

"SALVATION IS FOUND IN OUR HEAVENLY FATHER'S EMBRACE"

James 1:16-18

"Don't be deceived, my dearly loved brothers. ¹⁷ Every generous act and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights; with Him there is no variation or shadow cast by turning. ¹⁸ By His own choice, He gave us a new birth by the message of truth so that we would be the firstfruits of His creatures."

INTRODUCTION

Famed western writer Louis L'Amour (1908-88) carefully researched and verified a most unusual tale. It should stir hope within us for how powerfully and wondrously our gracious God may answer our prayers for those who stray from Him. In 1820, Peter Richley survived one of the most harrowing series of events of recorded history. The ship upon which he'd been traveling sank. He was soon rescued by the crew of another ship. By some strange and tragic twist, this ship also sank. Peter was then rescued again. This third ship also went down. Rescued a third time, his fourth ship of passage soon sank. Unbelievably, after Peter's four brushes with death that took the lives of many passengers and crewmembers of these ships, his fifth rescue ship sank beneath the waves! Finding himself once again on the high seas, however, Peter Richley floated with the serene confidence that somehow God did not want him to die yet.

As if on cue, another ship came by and answered his call for help. This ocean liner, The City of Leeds, was bound from England to Australia and traveled the same sea lane as Peter Richley's downed ships. The crew hoisted Peter aboard. Dry clothing was provided to him. The ship's doctor gave him a routine exam, pronounced him fit, and then asked him an unusual favor. "There's a lady on board who booked passage to Australia," the doctor explained. "She's looking for her son who disappeared years ago. She's dying and she's asking to see her son. She knows everybody on board and since you're the only newcomer, would you pretend to be her son?" Peter agreed. After all, he felt he owed someone a favor after his life had been saved for the fifth time. He followed the doctor below deck and entered into a cabin. There on a small bed lay a frail woman with silver hair. She was obviously suffering from a very high fever as she kept crying out somewhat deliriously, "Please God. Let me see my son before I die. I must see my son!"

After the ship's doctor gently pushed the young man toward the bed, Peter Richley began to sob. Lying on that bed, he saw the lifeline that kept him from drowning five times. This frail woman was none other than Sarah Richley—who'd prayed for 10 years to be reconciled to her son, Peter. He'd left home after a stormy exchange with his mother over his worldly ways, despite his Christian training; turning his back upon her and Christ. The ship's doctor stood amazed as the young man fell down by the bed and embraced the ill woman. "I'm here mom! I'm here. It's me! I've come back to you!" Within days, Sarah's fever subsided. His mother awakened to find the sweet answer to her prayers seated on the edge of her bed, miraculously reconciled to her and to Christ, carried there by the decks of six ships and some guardian angels!

This tale is a variation of the Bible's beloved story of The Prodigal Son ("prodigal" means "recklessly wasteful with money or possessions"). **Jesus** tells us in **Luke 15:11-32** of a farmer's younger son who is convinced rules are for fools. To throw off his father's restraints, he demands a third of his family's wealth so he can go to a distant town to live as he wants. Once there, he indulges his selfish passions; spending money freely on wine, women, and song. He fantasizes that if he can keep a drunken party going forever, he will be forever happy. Such a fantasy cannot be sustained. Sooner or later our money or our health fails us. We also fail to realize a life of selfish indulgence reduces us to living like an animal. When his money runs out, he's soon living worse off than the pigs he's forced to tend for a local farmer, just to stay alive. Finally, **Jesus** states, "he came to his senses" (**vs. 17**). This is a striking expression in Greek. It depicts the state of *rebellion against God* as an act of *madness*, and *repentance* as a *return to sanity*. Deeply regretting his foolishness in turning his back upon his father and God, he heads for home. He's convinced that even if

must follow all his father's rules as a servant, he'll be better off than the pig-like life he's made for himself. To his shock and delight, his father reinstates this Prodigal Son to all the privileges of sonship. In **vs. 24**, the father exclaims, "this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" The Greek verb translated "was lost" is translated "perish" in **John 3:16** (NIV): "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." This same Greek verb appears in **Luke 19:10**, "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." **Jesus** presents the Prodigal Son's story as a lesson in what it truly means to be "lost" and to find salvation.

