

Now Is the Day!

Isaiah 49:7-26, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13

November 15, 1998

“If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” This is what Paul writes near the end of 2 Corinthians, Chapter 5, immediately prior to today’s reading. Thus the gospel itself moves from the statement of objective fact, the ringing proclamation of what God has already accomplished for us, to the heartfelt appeal, the second work of the preacher, the beseeching, the seeking, the urging, and the encouraging of the hearer to believe, to trust, to respond, to obey, and so to appropriate the gospel to oneself. God has provided in Jesus Christ for your forgiveness, salvation, and redemption. Therefore believe and rejoice.

Then Paul continues in the same vein in today’s reading: “Working together with him, then,” that is, working together with God, “we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, ‘At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation.’ Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” Here is the good news in today’s readings from the scripture: God’s grace, God’s mercy, God’s love, God’s goodness, God’s forgiveness of our sin, God’s salvation, and God’s redemption—all these good and wonderful things—are being offered to us and extended to us right now, today, at this very moment, in this very reading, preaching, and hearing of the gospel. That is, these wonderful gifts are not simply matters of ancient history. These words of good news are not mere concerns of the distant past. Neither are these the shadowy hopes of a far away future. These are, instead, the good and true realities of the present moment, here, now, and today. “Now is the day of salvation.”

Yes, of course, grace, mercy, and salvation do have an ancient history. They go back to the apostle’s preaching and even to the prophet’s message. Most of all, they go back to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the moment of Christ’s obedient death, sin and evil were defeated once and for all. In vindication of his death, God raised him to a new and different life, the same person but forever

beyond the power of death, and in Christ's resurrection, death itself was defeated, also. This is the objective reality of the gospel. These are the tools of reconciliation.

Without this ancient history, grace, mercy and salvation would have no present reality. But the point is that with that history, they do have a continuing and present reality. How is that the case? How does Paul write to the Corinthians, in his own day, already some decades after the crucifixion, "Now is the day of salvation"? And how do I quote him and claim that great truth again when I say to all of us today, "Now is the day of salvation"? Paul does this, and I extend and continue it, because Paul means that this day, the day of the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, is the day of salvation. The very preaching of the gospel, the extension of the gospel into the present, is part of the very work of the gospel. That is why Paul says he is working together with God. Christ's work on the cross was complete, but Paul's work in the pulpit continued. The good news has to be told. Hearts are to be changed. Responses are to be won. So today, while the gospel is being preached, is still the time of God's mercy. Paul's use of the word "now" does not refer simply to some day on the calendar nearly 2,000 years ago, though of course it did mean his own time, initially. "Now" refers also to this very day of the gospel in our own lives.

So, what is the significance of this contemporary reference? Why do I stress this so much? Why is it important for us to say, to realize, and to know, "Now is the day of salvation"? Because the point of stressing this moment is the counterpoint that someday, the gospel will be preached no more. Someday, there will be no more proclamation of mercy. Someday, there will be no more announcement of the grace of Jesus Christ. Someday, there will be no more time. For some of us, that day will come at the end of our earthly lives. For others, perhaps, that day will come at the end of the world. Either way, the day of the proclamation of mercy will come to an end. This simple reality intensifies and heightens the significance of the mercy we are receiving now, and therefore it increases the urgency of the good news: "Now is the day of salvation."

Why did Paul have to stress not only the reality of the good news but also the urgency of the moment in his proclamation of the gospel? And why should we continue to stress both of these yet today? Obviously, then, because some of the Corinthians were holding back. And these were not pagans to whom he was writing. This is not an evangelistic letter written to those outside the church. This was written to the members of the Christian church at Corinth. And yet, Paul's great fear was that some of them had accepted the grace of God in vain. What does this mean? Perhaps some refused to commit themselves fully to Jesus Christ. Some refused to admit or confess their sin. Some refused to bend their pride. Some refused to believe in God. Some refused to accept God's grace. Some refused to follow Jesus Christ. Some refused to live in ways becoming of Christians. Some refused to give of their

wealth either to promote the preaching of the gospel or to alleviate human suffering. And apparently at least some of the Corinthians were blaming all of this on their objections to Paul's ministry. He may have been the greatest minister in the history of the church. He was certainly the most important missionary. And they did not like the way he preached the gospel. His concern was that their rejection of the minister of the gospel might result in their missing and forfeiting the gospel of Jesus Christ altogether.

