

Saving Private Ryan

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Date: 15 December 2002

Preacher: Paul Barker

- [0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 15th of December 2002.
- The preacher is Paul Barker and his sermon is based on Luke chapter 1 verses 39 to 56.
- Please be seated. The order came from the top.
- Save Private Ryan. It's World War II and Ryan's three brothers have been killed in action. And the order had come from the top as part of a promise that no American parent would lose all their sons in action.
- The problem was that James Ryan was in enemy territory in France after D-Day. So, eight men, led by Tom Hanks of course, set off to save Private Ryan.
- [1 : 19] And they do so rather reluctantly. They consider that they're endangering their own nine lives for the sake of one. They think the decree is stupid.
- They grumble among themselves saying, he'd better be worth saving. He'd better not be a loser.
- He'd better not just be ordinary. He'd better go and make his life notable after we've saved him. Find a cure for cancer. Do great things for mankind.
- At the end of the film, you're invited to ponder. Was it worth saving Private Ryan?
- At one level, the film says, yes. He's good looking and a good soldier. He's worth saving. But was his life really worth the lives of the nine lost in saving him?
- [2 : 27] They were, with one notable exception, also good soldiers. What must Ryan's life after the war be like to make his being saved worthwhile?
- How good would he have to be? How notable would he have to become? How many great acts would he have to do to make his life worth saving?
- In the end, the film is, of course, ambiguous. Deliberately so. What is a human life worth? In the chaos of war, you cannot really tell.
- The cost of saving Private Ryan's life is beyond simple accounting. Nine lives, was it more even, was a high price to pay for saving just one.
- It was certainly an extravagant rescue mission for one person. A rescue mission of dubious worth and dubious wisdom.
- [3 : 42] Like Remembrance Day and Anzac Day, Christmas Day is also, in effect, about a rescue mission. For many, it was a rescue mission of dubious worth and dubious wisdom.
- It was also an extravagant rescue mission at the cost of a precious life. You see, Christmas is God himself stepping, in a sense, behind enemy lines in order to save lives.
- In the past, leading up to Jesus' birth, through the period of the Old Testament, God had sent various prophets, lawgivers, kings, wise people, and others, assorted collection of his people, in order to rescue his people, to bring them back to himself.
- They were his equivalents of Tom Hanks. They were the captains, if you like, the prophets, the lawgivers, the kings, and so on. But in a sense, their mission always failed, in the end, to restore people to himself.

So now, at Christmas, God himself, the Commander-in-Chief himself, steps into action, enters the battlefield, in order to save.

[5 : 06] Not just sending a Captain Tom Hanks, but God himself, entering the battlefield. You don't see that in war. There was no Roosevelt or Churchill, on the Normandy beaches, or parachuting in, behind enemy lines in France, in 1944.

But God himself, at Christmas, entered the battlefield, of this world, in order to save. How foolhardy.

How unwise. God saves. But of course, God's was no ordinary rescue mission. Joseph, Mary's betrothed, was told by an angel, you shall name him Jesus, because he shall save.

That's what the name Jesus means, of course. God saves. It's the same name as Joshua, in the Old Testament. God saves. But Joseph was told, not that this baby, Jesus, would save people from war, or rescue a life in danger, in enemy lines in war.

You shall name him Jesus, because he shall save his people, from their sins. When Tom Hanks, eventually met up with, Private Ryan, Ryan refused, to go with him, to be saved.

[6 : 37] He didn't need saving. He didn't want to be saved. His mother would understand, if his life, his life was also lost, in the course of action, fighting for the allies. He himself thought, it was a stupid action, for these eight men, to come all the way, behind enemy lines, to find him, and save him, and take him back, to be home with Mama, out in the country, rural, rural United States.

And when Jesus came, God himself, in the battlefield, he met with the same sort of response, didn't he?

People refused to heed him, because they didn't see their need. They didn't want the challenge, the discomfort, that Jesus' words brought them. Because in the end, they didn't want to acknowledge their sin.

And if you don't acknowledge your sin, then you have no need, or perception, of a need, for a saviour. And it's the same today.

By and large, our world sees no need for Jesus, because it refuses to acknowledge its own need, of its sin, to acknowledge its own sin, and its need for forgiveness and salvation.

[7 : 52] So the people in Jesus' day put him to death. The rescuer rejected, the saviour silenced. But ironically, it was in the putting to death of the saviour, that the salvation was found.

