

A circular maze with a green background and gold lines. The maze is composed of concentric rings with various openings and dead ends, creating a complex path. The text is centered within the maze.

SAVED
from
WHAT?

R.C. SPROUL

S A V E D
from
W H A T ?

R . C . S P R O U L



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

Saved from What?

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For Dave and Maureen Buchman
Friends, co-laborers, and kinsmen in the faith

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SAVED *from* WHAT?

“Are you saved?”

I recall vividly a time more than three decades ago, in 1969, when I was asked this question.

These were the volatile days of the sixties—the era of the cultural revolution in America. I was a professor of theology at the Conwell School of Theology on the campus of Temple University in Philadelphia. The days were anything but halcyon. They were turbulent, marked by demonstrations against the war in Vietnam. Paroxysms of rage punctuated student protests and sit-ins. The academic world was in a state of unprecedented turmoil and upheaval. I recall trying to lecture above the din of bullhorns outside the classroom windows as I competed with the S.D.S. (Students for a Democratic Society) for my students’ attention.

On one such day, I sought an hour’s solace and quietude from this cacophony in the faculty dining room. I stretched my lunch hour to the limit in order to squeeze out every moment of peace I could enjoy.

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As the noon hour ended, I deposited my lunch tray in the bin and began my trek across the plaza to my classroom. I was walking briskly to avoid being late. I was alone, minding my own business. Suddenly, apparently out of nowhere, a gentleman appeared in front of me, blocking my forward progress. He looked me in the eye and asked directly, “Are you saved?”

I wasn’t quite sure how to respond to this intrusion. I uttered in response the first words that came into my mind: “Saved from what?” What I was thinking, but had the grace not to say, was, “I’m certainly not saved from strangers buttonholing me, and asking me questions like yours.” But when I said, “Saved from what?” I think the man who stopped me that day was as surprised by my question as I had been by his. He began to stammer and stutter. Obviously, he wasn’t quite sure how to respond.

“Saved from what? Well, you know what I mean. You know, do you know Jesus?” Then he tried to give me a brief summary of the gospel.

This serendipitous encounter left an impression on me. I experienced real ambivalence. On the one hand, I was delighted in my soul that someone cared enough about me, even though I was a stranger, to stop me and ask about my salvation. But it was clear that, though this man had a zeal for salvation, he had little understanding of what salvation is. He was using Christian jargon. The words fell from his lips without being processed by his mind. As a result, his words were empty of content. Clearly, the man had a love for Christ and a concern for people. Few Christians have the courage to engage perfect strangers in evangelistic discussion. But sadly, he had little understanding of what he was so zealously trying to communicate.

Do Evangelicals Understand the Gospel?

But what about the church today? Do evangelical Christians today have any clearer understanding of the gospel, of what it means to be saved? Sadly, again, there often seems to be little understanding even among those who are most active in evangelical circles.

Take, for example, a survey conducted by Christians United for Reformation (CURE) among the delegates to the annual convention of the Christian Booksellers Association some years ago. Since the delegates are composed mostly of Christians, we would think that they would have a basic grasp of the essential truths of the gospel. But when CURE staff asked one hundred delegates at random, the staff found that only one of those who were polled gave an “adequate” definition of the gospel. Most of the answers were something like, “The gospel is having a personal relationship with Jesus,” or, “It means asking Jesus into your heart.” Absent from these definitions were any affirmations of the person and work of Christ and the appropriation of His work to the individual by faith alone.

The sampling in the poll was small—only one hundred from over five thousand. Perhaps the answers were skewed by how the question was asked. But after talking with the pollsters, I was left shocked by the apparent ignorance of the most elementary article of Christianity.

As it turned out, I was asked to preach at the Sunday morning worship service for the next Christian Booksellers Convention, a year later. With the results of the CURE survey still in mind, I decided to speak on the theme of salvation, asking the question, “What is salvation?” I was nervous about the selection of this topic. I had two fears. I feared that asking such a basic question

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of Christian publishers and booksellers would seem like carrying coals to Newcastle, that it would seem to them a waste of time to consider something they already knew fully. And I feared that by addressing such a basic matter, I would be insulting the intelligence of my hearers and would come across as patronizing or downright rude.

When I finished the sermon that morning, I was overwhelmed by the congregation's response. All week long, people came up to thank me, saying things like, "I never thought of it like that." Indeed, I have attended every CBA convention since that year, and at every single one of them people have mentioned that sermon to me. If you are not a preacher, you might miss the significance of that. Rarely do people comment on sermons they heard from our lips in times past. I hardly remember myself what I preached on three weeks ago. My congregation would naturally remember even less. The power of the Word is not in people's being able to summarize a message they've heard. Rather, it is the power of God's Word piercing the soul. With that in mind, let me reproduce here the full Bible text from my only sermon from the book of the prophet Zephaniah—the only time during almost forty years that I can remember preaching from Zephaniah, but a profoundly shocking text that uniquely answers the question, "Saved from what?" The text reads:

The great day of the LORD is near;
It is near and hastens quickly.
The noise of the day of the LORD is bitter;
There the mighty men shall cry out.
That day is a day of wrath,

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A day of trouble and distress,
A day of devastation and desolation,
A day of darkness and gloominess,
A day of clouds and thick darkness,
A day of trumpet and alarm
Against the fortified cities
And against the high towers.

