

Gettin' Saved | Luke 15:1-10 & Psalm 1 | Sept 14 2025 at FPC LC

The way I grew up, I was pretty convinced that I got saved when I was about five years old, at a “Bible Man” live performance. See, sometime after the knockoff superhero, Bible Man, punched the personified sin of sloth and gluttony in the face, he turned to the audience and called for anyone who wanted to come on down and pray with him. And, you know, I had seen him on public access TV, so I rushed down. I thought I was going to get an autograph. But the next thing I knew, this man in a spandex suit and plastic face mask was having me pray the sinner’s prayer. I had to repent of all my sinful five year old ways. And at the end, he told me I was now saved. I was going to heaven. Turns out, the rehearsed prayer with the man in the spandex suit was really what the God of the Universe was looking for all this time.

And I didn’t know any better. After all, I asked my friends about it and one of them told me how they got saved. One of my friends, it turns out, got saved one Sunday at church. He went down, prayed with his pastor, didn’t really know what any of it meant but it really helped everyone out, let everyone go home. I think if he hadn’t done that, they’d still be playing that song and calling people down to the altar to this day.

One more: a lady I met once told me she’s been saved at least 10 different times. We’re all hoping this last one finally takes.

It’s become uncouth to talk about salvation these days. Even in churches, we don’t want to appear as though we’re one of those types. We don’t want the gimmicks and the high pressure sales tactics. Sure, we’ll talk about love and caring for our neighbors, we’ll talk about grace and volunteering. But getting saved? That’s for churches with a little less, uh, gentility than ours.

And outside the church, you can imagine, salvation has become even more of a dirty word. Today we dare not talk about the next life. We dare not play that tired game of asking “if you were to die tonight, do you know where you’ll be spending eternity?”

Even for us who have a rock solid faith, that’s just a bit much, isn’t it? Instead, if we were to talk about salvation, and that’s a big “if,” we’re supposed to talk about our own souls. Whatever it is within us that goes beyond the physical. And when we do, you all know, I’m sure, that we make ourselves feel better by throwing in 1000 qualifiers and maybes, trying to lighten the load. Maybe there’s something in us that remains even after our bodies fail. And maybe that thing in us is headed either towards wholeness or self-destruction. And maybe, just maybe, there’s something on the other side of it all, something we can maybe call God that’s the source and end of that wholeness.

That seems to be the way things are done anymore, if it’s done at all. Just make it some quasi-spiritual, moral issue. Certainly don’t bring up heaven and hell. Absolutely don’t mention the physicality of the resurrection. And you’d just have to be a real nut to believe that the same God who did Easter morning might also call time someday and do that same thing on a macro level.

We have before us a couple of parables that Luke has stuck smack dab in the middle of his Gospel account. What these are, are the central themes of his Gospel. And they’re stories that most of us could retell by heart, I’m sure.

We all know about the sheep who wanders off from the herd. You know the story. He wanders off, he gets caught in some thicket somewhere, realizes he needs to get his act together and decides today is going to be the day he turns it all around. So he starts trying harder. He starts making better life choices. Eventually he pulls himself up by his bootstraps and makes his way back... or wait, no, that's not right. That's usually where sermons on this parable end up, but doesn't the bible say something about that old, archaic, dirty word "salvation?"

Let's try again. We all know the parable of the lost coin, right? There's some lady in some dimly lit house somewhere. Dirt between the stones acting as grout. And one day as she's counting up her wages, she drops one of her coins and it pings off to the other side of the room, somewhere she can't see. And the coin, now hiding somewhere, probably caught between a quite literal rock and hard place, starts getting together with all the other lost items. They start talking about having a "can-do" attitude, about voting for someone else this next go around, about how we'll all hold hands and sing kumbaya... or wait, no, I did it again, didn't I? I know I've heard that sermon before. But, oddly, when I look at the bible, it is so insistent about this idea of "gettin' saved."

Let me try just one more time. Let's get to the bottom of this old word, salvation. Let's see what it's really about. After all, if these series of parables, the lost sheep, the lost coin, and if we were to continue on in Luke 15, the prodigal son; if these really are the central theme to Luke's Gospel, let's see what he's getting at.

If we were to continue a little further on in Luke, we'd see this man Zaccheus. Maybe he has something to teach us about this old word. See, he was a local guy. But, as many of us know already, when the Romans had come through, they asked around and found whoever they could that'd be willing to betray their own neighbors, cross their own family members, act as tax collectors. And Zaccheus had happily obliged because, see, he knew that with the Roman army at his back, he could demand just about any amount of money from these folks and pocket the difference.

And so Jesus, he takes notice of Zaccheus. He tells Zaccheus that they're going back to his house, they need to talk. And so back at Zaccheus' house, which undoubtedly was one of if not the nicest house in town, they get to talking. We don't know every detail but we do know that it ends with Zaccheus leaving behind his exploitative, greedy ways. In fact, he's going to use what he's got to fill back in, to bless his community, to do more right than he ever did wrong. And what's Jesus say? "Salvation has come to this house."

That's strange to me. No Bible man, no sinner's prayer. No nothing. Just Jesus reaching into someone's life followed by them finding something new within themselves. Hmm. Let's keep looking.

