

**Christ Presbyterian Church**  
**Edina, Minnesota**  
**October 8 & 9, 2011**  
**John Crosby**  
**Faith That Saves**  
**Ephesians 2:8 & Romans 4:16-22**

I was excited yesterday afternoon to have a privilege that doesn't come to many, to be able to stand here and watch a little girl I had baptized transformed into this beautiful young woman getting married. I thought of her running the halls with braces and pigtails after she was baptized, joining youth groups, going on mission trips, meeting a boy (I didn't like that part of the story), them falling in love, and now Cassie and Jeremy ready for their new life together. I thought of all the sermons that little kid must have had to endure over the decades she was here, all the ways that we have tried to talk to her about what it means to know God and how often that gets lost because there are so many words, and we don't leave enough time for the most important words.

This fall we want to spend time talking about the three most important words, looking at them from different angles so we are not just talking about faith and hope and love, blah, blah-blah, blah-blah, but so that we understand the difference. So far we have spent a month talking about faith, faith we said that moves us. What does faith really mean when you get through the religious gobbledygook? The very first week we said that if faith does anything, it is supposed to provide us with a view of the world, a worldview, a map of life. We said that faith offers us a connection to God on this journey we take through life, and if faith is a map, the Bible is a treasure map. We pick the map up and read the stories to find our way through life, to find the treasure.

The next week we saw that faith helps us even when we doubt. Faith helps us when we blink, and are in pain, when life does not seem to work. Facing doubts we learn to say together, "I believe. Help my unbelief. Put me in the company of people who have faith when mine fades so that we can help one another."

Last week Brad talked to us about another side of faith. He said, "Faith is just a religious word unless it comes to life in action toward other people." Without action, faith is just dead religion that turns into legalism, and he quoted James the apostle who said, "Without work, faith is dead." Where is your faith at work in life?

**Today I would like to say that at its root, faith is about a relationship with God in a way that is supposed to save us.** We talk about salvation or being saved by faith, but I wonder if you could explain that to somebody who doesn't know the Christian story, and so I wanted to talk in very specific ways about what it means to be saved. Again, faith helps us decide how we see ourselves as human beings. Many in the world see themselves and others as intelligent animals brought together by a combination of chemicals and temperatures, accidents of biology,

and, for them, the idea of salvation or being saved doesn't mean anything because there is nobody out there to talk to. Others of you are here because you are basically good people who believe that there is a God and you believe, as a good person, you need love and encouragement and help in trouble. Is that what it means to be saved? Does being saved somehow mean that we get protection, that we baptize these little babies so that there is sort of a God-Saran Wrap around them? Is that what we mean by being saved?

So some of us would be intelligent animals and some of us basically good people who need a pat on the head, but many more in the history of the church would say that they are sinners, an odd word to our ears, that they or we are sinners. Those of you who are condemned to read 18<sup>th</sup> century American literature read the sermon of Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, how people in church were pulled to the edge of the pit of hell and forced to dangle over, looking down and think, "That's you. That's where you are going if you do not flee from evil and turn to God." Are we sinners in the hands of an angry God? I think we have, basically, lost that sense, haven't we? We feel pretty good about ourselves. We feel that religion in the right dosage improves our lives, but the danger is that we have lost the sense of a holy, holy God. How does faith save you? Listen to the way it saved the apostle Paul. The apostle Paul said he was doomed but that somehow he had been saved, and he wanted to show us that secret. In his letter to the church in Ephesus he said this.

<sup>1</sup> As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

Another text says we were "objects of wrath."

<sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions....

We are dead in sin or alive in Christ.

<sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God's handiwork,

In the pew Bible, it says, you are "God's handiwork." A better translation, I believe, says you are "God's masterpiece,"

created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Salvation for Paul somehow meant that you were dead in your sins. You were an object of the wrath of God and somehow you were brought to life. This is not the same thing as saying, "Bad things will happen to you if you don't get the answer right," or when something goes wrong in life, "I must have done something wrong." Instead, in some fundamental way, the apostle Paul is saying that our relationship with God is broken, that somehow even when we don't want to, we end up walking away from God or on the enemy's side, seeing life in a non-God way. Faith is to help us see who we really are, the good, the bad, the ugly.

Out of this passage, I think, two errors have come. The one that a lot of you have fallen into, that I struggled with when I was young, was what I would call worm theology. You read this passage and say, "We are by nature instruments of God's wrath," and you say, "I'm a worm. They are right. I really am a bad person underneath. If they knew who I really was, they wouldn't even let me sit in the pew. God is going to get me sooner or later. I have to try harder."

Then others of you would say, "No, that's not me. I'm a good person, and if I play the game of faith and light the right way, then I probably will end up in the right place with a good life." Most of us fall on one side of the scale or the other of that. The try-harders because I'm afraid that God is angry or the I'm okay because I'm basically a good person. I wonder, what is your default? I would love to have the courage to ask you to raise your hands for which of those two options you fall closer to. I'm terrified to find out the answer. I believe that neither of these, even if they are your default, are the deepest truth about you because I don't think they are the deepest truth about me. I have turned from a worm hearing the wrath of God into an older brother, confident of my salvation and judgmental of other people. That is *my* struggle. But deeper than that, I am hungry. I think there is a hunger inside of me and you for a better life, what Jesus calls "life in all its fullness." I get maybe one hour a week, maybe one minute a quarter.

