

STEPS TO SALVATION

Luke 2:21-24

"When the eight days were completed for His circumcision, He was named Jesus—the name given by the angel before He was conceived.²² And when the days of their purification according to the law of Moses were finished, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord²³ (just as it is written in the law of the Lord: Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord)²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice (according to what is stated in the law of the Lord: a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons)."

INTRODUCTION

Most Americans claim to be honest, law-abiding citizens. They believe people are naturally good; aside from exceeding the speed limit or a few minor infractions, few really need restraints of law enforcement to do what is right. Is this true? Have you ever wondered what would happen if the entire police force of a major city went on strike? How long would law and order prevail? What happened in Montreal, Quebec, October 7, 1969, gives us a glimpse of the crime frenzy that might ensue. At mid-morning, both the police and firefighters unions walked off their jobs for 16 hours. At first, the strike's impact was limited to 17 robberies at gunpoint and 9 bank holdups (nearly 10% of the number of holdups of the previous 12 months). But as night fell, the taxi drivers' union seized upon the police absence to violently protest the exclusive airport pickups contract of the Murray Hill limousine company. Taxi drivers tried to burn down the Murray Hill garage and shot and killed a corporal with the Quebec provincial police. With no police force to quell this wave of violence, anarchy took over. Students and separatists were the first to join the rampage. Usually peaceful citizens then joined the ruffraff and crime went wild. Some 1,000 plate glass windows were smashed in a stretch of 21 business blocks in the heart of the city, while stereo units, radios, TVs, and wearing apparel were looted. Professional burglars took advantage of the chaos to make off with truckloads of goods, though one burglar was shot by a storeowner defending his shop. A smartly dressed man scampered down a street with a fur coat over each arm. By the time police began returning to their posts in the wee hours of the morning, 49 people had been wounded or otherwise injured during the rioting. Police made 108 arrests, the city's public buildings were placed under guard by the army summoned by Premier Jean-Jacques Bertrand, and damages ran into the millions of dollars.

Cal Thomas, a nationally syndicated U.S. columnist and devout Christian, comments upon similar riots in London that began August 6, 2011 and spread for six days to cities and towns across England. Thomas states, "Children don't 'catch' goodness and right behavior as they do a cold. Their natural tendency is to do wrong. The goal of discipline is to teach them to do right. The London riots are the extreme outcome when 'right' is no longer defined," and "civility, right and wrong, personal responsibility and accountability, . . . are not values" purposefully "passed on to the next generation."

Today's sermon, Steps to Salvation, reveals three crucial steps in bringing us within the fold of those God grants salvation from sin's penalty and power: Rules, Righteousness, and Redemption.

I. RULES

Jesus was born to parents who strictly adhered to God's laws, His *rules of conduct* recorded in the Jewish Scriptures. Joseph and Mary understood God's laws express His character, so to dismiss any of them as irrelevant or unnecessary is, to some extent, to dismiss what God is like. **Jesus** did not later fault Jewish religious leaders for their *excessive enforcement* of God's laws but because they *set aside* God's laws by their own laws and traditions. **Jesus** told them, "[Y]ou cancel the word of God for the sake of your own tradition" (**Matthew 15:6**, NLT). The word "law" appears five times in **Luke 2:21-40**, which describes **Jesus'** earliest days. Though He came to deliver God's people from the bondage of satisfying the requirements of God's law on our own, **Jesus** did so by being "born under the law" and obeying its commands (**Galatians 4:1-7**). **Jesus** tells us in **Matthew 5:17** (NLT): "Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did

not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose." The Apostle Paul echoed **Jesus** when he wrote in **Romans 3:31**: "Do we then cancel the law through faith? Absolutely not! On the contrary, we uphold the law."

What rules do you live by? If they reflect God's character, such godly rules draw us closer to the conduct of our Creator. But people often live by rules leading them away from God. Dennis Lee Curtis, an armed robber, was arrested in 1992 in Rapid City, South Dakota. Police found a sheet of paper in his wallet on which he'd written his code, sort of a Robber's Rules of Conduct: "1. I will not kill anyone unless I have to. 2. I will take cash and food stamps—no checks. 3. I will rob only at night. 4. I will not wear a mask. 5. I will not rob mini-marts or 7-Eleven stores. 6. If I get chased by cops on foot, I will get away. If chased by a vehicle, I will not put the lives of innocent civilians on the line. 7. I will rob only seven months out of the year. 8. I will enjoy robbing from the rich to give to the poor." Dennis Lee Curtis may have been proud of his rules to steal by, as though this set him above common thieves. But when he stood before the court and was sentenced, was he judged by the standards he'd set for himself? Our rules to live by are generally worthless if they conflict with the laws of society. The standards we set for ourselves are also worthless if they conflict with the rules of conduct God gave us to live by to align our lives with His.

