

CHAPTER 3

Salvation

We begin our exploration of specific Christian words with *salvation*. I do so partly because of its importance and partly because it provides an especially clear case study of the distortion of the meaning of Christian language by the heaven-and-hell framework described in Chapter 1.

To say the obvious, *salvation* is a very big Christian word. It names the yearning, desire, hope, and purpose of the Christian life. It is as central to Christianity as *nirvana* and *satori* (enlightenment) are to Hinduism and Buddhism. Thus what we think *salvation* means matters greatly.

Salvation is a loaded word. It carries a lot of baggage for many people. I have been aware of this for a long time, but I was nevertheless struck by the strength of its negative associations in an intergenerational discussion group that I recently facilitated. Half were in their twenties and thirties, and half in their sixties and seventies. Most were committed and intentional Christians involved in their churches. The rest were earnest seekers—no longer or not yet part of a church, but seriously considering whether there might be something real and important in Christianity.

For 80 percent of the group, *salvation* had *only* negative associations. These went back to childhood and teenage years. Salvation was about going to heaven. Though that might sound appealing, the opposite possibility—going to hell—was deeply alarming. For those raised in fire-and-brimstone churches, the threat of hell was explicit. Most

had experienced a softer form in which hell was seldom if ever emphasized—but the possibility of hell was still there in the language they heard in church.

Salvation as “going to heaven” affected their understanding of its sibling terms *saved* and *savior*. Because the obstacle to going to heaven was sin, to be *saved* meant being saved from their sins. *Savior* referred to Jesus dying for their sins in order to make their salvation possible. What they needed to do was to believe in Jesus and repent of their sins.

They recalled, even as children, worrying about whether they had believed and behaved as they needed to in order to be saved. Salvation was laden with anxiety, subsumed as it was within a fear-based Christianity. For some, the threat of hell had been used in emotionally abusive and manipulative ways to control their behavior. Many of these left the church, often for decades; resentment and rejection replaced fear.

Most also reported being bothered by the exclusiveness that went with this understanding of salvation. They were told, or absorbed, that only Christians could be saved—that is, go to heaven. And often only the right kind of Christians would go to heaven, which meant Christians like them. Others did not remember that this was emphasized, but heard biblical language that seemed to say so, especially the “one way” passage in the Gospel of John: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6). Salvation was associated with a sharp division between those who were saved, who were “in,” and those who were not. Many recalled at least a whiff of righteousness in their churches about being in the “in” group, while most of the world was not. As one reported, “Salvation and smugness go together.”

These understandings became unpersuasive at different points in their lives—for some it was in their teens, for others it was later. Only Christians can go to heaven? We are saved from our sins by Jesus as a blood sacrifice? Jesus’s death was God’s plan of salvation—God sent Jesus to be killed, to die in our place as payment for sin? Only people who believe this can be saved? Really? Is that the way things are?

CONTEMPORARY MEANINGS

Their understanding of salvation as “going to heaven” reflects its most common meaning in modern English. A recent poll asked respondents if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “Many religions can lead to eternal life.”¹ As the poll explained the statement, it equated “eternal life” and “eternal salvation” with “going to heaven,” thereby presupposing this is the purpose not only of Christianity, but of religions in general.

The connection between salvation and being saved from our sins by the death of Jesus is also widespread in modern English. Consider these definitions from three contemporary dictionaries.² Keep in mind that the purpose of dictionaries is not to define “truth,” but to describe common usage—what words most commonly mean.

American Heritage: Salvation in a Christian context is “deliverance from the power or penalty of sin; redemption.” *Redemption* is then defined as “salvation from sin through Jesus’s sacrifice.” *Save* is defined as “to set free from the consequences of sin: redeem.”

Random House Webster’s: Salvation means “deliverance from the power and penalty of sin; redemption.”

Oxford American: Salvation means “deliverance from sin and its consequences, believed by Christians to be brought about by faith in Christ.”

The biblical meanings of *salvation*, *saved*, and *savior* are very different, richer, and much more comprehensive than these dictionary definitions. To see this, we need to pay attention to how frameworks shape meaning. Just as their common meanings have been shaped by the framework of sin, forgiveness, and heaven, their biblical meanings are shaped by frameworks.