That sin was taken away, atoned for, the price for it paid, the sacrifice made. And yes, it's a high price. Yes, it's an extravagant cost.

At one level, we'd say, well, it's just one life, for saving many, so the accounting ledger looks, pretty sensible. It's a bit different from Private Ryan, where nine lives are lost, to save one.

But on the other hand, the life that is lost, at Christmas, or what's begun to be lost, at Christmas, is God's own son. The precious one.

The saviour of the world. The perfect one. God himself. Was God's rescue mission worth it?

[8 : 58] Or was it a strange, sad error of judgement? Was Jesus' life and death worth it to save me and you?

Is your life worth saving? Is my life worth saving? Have I done enough to make it worthwhile? Have I been notable enough? Have I done enough good deeds to make my life worth Jesus' death for me?

As he dies of his wounds, Tom Hanks, the last survivor of the rescue team, says to Private Ryan, earn it.

Earn it. The saviour, Tom Hanks, dies, telling the one to be saved to make it worthwhile.

Then at the end of the film, bringing it up to date, the old Private Ryan that his wife and children and grandchildren around him revisits Normandy and finds one of those massive war cemeteries, cross after cross after cross across the horizon.

[10 : 17] And he searches and finds the cross that he's looking for, Captain Miller's, Tom Hanks. And as he stands at this cross, he inevitably breaks down, crying.

And he turns to his wife and crying, pleads with her, tell me I've lived a good life. Tell me I've lived a good life.

You see, he can't tell whether it's been good enough to warrant his saving. He doesn't know whether he's done enough to make the loss of all those lives worthwhile. And though that scene is in one sense a pathetic scene, yet nonetheless it's rather true to life, I think.

There's a sense in which we're all a little bit like that with God sometimes. I don't know whether I've lived a good enough life. I don't know whether I've been good enough for God. Yes, I may have lived a good life, I can see that by the society's standards, but by God's greater standards, by God's even perfect standards, where do I stand?

I don't meet his standard, his perfect standard. None of us does. And so, like Private Ryan in his old age, there's a pathetic sense of crying, uncertainty, and doubt, and fear.

[11 : 41] Yeah. Have we earned it? Have we lived lives that make Jesus' death for us worthwhile?

But this is the point where Jesus and Tom Hanks are worlds apart. As Tom Hanks was dying, he said to Ryan, earn it. But as Jesus was dying on the cross, no such words came from his lips.

Rather, words of grace, forgiveness. Forgive them, Father, they know not what they're doing. You see, Jesus doesn't say to us, earn it.

He says to us, take it, receive it, accept it, it's yours, it's free, it's a gift. And that is worlds apart from earning the salvation that Private Ryan was told to do by Tom Hanks.

At the end of our lives, you see, we will not need to stand with fear and doubt and worry and concern and tears. Tell me I've lived a good life. Because we don't have to earn the salvation that Jesus died for.

[12 : 53] It's a gift. It's free. And that's why we celebrate Christmas and Easter for that matter as well. Because at the end of our lives we'll be able to stand before God not with fear and trembling but with confidence and assurance knowing that salvation is ours given freely by God the Saviour.

And we shall stand before God with hearts overflowing with gratitude at the gift that He's given us so freely but at such a price too.

The death of His Son. To stand in gratitude before God is not to make an occasional annual pilgrimage to the manger scene or some modern equivalent but rather to live lives fully each day and every day in gratitude to a gracious God who has saved us through Jesus Christ.

Full of joy knowing a forgiving Heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ. You see we don't have to indeed we cannot earn our salvation at all in any respects.

Nothing we can do can repay God for Jesus' death. Nothing we can do is good enough and big enough for that. But it doesn't have to be because that death was a gift to us to accept in faith to trust Jesus the Saviour he knows what he's doing.

[14 : 29] That rescue mission the Christmas rescue mission is a far greater story than Spielberg's epic. This was salvation for eternity not just for this life and not even just for a war.

This was salvation which is a free gift not something to be earned. And the joy of joys about it is that it's not Hollywood hype. It's true. And it's for everyone.

In the end only one person could save Private Ryan and it wasn't Tom Hanks. It was Jesus Christ. And he can save you as well.

And me. How then can you afford to neglect so great a salvation as this? The angel said to Joseph you shall name him Jesus for he shall save he shall save his people from their sins.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. James.

[16 : 25] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[18 : 55] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.