

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

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Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### Assurance of salvation

Presented by Graham Agnew

Nobody would have thought it strange when a 34 year old monk nailed some papers to the door of his local church. In that town, at that time churches were the focal point of activity within the community and church doors served as the public notice board where the minutes of town council meetings may have been found fluttering in the breeze, along with notices posted by enterprising sales people advertising their wares.

The church door was also where people would place papers expressing their ideas and opinions – an early form of “Letters to the Editor”. But on this day, as the young monk nailed his thoughts to the door, I wonder if anyone casually watching realised they were witnessing an event that would radically change the course of human history.

The date was 31 October 1517: The monk: Martin Luther. And the door was that of the Castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. It was truly a momentous day in history. When Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg in 1517 it was the starting point of what we now know as the Protestant Reformation, which would progressively sweep the Globe and lead countless millions of people to embrace the notion of God’s grace and love, through the Person of Jesus Christ.

It was a radical, theological concept which would ultimately lead to Luther being declared a heretic by the Pope of the day. Among his 95 points were severe criticisms of the church’s practice of selling indulgences. The idea here was that people could buy forgiveness for their sins and even buy their way out of hell and into heaven. All the money went to the Church’s lavish and expansive building programs and, (in earlier years), to fund the great Crusades.

Paying for your salvation??...Luther was incensed. But you know, if nothing else, the abuses of the church in the Middle Ages certainly proved the desperation of people to achieve the certainty of salvation – and over the centuries, this aspect of human nature has been given special attention by the world’s religious movements. Today, most religions include teaching designed, ultimately, to lead the penitent believer to experience salvation in one form or another.

In Buddhism the emphasis is on certain spiritual practices, leading to enlightenment and the achievement of nirvana. In Hinduism salvation is all about self-realisation and release from the negative influences that might otherwise hold us back. This process (in the beliefs of the Hindu) involves reincarnation. Salvation in Islam is a matter of observing “the 5 pillars” and being ever vigilant about one’s daily behaviour – morally and spiritually. Entry into heaven is conditional upon one’s performance in these areas.

Christianity is unique among the world’s religions in that our salvation is not acquired by something we do, but by something that’s been done! We receive forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life through belief in and commitment to Jesus Christ - and his death on the cross. In doing so, we receive power to live as God intends us to live – not that we’re perfect or get it right every time, but there’s a construction process taking place in the life of the person following Jesus. They are being renewed and restored daily in their relationship with Him.

And that's at the heart of our salvation: a relationship – not mere adherence to a long list of rules and regulations, but a relationship which the Bible describes as being like the most perfect “father/child relationship” we can imagine - and then some”. In Ephesians 2: verses 8-10 Paul says:

For it is by God's grace you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so no one can boast about it. God has made us what we are and in our union with Christ Jesus, He has created us for a life of good deeds, which He has already prepared for us to do.

We can't earn our salvation, but we can receive God's free gift through Jesus. For the Christian, assurance of salvation is not meant to make us comfortable or smug; it's meant to call us into action...to make a difference in the world!

In that sense, the certainty of our identity – our standing in Christ, is meant to significantly affect how we live – how we think – how we see ourselves. And this involves a number of factors. For instance, when we know our salvation is assured, our relationship with God is based on love, not legalism. This is one of the key themes of Paul's letter to the Romans – a book which had a profound impact on Martin Luther. Here's a passage that would have played a major part in the shaping of Luther's Protestant theology. It's in Romans 3: 21-24:

But now God's way of putting people right with Himself has been revealed. It has nothing to do with law even though the law of Moses and the prophets gave their witness to it. God puts people right through their faith in Jesus Christ. God does this to all who believe in Jesus, because there is no difference at all: everyone has sinned and is far away from God's saving presence. But by the free gift of God's grace, all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free.

Of course, there are moral, ethical and behavioural implications arising out of our relationship with Christ, but our salvation ultimately is dependent on God's grace – otherwise the parable of the prodigal son may have ended like this:

After the welcome home party, the wayward son (who's had a few too many) gets into a fight with one of the servants. He goes off his nut and gives the servant a whack, knocking him to the ground and causing quite a ruckus.

Now what's the father going to do? Will he say: “Get out of here, you ungrateful son; I never want to see you in this house again!” No, he's already accepted him back, knowing he's been living an “out of control” lifestyle in the far country.

In light of such an outburst, he's going to be disappointed for sure; and there may be some words of rebuke, but the boy's going to be restored and reconciled within the family because he's made the decision to return; he's been accepted back into the fold. His relationship to the father is not so much dependant on daily performance as much as it is on his overall standing and status as a son and heir.

That's one of the great blessings of knowing we're saved by grace: it takes away the guilt and pressure of trying to be good in our own strength – trying to earn salvation by our own goodness. It just can't be done! When we know for sure we've been put right with God our response to others is borne out of devotion, not out of duty.

In other words, we care for people, not as a way of earning brownie points towards the promise of a heavenly reward, sometime in the future; we serve out of a sense of deep gratitude for what God has done for us through Jesus. As John writes in his first epistle Chapter 4: 19: We love because He first loved us.

Like many of you, I've mixed in many different circles over the years and while I'd be the first to concede, Christians don't have exclusive rights to virtues like compassion, kindness, unconditional love and acceptance - I will say this: when you experience the care and support available from an authentic Christian community whose lives are being transformed by the risen Christ, there's nothing like it!

One of the wonderful aspects of being a Pastor is you get to see this sort of practical care and compassion every day as people both within your own church and those from other fellowships spontaneously and informally reach out and show they care. In my own church right now we have people who've been to the orphanages of Eastern Europe, the struggling peoples of Nepal, the impoverished masses in the Philippines and Cambodia; the primitive tribes of Papua New Guinea and the embattled peoples of Uganda. God's people do this spontaneously, not out of a desire for credit or reward but because of a deep sense of genuine compassion and concern.

Here's something else: when we know our salvation is assured through Christ, our sense of self-worth and value relies not on what others think of us but on what God thinks of us. It was on this very point Jesus had some of his most fiery clashes with the Pharisees and other religious leaders. They were all about outward appearance: praying publicly at the right time...dropping their money into the offering plate in full view of everyone and so on. Time and time again Jesus emphasised that, while people might look on the outside appearance, God looks at the heart. He said, by their fruit will you know what people are really like – that is, by the consistency of their Godly lives, not by short, artificial bursts of piety. Such consistency is borne out of a realisation we have been made right with God.

Here's the final point: when we know our salvation is assured: our view of life and existence is not restricted to here and now, but also encompasses tomorrow and forever. This perspective enables us to more effectively handle setbacks, suffering, delays and denials – because we know that ultimately, God is in control and no matter what, He will bring us through – the final destination of course, being eternity with Him. There is nothing like knowing for sure we have been put right with God. It's not a matter of smug, self-satisfaction – it's a call to action...it's about making a difference to the world in which we live.

It affects:

- How we see God (our relationship being based on love not legalism)
- How we see others (our care is motivated by devotion not duty)
- How we see ourselves (not measured by how others see us, but how
- God sees us)
- And it affects how we see life as a whole (not just here and now, but tomorrow and forever)

Today we've been talking about one of the essential truths of the Christian faith: the fact we can be sure of our salvation through Jesus Christ.

My question is: Do you have this certainty today? Let's face it, we live in a world of uncertainty...a very fragile and unpredictable world. But here's an area of certainty available to all of us. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it in Chapter 6, verse 19:

We have this hope as an anchor for our lives, it is safe and secure.

Heavenly Father, thank for the relationship we can have with you through Jesus – a relationship that assures us of sins forgiven and entry into your kingdom. In these days of uncertainty, may we embrace this truth and live it out in our daily lives.