

Why God Saves

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 January 2023

Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 0 0] Well, this morning in our service, we've been remembering our salvation. We've been celebrating in communion and in our songs all the things that God has done to save us, to save us from the power of sin, to save us from the penalty of sin, to give us hope, and to give us real power to fight sin in our lives.

All the great benefits of our salvation that we've been thinking about and singing about and praying about this morning. But have you ever stopped and wondered why?

Why did God save you? What is God's purpose in saving you? What does He want you to do with your salvation?

Have you ever actually stopped to ask that question? If you're saved and you enjoy the benefits of salvation, have you stopped and asked, well, what am I supposed to do with it now?

Because that's the question I want us to consider this morning. Because as we pick up this book of Exodus again, we're halfway through and we start the second half of this great book.

[1 : 0 7] Remember the first half we did last year was all about how God saved Israel out of slavery. He intervened in history and did amazing things to bring these people out of slavery.

And now they're at the point that they're looking back and they're just still amazed by all the things God has done for them. But now we start the second half, which is really all about why He saved them.

That's a simple understanding of the structure of Exodus. The first half is how God saved Israel. The second half is why. And it's a very important question to consider.

Why did He save Israel? Why does He save us? Because I think many people who are saved by God today, and who are rightly saved by God and enjoying the benefits of that salvation, and enjoying their amazing ability to pray and have a relationship with God, I think many Christians who are enjoying that salvation still don't get around to asking, well, what am I meant to do with it now?

One young Christian that was recounted in a book I was reading put it really well. Well, when after years of going to church, only after years did He come to the point of realizing that His salvation, that He's been enjoying for all these years, is actually for a purpose.

[2 : 3 6] And He puts it this way. So this is what I'm quoting from the book that I read. He said it felt like the rules were suddenly changed on Him. He explained that for years He was taught that salvation was a free gift, and that the gospel meant that He could have a personal relationship with Jesus.

It would be like someone gifting Him with a pair of ice skates. In excitement, He went to the skating rink and learned how to do all sorts of tricks. He enjoyed this and did this for years.

But now suddenly He is being told that the skates were actually given to Him because He was supposed to be part of a hockey team working together to pursue a championship. He wasn't supposed to just twirl around by Himself.

End quote. And I think that's a point that many Christians still need to come to in their lives.

That point that He came to. Realizing that we've been saved for a bigger purpose than ourselves. Not just so we can twirl around and enjoy our salvation, great as that is.

[3 : 42] And it's the point that the Israelites also had to come to in this story in Exodus. That's where we are now in Exodus 19. As they arrived at Sinai, the great destination of their salvation, God now addresses them and basically says to them, Okay, now let me tell you why I did all that.

Let me tell you why I saved you. And we're going to pick it up from Exodus 19 in your Bibles. Follow along from verse 3. Exodus 19 from verse 3.

Moses went up the mountain to God and the Lord called to him from the mountain, Listen, this is what you must say to the house of Jacob and explain to the Israelites.

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Just pause there. So that's a summary of the whole first half of Exodus in a verse right now.

God is reminding the Israelites of their salvation. This miraculous rescue from slavery, what I did to the Egyptians, what I did to your enemies that you had no power over and had all the power over you, I rescued you from that power.

[5 : 07] Then how I carried you on eagles' wings. He's referring to the wilderness. Remember that? When they were provided for miraculously, where they were protected from the Amalekite attack miraculously. And then how I brought you to myself, how God has now brought them to Mount Sinai to engage with him, to have a relationship with the God of the universe.

That's really a summary of Christian salvation, isn't it? Those three things, if you think about it. Rescue from an enemy that we had no power over sin. Then provision and protection as we live life.

And then God bringing us to himself, bringing us into a real relationship with our Creator. But he goes on. He doesn't stop there and say, now sit back and enjoy.

