

How Great a Salvation

Rich Nathan
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The Cross
Ephesians 1:3-7

This morning I want to continue in our look at the Cross and I guess I have to tell you that I am not going to follow the outline exactly that I have laid out this last few weeks. Remember, if you have been here, that my original plan was to start broadly by looking at the signs surrounding the Cross and then focus in on the words spoken from the cross. Looking at the blood shed on the Cross and, then, the person who died on the Cross.

As I was considering the subject of the blood of Christ, I found myself captured by one of those extraordinary passages in the New Testament in which the blood of Christ is the center, but the circumference is so marvelous that I really wanted to share this message with you. I would, however, let you in on the point of this series again. What I hope to do is to focus you on the greatness of our salvation. To capture you once again with how marvelous God is to allow us the privilege of being in relationship with him. That we would be so filled with the sense of God's goodness that we would want to let other people in on his goodness.

And so in today's talk, we are going to look at the great salvation that is ours in Christ. Let's look together at Ephesians 1:3-10,

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love, he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure which he purposed in Christ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ."

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Paul begins. He focuses his attention first of all on God the Father. And he makes this amazing statement in verse 4: *"He [meaning God the Father] chose us in him [that is in Christ] before the creation of the world."* Paul is beginning with the source of this great salvation. What he is challenging us with is this question: If you know Christ, if you have become a Christian, if you are a lover of God, if you know that your sins are forgiven and you will be in Heaven when you die – how did all of this come about? How did it come to be, friend, that you are a Christian? How did it come to be that your sins are forgiven? That you find yourself in church on Sunday morning rather than being at home reading the

newspaper, sleeping, gardening, jogging or anyone of a thousand other things that you could be doing?

There are a number of things that we could spend our time on profitably this morning. How did it come to be that you are in church today? That is what Paul is getting at in verse 4.

Some of you would say, "Well, my wife pushed me to come." Or, "I am here with a friend." Or, "I am here because of the influence of my mother or father."

But we must trace the cause back further than that. Further than the influence of another person, a radio preacher, a Billy Graham meeting. How did it come to be that you would want to live for God? That you would have a different value system than you used to have? How did that happen?

Some of you might answer, "Well, it is because of a decision I made. Because I accepted the truth about Jesus. Because several years ago I came forward in a meeting and I received Christ. The reason I am here today is because of a decision I made in the past. I heard the gospel and I accepted it."

But Paul says to understand the source of your great salvation, you need to push it back even further than your decision for Christ – not only back before others' influences in your life, beyond your choice and your decision, your repentance. Well, maybe it is because of what Jesus did and Jesus' activity in this world and his teachings, his miracles and his death on the cross and his resurrection.

But Paul says you must push it back even farther than that. The source of your great salvation according to the apostle Paul is always God the Father. Why are you a Christian? Because of God the Father's decision. Because of God the Father's choice. Because of God the Father's electing will. God is the great fountain and source of all blessing.

Paul begins, *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."* He chose us. Some people try to restrict that and say: Well, he chose us in him. In Christ. But all that means is that we are saved through Christ's mediation. We are saved in communion with his person. That all the blessings we receive come in and through Christ. Others say that God chose us on the basis of foreseeing our faith.

But how did it come about that we are in Christ? How did it come about that you would be in union with him as a branch is in union with a vine?

Paul says because he chose that. God chose that.

Some individuals would say: Well, what difference does it make whether he chose us or he simply gave us an opportunity and we chose him? It all ends up the same—we are saved.

Well, friend, I think you miss something glorious, something heart-warming and heart-comforting if you miss the fact that the reason why you are a Christian is because God chose you.

Let me make this more personal for you. The fact that God chose me is the foundation on which I build my Christian life. It is my continual comfort when I am struggling, that God left the 99 to go looking for me. Maybe others don't

glory in this as much as I do, but I am telling you this is the way I live. And it spills over in everything that I think and touch and do. The notion of God's prior decision, of life starting with God and new life starting with God.

You know, this was the crucial thing for me in becoming a pastor and leaving my job teaching at Ohio State. I struggled with the decision for ten years, prayed about it hundreds of times. But what I needed to know was if this was the will of God for me to change. That God was calling me to do it. That God had appointed me for this service. I did not simply want to pastor because I had the gifts to do it. Or because it was my great idea or my great sacrifice to God. What a neat way to spend my life. I didn't think I had that right to determine how I was going to spend my life doing this or that for God.

