

A PSYCHOLOGICAL COMMENTARY ON THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

by *Leo Lieberman*

Salvation—what does it mean in the context of today's disordered world? The human wisdom of the ancient ages may be assumed to be communicated to the present by way of the myths and legends forged in the fogs of antiquity. I shall try to translate the seemingly "forgotten language" of the Judeo-Christian biblical revelations into some of the psychological idiom of today.

The concepts contained in the accumulated wisdom of a people, the concepts that guide people toward what is best for the human condition in the long run, presumably help to decrease the probability that the individual or a group will be ensnared in the sufferings that often ensue from a trial and error approach. Increased insight into the human process represented by the biblical term "salvation" may make less painful and more joyous the evolutionary progression of a modern man from a chronically disordered situation to a more harmonious, creative, and self-fulfilling society. It would seem profitable to explore the insights of the ancients and try to recapture and internalize them by means of a modern idiom.

It seems to me that (1) the source of the salvation story is external; (2) the nature of salvation is the strength to preserve and protect; and (3) its objective is security, peace, and harmony.

The objectives of salvation vary from the Old Testament to the New. In the Old Testament, the objective is to be saved *for* this world in terms of prosperity, happiness, and security. The happiness of the soul is identified with the happiness of the body. On the other hand, in the New Testament the objective of salvation is to be saved *from the world* in terms of deliverance of the soul from corporeal life into immortality.

Now, what do the preceding religious concepts of salvation mean to me as a psychologist? It seems to me that the religious concept of salvation was an earlier attempt by man to approximate the transaction

Leo Lieberman is director of guidance and chairman of the Psychology Department at Suffolk University. This paper was originally given at the 1967 Conference of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science.

ZYGON

that occurs between a therapeutic personality (whether it be mother, husband, clergyman, friend, or psychiatrist) and an individual who finds himself handicapped by anxiety because he is unable to cope with frustration, threat, or constriction.

Some meaningful translations to psychological language seem possible. The soul becomes the personality. Salvation becomes maturation or the development of strength of personality. Evil is anxiety resulting from frustration, threat, or constriction. God, in this situation, is represented by a therapeutic agent. Deliverance becomes sufficient relief from anxiety to be able to handle it. Victory becomes the attainment of a balanced life. Peace becomes good mental health wherein the individual feels comfortable about himself and with others, and achieves his successive goals to a satisfying degree.

The key to modern salvation or zest in living is the therapeutic agent—which may be an individual or even a group. The essential feature in modern salvation as I am attempting to interpret it, namely, a therapeutic agent, seems to be not the commandment but the listening—the concerned, understanding, and appreciative listening by another human being to a troubled person which helps to save him from his anxieties, angers, fears, resentments, and insecurities and opens the way for him to self-control, self-confidence, inner harmony, concern for others, and zest in living.

Perhaps I can depict the saving power of what I like to call “creative listening” by describing the behavior of some people in group therapy.

From a group of compulsive gamblers and their wives (as well as other groups), I have learned about the process and the power of creative listening. Creative listening means to listen to another human being with patience, with understanding, with respect, and with faith.

Patience is the willingness to endure while another person tries to find the words that describe what is bothering him. Patience is the willingness to remain interested and involved while he gropes his way through the jungle of memories that are related to his difficulties.

Understanding and insight come from seeing the relationships between past burdens and present behaviors in the person.

Respect is the ability to appreciate what is good in someone, even if he has acted in a destructive way in the past.

Faith is the capacity to believe that what is good in the person will prevail over what is destructive in him.

As an example of the process of creative listening, may I present the story of an anxiety-ridden and angry man in our Monday night group of

compulsive gamblers. This man talked and ranted, it seemed in endless detail, about his aunts-in-law, uncle-in-law, and mother-in-law. The people around the table listened patiently and attentively without interruption. Gradually the group came to understand that he felt that his in-laws looked down on him; that they made him feel inadequate and helpless; that he had felt put down as a boy; that he had accumulated a life-long store of frustration and anger, anger that was strong enough to drive him to the track against his will or make him want to pick up a baseball bat and break the legs of anyone who put him down—especially his in-laws.