Within their biblical frameworks, these words are about much more than sin and forgiveness, heaven and hell. They speak about the transformation of life this side of death—about personal transformation and political transformation. They are about the transformation of our lives as individuals and as people living together in societies.

BIBLICAL MEANINGS

Salvation and its siblings appear almost 500 times in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV), the Bible most widely used in mainline Protestant churches today.³ *Salvation* occurs 127 times; *save*, *saved*, *saves*, and *saving*, about 300 times; *savior*, about 40 times. Roughly two-thirds are in the Old Testament and the rest in the New Testament.

Because *salvation* in common usage is closely associated with “going to heaven,” we need to clear up a major misunderstanding at the outset. *Salvation in the Bible is seldom about an afterlife.*

In the Old Testament, for almost all of the centuries it covers, the people of ancient Israel did not believe in an afterlife. The concept appears nowhere in the stories of the ancestors in Genesis or the exodus from Egypt, nowhere in the passionate words of the prophets or the praise, prayers, and wisdom of Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. The first clear reference to life beyond death is in Daniel, chronologically the last book in the Old Testament to be written, about 165 BCE.⁴ Even there, *salvation* is not used to speak about an afterlife. Salvation, as we will see, was about something else.

In the New Testament, *salvation* is occasionally about an afterlife—but most of the time it is not. So also *saved* and *savior* are not primarily about being saved from our sins so that we can go to heaven. In both the Old and New Testaments, the primary meanings of these three words are very different from their common modern meanings.

As we turn now to biblical texts in which these words appear, imagine that you don’t know what they mean. Let their meanings be shaped by the biblical contexts, the biblical frameworks, within which they are used. Our interpretation of these texts uses the historical-metaphorical approach sketched in Chapter 2.

Salvation as Liberation from Bondage: The first biblical framework shaping the meaning of salvation is the story of the exodus from Egypt. Set in the thirteenth century BCE, it tells the story of the Israelites' enslavement to Pharaoh, the political, economic, and religious lord of their world. Then God, through the leadership of Moses, liberates them from bondage. The story includes their entry into a new way of life together, beginning with the covenant with God at Mt. Sinai, continuing on the long journey through the wilderness, and ending with them about to enter the promised land.

This story is the ancient Israelites' "primal narrative," the most important story they knew and foundational to their understanding of God and life with God.⁵ Remembered and celebrated every year at Passover, it is to the Old Testament and Judaism what the story of Jesus is to the New Testament and Christianity.

Salvation and *saved* appear at one of the dramatic high points of this story of liberation from bondage. As the fleeing slaves are trapped between Pharaoh's army and the sea, facing death or reenslavement, God makes a path through the sea, the Israelites pass through, and the sea rushes back and drowns the forces of Pharaoh. Then the author of Exodus says, "Thus the Lord *saved* Israel that day from the Egyptians" (14:30). A hymn celebrates the deliverance: "The Lord is my strength and my might, and God has become my *salvation*" (15:2).

In Israel's memory of the exodus in the prophets and Psalms, *savior* is used. In Hosea 13:4, God says: "I have been the Lord your God ever since the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and besides me there is no *savior*." In Psalm 106:21, God is "their *Savior*, who had done great things in Egypt."

Within the framework of the exodus, note how comprehensive the meanings of *salvation*, *saved*, and *savior* are. Salvation involves *liberation from economic bondage*: the slaves in Egypt were exploited and impoverished, condemned to unremitting hard labor, and given only meager rations. *Liberation from political bondage*: in Egypt, they had no power, no voice, no say in how the system was put together. *Liberation from religious bondage*: Pharaoh would not give them permission to worship their God, whose passion was for a different kind of world.

Salvation as liberation from these forms of bondage shaped the life of ancient Israel. Consider the radical economic laws found in the Torah, the Pentateuch. No interest was to be charged on loans. Every seventh year, all debts were to be forgiven, and those who had fallen into indentured slavery because of debt were to be set free. Every half century (the jubilee year), the ownership of all agricultural land was to be returned to the original family without compensation. The intent of these laws was to prevent the emergence of a permanently impoverished underclass. The Israelites had been saved from Egypt, and Egypt was not to be re-created in Israel.