The great confidence that I have in pastoring is that God chose this path. God called me.

And, friends, I am telling you that it makes all the difference in the world of your assurance level to know that God is going before you rather than you forcing the door open. I had a marvelous personal experience of God going before me this week. And I would like to share it with you by way of giving glory to God.

A week ago Wednesday I was praying about a number of things and I said to the Lord, "You know, I am not sure if you want me to continue to write. I have this one book out and I am getting a nice response from pastors around the country, but, frankly, the publisher has not promoted it that much. And I don't know where it will end up in terms of overall sales. I don't think it will do that well." I said, "If you want me to write and to continue to write, will you show me favor?"

I had a couple of articles that I wanted to place in a magazine called "Leadership Magazine." I just asked the Lord, "If that is your desire, will you show me favor?" I believe it is appropriate for us to submit our decisions to God, to not just go ahead and do our thing and then say, "God bless this mess." But rather to submit our decisions to God and ask God to open the door and show favor if that is his decision and his desire.

And so that was on a Wednesday. You want me to write for Leadership, great. Show me favor. Completely unsolicited. Saturday, I got a letter from one of the editors of Leadership Magazine saying: We got your name from someone and we would like you to write for our magazine. And the letter was so positive. I read it and turned to God and said, "God, you are so awesome. I just prayed about this a few days ago. I didn't have to push my way in. Unsolicited, they gave me this invitation."

On top of that, check this out. I get a voice mail message on Thursday from Zondervan publishers, a Christian publishing company. And this fellow is on the phone saying, "Rich, I am calling to apologize and to humble myself before you." I thought: What's this? He said that he was talking with a fellow about young writers and asked who was out there. This fellow mentioned me and a book that I had written. He said that it struck a familiar cord and he realized that a couple of years ago he kind of shut the door on my project. He

said, “I guess you went with someone else, but if you have another writing project, will you please contact us?”

Do you understand the difference between God going in front of you and God simply echoing your prior decision? Do you understand God’s choice? God is not an echo; he is always the initiator.

Some of you say: Well, I don’t understand then if God chose me how all of this fits together. How he holds people responsible. I don’t understand.

Friends, I say this with great gentleness. But, frankly, I think there are two approaches we can take regarding the Christian life. We can say: I will only believe what I understand. All of my beliefs must be submitted to my ability to comprehend. That is called “rationalism.” If you only believe what you understand, then you are making yourself and your own mind into God. You are saying that everything must submit to your brain. That is rationalism.

But, frankly, it is not the approach that a biblical Christian takes. A biblical Christian believes what is revealed through Jesus Christ. And then we seek to understand that revelation. As the great Saint Augustine put it – his was a faith seeking understanding. We spend our lives pondering, wondering, marveling at the great revelation that we have in the Bible and in particular in the person of Jesus. But there is much of the revelation that I cannot comprehend and yet I believe. I don’t understand the doctrine of the Trinity. I can articulate it. We believe that God is three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And yet, he is not three Gods, but one. One in will, one in purpose. Three persons, co-eternal, co-equal, yet one. I don’t understand it. I don’t understand how Jesus Christ could be fully God and yet fully man. One Lord, not two Lords; one person, not two persons; but one person with two natures.

Some people say, “Well, the way it works is that God foresees who will place faith in Christ and then on that basis he chooses those people. But the Bible never says that the basis of God choosing us is foreseeing our faith or our goodness or anything else that would distinguish us from anyone else. To approach this marvelous doctrine of God choosing you, we must do away with philosophical speculation that requires us to understand entirely how this could be and bow before revelation that says that it is. He chose you because he decided to choose you.

And lest you say: Well, unless I can work it all out, I will not accept it. The book of Job comes back to us with a stunning rebuke and says to us [this is the message of the book of Job], God the Father speaking to us and saying, “I am under no obligation to explain myself to you. I do not owe you a reason or an explanation for my awesome activity in the world. I do not have to explain my plans to you or even my justice. Is this not the message of Job? The Father saying, “I am God. I am under no obligation to explain myself to you.”

In mercy, in sheer mercy, God occasionally gives us his reasons. God occasionally stoops down and says: On this occasion I will explain what I am doing at your job. In your health. With this country. In this accident. With your marriage or with your future.

But the book of Job offers us the other side of God’s personality and says: Nevertheless, you must understand that I am God and you are not. And I am

under no obligation to explain myself to you. You are not my judge. I am your judge.