“I will bring distress upon men,
And they shall walk like blind men,
Because they have sinned against the LORD;
Their blood shall be poured out like dust,
And their flesh like refuse.”

Neither their silver nor their gold
Shall be able to deliver them
In the day of the LORD’s wrath;
But the whole land shall be devoured
By the fire of His jealousy,
For He will make speedy riddance
Of all those who dwell in the land. (Zeph. 1:14–18)

If we read this text carefully, we will easily see that it has precious little “gospel” in it. The message is not “good news” but horrific news. It is so dire that one is not surprised when it is relegated to a hidden corner of the pastor’s study. The message is not politically correct in our time. The descriptive terms Zephaniah uses to paint the picture of the day of the Lord include the following:

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bitter	devastation	devoured
trouble	refuse	gloominess
alarm	desolation	fire
distress	wrath	
blood	darkness	

It seems almost as if the Holy Spirit enlarged Zephaniah's vocabulary to make the point clear. The litany of descriptive terms leaves little doubt about the horror of this predicted day. And this passage is but a small portion of the prophecy. The full message is even more hair-raising in its graphic declaration of the outpouring of God's wrath.

To be sure, the end of Zephaniah's book gives the divine promise of redemption. It ends on a high note, but not before stressing the dreadful exposure of the nation to the stark reality of divine judgment.

With a message so grim, what would even incline me to want to preach from this text? Simply this: here in this seldom-preached passage we have the clearest descriptions in the Bible in answer to the question, "Saved from what?" And when we're talking about salvation, we are talking about the concept that is *the central theme of all of sacred Scripture*—a concept that it is imperative to understand.

The Meaning of Salvation

When we search the Scriptures to determine the meaning of the term *salvation*, the first thing we notice is that it is used in a wide variety of ways. All sorts of things are discussed in connection with the noun *salvation* or the verb *to save*.

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For example, I have often wondered why, when God delivered Paul and Silas from the jail in Philippi by the earthquake, the jailer in panic came up to them and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Paul responded immediately by saying, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:30–31). I think I know what Paul meant by “saved” when he responded to the jailer, but I have wondered what was in the jailer’s mind when he asked his question. Here was a man who was responsible to the government for the guarding of prisoners, and the law in that day was simply this: if prisoners escaped from the jail, whatever penalty they were to suffer for their crimes, their jailer had to take that penalty in their place. When the walls of the jail fell down and the prisoners started to run free, this jailer ran to Paul and Silas and asked them about salvation.

It is certainly possible that what he had in his mind at that moment was a question about his eternal destiny, about his relationship with God. He had heard Paul and Silas singing hymns, and he knew they were religious fellows. The jailer addressed his question to the greatest theologian in history, the Apostle Paul: “What must I do to be saved?” Maybe he had eternity in view. Or perhaps all the Philippian jailer had in his mind was, how am I going to escape from the consequences of this jailbreak? The word *salvation* in the Bible doesn’t always refer to the ultimate question of being reconciled with God.

A woman came to Jesus for healing and beseeched Him to cure her of her disease. With a touch, Jesus healed her and said: “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace” (Luke 7:50). They didn’t even talk about reconciliation with God. The woman was looking for relief from pain and sickness. She was trying to be saved from

A QUESTION WITH ETERNAL CONSEQUENCES

Have you ever been asked by a stranger, “Are you saved?” Many Christians use this question as an opportunity to tell someone about Jesus. But a common response to that question might catch us off guard: “Saved from what?” Until this essential question can be answered, we won’t be able to make sense of Christ’s sacrifice or explain it to others.

In *Saved from What?*, Dr. R.C. Sproul reveals that the greatest danger we face is the holy wrath of God against our sin. But the glory of the gospel is that the One from whom we need to be saved is the very One who saves us. As we better understand the severity of our sin and the sufficiency of Christ’s atonement, the truth of God’s grace will deepen our worship and drive us to make His salvation known.

Dr. R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew’s Chapel in Sanford, Fla., first president of Reformation Bible College, and executive editor of *Tabletalk* magazine. His radio program, *Renewing Your Mind*, is still broadcast daily on hundreds of radio stations around the world and can also be heard online. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*, *Chosen by God*, and *Everyone’s a Theologian*. He was recognized throughout the world for his articulate defense of the inerrancy of Scripture and the need for God’s people to stand with conviction upon His Word.



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