciation of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The implications are as far reaching as they are radical. The truth indeed sets us free. We are free to stop living in denial of the reality of our sin. We are free to stop hiding from God and others. We are free to stop pretending that we are better than we actually are. We are free to stop blaming others, even blaming God for the things that goes wrong in our lives. We are free to stop looking outside of ourselves for the reason we are so messed up deep inside. We are free to stop running on the performance treadmill to gain God’s acceptance, approval, and affection. We are free because we are no longer orphans, but we have been adopted as sons of the Most High God, who loves us unconditionally in spite of our flaws and failures, our shortcomings and sins.

This is why we must “Preach the gospel to ourselves every day,” as Jack Miller said in paraphrasing Martin Luther’s often repeated urging to return to the essential message of the cross work of Jesus Christ as the only strength for living the Christian life. It is only by keeping the Gospel in view each day that we grow in the three directions of our divine design . . .

UPWARD

INWARD

&

OUTWARD!



BROTHER TO BROTHER

1. Education, science, and social machinery cannot change the human condition. Do you agree or disagree? Please explain.

2. Why do we think more highly of ourselves than we ought?

3. Why are we in the habit of writing self-atoning revisions of our past history, hoping to justify our thoughts, words, and deeds?

4. How would you describe the holiness of God?

5. How would you describe the sinfulness of man?

6. How would you describe the chasm between the two?

7. Have you been running on the performance treadmill to gain God's acceptance or approval?

8. What does it mean to "preach the Gospel to ourselves every day?"

1. Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, 24

2. *Beatrice Webb's Diaries*. Contributors: Margaret I. Cole - editor. Longmans, Green and Co Ltd. London. 1952