Parents, surely you understand this one, don't you? Just a week ago, I said this to one of my kids. "I am sorry if it seems unreasonable to you, but I am under no obligation to convince you of the rightness of my decisions before you do what I ask. I am your father." And a parent who seeks to explain to the satisfaction of a 3-year old everything that they do or say and every decision that they make in order to act, is going to be a very poor parent in deed.

You say: Well, Rich, why do you love the notion that God has chosen you?

Well, I tried to say it before. But God just fills me with assurance. He doesn't echo me; I echo him; I love because he first loved me. See, the fact that I didn't choose God, but that he chose me means that I am not hanging onto God by my fingernails, as it sometimes seems. Sometimes it feels like if I let go, I am just going to drop. The truth is that God's got me. He's got me. Whether I wake or I sleep. In all my stupidity. In all my bad decisions. In all my hotness and coldness. My ups and downs. He reached out before I ever existed and said: I got you. And snatched me out of the fire. And if you are a Christian, God did that for you too.

It fills me with assurance that when I preach my message is going to have an effect in some people's lives. It would be profoundly discouraging to me for me to think that it was up to my persuasive ability, my oratory, my clever words, to break down all the defenses that you come in with each week to church—all your preoccupations, all of your boredom, all of your sin, all of your apathy. If I thought that I was responsible to break through all of that, on top of the walls that you would have if you are not yet a Christian, I would feel helpless and hopeless.

But then I remind myself that the only thing that really matters is God's sovereign choice. That God has been at work in your lives for years, setting you up, inclining people to pray for you, letting circumstances heat up to a point where you are pressed into a decision, moving you into the corner, revealing himself to you. My job is easy. I just need to proclaim. God is doing all the work.

This wonderful doctrine encourages me that the kingdom of God is moving forward. We are on, if I can put it this way, an enormous aircraft carrier called "The Kingdom of God." And, yes, we can play on the deck and rearrange the furniture, argue with each other, get into fights, help each other, make the trip more pleasant for each other, share our food, pray for one another. But this aircraft carrier called "The Kingdom of God" is moving forward in a sovereign choice of almighty God.

This not only fills me with comfort and assurance, but it also humbles me. It drops me sometimes to my knees, where I say before almighty God, "I did not choose you, but you chose me. (John 15) I am here at church because of you."

I am a Christian because of God the Father. I will remain a Christian because of God the Father. And I will die as a Christian and be transported to glory because he who began a good work in me will bring it to completion. This is the sum of my faith, friends. This is what I live on. This is my security. And I

want you to have this security. He chose us in him before the creation of the world, before you did anything good or bad. He said, "I want you."

Let me tell you, this will make all the difference to you in terms of your sharing this summer with friends regarding Summer Harvest and your invitations. The weight can be placed squarely on God and not on you. You can go out and talk with friends and family and neighbors, encourage people to go, invite people to come to church, share the gospel, knowing that if God is at work at that moment, it is going to work. And if he isn't then you can pray that he would be at work. But the burden is always on God. The weight is on God. And at the end of the day you can say: Well, God, I did my little part, now it is up to you. Christianity is about God and not about us.

What are the goals of God choosing, of God's election? Well, God has three goals in mind; two of them terminate on us, and one of them that terminates on him. The goals that terminate on us are that we would be holy and blameless (#1), that we would be adopted as his children (#2). The goal that terminates on him is that he would get the glory.

Verse 4: *"He chose us in him before the creation of the world."* What's the goal? For us to be holy and blameless in his sight. Does he have a second goal in mind? Yes. *"In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ according to his pleasure and will."* He piles up words to show God's choice, God's choice, God's choice. Predestined. In accordance to his pleasure, to his will. That we be adopted. That is the second goal.

And the third goal that terminates on God is that it would all result in his praise. *"To the praise of his glorious grace which he has freely given us in the one he loves."*

What is the goal of God of this great salvation? Why did God choose us? First of all that we would be holy and blameless in his sight. God's goal is always to change us, to not leave us as we are. This is Paul's great answer to those who say: Well, if you are chosen, then it really doesn't matter how you live. I guess you can live any old way because it is just up to God. Paul says: Friend, the whole point of God's choosing you, what God had in mind is to transform you so that you would be like him—holy.

