

The Grand Mystery of Salvation

Pastor and author A.W. Tozer

October 18, 1953

In the first chapter of 1 Peter, beginning with verse nine and reading to verse 12: Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls. Of which salvation the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ, which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into.

Now, it so happens that there seems to be three major truths here which will divide themselves up nicely. There is a curious truth, or a singular truth, and a rather rare truth and a remarkably reassuring truth. The singular truth, singular because it is not much mentioned in the Bible, that salvation is such a heavenly and mysterious thing. That the very prophets who foretold it, didn't understand it and actually, searched and inquired diligently concerning this salvation about which they were writing. They knew only that they wrote of some favored people who were to come. Who were to receive remarkable, fabulous wealth at the hand of a kind, gracious God. But they didn't understand it much.

And then there is the rare truth that the Old Testament prophets had the Spirit of Christ. I want to mention that later.

And then this reassuring truth that our salvation is known and talked about in heaven and is admired by the unfallen angels. That it is not a recent thing, not even relatively recent, but very, very old, and that it is the theme of all the inspired prophets since the world began.

Now, let us look at this singular truth about the prophets. And it says here that the prophets who prophesied unto us of the grace that should come, they searched what or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify; when it testified beforehand, the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow. And that it was revealed unto them that not unto themselves, but unto us, they did minister the things which that we now hear preached.

Now, a lot may be learned about Biblical inspiration here. There are many theories of inspiration. And I suppose that I might as well say that I do not believe that evangelical truth necessarily must accept any one theory of inspiration so long as we believe that the holy men of God spake as they

were moved by the Holy Ghost, and that not one jot or tittle of the Scripture shall fail until all be fulfilled. I believe that that fulfills the requirements for belief concerning inspiration. But some persons believe that the inspired writers wrote only what they knew. They were simply religious reporters, reporting intelligently and spiritually on what they knew about them. And then that they exhorted and consoled and rebuked, giving application to what they knew to the hearts of the people.

Now, that doesn't go far enough. For the fact is, that sometimes the prophets were moved to speak of things that they themselves did not understand. They heard the Spirit's voice witnessing within them about wondrous things and they spoke what they heard; but they did not know of what they spoke.

Now, it was a relatively easy matter for a prophet to understand, say, when God revealed that Babylon should fall or that Israel should be taken captive or that Ahab should die and the dogs should lick his blood, or any of the scores of prophecies concerning historic events. That was a relatively easy thing, and I suppose that every prophet understood it.

If I had a prophetic foresight that New York was to be destroyed by an atom bomb and I were to write it down, I could understand my own writing. It could be simply a question of visualizing the destruction of that vast city. So that a great many of the prophecies of the Old Testament were, we'll say, are on the rational level. They could be understood easily by the prophets who prophesied. But when they entered the wondrous, golden world of grace and mercy and salvation and incarnation and resurrection and atonement and ascension and the sending of the Holy Ghost and the new birth and the bringing to being of a people made again in the image of God, all this staggered the prophets.

They couldn't get it. It wasn't simply a question of historic fact. It was the question of marvelous, spiritual understanding, and they didn't have it. So, they prophesied about others, and they were included of course, but that wasn't what was in their mind at the moment. They were prophesying for the future. Then they died not having received the promise. But the prophecies were perpetuated by divine inspiration and by translation as we have them today in our Bible.

Now, they heard the Spirit's voice speaking within them and they uttered forth what they heard. But as prophets they were able to prophesy, but as individual men, they had to examine and search. And I wondered as I read it, what did they search? Did they search some other prophet's writing, or did they search their own heart? Or did they seek in the sense that the Scripture says, seek and you shall find. He doesn't say seek what.

And every preacher has his own interpretation, and I suppose they're all right because that's actually, usually the case with the Word of God. It is, what should we say; it has a multitude of

applications, so that if one man says it means this and another says it means that and three others say it means three other things, they are not contradicting each other. They may easily be complementing each other. I have no objection to various interpretations, provided, the brother doesn't say, now, accept my interpretation or I rule you out. Then I'm sorry for a mind as razor narrow as that. Narrow as the razor's edge. But these prophets prophesied of things to come. And that was a wonderful truth and a curious one, that prophets reported on things they did not themselves understand.

And then here is a rare truth in that there isn't much about it in either Old Testament or New, directly. But it is here, bluntly stated, in unmistakable language. It is that the Old Testament prophets had the Spirit of Christ. But the word had is not good enough here; for it says the Spirit of Christ which was in them. The preposition is "in."

