

Jesus Saves!

Acts 16:16-34

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Prayer: *Holy God, we are thirsty for your Word. Open our hearts to hear you. Fill us with your love so we may live faithfully and love deeply. Amen.*

Jesus saves! You've seen this catchy slogan before. It's everywhere, from bumper stickers to T-shirts, hoodies, hats, and sports events. And, of course, in many churches and Christian gatherings.

Jesus saves! But what does that mean? We ask because salvation is central to our Christian faith, much like *nirvana* in Hinduism or *satori*, the idea of enlightenment or awakening in Japanese Buddhism. Yet, people often understand it in different ways.

A popular interpretation is that it refers to “going to heaven” after being forgiven of one’s sins by believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus as a form of atonement or redemption. But the slogan *Jesus saves* or *salvation* also carries a lot of baggage for many people. Another reason why a proper understanding is important. The popular understanding—“going to heaven”—while appealing, has its obvious opposite possibility—“going to hell”—which is also alarming. Many Christians worry whether they have believed enough to be saved or behaved as they’re supposed to, so they go to heaven.

But in the Bible, *salvation* and its related terms—*save*, *saves*, *saved*, *saving*—which appear almost 500 times, are seldom about “going to heaven.” In the New Testament, while it occasionally refers to an afterlife, most of the time it does not. In the Old Testament, the concept of an afterlife is nowhere to be found, at least not in Genesis, Exodus, the writings of the prophets, the wisdom books of Job, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Proverbs.¹ Actually, the idea of the afterlife was a late development in Judaism—around 100 years before Christ.” Early Jewish thought

¹ Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power—And How They Can Be Restored* (HarperOne, 2011), 38-39.

emphasized living a meaningful life on earth through obedience of God's laws (*Tanak*)

In the Gospels, Jesus rarely spoke about heaven or the afterlife. Instead, he focused on this life. He said, "The Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21), indicating that God's reign is present and immediate. For Jesus, freedom is a present reality. He told his followers, "If you obey my teaching... you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31–32).

Jesus saves! And he saves indeed! But it's not only about eternal life in the "bye and bye." The New Testament scholar Marcus Borg identifies several nuances of the Biblical meaning of salvation.

The first meaning is *Salvation as Liberation from Bondage*, physical bondage. That's the story of Exodus. God, through Moses, set the Israelites free from slavery and oppression in Egypt.

This is the kind of salvation we see in our passage this morning in Acts when Paul frees a slave girl with a "spirit of divination." She could tell the future, and her owners exploited her gift for profit. But Paul not only cast out the spirit but also broke the grip of those who exploited her for economic gain. Today, we might say she was trafficked—not for sex, but for money. Paul said, "In the name of Jesus Christ, I order you to come out of her!" And the spirit left her immediately.

Jesus saves—yes! But salvation isn't just about going to heaven. It's about freedom—freedom from bondage, oppression, and exploitation. That's the kind of salvation the slave girl experienced.

A second nuanced meaning of salvation is *Salvation as Return from Exile*. The people of God lived as captives in Babylon for fifty years, oppressed, impoverished, and powerless like their ancestors in Egypt. This is the historical context for the second part of *Handel's Messiah*, with its opening words of comfort. (Eleanor, give me an A, please) *Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God. And cry unto her that her warfare is*

accomplished. These are words of consolation, followed by an announcement that suffering will soon come to an end.

“Every valley, every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight, and the rough places plain.”

I hope you realized I was just having fun with Handel’s *Messiah*’s “Comfort Ye, Comfort Ye My People” by playfully exaggerating the *melismas*, as Mike called it. I couldn’t actually sing that aria (if that’s the right term) seriously, even if I tried. My real point was to highlight the irony in the lyrics—“the crooked straight” and “the rough places plain”—and how they reflect the idea that Jesus saves us by straightening out the messes in our lives—making the “crooked straight” and the “rough places plain,” as it were.

What the texts are saying is that God is building a highway, an interstate in the desert, if you will, that separates exile and home.

Many people—then and now—live in exile, longing for a place to call home. A place where they feel safe, free, and truly belong. A place of community and connection.

As a church, we’ve done something similar—welcoming a legally immigrating family, refugees in a new land. They arrived as strangers, unfamiliar with the language, culture, and politics. However, with the help of others, we were able to get them resettled in our community. We levelled the mountains, made their path smoother, if you will. And now they’re doing fine. That’s the kind of salvation and liberation the Bible speaks of, the freedom Jesus offers to all.

A third meaning of salvation in Scripture is *Salvation as Rescue from Peril*. This is the kind of salvation we find in the Book of Psalms.