The fact is that if you are not being changed, if you look at your life and you don't see a reorientation of values, if you look at yourself and see no love for God, no passion for purity, no desire to conform yourself to God's will, no real repentance, then no matter what you say about your relationship with God, it is merely empty profession. It is not possession. The difference between professing Christ and possessing Christ is that anyone who possesses Christ will be changed by the life of Christ. We will progressively become holy and blameless.

I must, for a moment, tell you that many, many people approach the issue of holiness lopsided and in a man-centered way. The reason why holiness has taken on such a bad reputation is because so much of it is completely unrelated to God. Holiness, in a lot of folks' minds and in a lot of teaching about holiness, begins to be equated with the things that we do, especially things that we abstain from like alcohol, blue jeans, long hair, rock and roll music, and certainly you

can't joke and have a good time. Holiness starts becoming very man-centered, very self-centered in a lot of the teaching. The people who are becoming holier and holier in many churches, actually become weirder and more annoying to everyone around them. If you ask their family and friends: Is this person becoming holier, more like God? Family and friends, who are after all the judge of what we are like—they are the great objective test of our so-called changed life. If you have really changed your family will notice it. Your friends will see it. A lot of family and friends would sit back and say: This person is not more like God to me. This person is just more annoying. They are more self-righteous, more abrasive.

Holiness is not a self-centered thing. It is not a man-centered thing. Holiness is not a matter of abstaining from certain activities. And it is certainly not a matter of becoming more annoying. Holiness defines the character of God. God is holy. That means he is separated from all that is not upright. He is separated from all that is not pure. He is separated from everything that is defiling. God is absolutely, completely, clean. His motives are absolutely pure. His choices are totally just.

To be holy, then, friends, is to become like your Father through intimacy and relationship with God the Father. The Bible's continual charge to us is for us to be holy because God is holy. He chose us then to be like him. And that does take some abstaining, but it is not just abstaining from activities. Holy people abstain from developing certain heart attitudes that Jesus says defiles us. A person who is becoming holy seeks to be rid of heart attitudes that pollute them and pollute their souls.

Like what?

Well, like bitterness and unforgiveness and judgment and lust and greed and envy and divisiveness and pride. A person who is seeking to become holy looks inside and says: I don't want to cultivate lust or greed or bitterness. I don't want to stir that up. Instead, I want to be cleansed from this stuff.

And on the other hand, I want to positively identify myself and relate to the source of holiness, which is God. Don't let anyone ever tell you that if you believe that God originated your salvation and that you have been chosen to be saved that this means that you will not seek to live a holy life, separating yourself from unholy attitudes and positively identifying with God. The fact is that a person who knows that they are chosen is a person who knows that one of God's goals is to see you become like him. We prove, according to 2 Peter, we make our election sure, we prove it, by seeking to be a holy people.

God has a second goal in mind in choosing us. And that is that we would be adopted as his children. *"In love, he predestined us to be adopted as his sons [and daughters] through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will."* Adoption. John says in 1 John 3, what a great salvation, what extraordinary love the Father has given to us that we should be called God's children.

You know, in ancient Rome, where Paul is getting this adoption metaphor from, in ancient Rome adoption didn't simply give a person a new name. Adoption didn't give a person a new status or a new set of legal rights. Adoption also canceled the person's legal debts. All debts were off. All previous

relationships were canceled. If you were an adult in ancient Rome and were adopted into someone's family, you could have owed a million dollars and those debts were canceled.

When we are adopted as God's children, everything we owe, the enormous debt we have piled up because of our sin, is canceled. All of our old relationships with Satan, with the world, with our old sin nature—all of that is radically changed. We take on God's new name. He puts his name on our foreheads. We become heirs with Christ.

I believe that it is this identity as children of God, as a son or daughter, how real that is to you that determines a great deal of your intimacy with God. Do you walk around with a continual sense that: I don't need to worry about this or that circumstance in my job. This or that person's opinion. That is not my identity. I am glorying in this one precious thing. God has called me his son. God has called me his daughter. God recognizes me. I am not saying this in an arrogant way. I am saying this in a comforting, humbling way.

To hear God speak to your soul and call you "child" which is the ministry of the Holy Spirit—Paul says in Romans 8 that God sends the spirit of adoption into our hearts and that spirit of adoption bears witness to us that we are children of God—to hear that is life changing, friends.