Now, this destroys that what some people have called the geographical interpretation of the Holy Ghost. I would call it the prepositional interpretation of the Holy Ghost. You know, there are those who bear down very, very heavily on the "on" and the width and the end. They say about the Holy Spirit, that He was on the Old Testament saints, but not in them. That he was with the apostles before the Pentecost, but not in nor on; that after Pentecost, got in the people. That makes preaching easy because all you have to do is look for prepositions, and that's a relatively easy way to handle the Word of God. Just watch the prepositions and hook your little comment on the preposition. But I've never been able to believe that God was such that He played in the marketplace and that He built His truth out of curious, little blocks. No, the Bible doesn't tell us only that the Holy Ghost was on, but it says here that He was in.

Now, that ruins some people's theology. That little preposition "in" here in Peter ruins it, because they say, the Old Testament prophets and saints never had the Holy Ghost. He was only on them. He came and rested upon them. The dove lighted on the roof, but never came inside the dwelling place. And you've got to believe that or else they won't admit you into their little narrow field of thought. But they say in the New Testament, He came with them. And they quote Jesus as saying, He is now with you, but shall be in you, meaning Himself as the with. And then when the Spirit came at Pentecost, He filled them and so the Spirit was in them.

Now, I believe the Holy Ghost was on the Old Testament prophets. I also believe the Holy Ghost comes on New Testament Christians. I believe that the Holy Ghost was in the Old Testament prophets, for Peter says so and I must take Peter's word for it in spite of the commentators.

Now, there's all this confusion here, and I do not want to get ironical about this though I fear an ironical quality has crept into my voice. But here seems to be the fact that there's all this confusion on this subject for a number of reasons. One, it results from letting the element of curiosity crowd out of the element of practicality. If Bible teachers could only remember that the men, holy men

who spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost and gave us divinely inspired truth, never for one remote moment, ever meant to give us anything to satisfy our intellectual curiosity. They meant to give us truth to transform us, spirit and soul, and bring us into holy living and holy believing. They never intended that we should have rattles to play with.

I have been to Bible conferences, and I have heard teachers of not only one, but many schools of Christian interpretation, that gave me the impression that they were proud of their ability to bring things out, both old and new, and particularly new. And when after they had settled the hash of the ordinary, simple interpretation of a thing, they gave you some curious interpretation. They had enjoyed the theology from a curious standpoint. And I believe that this will lead us astray just as sure as you live. Just as soon as I accept the doctrine, or the idea, that the Bible is a book of theological toys to be played with by tender seedlings, I have missed the purpose of the Scripture and I have no proof that I won't be in false doctrine before very long. For the Bible was given us not to satisfy our curiosity, but to sanctify our personality.

Now, another thing that has resulted in this confusion about the Holy Spirit being on, and in, with, and so on; is the carnal urge to rightly divide. Rightly dividing the Word of Truth turns out to be vivisecting it; it usually bleeds to death in the hands of the man who holds it. And then he carries a dead, pale text around with him and rams it down everybody's throat. The carnal urge to rightly divide; I think it arises from intellectual pride.

And then there is what we call trying too hard. I think I might lay this Bible down a minute and make an inane comment or two on that subject. That in trying to understand the Scripture, we are in grave danger of trying too hard. It is very rarely that we can screw up our belt tight to the last notch, grit our teeth, and say, I'm going to get this. God never has very much place for old Adam. He bid old Adam goodbye and said that the end of all flesh should come before Him. And God has never put any confidence in the flesh from that hour down to this hour.

Now remember that when the Old Testament priests went into offer their sacrifices, they did not dare wear wool clothing, because wool made them perspire. And I suppose that God was saying to the Jewish priesthood, now, don't mistake perspiration for inspiration. And your human perspiration will not glorify Me. Therefore, wear linen clothing so you can keep cool and serve me scripturally and spiritually, but calmly and coolly. And don't imagine that by trying hard you will get anywhere. Climbing Jacob's ladder with white knuckles and tired muscles; there's a lot of paganism in that. And the Lord wants to kill all that and let the Holy Ghost take over.

Now, when Jesus sweat blood in the garden that was quite another matter. That was not old Adam trying too hard, that was the Holy Ghost coming upon a man till he nearly burned him up. That was the prayer spirit laboring on the man until he nearly killed a man. And I believe in that. But I also

believe that theologians who push too hard, usually fail to see the point because they're not relaxed.

Now, Paul used the illustration taken from the arena and boxing and wrestling; and I suppose I can without being unspiritual. And if we might take baseball, which I never see. I've seen one game in 17-18 years and probably won't see another one for another 18; maybe never till the Cubs win the pennant again. But we would like to say this about baseball. They say that a young man who stays a .300 or .325 hitter, suddenly goes into a slump and he couldn't hit a pumpkin when it comes up to the plate. They say often it's because he has gotten tense and is pushing too hard; that he goes all tense into the batter's box. But when he gives up and says, what's the use, I couldn't hit a basketball. Then he starts to hit again. Because he gets off the tension. He isn't trying too hard. And I have met many saints that are trying too hard.