My question today is when was the Prodigal Son "saved"? Would he have been "saved" if the father's will made provision to establish a trust account guaranteeing him a livable income for life, regardless of where and how the Prodigal lived (**Luke 15:30** suggests his father kept tabs on him without asking him to return home until the son was ready)? Would he have been "saved" if his brother sacrificially agreed to bear the costs of the Prodigal's recklessness by placing part of his own inheritance on deposit in a bank in the distant town, to rescue him from the miserable conditions into which his selfish actions had thrown him? An angel told Joseph, "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (**Matthew 1:21**, NASB). If the Prodigal was "saved" only from the *consequences* of his "sins," is this what the angel meant by being "saved"? No! The son had been "dead" of devotion for his father. As long as he remained in the death grip of his pig-like appetites, he was "lost" to his father. He was not truly "saved" until he returned to his father's embrace as a humble, repentant sinner. He then came to "live again" (be "born again") and was "found" ("redeemed"); ready to resume a God-honoring fellowship with his father.

Jesus emphasizes that salvation is much more a matter of being saved *for someone* than being saved *from something*. God did not allow His own Son to be brutally sacrificed just to save us *from* consequences of Hell's eternal destruction, as wonderful as this is. **Jesus** sacrificed Himself for the purpose of restoring us to an eternal fellowship with our Heavenly Father that saves us from sin's penalty, power, and presence!

SALVATION IS FOUND IN OUR HEAVENLY FATHER'S EMBRACE

James was **Jesus'** half-brother and lead pastor of Jerusalem's house churches in Christianity's early days. Persecution began three years after **Jesus'** Crucifixion, forcing early believers to be "scattered" across the Roman Empire (**Acts 8:1-4**). James' letter may be the earliest New Testament writing, written 15-17 years after **Jesus'** Resurrection. James sought with a pastor's heart to provide the comfort and guidance Christians need to make sense of God's workings in our lives to keep us firmly within our Heavenly Father's embrace.

The first issue James tackles is confusion or discouragement arising from times of "testing" or "trials." **James 1:2-4** (CSB) tells us, "Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴ And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing." A difficult situation may seem like a "trial" if 1): We think we're *losing* something valuable we already have (as a wallet, our health, or a friendship); or 2): we think we're *not going to get* something vital to our happiness (as a beloved person we wish to marry, or a job or promotion we covet). In **vs. 2**, the Greek word for "trial" is "a situation that tests us to prove or improve our abilities." The Greek word for "testing" in **James 1:3** refers to refining precious metals to remove their impurities. We may cause our own testing or trials. Patrick, age 10, advises, "Never trust a dog to watch your food." Eileen, age 8 urges, "Never try to baptize a cat." Michael, age 14, says, "When your dad is mad and asks you, 'Do I look stupid?' don't answer him." God is not behind all trials. If God chooses for us to experience one of life's pressure cookers—most testing or purification requires heat, pressure, or both!—it's to draw us closer to Him to enrich our lives with the qualities of His love.

Paul Azinger was diagnosed in December 1993, at age 33, with lymphoma (cancer of the lymph nodes). He'd spent nearly 300 weeks in the top-10 of the World Golf Rankings. His earnings from 1987 through 1993 exceeded 5 ½ million dollars. He'd become convicted years earlier of his need of a Savior. But, like

many believers, his life still revolved around *his* interests. Paul thought if he honored God enough to prove he was on God's side, God would be on *his* side to help him get what *he* most wanted: to achieve great things as a golfer. He'd given little thought to being *saved from himself* or of achieving great things *for God*. In his autobiography, *Zinger* (1996), Paul says after being diagnosed with lymphoma, "Everything I had accomplished in golf became meaningless to me. All I wanted to do was live." But he'd also suddenly been smacked in the face with the realization that if he had nothing to show for his life but personal achievements that counted for nothing beyond the grave, his life would truly be meaningless.

Paul Azinger took the advice of **James 1:5-8** (NIV): "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."⁶ But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.⁸ Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do." James makes two emphatic points. First, God encourages us to ask for "wisdom" to understand His will. As Joseph and Mary's second son, James shared in their unique privilege. For 30 years, he observed **Jesus** seeking God's wisdom about struggles in their family, their community, their synagogue, or their country. James learned from his Brother that "wisdom" is "the ability to view life as God sees it and to live for God's purposes, rather than just for our own." God "generously" heeds prayers to help us make sense of our lives. James selected a Greek word for "generous" that assures us we're not an afterthought to our Heavenly Father; we have His "undivided, unwavering attention." He also responds to prayers for guidance "without finding fault"; without holding our past failures toward God against us.