Let me tell you a little story. There is the story of a woman who grew up during the 1920's. She had a cleft palate and she had a badly mis-shapened upper lip. Her teeth were all crooked. Her face was distorted. This woman wrote in a biography that the other kids, of course, in school would often say: What happened to you? What happened to your mouth? What happened to your face?

She said that up until she was in second grade, she used to tell people that she had fallen through a glass door. Somehow that made it more acceptable than being born this way. She said that all of it changed and her identity and the course of her whole life changed when she was in second grade. Back then they used to give the children a hearing test by whispering in their ears. They didn't have fancy equipment and all of the stuff that audiologists use today. They would whisper quietly in a child's ear and try to have the child repeat it. Something like: The big ball is blue. The sea is shining. A little phrase whispered quietly.

She was expecting a little phrase like that when her teacher bent over and whispered in her ear: "I love you and I wish you were my little girl." She said, "Those whispered words of affection changed my life. 'I love you and I wish you were my little girl.'"

Friends, that is what the Holy Spirit does. As the Spirit of adoption he whispers in our hearts, "God loves you and he wants you as his son; he wants you as his daughter." I am telling you this is what gets you through the tough days when it is all falling apart and you want to go out and kill someone or kill yourself. It is this whispered word of love. *"In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons and daughters in Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and his will."* I am a son of God.

Paul grasped this. The New Testament writers grasped this. That is why they had such a note of triumph rather than discouragement and despair as they were being dragged into prison for their faith. Hey, we are heirs with Christ. The property is ours. The world is ours. Heaven is ours. The crowns are ours because we are the children of God.

Who is the source of salvation? Where did it all come from? God. Unto what end did God save? To make us holy. To adopt us as children. But ultimately, just as the source is God's choice, the goal is God's Glory. *"In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will to the praise of his glorious grace."* That people would praise his glory.

Do you understand that this is how Paul always talks about salvation? When he gets down with that marvelous chapter on election in Romans 9 and talks about human responsibility in chapter 10. He pulls the whole thing together in Romans 11 at the end and celebrates God. Not that he understands at all, but he just falls on his face before God and he says:

"Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments, his paths are beyond tracing out. Who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor. Who has ever given to God that God should repay him? For from him, through him, and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen."

God's ultimate goal in this great salvation is that we would praise his glory. And this is a repeated line in Ephesians 1. We find in verse 6: *To the praise of his glorious grace.* We find it in verse 12: *In order that we who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.* And then in verse 14 as he talks about the Holy Spirit: *He is a deposit in heaven guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession to the praise of his glory.*

Now, I have taught on this over and over again, friends. God's ultimate goal is that he would be worshipped. That he would be praised. That people would kneel down and say, "What a merciful, merciful, merciful God we have. How awesome he is. How great." Isn't God awesome? Salvation is never the last stop on God's train. Making a decision for Christ is not the last stop on God's train. Holy lives are not the last stop on God's train. Saving babies from being aborted, feeding the poor, getting emotionally well, these are not the last stop on God's train. Bible study is not.

The last stop on God's train, where God is taking all of history, is to have everyone bow down and worship him. A lot of people come into this church and say: Boy, you guys sing a lot. What is the point of that? Why do you sing so much? Is it a warm-up for the message?

We sing so much because we have been let in on a little secret—that the highest goal of the Christian life is to worship God and to live for his praise.

This week, like a lot of you, I have been watching the Olympics and the awarding of gold medals. It was particularly thrilling to watch the American women get the gold medal on the last vault by Keri Strug and the celebration of all of that. I don't know what you regard as success. When do you get the gold

medal? When do the judges stand up and hold up cards with 10.0 on them for you? I know the Jenny Craig ads say that success for a woman is a size 8 dress. That is when the world stands up and says: Gold medal time. You wear the proper dress size.

Or maybe for you it is that you got the promotion you were working for. You received the corner office in the downtown office building. And they have to work through your secretary in order to get to you. In fact, you have two secretaries. 10.0.

You have your picture in the newspaper. You have been recognized by the Board of Something-Or-Others. You are on the Dean's list. You got your degree.

When do we Christians get a 10.0? In this life, I mean. When do we say: Got it. That is what I am living for. I have succeeded. Too often it is measured by: I prayed four days in a row. I shared my faith. I didn't sin in this way. And all of those things, by the way, are very good to do. But they might score you a 9.1 and get you the bronze medal. You know what the Olympic gold is in the Christian life? That God would be glorified because of you. You hit the gold when someone comes up to you and says: I praise God because of you. Your kindness, your counseling, your financial help, your activity in my life has caused me to praise God because of you.