I remember one time, I think I told you this before, but it'll bear repeating; and a man who has been here as long as I have, has to do some repeating. But I remember at a watch night meeting 20-30 years ago, that we were all around there praying. They were testifying, and one very godly man; now, he was all that. He was a very godly man. And I was sitting beside another godly man, a missionary under the Africa Inland Mission, Reverend Mr. Solunca, who had just lately gone to heaven. They found him beside his motorcycle out in the bush where he had given his life to the Lord Jesus. But anyway, this Solunca was sitting beside me. And this friend of mine, Everet, he jumped to his feet and he gripped his knuckles together, hands together, and in a spasm of Adamic determination, he told us his plans for the new year, how he was going to serve God. And my quiet, saintly friend beside me, touched my arm. He whispered; Brother Everet is screwing his violin string to tight. He said, he won't be able to keep it up there for the year. And I was a young fellow then and I remember it, and I think he did. He screwed it too tight.

You can throw your flesh in. And with strong religious determination, grit your teeth and batter your own head black and blue and never get anywhere. We can do that in theology too. The simplest explanation of any text is just what it says there. Just read it; get on your knees. And as Mark Twain said, the passages he couldn't understand never bothered him. But the ones he could understand made him sweat. And you will have time enough following the text that you understand without seeking to pry curiously underneath the surface and bring up some esoteric meaning that God never found there.

I spent from Wednesday to Sunday night, last week in Dr. Simpson's old church in New York City down off Times Square. And I preached one night, and I said merely as a matter of passing, you don't have to believe it. Nor, it doesn't mean much. It was just a passing thought. I said, you know, the angels are pure spirit, and the animals are flesh, but man, this wondrous being, is both spirit and flesh. And I went on to something else. That was just a little bracketed saying I gave and it's true.

Afterwards a man with a face like a mask, thin and cold, thin eyes and completely expressionless face, said, what did you say about the beasts not having a spirit? And he looked down. I could just see him. He had taken that argument to all the preachers that visit New York and made it #97 now. And he said, did God not make His covenant with all flesh? And then, he looked down, as if just say I won't hit him again. He's wounded. And I saw what I was into at first; I treated him as a brother and tried to reason; and then suddenly I saw there was no use. And I said, I perceive, sir, that you are a theological mechanic and more concerned with the letter than with the spirit. I worship the Most High God. Goodbye, and I left him. He came back to all the meetings, but he never bothered me anymore.

Now this fellow had gotten from somewhere, I don't know where, the idea that a dog has a spirit, and that when God made a covenant with Adam, he included the dog and the dog knew it, I guess, and probably signed the covenant. But it's all very silly, and if it's true, it doesn't mean anything. What do I care about horses and sheep and dogs and mountain lions? God never said, go into all the world and preach the gospel to my horses. He died for people. He came to seek that which was lost, and we're the last ones.

Lo and behold, when He came and considered being with God not to be hung on to, but lowered Himself and took on flesh, it was not the flesh of the beasts, but the flesh of the man. And it was a man that went out to Calvary, not a dog or a bear. So, if there is some hope for the beast, let there be hopes. I think John Wesley thought there was. But if there is, that's not within my field of interest at all. I can't know everything. I can only know a fraction of anything.

So why not stay by the Truth as it affects me. I could spend my life attacking creatures on whether an animal has a spirit or not and never read the Sermon on the Mount once. But it's infinitely more important that I read the Sermon on the Mount and yield my heart to obey it than it is that I settle curious things concerning prophecy or concerning any other phase of Christian truth.

Now, the simple truth is that the Old Testament prophets had the spirit of Jesus and that's here as a very rare truth. The Spirit of Christ which was in them is here in the Bible. And they prepared the world for the advent of the Savior, because it was the Savior, Himself, in them; the Spirit of the Savior in them prophesying. And they witnessed the Christ in type and symbol and historic situation and in the writings of the prophets.

And this explains why Christians love the Old Testament. That's why you may have wondered why you like the Old Testament so and you can read it and mark it and love it, and yet, you know, it belonged to an ancient dispensation, and the New Testament is your book, no. The New Testament isn't your book any more than the old was. You cannot separate the one from the other. They are

an organic whole. And the Spirit of Christ was in the Old Testament and Christ is in the New Testament; and you have one and the same thing.

There are passages that don't refer to you, and yet you feel an affinity for them. You read the book of Deuteronomy, which has to do almost wholly with Israel. And yet your heart warms and leaps and rejoices in your marked passages and you say, I wonder why. Why do I love the Old Testament? Ah, it's because the Spirit of Christ which is in them did testify. And you who are born again, recognize the same Spirit that dwells in your breasts in some major at least, and there's an affinity there. And that's why the Old Testament should be read. And that's why we should preach from the Old Testament.