We also sensed that he loved his wife and knew that if he did or said anything to hurt her mother, it would hurt his wife. Although we were aware of his angry behavior, we respected him for his concern for his wife. We had faith that his concern for his wife would prevail over his hostility toward his in-laws. And it did. I cannot say that he now loves his mother-in-law, but he does recognize her as a woman who has been frustrated and unhappy, and he no longer threatens to break her legs with a bat if she comes near his house. He has come to a better balance with respect to his emotions.

Why does the process of listening by the others in a therapeutic group result in a better balance for each member? It seems that the skills and attitudes learned about listening in the group are carried home and into daily life. When a man in the group listens to his wife at home with patience and understanding, he becomes aware of the feelings of fear, insecurity, and tension that are affecting her health. And he tends to become concerned about her and to do things for her that reveal his concern. When she expresses her appreciation, he has a feeling of joy that permits him to experience the real values in married life. Then, I have observed many times, a spontaneous exchange takes place in which the genuine values in married life replace the false values in gambling and the man comes to a more stable balance.

Through creative listening, whether by a husband to a wife or a parent to a child, a family can learn to handle its tensions and develop the zest in living that makes life worthwhile. The family can, through creative listening, become a therapeutic agent and achieve its own salvation and fulfillment.

In creative listening, there may be a twofold relevance to your own concerns as you try to strike a balance between the joys and sorrows of life.

One relevance: When confronted by a troubled person, whether he is close to you or not, you can, by concerned, insightful, and apprecia-

ZYGON

tive listening, sometimes help him to get things off his chest, untangle his confused thoughts, feel less alone in the world, or gain new courage to carry on. You might be his salvation.

Another relevance: When you are deeply troubled, it is possible that by talking out your resentment, anger, fear, indecision, or anxiety to an understanding listener, you may gain relief from the disturbing emotions and develop renewed or even greater strength to cope with the threats and frustration in your own life. That listener might be your salvation.

The psychological model of salvation that has been suggested implies that zest, satisfaction, and joy are of this world. The psychological model at first glance seems closer to the Old Testament concept of salvation involving the application of strength and victory in this life than it does to the New Testament concept of giving up this world.

What are the psychological parallels for these two diverse points of view about salvation?

In the Old Testament, the perception of salvation as acting with strength to obtain victory suggests a people who were confident, acting-out, and aggressive. They did not fear prosperity or desire to avoid striving for it. They neither feared their enemies nor desired to avoid injuring them. The Judaic people did not in biblical times, nor do they now, fear to achieve their temporal goals.

On the other hand, in the New Testament, the perception of salvation as a deliverance from the body and this life into the life of the hereafter suggests a people who decrease rather than increase motor activity, a people who choose not to disrupt relations with others, a people who surrender their temporal life space rather than lose their eternal life space. For these submissive people, the probabilities of prosperity and victory seem less and the chances of frustration and deprivation seem greater than they do for an aggressive people.

The emotional discipline involved in denial of self, in turning the other cheek, and in striving for long-range goals may, however, permit the development of a sensitivity to the needs of humanity in the long run that is essential to man's survival and to his harmonious, creative relationships.

The needs of people—regardless of color of skin, nation of origin, system of government, or style of living—for freedom from fear, hunger, poverty, ignorance, and unemployment do not change. Widespread insensitivity to fundamental human needs and ruthless competition for place, power, and privilege often lead to cataclysmic social disruption such as riot-torn cities, national revolutions, international wars.

It seems that the salvation through renunciation, the shattering of the sin of self, depicted in the New Testament is a necessary precondition to one's sensitivity to certain unchanging values for all people. It seems that salvation through renunciation is the genesis of the social discipline involved in giving up a portion so that others may have a more satisfying share of education, employment, food, housing, and health.