Because he goes on. Let's see what he says. After he reminds them of their salvation. Verse 5. Now, if you will carefully listen to me and keep my covenant, you will be my own possession out of all of the peoples, although the whole earth is mine, and you will be my kingdom of priests and my holy nation.

These are the words that you are to say to the Israelites. I saved you, Israel, God is saying, to be a kingdom of priests.

[6 : 31] Now, what I want us to do this morning is just consider that phrase. Just consider what it means for Israel to be a kingdom of priests.

What does it mean? What is a priest? Well, many people think that's no more than the guy in the Catholic Church who wears funny clothes. Right? You think of priests. What do you think of when you think of priests?

That's often what people think of when they think of priests. Most people, however, have some kind of understanding of what a priest is and what he does, and they're priests in the Bible and the Old Testament. And they understand that a priest is an intermediary between God and people.

Kind of like an insurance broker, you know, who mediates between you and the insurance provider and helps you to understand all their lingo and their jargon.

And a priest kind of does that. Helps us to understand stuff and also is the one we can communicate to in order to reach God. That's, of course, the understanding in the Catholic Church. You go to confession to a priest, and then he'll take that to God and they'll work out a setup for you, a solution for you.

[7 : 41] But that's not actually what a priest is primarily. In the Bible, when we go to the Bible and we look at the Old Testament, as I looked into it this week and I did the research into this idea of priest, I realized that it's actually got a much more profound meaning than just a go-between between me and God.

What is a priest in the Old Testament? Well, in summary, a priest's main job in the Old Testament was to look after the temple.

They were to look after God's dwelling place. There were certain kind of parts of their job which looked like being an intermediary between God and the people, but the main job they had was to look after the dwelling place of God, to trim the lamps, to make the sacrifices, to keep this dwelling place and the temple functions working.

Because remember in the Old Testament, the tabernacle or the temple was the place of God's dwelling. And it wasn't just some religious building. It was a very special location.

It was a space on earth where heaven and earth overlapped, where humans, where the creation could interact with the creator, could interact with heaven.

[9 : 01] It's where these two realms, because we've got two realms, right? We live in the physical world, earth, and there's also a heavenly realm. There's a spiritual realm. And there's a place where these two realms, where heaven and earth interact.

And in the Old Testament, it was at the temple, and the priest's job was to look after that place, to do all the necessary work, to work and keep this temple.

That was the phrase used for the priest's job description. You are to work and keep the temple. And in fact, that's interesting, because it's the same language used of Adam and Eve in the garden.

In Genesis 2, humans placed in the garden of Eden were to work and keep it. It's the same priestly language. They were in fact the first priests, because the garden of Eden was the first temple, essentially.

It didn't look like a temple, it didn't have pillars and gold and statues and stuff, but it was the place where heaven and earth overlapped, the garden of Eden. The location on all the earth where God and humans could dwell together, where they could interact.

[10 : 09] In fact, if you look later in the Bible, when Solomon built his temple, God specifically told them to put certain decorations in the temple, which were pomegranates and animals and trees and flowers, things to remind people of the garden of Eden, the first temple.

That was the first place where heaven and earth overlapped, and God gave humans, Adam and Eve, the task to manage that space, the overlap between heaven and earth.

humans were the priests in this great setup between heaven and earth, and God wanted to interact with the earth, and he wanted to do things in the earth, and so the humans would be essentially the intermediaries between heaven and earth, the ones who managed the space where God dwelled.

And from there, when they were doing their jobs as priests, the blessings of heaven would flow to the rest of creation. That was the plan. Kind of like Eden or the temple was kind of like, you could consider it a power substation.

A substation for heaven's power on earth to distribute the power of heaven and the will of God to earth. So think of it like that for now.

[11 : 26] Think of the temple as this substation of heaven's power on earth. But now, as we continue in the story, we know that that didn't last. The substation had a breakdown, as we know all too well in South Africa.

And that was because of sin. The reason that Eden failed to be the place where heaven and earth overlapped is because the humans in it, who were the priests, they sinned, and they were banished from it.