Luke 2:21-24 presents three rules God gave Israel to live by. God required circumcision of all Jewish males, all firstborn sons were to be presented to God and redeemed, and mothers offered a sacrifice 40 days after giving birth to be restored to the hygienic and spiritual purity necessary to participate in formal worship of the LORD. Joseph and Mary's compliance with these stipulations reveal how seriously devout Jews took their responsibility to prepare themselves properly body and soul for approaching God in worship.

Jesus' parents obeyed God's law by having **Jesus** circumcised. God commanded male infants to be circumcised when they were "eight days old" as an external physical symbol of the internal spiritual cleanliness He seeks in His people (**Genesis 17:10-12; Jeremiah 9:25-26**). **Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 16** (NASB) declares, "Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to keep the LORD'S commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good? ¹⁶ So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer." At His circumcision, His parents further obeyed God by naming Him "Jesus—the name given by the angel before He was conceived" (**Matthew 1:21**), which means, "the LORD [YAHWEH (God's most sacred name)] is salvation."

II. RIGHTEOUSNESS

In God's laws given before 1400 B. C., a woman became ceremonially unclean giving birth due to her blood flow and post-partum discharge. This is remarkable! The theory of the transmission of infection by germs, and the use of disinfectants, did not become accepted until late in the 19th century A.D. Christian Dr., S. E. McMillen, in his book, *None of These Diseases* (1963), points out how slowly medical science came to admit people who deliver babies and handle patients should be meticulous in purifying their hands and their instruments to prevent the spread of infection and unnecessary deaths. Mothers, in particular, often died in hospitals after they gave birth and were examined by Drs. who'd just handled patients with highly contagious diseases, until Louis Pasteur's work in the late 19th century awakened the medical community to the reality and dangers of transmissible germs. Being "righteous," living by God's standards of right conduct, promotes not only our spiritual health by our physical & mental health, as well.

As Joseph and Mary followed the procedure for a mother's purification, the mention of "a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons" reveals they utilized the offering allowed Israel's poor (**Leviticus 12:1-8**). As a carpenter, Joseph had the ability to provide for his family, but historical records show only the wealthiest usually provided "a one year old lamb for a burnt offering." Two birds suitable for sacrifice could be purchased for one-tenth the cost of a lamb and a bird. Had Joseph and Mary already possessed the costly

"gifts" of the "magi"—"gold, frankincense, and myrrh" (**Matthew 12:1-12**), they undoubtedly would have obtained the "year-old lamb" for Mary's purification.

The text refers to "their" sacrifice, which seems odd at first glance. Only the mother's purification after childbirth is specified in God's law. However, Joseph may have needed to assist in Mary's delivery in the manger away from their main family. This would have rendered him "unclean" and in need of purification, according to **Leviticus 15:19-23** and the *Mishnah*, an edited record of the oral *Torah* dating to the time of **Jesus**. Joseph was as zealous as Mary to comply with God's standards of purity and righteousness.

It's easy to deceive ourselves we are complying with God's standards of purity and righteousness when what we're really doing is complying with our own standards, or the standards set by our society, for right living. A father clearly remembers when he gave his two-year-old son, Steve, his first "adult" responsibility. He told Steve to watch Susan, his baby sister, while he stepped out of the room. He'd only been gone a few moments when he heard a thump; then Susan started crying. He rushed back to find Susan had fallen from the couch and was stretched out on the floor. Steve just sat there, looking innocent. His father said, "Steve, I told you to watch her." Steve answered, "I did." He watched her fall and he watched her cry. He claimed he did exactly what he was told to do. We often fall far short of the expectations of the "God" who "created man in His own image" (**Genesis 1:27**), even when we don't realize it. An unknown pastor gives us this challenge: "If you can start the day without caffeine, if you can always be cheerful, ignoring aches and pains; if you can resist complaining and boring people with your troubles; if you can eat the same food every day and be grateful for it; if you can understand when your loved ones are too busy to give you any time; if you can take criticism and blame without resentment; if you can resist treating a rich friend better than a poor friend; if you can face the world without lies and deceit; if you can overlook it when those you love take it out on you when, through no fault of yours, something goes wrong; if you can conquer tension without medical help; if you can say honestly that deep in your heart you have no prejudice against creed, color, religion or politics; then, my friend, you are almost as good as your dog."

