

THE QUESTION GOD CANNOT ANSWER@

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Heb. 2:1-3

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This is my first sermon. After my call to the ministry in 1941 my father invited me to preach at the Open Door Mission, a ministry he founded on Skid Row in Oakland, California. I knew nothing about preparing a sermon, but having watched my pastor and other preachers get up and talk out of their head,@ or so it seemed to me. I tried to do the same. It was a disaster.

It took me about five minutes to exhaust what was in my head! Having been told to speak for twenty minutes, I slowed down and repeated what I had just said. That took about seven minutes. So I slowed down even more and repeated what little I had to say a third time. The only reason I got away with it was because the whole audience was drunk! The experience was so traumatic I swore I would never preach again. But there was this **call@** from which I could not escape.

As I struggled with my dilemma, a thought came to mind. I recalled that memorizing lines for school plays had not been difficult for me. Perhaps I could write out my own lines and memorize them. With that thought in mind I sat down and wrote out the sermon as it appears below. After memorizing it, I went up into the Oakland foothills and, using a tree stump as my pulpit, I preached it to an audience of about fifty dead tree stumps I discovered alongside a lonely road. Looking back, I think that may have been one of the more responsive crowds to which I ever preached it!

Picture if you will, a giant eagle soaring majestically above the Niagara River, his great wings spread in flight. As he glides silently overhead looking for prey, he spies the carcass of a bird floating upon a block of ice on the River below.

He swoops down, lands on the ice, and begins to devour the dead bird. From time to time, while he eats, he looks up and sees the river is broadening out **C** a sign it is nearing the falls **C** but hastily returns to his meal, waiting until the ice is about to go over the falls when he will spread his wings and fly to safety. Why worry about the falls? Here is a great feast. There=s plenty of time.

So the ice floats onward carrying its strange cargo nearer, yet nearer, the gigantic falls. The roar of this great spectacle of God's handiwork grows louder and louder as if crying out a warning that death is near, but to no avail.

At last, as the block of ice is about to plunge over the falls, the eagle lifts his wings to take flight. But, while he has been engrossed in eating, his long talons have become frozen in the ice. He is unable to free himself, and goes screeching over the falls to his death.

The same can be said of many people=s today. They go floating along on the river of life interested only in material things. AThe Judgment Day Falls@cry out, but they pay no heed. Oh someday, when they are lying on their death bed, when they are about to breathe their last breath, when they have tried all the world has to offer, then, when they have no other way to turn, then they intend to accept Christ. They intend to fly into the safety of his everlasting arms. But they wait too long. The world has frozen their hearts and they plunge over AJudgment Day Falls@ unsaved.

In the Bible, I know of only one man who was saved in the 11th hour and that was the thief on the cross. "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" What salvation? The salvation we have by the virgin born son of God. The salvation we have by the shed blood of Christ. The

salvation we have in Jesus who died and rose again that we might be free from our burden of sin and live with him eternally. In Isaiah we read of this suffering Savior, "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed."

"How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" The writer of Hebrews calls this a "great salvation." Think with me for a moment about why this is a great salvation. I think it is great for three reasons.

It Is a Great Salvation Because It Is from God.

We are living today in a time when at every turn we are faced with a new religion. Each one claims that it has at last found the key to salvation. One offers salvation by following the golden rule. Another claims salvation through good works. If we look at any of these innumerable religions closely, we find they have as a prerequisite for salvation, some act on our part.

I'm afraid I would never be able to earn this kind of salvation because I'm just naturally not that good. If my salvation depended upon any act of mine, I greatly fear I would spend eternity in hell. But, praise the Lord, the Bible says, "By grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God, not of works lest any man should boast." Then B

It Is a Great Salvation Because of What It Cost.

In our endeavor to tell others of God's free gift of salvation, we sometimes forget that salvation cost a tremendous price. Salvation is free, but think of what it cost Jesus. Oh, the matchless love that sent him from his home in glory to die for us. It was a great price that he paid that day he as he stood before a huge crowd and heard them cry, "Crucify him. Crucify him."

Then, when Pilate had delivered him to be crucified, scripture says, AThe soldiers of the government took Jesus into the common hall, and they gathered unto him all the soldiers. And they stripped him and put him in a scarlet robe. And when they had woven a crown of thorns,

they put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand; and they bowed their knees before him, and mocked him, saying 'Hail, King of the Jews!' And they spit upon him, and took the reed, and smote him on the head. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe from him, and put his own raiment on him, and led him away to crucify him."

Then as he hung there, nails piercing his hands and his feet, suffering untold pain and anguish, he asked for a drink of water and they gave him a sponge of vinegar. After he was already dead a soldier with a spear pierced his side, and blood and water flowed from the wound. Yes, salvation is free, but oh the price that Jesus paid.

"Lest I forget Gethsemane,
Lest I forget Thy love for me,
Lest I forget Thy thorn-crowned brow,
Lead me to Calvary." Then --

It Is a Great Salvation Because of What It Does.

None of us can explain what changed Paul Rader from a down-and-out drunkard into a great evangelist. Or "Happy Mac" McDonald from one of the world's fastest tap dancers into one of the world's finest song leaders.