The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? (27:1)

Save me from my persecutors, for they are too strong for me. (144:6)

This is also the kind of salvation the jailer in Acts receives. When an earthquake shakes the prison and the doors fly open, he fears the prisoners have escaped—and prepares to take his own life. But Paul stops him, saying, “Don’t harm yourself. We’re all here!” (v. 28).

The jailer asks a simple but consequential question. Most translations have him say, “What must I do to be saved?”—a favorite of preachers because, of course, it’s what we want to preach on. But New Testament scholar N.T. Wright suggests a more faithful translation might be, “Can you help me get out of this mess?”²

I almost titled this sermon *Any Way Out?* before choosing *Jesus Saves!* But I think Wright’s version captures the heart of it. Looking at the slave girl and the desperate jailer, the question makes perfect sense because, my goodness, what a mess they’re both in! They’re trapped in spiritual, economic, political, and social oppression.

And we get it. When life feels like it’s spinning out of control, we often cry out the same way: “Lord, can you help me get out of this mess?”

The guard’s question may be complex, perhaps even beyond his understanding, but Paul’s answer is clear: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (v. 30). And he got saved, that is, Jesus got him out of the mess of his life.

Thomas Long, professor emeritus of preaching at Candler School of Theology, tells this story:

Long said, when my wife and I moved to Atlanta some years ago, we looked around for a church. After visiting several, we decided to join Central Presbyterian Church downtown. We enjoyed the worship and admired the church’s mission.

² As quoted by Meg Jenista, “Acts 16:16-34 Commentary” in *The Center of Excellence in Preaching*, <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2025-05-26/acts-1616-34-4/>

The pastor invited all new members to dinner with the church officers one Wednesday evening. After the meal, he said, "Let's go around the table and share why each of you is joining the church."

People gave the usual answers. One said, "I'm a musician, and this church has the best music program in the city." Another said, "We have two teenage daughters, and the youth program here is fantastic." Someone else said, "I like the parking lot. I can park my car here easily, so I'm joining."

It was like that until it got around to Marshall. His story is that he had once been high on crack cocaine, living on the streets. One day, he stumbled into the church's outreach center and begged for help. The director told him she didn't have the funds to get him into treatment that month—but she promised that if he stayed with them, they would stay with him. And she took his hand and knelt with him on her office carpet, and prayed.

Marshall stayed. And he got clean.

"I've been sober for three years now," he said. "I'm joining this church because God saved me here."

Long said the rest of us sat quietly. We were there for the music and the parking lot. Marshall was there for the salvation.

A few weeks later, a short note appeared in the church newsletter: Marshall was now in DeKalb County Jail.

Long said we had joined the church together. We were brothers in Christ. So I went to visit him.

After passing through three layers of security, I found myself seated behind thick glass, holding a phone. On the other side, in an orange jumpsuit, was Marshall, holding the other phone.

"Marshall, how are you?" I asked.

"By the grace of God," he said, "I'm doing all right."

"Marshall, what happened?"

He said, “I was working at the outreach center, counseling others like me—telling them they could turn their lives around. That they could do right. And I realized I hadn’t done right myself. I hadn’t faced my own past. You see, I had an old warrant in DeKalb County. It was years old. No one would have come for me. But I knew it was there. So on Christmas Eve, I turned myself in. But I’ll be out by Easter. And I can’t wait to worship at Central again.

“But in the meantime,” he continued, “I’ve started an outreach center right here in jail. Some of the guys can’t read or write, so I write letters to their families. And every night, we hold a little prayer meeting in my cell. Not many come, but some do. We pray for the other prisoners, and for the guards too.”

Long said, “And as I looked at Marshall through the glass—dressed as a prisoner but full of peace—I realized I was looking at one of the freest people I’ve ever met.”

The slave girl is enslaved by a spirit of divination. And the Roman prison guard is trapped by a system that demands his political allegiance but disregards his personal life. Paul, through the power of Jesus’ name, delivers them out of their bondage. This is what “Jesus Saves” truly means: Jesus frees us from the mess of our lives. He breaks the chains of anything that degrades, dehumanizes, or enslaves us—addiction, injustice, or oppressive systems. Jesus sets us free to live fully and freely. Through him, Paul freed the slave girl from greedy exploitation. The Roman prison guard was freed from the fear and shame imposed by a system that valued duty over his life. Jesus saves us from all forms of oppression—spiritual, physical, political, social, and even religious.

Get me out of this mess!” is often our desperate cry. The good news is that Jesus offers a way out—freedom from the chaos and burdens of life. Thanks be to God. Amen.