So they were banished from the place of God's presence so that there was, they could no longer mediate heaven's presence to earth. And so there was a very real blackout of heaven's blessings flowing to earth.

And the situation stayed like that for a while. But all through it, as we read the Bible, we realize God had a plan. God had a plan. And His plan was not only to restore the place of His presence on earth through the nation of Israel, that we later discover, but His plan was just as much to restore a priesthood.

And that's often what we neglect to focus on. He restored the temple. And as we read in Exodus, this year, this term, we're going to see His instructions to restore, to build the tabernacle, and therefore to have a place where again, once again, humans and Him can interact, and heaven and earth can interact and overlap.

[12 : 53] But just as important are many chapters in Exodus about restoring the priesthood, establishing a priesthood, people who would look after that place and who would work it and keep it, and from there, mediate God's presence outwards.

And so that is what's happening here in Exodus. As we begin this chapter, what God means when He says, I've saved you to be a kingdom of priests, He's saying, I've saved you to take up Adam and Eve's original mandate to mediate my presence to the rest of the world.

That's what He's saying to the nation of Israel. So, yes, God's presence is in the temple, but His presence is therefore in the nation, and they must therefore manage that and take God's presence to the world.

So Israel and the temple in the middle of it was to be a substation of heaven for heaven's power to again flow to earth. Which means that Israel were not just saved to enjoy God's presence.

Israel was saved to be God's presence in the rest of the world. Do you see that? That's what it means when God is saying, I want you to be a kingdom of priests.

[14 : 13] I want you to maintain my space on earth so that you can be my presence in the rest of the world. That was Israel's mission. And so how were they meant to do that?

What did God give to Israel to carry out that task? What equipment did He give to Israel to be His presence in the world? You know, because you need, as we've, our power utilities have learned, you need tools and equipment to maintain the substations.

Okay? And it was the same with this heavenly substation on earth. What equipment did God give to Israel to maintain His presence on earth? Well, the main piece of equipment He gave them was His law.

Which is the very next thing we read about from Exodus 20 onwards. The Ten Commandments and then the unpacking of those Ten Commandments. His law. And that's why in verse 5 of Exodus 19 we read, If you carefully listen to me and keep my covenant, then you will be a kingdom of priests.

In other words, keeping my covenant, keeping the covenant I'm about to give you, the instructions, the law. And that's the next five chapters of Exodus we're going to read is all about that law. And that law, as we go into it, we'll realize it's all about instructions of how to live with each other.

[15 : 39] How the Israelites not were to go and speak to the nations, but how they were actually first to interact with each other. And that's the surprising thing.

The surprising thing is that the way Israel were going to mediate God's presence into the world is actually how they lived with each other. God wanted them to be a community inwardly that reflects the character of God and when they are a community that is able to live well together and reflect the character of God, then they will be a powerful station of heaven on earth to be able to mediate the blessings of heaven to the rest of the world.

That's how they would fulfill their mission as priests. Not just by telling people what God is like, but by showing them. And this is vital for Christians to understand.

I'll get to that in a minute, but we've got to carry on the story, you see, because, spoiler alert, they didn't keep that law very well. Because of sin, once again, they failed, just like Adam and Eve, they failed to mediate God's presence to the world.

And just, well, what happened, if you imagine like these two realms overlapping and there's this bit in the middle where heaven and earth overlap, what happened in Eden was that humans, because of their sin, were banished from that.

[17 : 07] They were banished from that place of overlap. But what happened in Israel with the temple is that they became just like the nations, and so heaven itself withdrew eventually from that temple.

And so both times it was the result of sin that stopped humans from being, from taking up this priestly role to interact in this overlap of heaven and earth.

And so until the power of sin was going to be dealt with and broken, humans could never be the priests between heaven and earth that God had made them to be.