We can't explain the change that comes over the human derelict who has found Christ, but we know that something has happened down inside that has given him a new vision of life, a new hope, a new goal. Salvation in Christ not only takes away our sins and gives us eternal life, but it transforms our lives here on earth and makes us new creatures in Christ Jesus

Thinking along this line brings to mind the story of "Old bust 'em up." "Old bust 'em up" was a tugboat which harbored in New York Harbor. She gained her name from several of the other tug boat owners there in the harbor, because invariably whenever she came into the harbor she would ram into buoys, and bash into several ships and cause a general mess-up, after which the captain of the unruly tug would storm out on deck and proceed to give all within hearing distance a royal

cussing out. It became a habit then, to be around when "Old bust 'em up" came into the harbor, as it was sure to be a good show.

One day a cry went out along the dock that "Old bust 'em up" was coming in. Everyone dropped what they were doing and went to watch the fun. To the surprise of all, "Old bust 'em up" came gliding into the harbor as nice as could be. No ramming into buoys. No smashing into ships. And not one outburst from the captain. This was too much for the onlookers and one of them called out across the water, "What's come over "Old bust 'em up"?" There was silence for a moment and then the big burly captain came out on deck and roared back so everyone could hear, "There's a new skipper on board!"

That's the change which comes over every newborn Christian, for, they, too, have a new skipper on board in the person of Jesus Christ. That is the change which will come over your life if you'll let him be Captain of your life.

Yes, this truly is a great salvation. It seems unbelievable that there are those who are neglecting to accept it. And yet thousands of souls go into eternity unsaved every day. They keep resisting the Holy Spirit, choosing to follow the will of their own sinful hearts.

Some of them try to hide behind what they call hypocrites. They argue that so-and-so is a Christian and I'm as good as he or she. How silly that is. When someone tries to hide behind someone else, they are acknowledging that the one they are hiding behind is bigger than they are, for it is a known fact that you cannot hide behind something that is smaller than you are.

True, there are those who profess to be Christians, who do not possess many of the Christian virtues. There are unsaved folks who live by a higher code of morals than many Christians. But salvation is not based on morals. It is not based upon what so-and-so does with Christ. It is based upon what you do with him.

So if you are letting someone stand in your way of accepting Christ, don't let that person stay there any longer. Take your eyes off of him or her and put them on Christ, the One who lived, died, and rose so you -- y-o-u -- you might be saved.

"How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" That is the question God cannot answer. I reverently challenge him to answer this question. He cannot, because there is no other way. John 14:6 records Jesus as saying, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but by me."

A man was drowning in the Chicago River. Unable to swim, he had already gone down two times when a man on the bridge above heard his cry, rushed to the railing of the bridge with a lifebouy and threw it to the floundering man. To his amazement the man refused the bouy, choosing rather to try to save himself, and within a few seconds his struggling ceased and he sank to the bottom of the river.

You say, "What a tragedy. How foolish." And you're right! But, friend, it is a far greater tragedy when you reject Christ, and a thousand times more foolish, for rejecting Christ means doing so for all eternity.

Some time ago I read the following incident in a Midwest newspaper. It was a rainy, cold, winters night as a man drove on his way to a nearby city on business. He noticed the lights of the car some distance ahead of him had disappeared. Thinking it had gone over the crest of a hill he continued to speed ahead.

It so happened that due to the heavy rains the highway bridge had been washed out. Quite unexpectedly, the car ahead of him came upon this precipice, was unable to stop, and crashed over the bank into the surging river below.

The driver was able to free himself and swim ashore. He hurried up the bank and down the

highway a short distance to warn the cars that were following, of the danger ahead. As the lights of the first car appeared, he began frantically waving his arms, signaling the car to stop. The driver, thinking he was a hitchhiker, ignored his frantic warning and hurried on into the night, plunging over the bank into the river.

Another driver was right behind the first, and he, too, chose to ignore the man's waving arms, and crashed into the raging waters below the bridge.

As a third car approached, the fellow now was almost crazy at seeing two cars plunge over the washed-out bridge. He ripped off his drenched shirt and began waving it in the air as he stepped directly into the path of the oncoming car, screaming at the top of his lungs, "For God's sake stop!" But the driver did not heed him, swerved around him and plunged over the precipice to his death.

That night several more drivers ignored the man's warning, and, as a result, over a dozen people died. He understood the danger. He wanted to be their Savior. But they would not heed the warning.

In much the same way we preachers -- pastors and evangelists -- are crying out, **A**For God's sake, stop!" But people continue to reject our warning and plunge into a Christless eternity. We know the dangers that lie ahead, but sinners think we are a bit odd and, yes, sometimes crazy. If only they would heed the warning! But no. They swerve around preachers and churches and even their mother's prayers, as they proceed nearer and nearer to an eternity without Christ.

"How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" That is the question God cannot answer. Actually, there are three things God cannot do. One, God has promised you salvation if you accept his son as your Savior, and God cannot lie. Two, God cannot see your sin behind the shed blood of Jesus. Three, God cannot answer this question, "How will (you) escape if (you) neglect so great salvation."

The truth is you can't escape, and you shan't escape! Sir Walter Scott put it this way B

AThat day of wrath, that dreadful day
When heaven and earth shall pass away.
What power shall be the sinner=s stay?
How shall he meet that dreadful day?@

Beloved, there is only one way of escape, one way that leads to salvation and that way is Jesus.

For God=s sake -- and your own sake B heed my warning and receive him B right now!