

“Our Savior Is Here”

Dave Barry is a humorist and author. He writes about Christmas at his son’s school. “To avoid offending anybody, the school dropped religion altogether and started singing about the weather. At my son’s school, they now hold the winter program in February and sing increasingly non-memorable songs such as ‘Winter Wonderland’, ‘Frosty the Snowman’, and...’Suzy Snowflake’, all of which is pretty funny because we live in Miami. A visitor from another planet would assume that the children belonged to the Church of Meteorology.”

Well, those of us in the U.S. may be confused over what Christmas is about, but the gospel writer Matthew was very clear. The angel said to Joseph, “She (Mary) will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Jesus came to save us from our sins. That is what Christmas is about!

We don’t use the word “sin” as much today. Church consultant Bill Easum argues that the word “sin” has no meaning for most people in our culture. Yet it is an important word in the Bible.

What does the Bible mean by the word “sin”? The word for sin most often used in the New Testament is the Greek word “hamartia”. It means “to miss the mark”. – like you shoot an arrow and miss the target.

What are ways we “miss the mark” and fail to live as God intended life to be lived? We “miss the mark” by breaking the laws and commandments of God. 1 John 3:4 says, “sin is lawlessness.” God has given laws and commands for our own well-being and so life can be good. Sin involves violating these commandments of a loving God.

We also “miss the mark” when we are morally weak and give in to evil. Sometimes we really want to do what’s right and good, and avoid what’s evil and hurtful. But we lack the power to follow through. The Apostle Paul wrote, “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me” (Romans 7:18-20). Who of us does not see himself or herself in that description of human nature!

We sin, or “miss the mark”, by rebelling against God, pitting our will against His. This truth is profoundly brought out in the Adam and Eve story. God puts them in a paradise where they can enjoy everything – except one thing: They are told not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or else they will die. The serpent says, “You won’t die.” So they eat from that tree, in defiance of God. Adam and Eve are *us* (Adam means “man”). We too at times reject what God says and decide to do our own thing, set our own rules.

So, sin is “missing the mark”, falling short of what God wants us to be. Romans 3:23 says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Who of us can say, “I haven’t missed the mark? I’m best person I could be?”

All of us, as human beings, are a mix of good and evil. We are created in the image of God.

Because of that, we have tremendous potential for goodness - to soar to heights of bravery and selfless acts of kindness. But there is a dark side to each of us as well, a side often hidden from others. A man tells of inviting a college student and his girl friend to his house for lunch one Sunday. As they started to relax, the host said to the young man, "Why don't you take your sport coat off?" (He had already removed his tie and overcoat). The young man kind of hemmed and hawed around, as if he didn't want to. Finally, this student was able to get his host off to the side, and said, "The only parts of my shirt I've ironed are the cuffs and the collar!" He had pressed only the parts that showed; the rest of his shirt was full of wrinkles. Isn't this the way we are sometimes! We can present a nice clean image to people, the part that shows, but hidden beneath the surface there can be a dark and evil side that can be quite wrinkly and dirty!

It's good to remember, also, that sin is not just individual wrongdoing, but it has a collective, social dimension to it. We see the effects of collective evil in the form of corrupt governments, our wasting of precious natural resources, powerful nations bullying weak neighbors, children starving in a world where enough food is available, and "isms" such as racism and sexism.

What's the result of all of this? What does sin do? It separates us from God. The prophet Isaiah could say, "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2). God created us to have a close, loving relationship with Him. But sin distances us from our holy and loving Creator.

This distancing from our *heavenly* Father can be mirrored in parent-child relationships. Our one son was engaged to a young lady when he was in college. There was just something about this girl that didn't set right with Nancy and me. She seemed to be taking our son for a ride – milking him of what little money he had. We tried not to interfere, but one day we expressed our reservations about her and our concern for him. Our son went ballistic. He wrote us a horrible letter. It cut deep. It really ate away at our relationship with our son. Through all of this, we tried best to keep loving our angry, rebellious son. I'm not saying parents are always right, but in this case, what we sensed was true. He began to see it. He broke off the engagement. And slowly we began to get our son back. This is something of what happens between us and our heavenly Father because of sin on our part.

When this relationship with God is messed up, it spills over into every aspect of life. We have trouble getting along with others. It limits our capacity to be a whole and healthy personality. It robs us of inward serenity, peace.