In the first centuries after the exodus, the ancient Israelites had no king. Why? Because in Egypt they had experienced the oppression and exploitation that went with kingship. When kingship did emerge in Israel around the year 1000, some protested that a king would be a new Pharaoh.⁶ Israel was to have no other king, no other lord, than the one who had brought them out of Egypt. The absence of kingship was not about radical individualism or anarchy; Israel was a corporate entity, a people called to live life together in accord with the covenant with God.

So also the exodus story and the meaning of salvation within it were foundational for the prophets of the Old Testament. In the centuries after the rise of kingship, prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, and others indicted the monarchy as a new Pharaoh responsible for re-creating Egypt within Israel—a system of political and economic oppression that denied the God of Israel, who had liberated them, or *saved* them, from Egypt.

Salvation as Return from Exile: The second major framework shaping the biblical meaning of salvation is the Jewish experience of exile in the sixth century BCE. It began when the Babylonians conquered and destroyed Jerusalem and took many of the survivors into exile in Babylon. There, like their ancestors in Egypt centuries earlier, they were oppressed, impoverished, and powerless. The exile lasted for about fifty years and ended when Persia conquered Babylon and the Persian emperor Cyrus decreed that the exiles could return to their homeland.

This is the historical context for the second part of the book of Isaiah, beginning with chapter 40. Its magnificent language is familiar to millions because of Handel's *Messiah*. Consider how these phrases from the oratorio come alive in the historical setting of exile and return:

“‘Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people,’ saith your God.” These opening words of Isaiah 40 deliver a message of consolation and are followed by the proclamation that Israel’s time of suffering is over.

“The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord.’” A way—“the way of the Lord”—is being prepared for the exiles to return.

“Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight, and the rough places plain.” God is building a highway, an interstate, an *Autobahn* in the desert that separates Babylon from the homeland.

“He shall feed his flock like a shepherd.” As they journey through the wilderness, God will care for them as a shepherd cares for the flock.

In this context of exile and return, the second part of Isaiah abounds with the words *salvation*, *saved*, and *savior*. The first two are combined in Isaiah 45:17: “Israel is *saved* by the Lord with everlasting *salvation*.” Half of the occurrences of *savior* in the Old Testament are in this part of Isaiah. One occurs near the end of this glorious passage:

But now thus says the Lord.... Do not fear... I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire, you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your *Savior*.... You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.... Do not fear, for I am with you. (43:1–4)

Note how God as *Savior* is associated with:

God's presence on the journey: when you pass thorough waters, rivers, fire, flame, "I will be with you."

God's love: "I have called you by name, you are mine.... You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

God's assurance: "Do not fear"—twice, both in the context of God's presence.

All of this—release from Babylon, a journey of return, God's presence and love—is the meaning of *savior*, *salvation*, and *saved*. Salvation is return from exile—coming home.

***Salvation as Rescue from Peril:* Rescue is the primary meaning of salvation in the Psalms. The longest book in the Bible, it is a collection of prayers, hymns, and liturgies—the worship and prayer book of ancient Israel. The Psalms tell us how our spiritual ancestors praised God, invoked God, and prayed to God.**

***Salvation* appears in the Psalms more often than in any book in the Bible, including those in the New Testament. It is mostly about rescue, deliverance from peril and danger. Sometimes it is individual deliverance and sometimes collective deliverance—of the people, the nation. Sometimes the peril is illness. Often the peril is posed by enemies or "the wicked." Sometimes the petition is to be saved from death, "the Pit"—but this is not about surviving death and entering into a blessed afterlife. Rather, this is being saved from a potentially mortal illness or from enemies who desire the death of the petitioner(s).**

A sampling of passages from the Psalms that use salvation and its siblings:

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? (27:1)

Restore to me the joy of your salvation. (51:12)

By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation. (65:5)

I am lowly and in pain; let your salvation, O God, protect me. (69:29)

I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. (118:21)

