

"Salvation: Not Just for the Hereafter"

John 14:1-10

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Fourth in a series on *The Shack*

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴You know the way to the place where I am going."

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."

Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.

"The people who know me are the ones who are free to live and love without any agenda."

"Is that what it means to be a Christian?"

"Who said anything about being a Christian? I'm not a Christian."

"No, I suppose you aren't."

"Those who love me come from every system that exists. They were Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans and many who don't vote or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions. I have followers who were murderers and many who were self-righteous. Some are bankers and bookies, Americans and Iraqis, Jews and Palestinians. I have no desire to make them Christian, but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into my brothers and sisters, into my Beloved."

"Does that mean that all roads will lead to you?"

"Not at all. Most roads don't lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you."¹

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

I will travel any road to find you.

Jesus is the way, the road, the path to salvation. These words have been so often used, and so often misused, as to be rendered meaningless. And yet they are loaded with history and packed with meaning.

The road or path is a traditionally Jewish way of talking about following God. God is the one who directs our path. When our feet are walking on that path and we do not stray, we are going with God, we are going the 'right direction.' You may be surprised to hear this idea of a path is common to all the major world religions.² While the New Testament refers to the road (*hodos*) in concrete and sometimes metaphorical ways³, it does not directly link *the path* with Jesus, except in the Gospel of John. John's is the only gospel in which Jesus says outright that he is the way.

¹ Pp. 181-182 in Paul Young's *The Shack*.

² Hinduism refers to 'dharma' or the path of righteousness; Islam considers itself the path or way to God; Buddhism moves along the path to enlightenment, and Judaism consistently refers to the path or road of righteousness.

³ Common NT usages of 'hodos' include the Parable of the Sower, Jesus walking on the way to Jerusalem, followers walking along with Jesus, and the place where people encounter Jesus (road to Emmaus, Saul's encounter in Acts).

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is talking to his disciples. Jesus assures them of his presence after he will no longer be physically with them. This gospel was written for the early church: a small, minority group of struggling believers. The gospel of John was never intended for the broader non-Christian world. It was not written as an apologetic for Jesus *as the way*. Rather, it was written to strengthen the resolve of people who already believed.

So often this scripture has been used as a weapon to put down people and to put forth an exclusive brand of Jesus-belief.

There is the story of the man who encountered another about to jump off a bridge. The man, a Christian, was very concerned and spoke to the man about to jump.

"Friend, why are you jumping?"

"There's nothing to live for."

"Oh, yes, there is! Do you believe in God, or are you an atheist?"

"I believe in God."

"Well, so do I! Are you a Christian or some other faith?"

"A Christian."

"There you go! So you know there IS something to live for! Are you a western Christian or one of those eastern Christians?"

"Western, of course."

"Me, too! Would you be Reformed or Catholic?"

"Reformed." By now the man who was going to jump had turned around to face his questioner.

"How about that! Me, too! So are you Presbyterian, Methodist, or Congregational?"

"Presbyterian."

"Wow, we have a lot in common. Cumberland or PC-USA?"

"Cumberland."

"Amazing! Me, too! Not many of us around these days. So you wouldn't be a five-point Calvinist, then, being a Cumberland?"

"Well, as a matter of fact I am a big fan of Calvin."

The man who had been so concerned suddenly pushed the other off the bridge, saying, "Die, heathen!"

Only if you believe *the way* I do will you go to heaven. Only if you believe *Jesus is the only way* will you attain salvation.

Today we look at two things: how the author of the gospel of John and author Paul Young address the question of salvation. What I hope we will gain is a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be saved and what it means to claim Jesus is the way.

In my house there are many rooms.

What's the first thing that pops into your head? A heavenly mansion with lots of rooms. White with gold filigree, very fancy looking, a huge green expanse of lawn. . . Popular preacher Joel Osteen likes this image. He claims that we each have a room in heaven with our name written on it. Inside that room is every single thing we desired in this earthly life but did not ask God for. Osteen says that includes financial prosperity, fame, and completely happy love relationships.⁴ So far I haven't been able to locate this promise in the Bible, but this kind of gospel is really popular.

Far more wise people than I who have studied this passage in John say the heavenly mansion is a completely wrong interpretation. "My father's house" is not a synonym for heaven.⁵ When we look at the Greek word used for 'house' it is noun form of the same word Jesus uses when he says 'abide in me.' House is not heaven but rather an abiding place, a place to be with Jesus. A place in which we live in relationship with God. Throughout the Gospel of John, location is consistently used a symbol for relationship. Jesus uses this domestic image to say, "When I return to God, this will make it possible for you to join in the relationship I share with my Father."⁶ (see John 20:17).

⁴ From one of Joel Osteen's televised preaching events.

⁵ NIB Commentary on John 14:1-11.

⁶ Ibid

Relationship. That's the way. That's the path, that's the journey. Oh. That's harder than putting my coin in the God slot, saying "Jesus is my Lord and Savior" and getting my ticket punched for the heavenly mansion. This is much harder than buying our salvation like fire insurance.

Taking part in an ongoing relationship with God, a relationship that we access through Jesus, a relationship that starts here and now right where we live, right here in Lake Highlands, this is going to take some time and effort and self-reflection! Oh. Salvation begins here, and begins now, and demands something of us right now. It's not just for the hereafter.

In *The Shack*, author Paul Young says a relationship with and through Christ is the main thing, the only thing, who saves us. Christianity, religion, and institutions are not the thing.

"I don't create institutions---never have, never will. I'm not too big on religion, and not very fond of politics or economics either. And why should I be? They are the man-created trinity of terrors that ravages the earth and deceives those I care about. . . Systems cannot provide you security, only I can."⁷

Systems cannot save us, only Jesus.

All well and good, what does this mean for us?

For one thing, it means the incarnation really matters. It means God gives us the chance to be closer to God than ever before in the history of humankind. It means we have the chance, if we will take it, to enter into the heart and mind of God. It means we have the chance, if we will use it, to be Jesus with skin on to others who need to see Christ alive and well and alive among us.

It means we have the chance to be with and for each other in such a way as people looking at us from the outside know we are Christians by our love, by the way we love one another, and maybe more importantly, by the way we love others different from us.

It means we spend time in the Word so we might nurture our relationship with the Word. It means we spend time in prayer and worship so we might tap into the power of God. It means we listen for God's quiet voice as it reverberates in us. It means we return again and again to life as God wants us to live it. It means we can be saved here and now! Being saved here and now, not just after we die, but saved from ourselves, from our self-centeredness, from

⁷ Pp. 179-180 in *The Shack*.

our addictions, from our anxiety, our misgivings, from our own worst enemy. Being saved not just FROM something for FOR something---for life and truth and joy, not just someday in the hereafter but now, here and now.

Maybe the real question is not whether people outside the institution of the church are saved, but whether we inside the church have any true sense of how CRUCIAL it is to have a real relationship with Christ. Crucial, yes, but more than crucial. It's a matter of life and death. Not just life after death, but life, in its fullness, now.