Jesus left in his wake people who gave praise to God when he healed someone, when he talked with them, when he loved them. In his wake were a bunch of people who gave glory to God because they met Jesus. That's Olympic gold. It doesn't get any better than that. Not that we would be praised, but that he would.

Now, finally you may ask: Rich, what is the method that God uses to bring about these wonderful blessings? Our holiness, our adoptions as sons and daughters, his glory? We know that God has done the choosing. He is the source. We know that the goal is to do these wonderful things, but what is the method?

The method is found in verse 7. *"In him, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of God's grace."* That word "redemption" is a precious word for Christians. Redemption—it means to be purchased out of slavery. It means to be released from captivity and bondage by the payment of a price.

Why did Jesus come? Let him answer that? Why did Jesus come?

Matthew 20:28, *"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many."* Jesus came to buy us back out from under the captivity that we had fallen into from Satan; to sin.

Let me tell you a little story. There was a little boy who built a boat and went down to the shore with his dad to the docks to sail this little boat. He had spent months building it. He put it in the water and it began to sail. A wave came in and picked up the boat and started to carry it out. And the little boy tried to reach for it and couldn't. His dad tried to and couldn't grab it. It sailed beyond the larger fishing boats that were in the harbor. All the little boy's work was lost. He was very sad. A few weeks later he was walking in the downtown area and

saw his boat in a store window. The boat that he had built. He went in and told the shopkeeper: That's my boat. That is the boat I built. The shopkeeper said: Well, it is not your boat anymore. A fisherman sold it to me. If you want it, you will have to pay for it. The little boy went home and got all of his money. He went back to the store and bought the boat. He took it out of the shop and held the boat close to his chest and said: You are doubly mine now. I made you and now I have bought you. You are doubly mine.

That is what God the Father says to you through redemption. He says: I made you and now I have bought you; you are doubly mine. You say: How did he buy us?

The text tells us. Through the blood of his own Son. In him we have redemption through his blood. This echoes many other texts such as Acts 20:28, where Paul says, "Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."

I want to finish by taking a couple of minutes to reflect on the blood of Christ. It is the blood of Christ that forms the purchase price for our salvation. The New Testament continually testifies that every blessing of God comes through the blood of Christ. This is God's method for blessing.

A lot of churches, a lot of pastors and theologians, and a lot of people don't like to talk about the blood. It is an offense to the natural mind. Because it suggests to us that we are not saved through education. That we are not saved through government programs and think tanks. That we are not saved through another study commission or research initiative or good idea or philosophy. We are not saved by religion, by religious practice, by prayer, by fasting, by church-going. We are not saved by the teachings of Jesus, by his wonderful example, by the Sermon on the Mount. We are not even saved by the declaration of God.

And I say that with great reverence. But you know, salvation was a much more difficult problem for God than was creation. To create the universe, God merely spoke and the whole universe came about. But not so with salvation. To redeem us, to buy us back out of slavery, to free us from our sins, God could not simply speak. He could not simply say, "I forgive you." Because according to God, the penalty for sin is death, either the death of the sinner or the death of a substitute.

There is only one way for people to be saved. Through the blood of Jesus Christ. Only through the blood of Jesus. There is no other way. And I think part of the reason modern men and women hate talking about the blood is because the blood is such an insult to us. See, we want to feel good about ourselves. We love books on building self-esteem. We enjoy positive thinking seminars. But the blood comes along as an offense and says: If you think there is still something you can do to save yourself or to gain favor with God, you are on the wrong road.

The apostle Paul was on the wrong road. He was on the wrong road to Damascus, believing that his zeal for God, that his religious fervor, his obedience to God's command had earned him special status in the sight of God. He believed with all of his might, that there was something he could do to gain favor and status with God.

But when he saw Jesus on the road to Damascus, and when Jesus communicated to him the only way that men and women could be saved, through the blood of Christ, Paul said, "I consider everything that I have ever done a loss, worthless. I consider it all dung, refuse, garbage now that I have gained Christ."

Friends, do you understand how great a salvation God has designed for you? He prepared it all in eternity and in eternity he chose you. He calls you to be holy and to be adopted as his children for the praise of his glory. And he worked it out in time by ransoming us through the blood of his own Son.

Let's pray.