Turn, O Lord, save my life; deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love. (6:4)

Save me from all my pursuers and deliver me. (7:1)

Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. (31:2)

Save me, O God, by your name, and vindicate me by your might. (54:1)

Deliver me from those who work evil; from the bloodthirsty save me. (59:2)

Save all the oppressed of the earth. (76:9)

Save me from my persecutors, for they are too strong for me. (142:6)

They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt. (106:21)

All of these meanings of salvation in the Old Testament—as liberation from bondage, return from exile, and rescue from peril—continue in the New Testament, especially in the gospels and the letters of Paul. What they all have in common is salvation as “deliverance,” “rescue.” To be saved is to be delivered/rescued from that which ails us. Salvation is also about more than deliverance and rescue: to be saved is to enter into a new kind of life—a life covenanted with God, the central theme of both the Old and New Testaments. Salvation is about deliverance and transformation.

MORE IMAGES OF SALVATION

This root meaning of salvation and its siblings is also expressed in many biblical texts and images that do not explicitly use the word. For example, Isaiah 35 is filled with images of salvation as transformation, even though the word does not appear:

The dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom.... Waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. (vv. 1, 6)

Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.” (v. 4)

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. (vv. 5–6)

The chapter concludes with the joy of salvation and the ending of sorrow:

Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (v. 10)

Salvation as deliverance and transformation is expressed in a number of compact images found in both the Old and New Testaments. They occur so often that they are archetypal. I illustrate with texts from the New Testament.

***From Blindness to Seeing Again.* The Gospels contain stories of Jesus giving sight to blind people. Whatever the historical basis for these stories, it is clear that blindness and seeing have a metaphorical meaning as well. This is most apparent in John's Gospel where Jesus is "the Light of the World" who opens the eyes of the blind and shines in the darkness. For John, "enlightenment"—seeing again, seeing truly—is a major image of salvation.**

The metaphorical meaning of blindness and seeing is common to a number of sayings attributed to Jesus. They speak of sighted people who are nevertheless blind:

There are those who have eyes but do not see. Just as, to switch to a hearing metaphor, there are those who have ears who do not hear. (Mark 8:18)

There are blind guides (Matt. 23:16, 24)—obviously sighted people are being spoken of.

If a blind person leads a blind person, they will both fall into a ditch (Matt. 15:14). Here also, sighted people are being spoken of.

***From Death to Life:* The Gospels contain stories of Jesus restoring people to life. Again, whatever the historical basis of these stories, their metaphorical meaning is clear. Just as there are sighted people who are blind, so also there are living people who are dead. Consider this provocative and brilliant one-liner from Jesus: "Let the dead**

bury their own dead” (Matt. 8:22). He obviously said this about living people. It is a serious indictment—we can be alive and yet dead. It also includes good news; there is a way of leaving the land of the dead.

The movement from death to life is also found in Paul’s thinking. Paul speaks of dying and rising with Christ (e.g., Rom. 6:3–11) and of he himself having been “crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:19) and entering into a new kind of life. In John’s Gospel, this is the meaning of being “born again” (John 3:1–10).

From Infirmary to Well-Being: The Gospels contain many stories of Jesus healing people. At least some of these reflect historical reality—Jesus was known as a healer and exorcist. More stories are told about Jesus as healer than about any other figure in antiquity. But these stories also have a more-than-factual meaning. This is salvation as healing the wounds of existence, as well-being, as wholeness. Indeed, this is the etymology of the English word *salvation*. Its Latin roots are the same as those for the word *salve*, a healing ointment. Salvation is the healing of our wounds and becoming whole.

From Fear to Trust: The overcoming of fear and anxiety is a common concern in the Bible. “Fear not” and “Do not be afraid” are among its most frequent phrases. In a famous passage in the Gospels, Jesus counsels his followers not to worry, not to be anxious, but instead to trust in God (Luke 12:22–31). So also 1 Peter 5:7: “Cast all your anxiety upon him, because he cares for you.”

THE MORE-THAN-PERSONAL MEANINGS

Salvation concerns individuals; it is personal. But it is also consistently corporate in the Bible. It includes how we live together in communities, societies, and nations. In other words, salvation is about the kind of world we live in.

