

God In Control

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It is often said that the church has to reinterpret biblical words like redemption, salvation, justification, and others for a new generation of Christians.

I would agree with that because the Bible remains wise and relevant from age to age. Those words and ideas are used again and again throughout the Scriptures. Not only that, but there are hundreds and hundreds of stories and illustrations of those very concepts.

Literary critics will often say that that is the secret of the Bible's hold on the imagination of humanity: stories that bring to life the meaning of these concepts and words.

You can see those concepts brought to life in novels and scenes from movies. You can see it on television and in the news and even in our lived lives.

The very name "Jesus," means "God saves" or "God rescues." But you know, the story of the entire Bible is the story of God coming to save and coming to rescue. Just in the Psalms, there are so many instances of the psalmist crying out, "Save me, O God." "Rescue me," or "Deliver me."

From Abraham and Sarah to Daniel in the lion's den, God in the Bible is all about delivering.

God declares to Moses from the burning bush that he has seen the suffering of his people. "I have seen the oppression of my people who are in Egypt, and I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians."

The Exodus experience is the shaping event in Hebrew history, and for Jews and Christians alike, it is the central image of God's activity, so much so that the earliest Christians immediately understood the Crucifixion and Resurrection **as** the new Exodus and the new Passover.

Not everybody knows that they are in need of rescue. A lot of people are unable or unwilling to admit that they are in trouble. And, of course, there are two kinds of trouble: the kind that is imposed from the outside, and the kind that comes from within ourselves.

We have all witnessed how awful it can be when a person cannot see that he or she has done something to cause trouble. Contrary to opinion in some circles, admitting one's errors is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of real strength. A healthy person must have the capacity for repentance.

The scriptures tell us that God has smiled down on us. It has already happened. It has been accomplished.

An old Swiss legend has it that a man, who was lost on horseback in the middle of the night, crossed the frozen Lake Constance without realizing what he was doing. When he reached safety on the other side and was told of the terrible fate he had just narrowly escaped, his knees buckled under him in terror and relief.

As humans, that's kind of where we are. We have already arrived on the other side, because God has loved and cared for us. And we'll never know how much God cares for us if we are not able to see the difficulty we were in before.

Today our focus is on the 11th chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. It is the last installment in a series on the theme: "Broken—Good News for Tough Times."

The 11th chapter has been called by a few commentators as the emotional center of the letter to the Romans. And Joel Marcus at Duke Divinity School has said these two verses are the key to the gospel.

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It **is** the human story, isn't it? We have all suffered the effects of sin and disobedience – which is to say that we have all fallen short. Not only as individuals but also as communities, cities, and nations, we are poisoned with greed, jealousy, strife, self-seeking of every kind.

But Paul writes, “God has locked up all people in disobedience, in order to have mercy on all of them.”

I think by our own admission, at any given moment, you and I can be anything but our best selves—I mean, after all, we can all be pig-headed, greedy, self-centered. Not thinking about our neighbor or even God, for that matter.

But as surely as each one of us has fallen short, God has reached down to us “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm,” as the Old Testament says. In Christ, God has rescued and delivered us! And by us, I mean, all of us.

Marianne Thompson who teaches at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena wrote this: “In the Roman context, mercy was reserved for the worthy among captives and vanquished enemies. Nowhere in the ancient world, outside of this text, was mercy granted in so indiscriminate and impartial a manner to ‘all.’”

I think that I can speak for all of us who worship at Crossroads that we are all sinners. We have all fallen short of who we want to become or what God hopes from us. If you are worshipping online with us for the first time this week—and not part of the Crossroads Church—I hope these words come as a relief to you.

To my knowledge, no one here at Crossroads has reached or claimed to have reached perfection. And that's just the point that Paul offers today.

The Christian faith and Crossroads United Methodist Church cannot promise you a perfect human response to all your needs. But over the years, people have been shaped by this gospel, and it has given us a kind of joy that comes with the knowledge of deliverance—deliverance from fear.

There is a freedom and liberation in knowing that God knows the worst about us and has nevertheless found the way to rectify all that is wrong. We are a people who know that we have received mercy.

In this joyful word from Paul, we welcome all fellow travelers. Let us come now to a place in our lives where the Lord smiles down on us. “Rejoice! Again I say, rejoice!”