The relevance of the two opposite kinds of salvation to the urge of contemporary man throughout the world to fulfil himself becomes clear if we analyze two basic factors in life adjustment. One factor consists of those things that impede progress and can be changed; the other factor consists of those things that cannot be changed. If man wishes to maximize the opportunity to actualize the spectrum of his potentialities for living, he must be energetic, aggressive, and victorious about those things that can be changed; and he must be sensitive, compassionate, and humble about those that cannot.

Probably the time has come for the Happy Warrior of the first half of the twentieth century and the Unhappy Warrior of the late 1960's to give way to the Humble Warrior that the times cry for. The problems of today call for the combined salvations of the Old and New Testaments; they call for action with restraint or, in psychological terms, aggressive behavior modified by foresight and social sensitivity.

The key to survival and to the fulfilment of an individual's potentialities or of mankind's potentialities seems to be regulated human responses that are appropriate to a specific set of circumstances or to a particular time:

There is a time to fight,
And a time to quit.

There is a time to oppose,
And a time to submit.

There is a time to take,
And a time to give.

There is a time to cling,
And a time to let go.

There is a time to be powerful,
And a time to be powerless.

There is a time to be a lion,
And a time to be a lamb.

There is a time to be organized,
And a time to be disorganized.

There is a time to be a priest,
And a time to be a prophet.

ZYGON

There is a time to be secure,
And a time to be insecure.

There is a time to be just,
And a time to be merciful.

There is a time to be father,
And a time to be mother.

There is a time to be tough,
And a time to be tender.

Often the complexity of life's challenges is such that one's response cannot be simple but must be complex. We cannot generally be entirely aggressive in behavior or entirely submissive. Rather, the successful personality has the strength to combine and balance these two behaviors as components of a total response. The total, balanced response is apt to have a greater probability of being appropriate to a particular time and place than an inflexible, one-track response. Such balancing of behavioral components can be seen in the plea of Portia for her friend that justice be tempered with mercy, or can be perceived in the teaching of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., that resistance to oppression be passive. Such balancing permits the potent application of both kinds of salvation in the struggle for harmony and progress.

Unfortunately, some personalities become so ridden with fear or guilt that submission becomes a way of life leading to a narrowness of life space, or a constriction in the inner and outer environment, that dooms the individual to a largely unfulfilled life.

Even more unfortunately, some personalities are so deluded about their grandiose role in shaping destiny that they become irrevocably riveted to aggression as a way of life. Such an individual presumes that his values are universal values, and the Unhappy Warrior strives with a kind of "weary grandeur" to cram his great empire or great society down the throats of people who are so ungrateful and so stupid as to prefer death to his benevolence.

The Humble Warrior, on the other hand, responds to the challenges of our times by fighting for political and economic progress for those groups of people who say that they need and want such progress with his help. If a group of people tell him that the things that are important to him are not important to them and that they don't want his help, the Humble Warrior has sufficient sensitivity, flexibility, and humility to back off. He has enough control over his impulses to accept with tranquillity an important, unchanging, basic human value: that other people have the right to create their own values.

Each person in the world of today has the capacity to be a humble warrior if, as did the heroes of the Old Testament, he develops enough ego strength to assert his will to fight and work for a better life for himself and others; and if, as did the martyrs of the early church, he also develops enough disengagement from his own needs and enough sensitivity to the needs of others to control his aggressive impulses; and if, as a modern man, he develops enough poise to blend his assertiveness and his sensitivity in a mixture that is appropriate to the requirements of diverse situations. Such a person can increase the probabilities that he will lead a life that will be both satisfying to himself and satisfactory to others.

In summary, the balanced person of today can fulfil his potentialities as an inner-directed and outer-directed human being and can become a success in creating a peaceful, orderly society if he can look steadily into the two faces of salvation.