

When He Reached Down His Hand for Me

Isaiah 59.1, 16

Two verses from Isaiah 59 will provide our text for this morning.

Verse 1 reads: Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.

Verse 16 reads: He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.

There is a song we sing from time to time at Grace Community Church, and it provides the title and the inspiration for this message. Let me read you the lyrics:

Once my soul was astray from the heavenly way,
And I was wretched and vile as could be.
But my Savior in love, He brought me peace from above,
When He reached down His hand for me.

I was near to despair when Christ came to me there,
And He told me that I would be free;
Then he lifted my feet, he gave me gladness complete,
When He reached down His hand for me.

How my heart does rejoice when I heard His sweet voice,
And in the tempest, to Him I can flee,
There to lean on His arm; safe secure from all harm,
Since He reached down His hand for me.

When Christ Jesus reached down for me,
When He reached way down for me;
I was lost and undone, without God or His Son,
When He reached down His hand for me.

This hymn teaches us a very important truth about God's salvation: Salvation is God reaching down to us, not the other way around. Salvation is not us reaching to God or aspiring after God, but is God reaching down to us, pure and simple. Salvation is the work of the arm of the Lord, not the arm of man. There is no greater point of the gospel than this; nothing that more clearly distinguishes the religion of God from the religion of man. Beginning with Cain's sacrifice and on through the Tower of Babel, the self-righteousness of the Pharisees, and the legalism of Galatia's church, Man has shown his unwillingness to acknowledge his utter inability to help himself and trust his soul's case to the work of God alone.

And this wicked principle is by no means dead in the thoughts of believers. This is why we always preach the simple gospel to believers as well as unbelievers. Those of us who have been saved by the long and strong arm of the Lord still struggle with the flesh and its prideful insistence on the ability to do some good thing God can accept. But, according to the word of Paul, we come in this world with nothing good in us, and we remain that way. There is nothing that has arisen in the heart of a man or woman that God can accept or find pleasure in. The only thing that God has ever found good in a man is that which God, Himself, put there. Does a man have faith? It is the gift of God. Does a man love God? That love was born of God's love for him. As one song writer put it, "The only good thing in me is Him."

Isaiah tells us that it takes nothing less than the arm of the Lord to save. There were those in Isaiah's day who despaired of salvation, and well they might for their case was desperate. But Isaiah does not turn them to thoughts of themselves. He does not say, "Your sins have separated you from the Lord, but you can always quit sinning." He does not call on them to bring even more sacrifices. Rather, Isaiah turns their thoughts to God and His abilities: The arm of the Lord is not short!"

The arm of the Lord is not so short that it cannot reach any and every one He desires to reach. There is no depth of depravity so awful that the Lord cannot save a soul from it. There is not a despair so deep that the Lord is unable to stretch His arm to the despairing one. There is not a heart so hard that the strong arm of the Lord cannot break it.

It may be that you feel you are out of the reach of God's grace. You may feel you have sinned too much. Maybe your sins are many, or maybe you feel you have not sinned so often, but you are guilty of some of the most vile and wicked things imaginable, or maybe you must confess that your sins are both awful and many. It does not matter. It is irrelevant how often or how seriously you have sinned. The fact is, you have sinned much more often and much more awfully than you think. No, the issue is not the greatness of your sin, but the greatness of the God who saves from sin.

Maybe you feel that your desires after God are not enough to attract His attention. You do not feel your sin enough, nor do you feel your need of Him enough, so you think that you have not called out to Him often enough or loudly enough. You think you do not have faith enough to bring salvation your way. Isaiah goes on to say that God's ear is not dull that he cannot hear. It does not take a loud call to get God's attention. It is not how loudly you call that is the issue. Rather, it is to Whom you call and for what you call that is at issue. Do you call upon the Lord. It is written, "Whosoever shall call upon the name

of the Lord shall be saved." Do you see anything in that promise about how loudly or earnestly you call? It is not the call that saves, but the Lord that saves. God can hear the lowest whisper, even the thought of the heart.

If there is any fault to be found in calling on the Lord, it is to call on Him for something he is not giving. The Pharisee sought a reward for his righteous works. But God didn't hear his call even though it was prayed loudly in the street. But note the publican off to the side. He could not so much as lift his eyes to heaven. He was broken-hearted and in despair. He had nothing good to claim and no reason to give to God for saving him. But his pitiful cry was heard, for he prayed, "God be merciful..." God delights in mercy, and His ear is ever tuned to a cry for it. There has never been a request for Divine mercy that has been denied.