But that is why Jesus came, to free us from our real slavery. Just as, you know, the Israelites were under the slavery of the Egyptians and they couldn't but obey the Egyptians until God intervened.

We couldn't but obey sin until God intervened in the person of Jesus to free us from our slavery to sin and then transform us by His powerful Spirit working in us.

[18 : 16] The amazing benefits of salvation, but we are given that salvation not just to enjoy God's presence in our individual lives, but to be God's presence in the world.

That's the main thing many Christians still need to understand. We were saved. If you are saved, if you are sitting here this morning and you know you are saved. Now maybe you don't, in which case, just come back, keep listening to the Bible because we make it very clear Sunday after Sunday what Jesus did for you.

You need to put your trust in that. You need to come to Him to be caught up in God's plans for this world so that you just don't live a hopeless life and die a hopeless death. You need to be saved. We need to be saved.

God has made it available to anyone irrespective of who you are and what you've done because of what Jesus did on the cross. But for those of you who are saved, you need to realize the reason why.

Not just to enjoy God's presence in your life, but to be God's presence in the world. And that is why Peter writes to the early Christians the reading we heard earlier and he says this, 1 Peter 2 verse 9, But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood.

[19 : 26] You are a royal priesthood. And he's not just talking to the ministers and the pastors. He's talking to the people in the pews. And he's saying, you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

These are all phrases used to describe Israel in the Old Testament, but Peter is now applying them to Christians in the pews. A holy nation, a royal priesthood, a people for God's possession so that you may proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

You are a royal priesthood. Have you ever considered that you are a priest? Have you considered that? That you, if you're a Christian, are a priest?

That doesn't mean that you must wear funny clothes. But you are a priest. And that's a very important, vital thing the Bible teaches.

In the Catholic Church, if you go to the Catholic Church, you've got these priests, right? Stand up in front and they're in the confessional booths and stuff. And it's believed that they are the dispensers of grace to the people.

[20 : 37] That they take God's grace and they dispense it to the people. That's what the priests in the Catholic Church are called, the dispensers of grace. But you know what the Bible says? The Bible says that you, as a saint, who are being sanctified and transformed by the Holy Spirit, you are a dispenser of grace to the people and the world around you.

If you have the Holy Spirit dwelling inside you. It's not to keep that power to yourself, but it's to dispense it to others. You are a priest. All Christians are priests who are called to mediate God's presence and light to a dark world.

And that is a high calling. And maybe you're feeling like that guy who described, you know, getting the ice skates and you've been twirling around enjoying your salvation, but now as you hear this, you realize you're actually being called to play in the championship.

You've been called to use what you've been given to be part of the team. And so how do we do that? How do we take up this great high calling of being priests in the world?

Because it's very intimidating. You look at the world and it's very dark and sinful and what are we supposed to do? How can we possibly change that?

[21 : 51] How can we possibly bring God's presence into a world that is so resistant to it? Well, surprisingly, it's in the Bible exactly the same way that the Israelites were meant to and that is learn how to live with each other well first.

learn how to relate to each other. That's how we will be effective in the world around us. That is why Jesus says these words to His disciples in John 13.

He says, I give you a new command. I'm giving you a law. I'm giving you the equipment to be heaven's substation on earth. What is it? Love one another, Christians.

Love, really love one another as I have loved you. You are also to love one another. And then He goes on to say, by this everyone will know you are my disciples if you love one another.

See what Jesus is saying? If you learn to be a loving community together, that is where the power is which will make you effective to be priests to the world.

[22 : 56] The world will know you are my disciples if you learn how to love one another properly first. Just the same as in Israel. You know, God's saying to them, you're to be a kingdom of priests, but let me tell you how.

Don't steal from each other. Don't lie. Be good to each other. Love one another. And that's what the law is all about that we're going to read in the next few weeks. And it's what Jesus is saying here.