In the broad and important sense of the word, salvation in the Bible is “political” as well as personal. The word *politics* needs redeeming from its contemporary reduction to partisanship, nastiness, shadiness, and self-interest. The broad meaning of *politics* is ancient, reflected in its Greek root *polis*, which means “city.” Politics concerns the shape and shaping of the city—by which is meant humans living together in large populations. Politics is thus

about the shape and shaping of societies, nations, and the world itself. What should the humanly created world look like?

In this broad sense, salvation in the Bible is political, a dimension that is often missed when we are limited to understanding the word within the heaven-and-hell framework. A historical-metaphorical reading of scripture restores a crucial dimension to what the Bible means by salvation. Its political meaning is central to the story of the exodus, the prophets, Jesus, and Paul. The political meaning of salvation in the Bible has two focal points: justice and peace.

***From Injustice to Justice:* The primary justice issue in the Bible is economic justice. Many issues that we think of as justice issues today (like democracy, racism, human rights, gender equality, the environment) had not yet come up. For the most part, the Bible doesn't address them. Rather, its passion for justice is focused on economic justice.**

There is an obvious reason for this—the world of the Bible was marked by massive economic injustice. The ruling elite acquired about two-thirds of the wealth in society, while around 90 percent of the population lived on the margin of subsistence and destitution. For the primary voices in the Bible, this is not what their God wanted. Rather, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it” (Ps. 24:1)—the earth belongs to God, not to us. We are but “aliens and tenants” on this earth (Lev. 25:23)—we do not own it. Yet we most often treat it as if we do own it—and some of us own more of it than others.

The economic justice that is the Bible’s passion (and God’s passion) concerns the basic necessities of life. In the Bible, they are land and food, the material basis of existence. Everybody should have enough, not as the product of charity, but as the result of the way the system is put together. The Bible knows that powerful and wealthy elites commonly structure the world in their own self-interest. Pharaoh and Herod and Caesar are still with us. From them we need to be saved.

***From Violence to Peace:* The second broad political meaning of salvation in the Bible is peace. Like many images of salvation, peace has both a personal and political meaning. The personal meaning is peace of mind and, slightly**

extended, peace with those with whom one is in intimate contact—family, neighbors, associates. But peace in the Bible is also about the end of violence and the cessation of war.

Along with economic injustice as institutionalized poverty and destitution, institutionalized violence was the other plague that caused the greatest amount of unnecessary human misery in the world of the Bible. There was the violence that the ruling elite used to keep the population in line. There was the violence of wars, which were most often started by the ruling elite against foreign elites for the sake of gaining their land and wealth. For the most part, ordinary people (90 percent of the population) had no stake in wars, even as they were often ruined by them by higher taxation; conscription; pillage of domestic animals; ruining of crops, resulting in famine; confiscation of land by an invader; and being slaughtered while fighting or as civilian victims of an invading army.

Thus it is not surprising that the second primary political meaning of salvation in the Bible is peace and nonviolence. Not just personal peace of mind and nonviolence in our personal relationships, but peace as the end of war. One of the best-known passages of the Old Testament occurs independently in two prophets, indicating how widespread this yearning was:

*Many peoples shall come and say,
 “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
 to the house of the God of Jacob;
 that he may teach us his ways
 and that we may walk in his paths.”
 For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
 and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
 He shall judge between the nations,
 and shall arbitrate for many peoples;*

*they shall beat their swords in plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more. (Isa. 2:3–4; Mic. 4:2–3)*

So also in the Gospels. According to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God (5:9) and “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies” (5:43–44).

According to Luke, as Jesus wept over Jerusalem, which in his time had become the center of collaboration between the Temple authorities and Roman imperial officials, he said: “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!” (19:41–42). In Luke’s story of Jesus’s birth, the angel speaks of Jesus as a “Savior” and the heavenly chorus sings of Jesus as bringing peace on earth (2:11, 14). “Savior” as the one who brings peace on earth was one of the titles of the Roman emperor in the first century. But the emperor brought peace through military conquest. Imperial peace is the absence of resistance to imperial policy. The peace of which the Bible speaks is peace through justice.