Is that what it is supposed to be like? It is not necessarily when I am on a mountain top having this incredible experience, one of those moments when God seems close and everything seems right, no matter how it is going. I think we are designed to be connected to God, but we sense that something is off. If we are honest, we sense that in some way we are broken, and into that God comes toward us, the Holy God comes toward us. John Ortberg has a great book, *God Is Closer Than You Think*, and he says,

The central promise of the Bible is not "I will forgive you" although, of course, that promise is there. It is not the promise of life after death although we are offered that as well. The most frequent promise in the Bible is "I will be with you." Before Adam and Eve ever sinned or needed forgiveness, they were promised God's presence, walking with them in the cool of the day. Enoch "walked with God." The promise of God's presence was made to Noah, to Abraham and Sarah, to Jacob and Joseph and Moses and David and Amos and Mary and Paul and too many others to list. The presence of God is the reason for courage: "Do not be terrified...for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." It keeps us going in darkness: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me." The central promise in the Bible is not "I will forgive you." The most frequent promise is "I will be with you."

In the Old Testament God keeps showing up. He gives them the Arc of the Covenant and The Tabernacle, manna, the Temple, the Pillar of Cloud, the Pillar of Fire. Those are like post-it notes that say, "Here I am. I am God. Here I am. I am with you." When God Himself comes to earth, His Name is Emmanuel. Emmanuel means *God With Us*. And when Jesus leaves, He says, "I am sending the Spirit to be with you everywhere." And at the end of time when sin is defeated and all of our fears are distant memories, the picture of life with God is that God's dwelling is now with His people, and God will dwell with them forever. That is faith. **Faith somehow lets us see that God is running after us, that God wants to be with us, that God is coming for us**, and that is a great thing.

That is either the very best thing or the very worst thing because if the Holy God is coming to a neighborhood near you, are you ready for that God to be there? Paul said, "You are objects of wrath." Like Adam and Eve who hid in the garden from God, many of us either run from God or put God in a little box or try to impress God. We are objects of wrath or we are uncertain whether God is still angry at us but salvation meaning *saved by faith* brings another image, and that is in the last line of our passage. Paul says, "For you are God's masterpiece, created for good works before the foundation of the world." You are not junk. You are God's handiwork, God's masterpiece, but something has been broken. You are God's masterpiece but something has been scarred and you can't see it.

You will, for the next several years, I am sure, be deluged over and over with images from Laura's and my sabbatical. One of the places we went was Rome. One of the best days we had was in the Sistine Chapel where Michelangelo spent years telling the story of God in a painting across the ceiling. Perhaps the most famous picture of that story is God reaching out and creating Adam, right? But did you know that by the 1980s, the candle smoke that had filled the Sistine Chapel for 400 years made it so that you could barely see the ceiling? This is what the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel looked like in 1970 (*slide shown*). So they undertook a 12-year process of restoration because they said, "That is not the masterpiece." This is what the painting looks like today (*slide shown*). We are masterpieces that were broken and have been restored.

That is my image of what God's salvation is for us, taking broken masterpieces that cannot fix themselves no matter how hard we scrub and turning us toward God so that the glory from God makes us gleam like that, masterpieces being restored with hints of what the final product will look like. Some of you still look pretty dirty. None of us look like a masterpiece yet, but in all of us who have turned to Christ, there are little hints of glory. Some of you lose your temper far less than you used to. Some of you have started to use your money to help the poor. Some of you have learned those sacred three words and on occasion use them, "I was wrong." That is the hint of the glory of God trapped inside the broken masterpiece. As we turn to the grace of God by faith, God turns us, who used to be objects of wrath, into the children of God.

Do you want another way to look at what your role is as a restored masterpiece? Think of it this way. Best moment of your day if you are a mom or a dad? You walk into the room. The kid hears your footsteps or your voice and turns around and beams. This is long before they are teenagers. They turn to you and their faces glow, and they run toward you, "Mommy, look what I did." "Daddy, look what I got." It is a moment beyond compare. That is how God wants to feel when we hear Him approach. We turn to Him and our faces light up with joy, not afraid, not ashamed, not guilty. Restored masterpieces are children where the impulse to run to God is now without fear, and then we show God what we did today like we would show Mom or Dad. "Look what I did! This is my masterpiece today. Look what I did (*slide shown*)!" And Mom bends down. "Look what I did, Dad! This is my masterpiece today." This is my favorite. "Look at that, Dad. That is you!" (*slide shown*), but in each of those cases, the mom or the dad picks up the little offering that the child has and says, "Oh, this is the best one yet! We are going to put this on the refrigerator. I love you so very much!"

You are dead in your sins. Because of His great love, God, rich in mercy, made you alive in Christ. By grace you have been saved through nothing you have done. Created in Christ Jesus, you are God's masterpiece. Let's pray.

Lord God, this is, I believe, the deep end of the pool. This is not a homily filled with cute little stories but the most important thing in our lives. If that is not true, then we are deluded and should live however we want, but if it *is* true, that we are Your children and we are saved by faith in Your grace. Then we ask You to come and show us little hints of the masterpiece that You already see. There are some here, Lord Jesus, who have confused coming to church with coming to You, who feel that if we act right on the outside, You will forgive the mess on the inside, so just as You came running after the Prodigal Son, just as You walked after Adam and Eve and would not stop walking. I ask You to come for us. Give us grace, grace that sets us free, faith that allows us to see what You are doing in us and what You want us to do in the world, and forgiveness that changes us from objects of Your wrath into children who listen for their mother's or their father's voice at the door. Bless us. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*