If we were to back up all the way to Luke 7, we'd see a woman, one simply called a sinful woman, come to wash Jesus' feet. Typical women's work in that time and place. And while she is doing that, all the men in the house dare not talk *to* her. But they have no issue talking *about* her. That is, until Jesus actually meets her eye, speaks to her with some dignity and respect. Treats her as though she herself is a speaking subject and not just a spoken-for object, something that may very well have been a first in her entire life. And Jesus, he ends up telling this woman and all the angry male company in the house "your faith has saved you."

Again, Luke is being weird, isn't he? No altar call. No strong-arming and asking the woman where she'll spend eternity. Just Jesus reaching in and making something new happen.

Let's jump forward to Luke's second work, the book of Acts. Maybe Luke gets with it by the time we get to the sequel. And see, if we did, we might see this Pharisee, a man incredibly sure of himself, having gone to the elite school in Tarsus, having rubbed elbows with Greeks and Romans alike. We'd see his cold, mechanical mind turn towards this rebellious group, the Christians, with plans to end them. But then, one day, on his journey to Damascus, he gets struck with something beyond himself. It's a vision of Christ, reaching in once more. And the result is that this man, Saul, Paul, whatever you want to call him, he has to confront a life that is now bigger and wider and more compassionate than he had ever considered. And, from there, he spends his days living not for himself, but existing in this sorta in between space. Identifying with this bigger, broader world in need of God's own love more than he identifies with all his previously known merit. In fact, about half the New Testament are letters written by him as he went throughout the Mediterranean, participating in Christ's own mission of salvation.

We could consider any one of those stories when we think about this word, "salvation." But let me give us just one more today. There was a man, Cephas or Simon Peter (depending on how you knew him). A young man dispossessed from this world but hoping to make a new world. He ends up following Jesus, getting told that he'll be in the messiah's own band of heroes when they go about saving the whole world. And over and over again, Peter struggles with it. He can't quite keep up with what's going on, but he means well. And he's happy enough to follow along, after all they're apparently saving the world or at least Israel or something like that, he's not quite sure but he knows it has to do with that old word, salvation.

And he starts to get pretty excited as they make their way down to Jerusalem, the big city where the real action is taking place. Finally, it won't just be some countryside healings and nice ideas to live by, they're going to really make a difference. But then it happens. Jesus, who he's been following for a good three years at this point, gets rounded up by the guards. And Peter tries to fight back but Jesus seems insistent that their mission was to love folks, even to the end. And so, he follows from a distance, until he sees it. He sees it. The cross. The brutality. The death.

Peter was in despair. He didn't know which way was up. And yet, Jesus, somehow even after the cross, keeps breaking into his life. Keeps confronting him with a power, a presence, a purpose that outlasts and outshines anything else. Something that means more than anything else. Even if it meant the whole world falls away, Peter, see, learned to stick to Jesus' mission. Kept with the suffering love going out to the ends of the earth. After all, he was on the mission of salvation.

When you consider what the bible actually has to say about that old, worn out word, salvation; we find it might not be so worn out after all. I think, the difference is, you just have to recognize a few things. First, it's not just about the next life, nor is it just about this life. It's somehow both. Because, second, it's not just about where you'll end up, it's about going on an adventure with God. The God who seeks us out like a woman looking for her coin and then rejoicing in it. Like a shepherd who cares more about the one lost sheep simply because they are the one lost sheep and that's how our shepherd works. And given that, third, we know that salvation is not just a one time formulaic prayer or altar call, it's actually something bigger than that. Bigger than even our own lives. It's just the word we use for when a living God reaches into our lives and begins the lifelong work of remaking us through His Son Jesus.

See, as far as I can tell, and I'll close with this, we're saved at least three times over.

We were saved 2000 years ago when a man of perfect peace willfully walked to the cross, intent on loving and blessing people the entire way. Sticking to His Father's business even in the gravest of times. We're saved because that really is not the norm. That really does go beyond being nice or getting our act together. And we're saved because His Father honored that three days later.

Next, we are being saved anytime we participate in or at least dare to receive that kind of love. I think that's what Peter came to after the cross. Even then, even then, a hope and a presence stuck with him. Showed him something bigger than his own life. More important than something we can someday do, but only after we get our way in this or that domain in life. No, this is the thing we do. And truth be told, every time we say yes to what God is doing through Jesus Christ and His love, and every time we partner with God to be a part of that love, we're being saved.

Every single time that we plant ourselves firmly, like the tree in Psalm 1, in what God is doing. When we resist the winds that may blow up on us and instead ground ourselves in God's holy love. It is then that we are being saved.

And finally, I am confident that we will be saved. Not because I have the whole cosmos figured out or because I prayed some prayer or because I attend church. Nothing like that. Instead, what I see throughout Paul's writings especially is a confidence that we will be saved because we see in Jesus a God who seeks us out. Because we see in Jesus not an answer to every question we might have about the next life. But a confidence that whatever comes next, He has gone before us and he will keep seeking us out no matter what.

Let's pray...

O God of our salvation

We thank you and bless your holy name

For we were saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved.

Give us a boldness this day

To not shy away from the content of your Gospel

But to rejoice in a Lord who is bigger than us.

To celebrate Good News that goes beyond behavior management or collective action.

Teach us, Lord, to witness to your saving grace

And to reclaim the power, the purpose, and the presence of Jesus Christ in our lives.

For we know that our world is in need.

And we long to offer it what it cannot offer itself

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, Amen.