If you're going to be effective to take God's power, represent Him, be the priests to the world, then you need to learn how to live well together as Christians. And that is why Peter, in the same letter that he writes, you are a royal priesthood, he writes these words in 1 Peter 1.22.

Since you have purified yourselves by your obedience to the truth so that you show sincere, brotherly love for each other, now from a pure heart love one another constantly.

In other words, be a community that reflects the character of God. And if we learn how to be a community that reflects the character of God, then we don't just tell people what God is like.

[24 : 03] We show them. Of course, the difference between us, now you might be asking, well, Adam and Eve failed to do that. The Israelites failed to do that, so why are we not going to fail to do that?

Well, because of the Holy Spirit. That's the difference between us and the Israelites. We have God's powerful Spirit, His very presence in us, enabling us to fight sin, enabling us to sacrificially love more and more so that we can more and more take up this mandate to bring heaven's power to earth.

Because we are now the place God dwells. Did you know that? It's not a temple anymore. It's not a garden. It's not Sinai. It's the Christian community.

The Christian community. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3.16, don't you know that you are now God's temple? And people read that and go, oh, cool, I'm God's temple, so I better look after my body.

You know, that's such a high calling. But that you in the Greek is plural. It's not you are God's temple, it's you are God's temple. The community.

[25 : 17] community. That is where God dwells in the Christian community. That's why Jesus says in Matthew 18, where two or three are gathered, there I am with them.

And so, you know, just as the priests, if that is true, if we, the Christian community, and our relationships with each other are actually the place that God's power dwells, then just as the priests were to work and keep the place of God's presence in the temple in the Old Testament, and just as Adam and Eve were to work and keep the place of God's presence in the garden, we are now to work and keep a loving Christian community, which is the place of God's presence today, so that that presence and the power of heaven can flow out into a broken world.

But that does take work, and it's not just a matter of coming to church on Sunday and saying hello to the person next to you and having five minutes of coffee after the service.

That's not the Christian community that Jesus is talking about and that Peter is talking about. It takes work, it takes sacrifice of time and energy to love each other better, to see each other more, to deepen our real connection with each other around the truths of God's word, and that's not, that doesn't happen on Sunday.

Important things happen on Sunday, but that doesn't happen on Sunday. Remember what Jesus said in John 13, love one another. This is how the world will know that you're my disciples if you love one another, but the world is not here at church, so where do they see you loving one another?

[27 : 04] They're not here, but it's when we as a Christian community partner together and share our lives out there in the world. That's when things happen.

That's when the Holy Spirit's power, when you put a bunch of Christians together who have the Holy Spirit in them, and they gather around a common objective to work for the kingdom with the power that God has given, and they do that together out in the world.

That's when things happen. And so this year, we as a church, I want us to concentrate and think deeply about how we can do that better.

Because if this is true, that we are the priests, we are God's temple, we are the substation of heaven on earth, then we've got to make sure we work and keep that community just as hard and as focused as the priests worked and kept the temple.

people, especially we need to work even harder, especially after the years that we've been through with COVID, it's really put people to, you know, it's caused us to live our separate lives again, and it's severed whatever connections we had.

[28 : 18] We've got to work, we've got to keep it, we've got to make this Christian community this powerhouse once again. But in the meantime, I want you to consider, if you are saved this morning, if you know that you are saved, I want you to ask yourself, go home and ask yourself why.

What does God want you to do with your salvation? To swirl around on your own, enjoying the ice skates you've been given, or to join the team and start playing the game?

Let's pray. O Lord, when we read passages like this, we are blown away with what a high calling you give us, and that you've seen fit to take broken and imperfect people like us and put us right in the center of your plans for the world.

Lord, this is a high calling, and we cannot do it by ourselves. We pray for the presence and the power of your Holy Spirit to work in and through us, so that we can work and keep the place of God's presence, the community that you have placed us in.

Help us to do that better in the coming year, and help us to step up and embrace the purpose for which you saved us. In Jesus' name, Amen.