

"Salvation Belongs to Our God"

"Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" Revelation 7:10b.

On Thursday evenings, I have the honor and privilege to meet with a group of Emmanuel members to study God's Word. Over the years, we've had opportunities to study God's Word in various formats and lately we've been studying different books of the Bible by simply reading and discussing them together. This past Thursday, we wrapped up our study on Jonah. This recent study of Jonah was a timely connection for me for our observance of All Saints' weekend at Emmanuel and I'd like to share some of those connections with you. Our Revelation reading for this weekend and the story of Jonah have some helpful overlap that allow us to witness how things look to saints in heaven and how things look to saints this side of heaven. Using a statement found in both Revelation and Jonah, we'll be reminded of God's care for both His saints in heaven and on earth.

If you're familiar with the story of Jonah, the key detail that is most widely known is Jonah being swallowed up by a big fish. While that's the most memorable part of the story, what's even more important in that same scene is a statement he makes in prayer inside the fish. From the belly of the fish, Jonah prayerfully proclaims, **"Salvation belongs to the Lord!"** (*Jonah 2:9c*). It's a truth that Jonah likely picked up from his up bringing in the Psalms (cf. Ps. 3:8) and it was the words that the Lord brought to his mind as he experienced rescue from being tossed into the depths of the sea.

Honestly, it's a stunning statement on the lips of Jonah because the rest of the book reveals Jonah's struggles with this truth that, **"Salvation belongs to the Lord!"** (*Jonah 2:9c*). And this statement is also a perfect summary of the entire book of Jonah in which God demonstrates His desire and ability to save Gentiles, those outside the people of Israel. In magnificent fashion, the Lord saves pagan sailors and the wicked city of Ninevah, people who seemed so far from caring to know the Lord. Yet, by His grace the Lord led those lost ones back to Himself.

This solitary statement from Jonah, that **"Salvation belongs to the Lord!"** (*Jonah 2:9c*), overlaps with the powerful proclamation that John records in his vision of heaven. John writes about a great multitude crying out in a loud voice saying, **"Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"** (*Revelation 7:10b*). While not exactly the same words, the meaning behind Jonah's statement and the multitude's statement are the same. Whether it's the struggling saint on earth, Jonah, or the victorious saints in heaven, the multitude, the same God has worked their salvation. Yet, how this reality is experienced in heaven and on this side of heaven is quite different.

One way we see this stark contrast is the saints' reaction to not owning salvation. Salvation belongs to God and He gives it as a gift to His people. To the multitude in heaven, this is a great joy and celebration. All nations, tribes, peoples and languages are united in bold confession of God's saving gift. There is no division, isolation or frustration as all are together in one place directed toward the same purpose of worshipping the God who has brought them together from all time and space. They rejoice that the Lord owns salvation and delivers it according to His perfect plan and timing.

To Jonah, God's gift is a great joy and celebration as he gives thanks alone in the belly of the fish. However, his praise and worship are disjointed from the sailors and Ninevites who also join in this confession of the Lord's gift of salvation. In fact, Jonah is so displaced from those others God saves, that he's actually upset and angry with God. Jonah wrestles with the fact that God owns salvation and chooses to deliver it to people he deems not worthy. He is frustrated by God's timing and plan. And sadly, the sailors, Ninevites and Jonah can't realize the unity they have at that time.

Another way this stark contrast is seen is in how the vehicles of salvation look to the saints. **"Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"** (*Revelation 7:10b*). To the multitude in heaven, salvation flows from the victorious court of God and the Lamb. They wave palm branches and are clothed in white robes washed by the Lamb's blood. The multitude of heaven are pictured in purity and victory exalted into the throne room of their mighty God.

To Jonah, the Lord's salvation comes in much humbler means. His proclamation, **"Salvation belongs to the Lord!"** (*Jonah 2:9c*), comes from the belly of the fish in the depth of the sea. As if that weren't humble enough, Jonah's salvation is fully realized when he's vomited by the fish back onto the shore – a far cry from pure white robes and palm branches waving. And in great irony, the Lord uses Jonah as his instrument for salvation for people he can't stand. Jonah's first attempt to escape the Lord's call and his second attempt to preach Ninevah into destruction result in the Lord's rescue for foreigners. And from the storm-battered sailors, to fish-reeking Jonah, to sackcloth-and-ashes Ninevah, the picture of salvation this side of heaven looks far from pure and victorious.

The final way we'll consider this contrast is how God's presence is experienced by the saints. For the multitude in heaven, God's presence is intimate, personal and peaceful. The distance between them and God is removed and not only are they around His throne, but they are also sheltered by His presence. He truly is their refuge and safety both spiritually and physically. The daily cares of life are no longer a concern as God Himself sustains them without any mediator needed. He is the one who protects, nourishes and consoles. He is their peace.

For Jonah, God's presence is intimate, personal but challenging. Jonah struggles in his relationship with God and he tries multiple times to put distance between himself and God and fails. He fights against trusting God to the point that God at times seems like His adversary and not His Savior. He allows his own selfish cares in life to overshadow the mercy and pity God is mediating in his life and the lives of those around him. And instead of leaving Jonah in the comfort and peace of his own anger, the Lord pursues him to redirect and guide him back to Himself where true peace and comfort can be found.

The stark contrast between the multitude and Jonah is important and relatable for us this All Saints' weekend. I want you to pull out your bulletin and open up to that list of the faithful departed. Whether you know some of the names on that list or none of them, this weekend we have the honor and privilege of giving some names to that nameless multitude in heaven. Because salvation belongs to the Lord, they are now united with all those others to whom the Lord has delivered His salvation. Because salvation belongs to the Lord, these once-sin-riddled lives are now the picture of purity and victory. Because salvation belongs to the Lord, they are at peace in the Lord. His pursuit of them has ended as they now stand by His side for all of eternity. Because salvation belongs to the Lord, they who were saints on earth are now saints in heaven.

Now, I want you to look at yourself and those around you. Whether you know everyone's name or not, we are the Jonahs of this present day. We have struggled with God owning salvation instead of us. Whether it's our own salvation or the salvation of others, we've tried to tell God, perhaps even in anger, how to use His gift of salvation best. We've failed to recognize the unity of salvation that God desires to bring to us and yes, even to those we can't stand in this life. We've preferred to pursue God's powerful means of vengeance and wrath for others more than seek the humble means of mercy and pity for others that He has so graciously given to us. We often treat God more like our adversary than our Savior seeking ways to distance ourselves from Him and His Word. We are much closer to the picture of messiness and chaos than the picture of purity and victory.

Dear struggling saints on earth, because salvation belongs to our God, He continues to pursue us this side of heaven. Because salvation belongs to our God, there is no distance, not even death and the grave, that He won't go to bring us back to Him. Because salvation belongs to our God, He continues to deliver forgiveness, life and salvation in humble, approachable and accessible means of His Word, water, wafer and wine. Because salvation belongs to our God, He continues to show His desire and might to save even in the messiness of our sinful lives. Because salvation belongs to our God, He will unite our disjointed voices of praise in His presence forever, with all the saints who have gone before and all the saints to come. Because salvation belongs to our God, you are not only saints on earth, but you will be saints in heaven. Praise be to the Lord for **"Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"** (*Revelation 7:10b*). Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan