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The Saving Faith of a Little Child

WHAT DOES IT take to be saved, to be born again, to enter the kingdom of God, the family of God? Different people give various answers, but I will not compare and contrast their perspectives. On the whole, I aim to go straight to Jesus and ask him.

Salvation is the pivotal spiritual transformation that can occur in childhood or any later phase of life. I believe that this event happened within Jesus in his early childhood. In our times, people seek transformation in a broad sense rather than salvation in particular. If we urgently need some component of health or psychological well-being, it is common to feel transformed when this need is met. In many cases, this feeling arises partly because God is reinforcing our positive step forward. But there is a kind of transforming that

human beings cannot do by themselves. Salvation is given to us by God when we become ready to receive it.

What Jesus thought about any topic may be gathered from his statements, promises, parables, commands, questions, and things that he did. The topic of salvation is an entryway into his original gospel message, and the things he had to say about it all form a meaningful web. I begin with his teaching on how important it is to begin as a little child.

Imagine the scene. Jesus has been engaged in teaching about family life. The next thing we know, mothers are bringing their children for him to touch and bless. Some of his closest disciples start criticizing the mothers for this interruption. The response of Jesus to these disciples was righteous indignation. To them he simply said, “Let the children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Mk 10:13–16, Lk 18:17). Jesus was pointing out that his critical disciples were themselves acting in a manner inconsistent with being in the kingdom.

After probing the faith of a little child, this chapter considers four more aspects of salvation: the happiness that Jesus promised to those who are poor in spirit—the humble; Jesus’s open arms of welcome for those who ask, seek, and knock; being born of the spirit; and repentance. There follow a reflection on living faith and a word about joy.

A note about terminology. When I discuss the kingdom of God and the family of God, I begin by equating the two, and in this chapter, I use these phrases as synonyms. However, the concepts are overlapping but distinct (chapter 12). Even though Jesus spoke often of the kingdom of God, he tended to explain it in the language of family. The language of family fits Jesus better

and communicates better today. This explains my choice to define salvation initially in terms of the faith of a child.

The Meaning of a “Little Child”

When the disciples criticized the mothers for bringing their children to Jesus, he taught a requirement for gaining entrance into the kingdom of God. The kingdom is a gift that can only be received in the manner of a little child. Jesus did not define the childlike attitude; but it is reasonable to think that at least an open and receptive attitude of faith is required.

I believe that the child's attitude and manner of relating also include humility. On another occasion, when disciples asked who is the greatest in the kingdom, Jesus brought a child into their midst and said, “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:1–5).

Jesus understood that, as children of our heavenly Father, our relationship with God has some features in common with a good relationship between a little child with its earthly parents. Repeatedly, for months, I would get caught up watching the little girl across the street in the front yard with her father. Every few minutes, she would go to her daddy and lift up her arms. He would bend down and gather her up in his arms for a minute or so. She wanted reassurance, and he was trustworthy. This scene was a charming illustration of the truth of relationships in the family of God; and it showed the goodness of one of the most important human virtues, trustworthiness.⁸ And trust in God is well placed: “The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms” (Dt 33:27 NIV). Jesus's parable of the mustard seed reinforces how comparatively little we are when we enter the kingdom—and how great our prospects are. “The kingdom

of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of heaven come and make nests in its branches” (Mt 13:31–32).

Implicit Autobiography in Some of Jesus’s Teachings

It is plausible that much of what Jesus taught as an adult he had learned through his own prior experience. In speaking of the faith of “a little child,” Jesus was also being autobiographical, telling us something about his own early childhood.

The spiritual life of a child is significantly influenced in the home and surrounding society. Jesus’s extraordinary mother Mary would have chosen an outstanding husband in Joseph. Thus, Jesus grew up in a home that would have been an excellent place to begin to know God. Among his neighbors in Nazareth, some would have had strong faith, and this would have encouraged faith in this growing and spiritually receptive child. In later childhood, Jesus would have benefited from the local synagogue, where he would have studied the Hebrew scriptures, in which he would have recognized and rejoiced in its gems.

With these supports plus the spirit of God within him (see the next chapter), it is easy to imagine Jesus relating with his heavenly Father and finding in him the source of his greatest joy. He was beginning to experience God’s love for him; and it is plausible that he was starting to love God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. This could have motivated him to do the Father’s will by making good decisions and doing good to others. These childhood experiences may have helped Jesus to associate a variety of meanings with his later concept of the faith of a little child—which he taught to adults.

Humble, Poor in Spirit, Secure, and Happy

I interpret the next teaching of Jesus as helping us understand the faith of a little child as an attitude of humility. “Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:6, substituting “happy” for “blessed”). Being poor in spirit cannot mean lacking in self-respect or having a bad attitude toward oneself; this would not be meaningful as a requirement for entering the family of God.

I believe that the phrase, “poor in spirit,” implies humility. We need to recognize our growth needs. Persons seeking to enter the family of God need some sense of the difference between the Creator Father and the child. Humility can also be defined by contrast. Its opposite is pride (in the sense of hubris), arrogance, or contempt for others; these interfere with good relationships in the kingdom of God.

This teaching of the kingdom belonging to the poor in spirit comes from Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7). The Son of Man began with a series of promises that are generally called “beatitudes” (Mt 5:3–12). This term comes from the Latin word *beatitudo*, which means “happiness.” Jesus’s course in spiritual happiness had eight beatitudes. The first beatitude promises happiness to the poor in spirit and gives them assurance that the kingdom is theirs. The gift of the kingdom of heaven includes salvation that encompasses love, forgiveness, and transformation beginning on earth and continuing into everlasting life. The more we realize the meaning of the kingdom, the more we experience the happiness that Jesus promised.

How can it be so easy to gain salvation? Jesus’s simplest answers are: “The Father himself loves you.” “It is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Jn 16:27, Lk 12:32). Entrance is free to those with the faith of a child. But staying in the kingdom requires growth.

Whenever we are poor in spirit, if we recognize that we are out of alignment with the divine way, and if we mobilize our energy to go back to this beatitude, things change significantly. We can open ourselves and receive once again, even for the zillionth time, the assurance of faith and a relaxing happiness that restores us and puts us back on the path.

Jesus's Open Arms

More of Jesus's wide-open promises are found in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7). “*Ask, and you will receive; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you*” (Mt 7:7). In my opinion, these assurances are given to those who are humbly open and active—persistent seekers. Asking, searching, and knocking have meaning here in the context of approaching and being welcomed into the kingdom of God.

These promises show the striking openness with which Jesus brought people into the family of God by awakening living faith in receptive hearers. They came from the east and west, north and south. He did not initiate them into a system of theology. Instead, he gave direct teaching plus images that evoked the response of the whole person and gave a wide latitude for interpretation. The door opens to a diverse humanity.

Spiritual Receptivity and Rebirth from Above

Without the faith of a little child, spiritual rebirth—which is equivalent to entering the kingdom—cannot take place. Nicodemus came out under cover of darkness to meet Jesus (Jn 3:1–12). He was a Pharisee, very familiar with the laws of Jewish tradition. He was also a member of the Sanhedrin, the

highest ruling court of the Jews, which met in the Temple. He was very impressed with Jesus and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.” These “signs” were deeds of power such as healings.

Jesus could have responded to Nicodemus by quoting scriptures and giving enlightening commentary. But Jesus perceived that Nicodemus needed something else. Jesus gave him the frank diagnosis, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” In contrast to the theme of the little and humble child, the word “above” was a way of referring to heaven. We need to be born from heaven; “the kingdom of God” and “the kingdom of heaven” were interchangeable ways of referring to the same reality. Nicodemus failed to understand this truth because he made the mistake of interpreting Jesus literally. “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus replied: “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit’” (Jn 3:6–8). “Wind” and “spirit” are both translations of the same Greek word, *pneuma*. Jesus’s reply affirms the importance and reality of spiritual experience—sincere relating with God like Jesus probably did as a child. Jesus’s reply also acknowledged human limits in spiritual experience.

Then Jesus tried to reach Nicodemus one last time. He spoke of himself as “the Son of Man” who had “descended from heaven.” The term “Son of Man” was the mysterious title that

Jesus chose to refer to himself. It underscores the humanity of Jesus; but Jesus was not just *a* human but *the* human. But if he had descended from heaven, he was also more than human. What he communicated to Nicodemus in private, he did not yet proclaim in his gospel to the crowds, and for good reason, as we will see in the first two chapters of Part III.

This conversation did not bear fruit quickly. But eventually Nicodemus did exercise the faith to protest the injustice of the Sanhedrin's judging Jesus without a hearing, and then, after Jesus's death, joining with Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus's body for burial in the tomb (Jn 7:50–51, 19:38–42).

I believe that Jesus responded to Nicodemus in a way that was designed to help him realize his spiritual poverty, his lack of experience in spiritual realities. If he had asked Jesus for spiritual help, or changed direction and begun to search for God wholeheartedly, or knocked on the door of the kingdom, so to speak, in a way that was humbly ready to begin a new life on a new level, Jesus would have welcomed him on the spot.

Jesus's teaching of the need to be reborn is sometimes interpreted as requiring a powerful religious experience. But spiritual growth can progress in a smooth, gradual way; and we can enter the kingdom of God (equivalent to the kingdom of heaven) without sensing that any major threshold has been crossed.

Nevertheless, to be born of the spirit implies beginning a new life as a child of God. This requires ongoing, humble openness. If we choose to cooperate, the religion of the spirit will lead us into new ways of thinking, feeling, and doing.

Note that Jesus's message was centered on God. With Nicodemus he implied his divinity, but he never required people to believe in him or to believe anything about him as part of the price of entering the kingdom and gaining salvation. (The important

exception is discussed in Part III, chapter 18, in the section on the enduring validity of the original message.)

Repentance, Needed by Some to Enter the Kingdom

Zacchaeus was lost—the kind of person that Jesus was especially drawn to. The story of Zacchaeus demonstrates the power of spiritual transformation to inspire a great decision and action (Lk 19:1–10).

Zacchaeus was living in reverse and needing to repent—to turn his mind around and say ‘YES’ to God with his life. Being the chief tax collector in the region, his job was to gather the oppressive taxes demanded by the Roman empire; in addition, he had enriched himself greatly by overcharging people. He would have been hated by the Jews in his area.

But he had heard about Jesus, and when he learned that the famous teacher was going to be coming through Jericho, he went out to meet him. But he was short, and the crowd was already lined up, so that he could not see. So he rushed ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to be able to see Jesus when he came by. When Jesus saw Zacchaeus, he called Zacchaeus by name and said that he had to stay with him in his home.

When the crowd heard this, some of them criticized Jesus for staying with a sinner. But Zacchaeus was so full of eager expectation that when he saw Jesus and heard what he said that it triggered his faith. After getting down from the tree, he replied, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

Then Jesus described this event with the word “salvation” and gave a major statement of his mission. “Today salvation has come to this house . . . The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” Again, the Son of Man is functioning divinely.

Traditionally, only God is a savior, as the prophet Second Isaiah had spoken in the name of God: “There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a savior; there is no one besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!” (Is 45:21–22).

For his salvation, Zacchaeus had the courage to come to Jesus, face his great weakness, and take powerful and generous action. What Zacchaeus needed to do to enter the kingdom family was to actively exercise transforming faith expressed in repentance.

To this story of repentance, I would add a bit. Jesus said, “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Lk 5:32); and he concludes the parable of the lost sheep: “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Lk 15:7). I interpret these teachings to imply that not everyone needs to repent before entering the kingdom of God.

If the righteous do not need to repent, many others do need to do so. I discuss some details of repentance in connection with forgiveness (chapter 15). And once our process of repenting is completed, our challenge is to let go of guilt feelings in cooperation with the transforming grace of divine mercy.

Finally, every person who enters the family of God starts a more direct and upright relationship with God. This makes us more keenly aware of our need to grow. And sooner or later, our own wandering into actions that go against the will of God makes it our turn to repent.

Living Faith, Receptive and Active

Mystery surrounds the work of God’s spirit in our mind; and how heaven determines when our spiritual birthday occurs is uncertain. But I believe that we can understand something of what is going on.

I conceive of living faith as a never-ending cycle with two phases. The first is *receptive*. We may be primed to find God by parents, friends, and strangers, social media, personal problems, or restless seeking. All kinds of factors can cooperate with God's silent work of grace in the mind.

The time comes when we see and hear a person filled with faith; or we read, ponder, or pray. *A spiritual truth enters the mind, and the spirit of God illuminates it so that the mind intuitively recognizes its truth. It touches us before we have a chance to doubt or reject it.* Later, our trust may falter; we may choose to uproot it. But at least for a time, we are *in synchrony with spirit*.

When we receive a spiritual realization, we can stop and ponder its meaning and allow it to sink in and take root. For example, we can receive the kingdom of God in the sense of receiving our new primary identity: a member in the family of God.

But to complete the process of making God's gift truly our own, we need to act on it. This can happen by moving into the *active* phase of living faith. We *enter* the family of God by beginning to relate on the basis of our new identity as a child of God.

The connection between salvation and faith is clear in the often-repeated teaching, "by grace you have been saved through faith" (Eph 2:8). This means that saving faith is a gift from God; it is not something that we can earn by what we do.

God-given faith comes with unsuspected power. *Active faith* enables us to make truth a part of ourselves, and it *allows divine spirit to do good through us*. Exercising one's faith develops a larger capacity of receptivity and a greater power to act.

When Jesus had occasion to criticize some of his followers by saying, "you of little faith," he wasn't complaining that God hadn't given them enough (Mt 6:30, 8:26, 16:8, 17:20; Mk 9:22–23). Rather, he was telling them that they were not using the power

of their gift. When he said to a person, “Your faith has made you well,” he was not denying his own healing power, but emphasizing the essential role of the other person’s faith (Mk 5:34, Lk 17:19). Acting on faith completes the circuit of divine giving and human receiving.

Only receptive and active faith is living faith. Only living faith is saving faith. And saving faith is growing faith.

A Word About Joy (and Transition)

Joy is the topic of chapter 10, and positive emotions in general are treated in chapter 14. But since joy is essential to full spiritual comprehension and motivation, it is good to draw attention to it now.

Noticing and savoring joys allows them to fill and uplift us. We can savor a joy that we look forward to having in the future, one that we are experiencing in the present, and one that we recall from the past. And with a joyful heart, we become free from anxiety regarding our salvation.

The aspects of salvation that we have explored are sources of joy. The humble faith of a little child, the happiness of a beatitude, Jesus’s open arms, repentance—indeed everything that liberates us from some obstacle that stands in the way of our entering into, or progressing in, the family of God—is inherently joyous.

All the blessings that have been mentioned in this chapter are possible because the Father loves us and takes pleasure in giving us the kingdom. If, as I believe, God is love (1 Jn 4:16), then love is so central, so all-pervading and dominant in God that everything that our Parent does expresses love, as does every quality we discern in relating with God. In one way or another, all our joys are bound up with the outworkings of the love of God.

Spiritual rebirth is a milestone on the path of living faith. Whether we enter the kingdom of God dramatically and suddenly, or hardly notice any significant change, spiritual rebirth adds to our joy.

But after we enter the family of God, what comes next? The child grows up to be like the Parent.

The faith of a child makes it easy to enter the family of God, but staying in it requires ongoing growth. To get through the trials and testing that are part of life, we continue to need this same living and growing faith. We are each still a child of God. The Son of Man encourages us with a promise that brings more joy. “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. *For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*” (Mt 11:28–30).

If we are toiling on one or more big tasks, we may feel like an ox wearing a heavy yoke, pulling a plough all alone through dry, hard, rocky ground. If so, we need to exchange this yoke for another one that two workers can pull together. Not only does Jesus give us an agenda—the will of God—that is manageable. Jesus’s companionship also brings new energies, joy, and refreshing rest for the soul.

In all these adventures, God’s spirit within—the topic of the next chapter—plays a great and often overlooked role. Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to “treasure hidden in a field” (Mt 13:44). Let’s see what we can find.

Questions and Invitations

- For Jesus to connect salvation with the faith of a little child implied an emphasis on the relation with God as our Father. What is it like for you to be childlike?
- How do you relate to the approaches to salvation listed here—childlike faith; being poor in spirit; asking, seeking, and knocking; and repentance?
- Living faith—receptive and active—is transformative. How much of the growth, power, and joy described in this chapter have you begun to experience? What would you like to experience more of? What can you do to enhance your progress in this area? Discussing with others will multiply your discoveries.