Salvation as a world of justice and peace is the “dream of God” in the Bible, a phrase used by Verna Dozier, an African American author and theologian, and by retired South African archbishop Desmond Tutu.⁷ God’s dream, God’s passion, is a transformed world of justice and peace.

An understanding of salvation that takes the Bible seriously will be both personal and political. It can inform us about personal transformation. Even some of the overtly political meanings of the exodus story have personal or psychological-spiritual meanings. Most of us as we grew up acquired a Pharaoh within who holds us in bondage, tells us to work harder, and gives us meager rations. This Pharaoh is most often the internalized voice of our socialization into a particular family in a particular culture, at a particular time and place, with its conventionally

accepted demands. Many live for decades, sometimes for all of their lives, with a strong demanding critical voice within. Salvation is liberation from the Pharaoh within as well as from the Pharaoh without.

So also return from exile has a personal meaning. Some people are literally exiled to another country, where they live in conditions of disempowerment and impoverishment. But exile is also an archetypal image of the human condition. We often feel cut off, separated, exiled, alienated from life. Salvation as return from exile is return and reconnection to what matters, a center of meaning and purpose—to God. Our lives began in Eden, we were cast out of Eden, and we long to return. In words from St. Augustine, our hearts are restless until they find their home in God—until we return to and reconnect with, as Acts says, the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

So salvation is personal transformation. And it is also the transformation of this world, the humanly created world in which we live, into a better world. Salvation is a twofold transformation—of ourselves and the world.

I conclude with two stories. The first goes back forty years to graduate school. As one of my professors was lecturing on chapter 5 of Paul's letter to the Romans, he told a story about an Anglican priest confronted by an evangelical Christian.

"Are you saved?" the evangelical asked.

The priest responded, "It depends on what you mean by 'saved.' Do you mean 'Am I saved?' in the past, present, or future tense? If you mean 'Am I saved?' in the sense, 'Has God already done all that is necessary to save me?' then yes, certainly. If you mean 'Am I saved?' in the sense, 'Do I presently live in a saving relationship with God?' then my answer is yes, I trust. If you mean 'Am I saved?' in the sense, 'Have I already become all that I might become?' then certainly not."

Though the priest's response can be heard as rather haughty, it is also in accord with the Bible. There salvation does have three tenses. It is what God has done in the past. It is what can happen in the present. And it is also not yet—not completed, neither for us as individuals nor for the world.

The second story is from the last decade when I was speaking at a mainline clergy conference. I mentioned in my first lecture that whenever Christianity emphasizes the afterlife as the reason for being Christian, the result invariably is a distortion of Christianity. It becomes a religion of requirements and rewards; the message is “Be a Christian now for the sake of heaven later.” It focuses our attention on the next life rather than on this world. It creates an in-group and an out-group; there are some who meet that criterion and some who don’t. And so forth.

In the question-and-response period that followed, one of the clergy asked, “If Christianity’s not about an afterlife, then what’s our product?”

His question struck me as earnest, not confrontational or sarcastic. He was in his forties and thus had attended a mainline seminary not so long ago. I wondered how he could have done that without encountering a more biblical understanding of salvation. I realized that he didn’t know what his message was if it wasn’t about heaven.

I took his question seriously, for it’s an important question. If Christianity is not primarily about an afterlife, if salvation is not primarily about an afterlife, then what is our “product”?

My answer, the answer pointed to by this chapter, is that our product is *salvation as the twofold transformation of ourselves and the world*. Moreover, I think most people yearn for this. We yearn for the transformation of our lives—for a fuller connection to what is, from liberation to all that keeps us in bondage, for sight, for wholeness, for the healing of the wounds of existence. And most of us yearn for a world that is a better place. We may have disagreements about how that is to be brought about. But most of us yearn for that—for ourselves and our contemporaries, for our children and grandchildren, and for the people and world of the future.

Salvation concerns these two transformations. It responds to our two deepest yearnings. Who does not want this? This is what Christianity at its best is about. And this is what the religions of the world at their best are about.