This brings us to James' second point: *how* we "ask" God's guidance can affect the answers we "expect to receive" from Him. The root idea of "doubt" (**vs. 6**) is "indecision when torn by divided loyalties." A man named Jake once asked Dear Abby, "Is it possible for a man to be in love with two women at the same time?" She replied, "Yes, and also hazardous." James warns it's hazardous to divide the loyalty we owe fully to God with the world, ourselves, or anyone else. This becomes more explicit in the warning against being "double-minded" in **vs. 8**. We don't truly demonstrate "faith" in God's guidance and love unless we are willing to *commit* ourselves in trust to our Heavenly Father—our lives, our well being, or the lives of those we most love—regardless of how or where His will leads us. After 6 months of chemotherapy and 5 weeks of radiation, Paul Azinger recovered from lymphoma. He returned to the PGA tour. In 2000, he blew away the competition by winning a PGA tournament by seven strokes. He was named PGA Tour Comeback Player of the Year. He now broadcasts golf tournaments for Fox Sports. But he no longer lives to be a champion in the golfing world but in God's world. His top priority is to make his life count for the Lord. He often testifies his bout with cancer changed his focus from being self-centered to Christ-centered.

The second issue James tackles that might tear us from our Father's Heavenly embrace is sinful distrust of His heart toward us. "No one undergoing a trial should say, 'I am being tempted by God,'" he cautions us in **James 1:13-16** (CSB), "since God is not tempted by evil, and He himself doesn't tempt anyone."¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desire.¹⁵ Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death.¹⁶ Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters." "Tempt" is the verb form of the noun "trial" in **James 1:2**. Our own sinful cravings are to blame if we allow Satan or sin-warped thoughts to trick us into reacting wrongly to a God-given trial. Adam and Eve believed and acted upon Satan's lies that God withheld something rightfully theirs and "good." This allowed a trial God designed to keep Him as the center of their existence, for their own good, to sour into a "temptation" that ruined them (**Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-24**), as we can be ruined.

Admittedly, we may not always feel we're *better* off for having experienced a trial, even if we resist temptations to be *bitter* for what's happened to us. We may be so dazed by a trial, that, for a time, we just feel *battered* by our ordeal. All God expects of us is to trust the depth of His love for us, even if we are dazed or battered. Pastor Max Lucado tells the story of Chippie, a once joyful and musical parakeet: "His

problems began when Chippie's owner decided to clean his cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. The phone rang and she turned to pick it up. She'd barely said 'hello' when 'ssssopp!' Chippie got sucked inside. His owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was Chippie—still alive, but stunned! Since the bird was covered with dust and soot, she grabbed him and raced to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held Chippie under the running water. Then, realizing Chippie was soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do. She reached for her hair dryer and blasted the pet with hot air. Poor Chippie never knew what hit him. A few days later, a reporter who'd initially written about the event [how he heard about it we're not told] contacted Chippie's owner to see how the bird was recovering. "Well," she replied, "Chippie doesn't sing much anymore—he just sits and stares." It's not hard to see why. Sucked in, washed up, and blown over That's enough to steal the song from the cheeriest heart."

This has been a long introduction to our main text. Next week we'll focus upon the warmth of the embrace our "Father of lights" extends to us when we yield ourselves to **Jesus Christ** as Savior and Lord. We are the Father's Spiritually "born again" (**John 3:3-7**) "new creation" (**II Corinthians 5:17**). "By His own choice," **James 1:18** declares, "He gave a new birth by the message of truth so that we would be the firstfruits of His creatures." After God freed the Israelites from slavery and death in Egypt, He commanded that the firstborn of their children (for which substitutes were allowed) and flocks, and the firstfruits of their fruit and grain, were to be devoted to His service (**Exodus 13:1-2, 11-13; Exodus 23:19; Deuteronomy 26:1-10**). As the people Christ freed from slavery to sin and death, we belong to the Lord and are to be devoted to God's service as the "firstfruits" of His Heaven-bound people.

We are all that will survive the total, fiery destruction hanging over everything and everyone else of our present world, according to **II Peter 3:3-4, 9-11a, 13** (NLT): some of the Bible's most sobering words: "Most importantly, I want to remind you that in the last days scoffers will come, mocking the truth and following their own desires. ⁴They will say, 'What happened to the promise that Jesus is coming again? From before the times of our ancestors, everything has remained the same since the world was first created.' ⁹The Lord isn't really being slow about His promise, as some people think. No, He is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent. ¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief. Then the heavens will pass away with a terrible noise, and the very elements themselves will disappear in fire, and the earth and everything on it will be found to deserve judgment. ¹¹Since everything around us is going to be destroyed like this, what holy and godly lives you should live, . . . ¹³But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth He has promised, a world filled with God's righteousness."

CONCLUSION

Eleanor Powell (1912-82) was an American film actress and dancer of the 1930s and 1940s, known for her exuberant solo tap dancing. She starred opposite many of Hollywood's leading men in movies, including Jimmy Stewart, Robert Taylor, Fred Astaire, Nelson Eddy, and Robert Young. She first stated what has become an enduring quote: "What we are is God's gift to us. What we become is our gift to God." How much of a gift to God would you like to become?