Now the reassuring truth, that redemption is famous in heaven and was famous in ancient times; and that the plan of God to redeem the fallen race excited wonder and admiration among the very angels; which things angels desire to look into. I don't know how much they ever found out. But the angels were stirred to desire to know this wondrous redemption.

Now, why were the angels admiring so greatly this truth? I believe it's for three reasons. Because of the being that is to be redeemed. If we could ever make people see three things about themselves. One is, what wonderful creatures they are; and the second is, what hopelessly sinful creatures they are. And the third is, what great hope there is in Christ.

I think we could settle a lot of our problems, but we either take the attitude that we're sinful and then begin to tramp ourselves down to the level of the gopher and the rat, or else, we take the idea that we're not sinful and deny that we've sinned and push ourselves up. Both are true, brethren.

We were made in the image of God. And we're made only a little lower than the angels and are to be higher than the angels. That's what we were. That's what we potentially are. But without the new birth and redemption and forgiveness and cleansing, we'll find our place to that hell that's reserved for the devil and his fallen angels. Those two truths are not self-contradictory. They are two sides of the same truth. But man was made in God's image; and God for that reason sent his Son to die for them. Therefore, nobody ever ought to think low of himself, though he ought to remember how humble and little and sinful and hopeless and broken he's been before his God.

So, we keep these two thoughts in suspension; that though we were originally in the image of God, we stained our souls and ruined us and brought judgment in hell and death upon us. But then, that God for Christ's sake, saves us, redeems us for another's worth and merit, and restores us again to the image of God.

We shall someday stand a little higher than we anciently stood in the lines of our forefather Adam. Those are wonderful truths and they're reassuring truths. It's wonderful being man. Angels are interested in it.

And then, the second reason is the astonishing mercy of God. If God gave us our desserts, brethren, there wouldn't be one of us here this morning. Not one. Not one. You, kind-faced old lady that has spent your lifetime looking after children and then looking after grandchildren, and living the best you'll know how. You wouldn't be here. You would be in hell too. And you, honest businessman that never cheated in your life and that are upright and good and honest and a worthy, exemplary citizen, you'd be in hell too. And everybody that is above the age of responsibility belongs there. And whoever denies that he does, will go there. And oh, the astonishing mercy of God that He should come to us, who? Because of what we were in Adam, made in the image of God. We went down lower and further than we would have gone.

In the Henry plays by Shakespeare there was a prince called Prince Hal. I think it was Prince Henry the fourth if I remember correctly. But Prince Hal, Harry, they call him, was of course a noble prince, a son of the king and heir apparent to the throne. He must live like the noble man that he was. But instead of that, he forgot his noble standing and went and frequented the pubs and drank sack, whatever that is, I suppose English beer, along with Falstaff and the other bloated, big-bellied, beer drinking, liquor consuming crowd.

Nobody minded to see fat old Falstaff there. He had not come down to go to the saloon. But the royal prince had come down. Therefore, he was infinitely more to blame because he had come down so far. And so, if we had never been anything, our sin might be forgiven or overlooked or excused. But as men made in the image of God with moral perception and conscience and ability to grasp spiritual truths, for us to go down where we've gone.

Oh, the grace and mercy of God that we should be saved. And that's why the angels stood with open eyes and said, how can it be that such creatures as they, should be treated as they are by the great God who loves us?

And the third is, and this is most important, because of the one who would rescue us, the One, Christ Jesus our Lord. Now, as we see these angels looking with reverent wonder and these prophets who prophesied since the world began, wondering what it was all about and dreaming and hoping they might know. We can only say that our foundations stand sure. It's not a new religion. Not Mrs. Eddy in a fit. Not Father Divine with his old bald head and his angels, concubines. Not Joseph Smith, in his curious plates dug up under an apple tree. But before the world began, this was in the mind of God, ancient as the sun. And before the sun burned in the heavens to redeem you and me, it was in the mind of God. Angels desired to look into it.

You know, I heard about an old gentleman, a dear old saint of God. He was realistic, and he didn't say as lots of Christian do, they never have a doubt. No, I never have a doubt--hypocrites. They do have a doubt, but they won't admit it. But this old fella was a realist. And he justified, he said, I admit I have doubts sometimes. He said, I'll hear an argument, or somebody would advance an idea and it'll stun me for a little. And he said, when I have such doubts, I always dive down to the bottom and examine the foundations of my faith. And he said, every time I have done it yet, I have always come to the surface singing how firm a foundation ye saints of the Lord is laid for your faith in His excellent word. So, that's all I meant to do this morning was to remind you and examine the foundations a little. And now let's sing, How Firm a Foundation. All right.