The bottom line is: We need help! We need something, someone to save us! The angel says to Joseph that Mary "will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). God took the initiative and did an incredible thing to save us. God sent His own Son Jesus into the world to be our Savior.

Our part, in order to be saved, is to believe in Jesus. In those matchless words of the Gospel of John, "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that *whoever believes in him* should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

In the Bible, to “believe” in Jesus does not mean just to believe there was a Jesus, or that He is the Son of God, or even to agree to the fact that He died on a cross. There are a lot of people who believe that, but it makes no difference in their life. The word in the New Testament most often used for “believe” is the Greek word “pisteuo”. This word means to cling to, to rely upon. It’s as if you are drowning, and someone throws a life preserver to us. We cling to that life preserver, trust it with all our being that it will save us from drowning. *Jesus is our life preserver!*

So, what does it mean to be saved? Some would answer, “It means we won’t go to hell.” That is true, and that’s an awesome thing. But being saved means much more. When we are saved, ***we have a new relationship with God.***

We have a new standing before God. We are declared “righteous”. We are righteous – not because we are good, but because of what Christ has done for us. When we trust Him to save us, *His righteousness* is put into our account so we can stand right with our God.

When we are saved it means *our sins are forgiven*. A nationwide poll once asked people: “What word or phrase would you most like to hear uttered to you?” The number 1 answer: “I love you.” Number 2 answer: “You are forgiven.” God says to us: “Because you trust my Son Jesus, you are forgiven.” (By the way, the number 3 answer is: “Supper is ready”). No sin is too bad that Jesus will not forgive and cleanse us if we confess it.

To be saved also means *we are brought close to God*. Ephesians 2:13 says, “But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

We are also accepted into God’s family and become His sons and daughters. John 1:10-12 says, “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” Can you and I be close to God? Yes, in fact, our relationship to God can be so close and intimate that we can call our Creator, “abba” (“daddy”).

What does it mean to be saved? It means we have a new relationship with God. But also, ***God begins to change our life and character.*** One of the great realities of the Christian faith is when we meet the Living Christ, He changes us! Christ comes to live in us! We are given a new nature inside – the God-nature.

Do we still sin? (You know the answer!). Of course we do. We have the life of Christ in us, but we still have the old, sinful nature too. And there is a battle between these two natures. It would be great if once we became a Christian we no longer were tempted to do evil, and no longer had to deal with the sin-nature. But we do. A man named Michael Nichols tells of driving by a big church with a lighted sign outside. The wording on the church sign said, “If you’re done with sin, come on in.” But as he got closer to the sign, he noticed someone had scrawled with

lipstick: “But if you’re not quite through, call 272-0200.”

Even the most effective Christians still struggle with temptation and sin. I once heard a prominent evangelist by the name of Torrey Johnson, a man of great integrity who won many people to Christ, confide that right before he stands up to preach, he feels an urge inside to use profanity. David duPlessis was a giant of the faith. He carried the message of the Spirit-filled life to every denomination and every continent. A few years before his death, he was asked a pointed question by a young man. “Dr. duPlessis, as a young Christian, I’m committed to serving Jesus Christ with my whole heart and to living in purity – body, soul and spirit. Still, I sometimes have struggles with my thought life. Could you tell me, sir, about how old I’ll be when improper thoughts – especially about women – won’t tempt my mind any longer?” Dr. DuPlessis, whose purity of life and faithfulness to truth were legendary, looked squarely into the eyes of the young man, and then, in the 80th year of his life, said, “Son, when I get that old, I’ll let you know.”

Here’s the thing: Christians are still tempted. Dedicated believers still sin after they are saved. *But once we truly turn our lives over to Jesus and trust Him to save us, our attitude towards sin is different.* Sometimes followers of Jesus are guilty of the same sins as people who are not saved. But we recognize it as sin, grieve over it, and strive to overcome those sins. And because Christ lives in us, He gives us power that we don’t have just in ourselves to overcome the evil part of our human nature.

Stanley Baldwin tells of his years in college, when he had little money, living in a town where he tried to bury his garbage in the backyard, rather than pay for the garbage service. But what he didn’t realize was that the garbage service was provided free in that town. Some of us trying to dispose of the garbage in our life and soul by our own human efforts alone. There is One who paid a great price to provide that service for us! His name is Jesus!

Christmas is good news to us sinners that a Savior has come! The angel said to Joseph that Mary would bear a son, “and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

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