What is the arm of the Lord? Better we should ask, "Who is the arm of the Lord. It is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is God's arm. In chapter 53 Isaiah writes, "Who has believed our report and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" John applies these words to Christ being revealed. And, again, in chapter 59 verse 16 we read, "He saw that there was no one, He was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so His own arm worked salvation for him, and His own righteousness sustained him." Is that not Christ? He is God's arm, He is God's righteousness. Since the arm of man was unable and unwilling to save, God did it Himself. And therein lies the sinner's hope.

We may think of many historical instances which might be described as God's reaching down His hand to save one of His own. Indeed, the people of God do not experience only one salvation. They experience only one regeneration, or New Birth; but God saves them from their sins on a continual basis. And Paul says that we are nearer our salvation than when we first believed. But I would like to focus on two events in which our Lord reached down to save His people. The

point to be made in each case is that it is God that does the reaching; and that He reached way down in order to accomplish His work.

God first reached way down to sinners when His Son – His long and strong Arm – came to this earth 2000 years ago. Before Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary, he was with God and was God. It would not have been robbery for Him to claim and grasp tightly all the privileges of Deity. He was rightfully God. But God cannot save us from our sin while remaining in heaven. It was necessary that God become one of us if He is to save any of us. Hebrews 2.16,17 puts it this way:

For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.

And this is just what Christ did – became like us in every way except sin. It may not seem to us that this was any big deal, but that is only because we do not realize how high He was as God, and how low we were through sin. Paul describes it as making himself of no reputation. Most of us are quite jealous of our reputation so we guard it carefully. And we must guard it for our good reputations are mostly a lie, so we must work very hard to cover the truth about us lest our reputation suffer for it.

But Christ had a Divine reputation: he was God – King of the universe, adored by angels, praised by saints. But, when He comes into the world, it says he “made himself of no reputation.” The same Scripture goes on to say that He humbled Himself and became obedient like a servant to a master. Imagine that! The King becomes a servant; the Highest becomes the Lowest. And this is not all, His obedience was

unto death: not that He merely obeyed to the point of death, but that he became the servant of death. How can this be?

Earlier I said that Christ was made like us in every point except sin. That is only half true. He had no nature to sin – no inclination of any kind to disobey God. Furthermore, He never did any sin – never once transgressed the law of God. But the Bible tells us that He was “numbered with transgressors.” How can this be? How can a just God number a sinless man among transgressors? The Scripture goes on to explain: He bore the sin of many. It was not His own sins that he bore, but as Peter tells us, He bore OUR sins in His body on the tree. So far as God’s law was concerned, Christ became like us in every way, including sin, for the sin of God’s people was laid on Him and charged to Him as though He, Himself, had done them. This is, to a great degree, a mystery. But He who is the hope of God’s people and God in human flesh, became like us – without God and without hope – in order to save us godless, hopeless people. He cried out, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” How far did God reach down in order to save sinners? He reached all the way down to their godless, hopeless condition, and experienced it in all its awfulness. It takes a long, strong arm to reach that far and drag the sinner back up.

But there is another instance in which it can be said that God’s arm reaches way down for the sinner. Sometime in the life experience of everyone of God’s elect, God reaches down to them, and by His Spirit, calls them to Christ. And when He does so, He has to reach all the way down to where the sinner is. The gospel is not that God will meet you half way or give you a second chance. It is not, “You do your best, and God will do the rest.” Paul says that God raised us up with Christ when we were dead in our sin. Christ did not wait for Lazarus to get half way out before He gave him life. Rather, He spoke into that tomb with the voice of God and that Voice – that strong arm – went all the way to dead Lazarus, and brought Him out.

God is not looking for good people to save. He did not come to seek and save that which was near at hand, but that which was lost. There are none of you so far from God that He cannot reach you; but there may be some who are too close to God. There are folks who think they have drawn near to God in their religious fervor and moral behavior. Some think they have come near to God through the performance of religious rituals. Such people are too close for God to save them. His long arm reaches past them, way down to the bottom of the barrel, and scrapes the scum and goo off the bottom – the dregs – and says, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine."

May God reach down His hand this day – all the way to you – and deliver you from your sins.