So, in response to their objections, Paul offers a review of his life and ministry. He does this not at all to brag on himself, but only in order to commend the gospel of Jesus Christ to his hearers then at Corinth and so to us yet today. We would do well to hear what he has to say, not only to help us believe the gospel he proclaims, but also to help us to evaluate our own lives and see whether we are doing everything we can to live the faith and so to share the gospel with others about us. Paul writes, "We put no obstacle in any one's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything." Paul had been badly treated as a minister, but he had persevered. People beat him, and lied about him, and tried to tear down the church, but he kept on preaching the gospel. Paul knew that he deserved no better than his Lord and master, who had been executed. Paul knew that the example of his life would do much to advance Christ's gospel. So, this review Paul gives sets high standards, approaching the life of Christ himself. Few ministers and few other Christians, then or now, could live up to them. And yet, there they are, staring us in the face.

What do they accomplish? Both the reality and the urgency of the gospel message Paul preached were well commended by the reality and the urgency of the Christian life he lived. In this way, he continues to speak to us today. The gospel of Jesus Christ Paul preached and lived is real, and now is the time for us to believe it and to obey it. You see, the gospel will do no good if no one ever hears it, or believes it, or accepts it, or lives it. The gospel is not magic. God does not treat us as if we were sticks and stones. The gospel works in and on our hearts and souls. The gospel is the message of what God has done in Jesus Christ to reconcile us to himself, and it cries out for our acceptance. Paul entreated and urged people to be

reconciled to God. So is it the duty of the church today, speaking through its pastors in its pulpits, and through its members in all the world, to urge all who hear to believe and to obey, to receive the gospel and to act upon it, to love God and to love each other.

So, how does this living word of God in these ancient scriptures still apply to us today? As Paul writes, “We entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain....Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” Now is the time to accept the grace and mercy of God! Now, while gospel is being preached, is the time to respond, to believe, and to obey.

For some, though not for all, this might mean repentance and believing for the first time. Maybe there are some here today, or listening to the radio, who would like to profess their faith in Jesus Christ for the first time. We certainly invite and urge you to do so.

For many others, here and at home, it may mean coming closer to the God and Father of Jesus Christ whom we already love, serve, and obey. This seems to me to be the great point of Paul writing to the church at Corinth, to those who were already, at least at some level, Christian, and to us still gathering as the church today to hear the word of God in his writings. That is to say, the Christian life is not completed at the initial moment of conversion. It is only begun at the moment of conversion. The Christian life involves an ongoing and perpetual conversion. We are never through growing. It is always possible to be more faithful than we have ever been before. It is always possible to be more Christlike than ever before. It is always possible to be more obedient than ever before. This is the point of life in the church. Here we hear the gospel and continue to grow in grace and faith. If that were not important, we would never need to come back here. But it is important, so we keep coming back, throughout our lives, seeking to accept the grace of God well and not in vain.

“Our mouth is open to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return—I speak as to children—widen your hearts also.” Paul means that he has shared the gospel freely with the Corinthians and loved them fully. What he seeks is their love in return: their love for God, their love for Jesus Christ, their love for the gospel, and yes, their love even for the ministry of the gospel. He wants them to be the church of Jesus Christ. He wants them to accept the grace of God for real. He wants them to live their whole lives the way Christ intends for them to live. He wants them to appropriate the good news of the gospel into their very hearts and souls, into their faith, and into their life together as a congregation.

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As the Apostle Paul has written to all of us, so do I say to all of us again, “Now is the day of salvation....Widen your hearts also.” Widen your hearts to love God and his Christ, his gospel and his church.

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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