III. REDEMPTION

God proclaims in **Numbers 3:13** (NLT): "[F]or all the firstborn males are mine. On the day I struck down all the firstborn sons of the Egyptians, I set apart for myself all the firstborn in Israel, both of people and of animals. They are mine; I am the LORD." Would Israel's firstborn sons have perished the night God sent His "destroyer" of judgment through Egypt, if their homes were not protected by the blood of a Passover lamb sacrificed in their behalf (**Exodus 12:21-23**)? Yes. From then on, God insisted Israel's firstborn sons were to be devoted to His service. But when presenting their first-born sons to the LORD, parents could "redeem" them from priestly service by the purchase price God set of "five shekels" (approximately \$150 today; what Americans typically earn in 2-3 days) (**Numbers 3:40-51; 18:14-16**). Redemption thus became the primary way God provided for the support of the Old Testament priesthood. As Mary's firstborn son, and as one who belonged not to the priestly tribe of Levi but to the tribe of Judah, **Jesus** had to be exempted from priestly service by payment of the redemption price set by God. A "sin offering" also needed to be made in **Jesus'** behalf, as was true of all firstborn sons. He had no personal guilt and was unstained by Adam's sin by virtue of His virgin birth, but by coming to earth to voluntarily take upon Himself the guilt of our sins (**Isaiah 53:4-10**), **Jesus** was stained by the guilt of our sins.

Redemption impressed upon Jewish parents the realization their children belonged to God even more than to them. Redemption also emphasized the obligation of the Jews to serve and worship the LORD who had provided them a way to escape God's judgment by the blood of the Passover lamb sacrificed in their behalf. As, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (**John 1:27**), "Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed" (**I Corinthians 5:7**, NASB). Should we who benefit from Christ's sacrifice in our behalf be any less zealous to serve the Lord than the Israelites of old? **I Corinthians 6:19a-20a** (NLT) urges: "Don't you realize . . . ? You do not belong to yourself,²⁰ for God bought you with a high price."

CONCLUSION

One of the most incredible stories of redemption we'll ever hear took place in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the 1990s. A young man named Tom McGee, after a night of partying, got drunk and ran head-on into a car driven by another young man named Ted Morris, killing Ted instantly. Tom was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to a number of years in jail. But due to overcrowding, nonviolent prisoners were being given early paroles, so Tom McGee actually spent only a few months in prison before being released. He hadn't learned his lesson. It wasn't long until he was arrested again for drunk driving. His parole was revoked and he was sent back to prison to complete his sentence.

Jack Morris, his victim's father, visited Tom McGee in prison. Jack had received God's grace of salvation through **Jesus** and did not believe he was in a position to judge Tom. Jack also believed it would be a greater tragedy than the loss of his son Ted, who was now safe forever in Heaven, for Tom to be lost forever in Hell. After visiting Tom several times, Jack began taking cookies his wife, Elizabeth, had baked for Tom and they became friends. When Tom McGee was released from prison, after serving his full sentence, he had no place to go. Jack and Elizabeth Morris invited him into their home and gave him a place to stay. They provided the means by which he could receive an education and helped him find a job. They were members of a Church of Christ in Tulsa. Tom began attending with them. One day, he called upon **Jesus Christ** to be his Lord and Savior and was baptized to "walk in newness of life" (**Romans 6:4**, NASB).

Before long, Jack and Elizabeth Morris, the father and mother of the son Tom McGee killed, adopted Tom and made him their son. When Jack and Elizabeth Morris die, Tom McGee will inherit their estate. Does this story seem unreasonable to you? If an irresponsible drunken driver kills someone dear to you, your most natural response would be to hate this person, not to love him; to long for this person to be put away in prison and to be punished, not to extend such kindness and forgiveness toward him that you would be willing to adopt this person fully into your family! You would have every right to insist this person doesn't deserve anything good from you.

But isn't Tom McGee's story our story? Aren't our irresponsible actions what cost our Heavenly Father the life of His Son? Suffering the consequences of *our* violations of God's laws is what killed **Jesus**. Yet, God extends such kindness and forgiveness toward us, in the name of His slain Son, that He's willing to adopt us fully into His family, though we do not deserve anything good from Him. As **Romans 5:6-10a** (CEV) explains, "Christ died for us at a time when we were helpless and sinful."⁷ No one is really willing to die for an honest person, though someone might be willing to die for a truly good person.⁸ But God showed how much He loved us by having Christ die for us, even though we were sinful.⁹ But there is more! Now that God has accepted us because Christ sacrificed His life's blood, we will also be kept safe from God's anger.¹⁰ Even when we were God's enemies, He made peace with us, because His Son died for us." **Romans 8:15-17a** (CSB) extends even farther how fully God embraces us within His family though we were once His "enemies." "You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. Instead, you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father!'"¹⁶ The Spirit Himself testifies together with our spirit that we are God's children,¹⁷ and if children, also heirs—heirs of God and coheirs with Christ."