

# HIMSELF HE CANNOT SAVE

By Paul Penno Jr.

June 25, 2011

What is the fundamental difference between genuine Christianity and Islam? It has to be in the very idea of God—who He is. The first chapter of the Koran reveals the Muslim idea of God: Allah, “the Beneficent, the Merciful, Lord of the worlds. Owner of the Day of Judgment.” Very exalted idea, solemn. It’s the heart-moving concept of monotheism, deliverance from the confusion and darkness of pagan polytheism. Muslims are profoundly thankful that they are not pagans; they regard any idol worship or reverence for idols as blasphemy. And that stirs their loyal jihad-indignation.

The idea of God that Jesus tells the world is different. He is “our Father, which is in heaven,” whose name is “hallowed.” The idea is purest intimacy of family love that grips the human heart from babyhood and always cries “Abba! Father!” (Rom. 8:15). The fatherhood of God is the fundamental idea that Jesus preached over and over. To every human soul He proclaimed, God is *your* Father!

And such a heavenly Father is far more than being “Owner of the Day of Judgment.” He “is love [*agape*],” an idea absent from the first chapter of the Koran. So great is His love for a sinful world that He gave Himself in the giving of His Son to die the second death. He “poured out His soul unto death,” that ultimate death of total denial of self (Isa. 53:12).

There has to be a Father and Son that the Son may reveal the Father’s love in such a way. In genuine Christianity, every believing human soul also becomes “owner of the day of judgment,” for the *agape* (which God is) “casts out fear” of judgment (1 John 4:18). Human beings are not Allah—forever no; but believers in Christ become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). They too bear the cross. Many Muslim hearts yearn to understand.

When Jesus hung upon the cross, the priests and scribes and elders said in mocking contempt, “He saved others; Himself He cannot save” (Matt. 27:42). And in these words there was a truth far beyond what the Jews had any thought of,—a truth that even the followers of Jesus do not appreciate. Whoever grasps the full meaning of the statement, “He saved others; Himself He cannot save,” and who allows it to apply to himself, has salvation, for it contains the whole of the Gospel.

“He saved others.” The Jews acknowledged this, yet they crucified Him. He whose only offence was that “He went about doing good,” was hanged as a malefactor, and He lifted no hand in self-defense, nor uttered a word of reproach against His persecutors. “He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He opened not His mouth” (Isa. 53:7). He saved others, and even while hanging on the cross, “a reproach of men, and despised of the people,” He showed His power to save, in the case of the penitent thief; but Himself He could not save.

And this was the secret of His power to save others. It was not simply that He *would not* save Himself,—not alone that He unselfishly forgot Himself,—but He *could not* save Himself. To have saved Himself would have been the destruction of all others; for if He had planned to save Himself, He would have stayed in heaven, and never exposed Himself to reproach and cruelty. But such a thing was impossible; He *could not* thus save Himself, for such a saving of self would have been selfishness, and there was no selfishness in Him. He absolutely could not remain in heaven and leave man to perish. But He could not save men, while keeping Himself in safety apart from them and their troubles. So “He gave Himself for us” (Titus 2:14).

The Father has not merely offered to give Jesus to us; He has given Him to us! Since the world began, only one “righteous act” has ever been performed—the sacrifice of Jesus. The Father gave Him and He gave Himself for us, each one individually, going to hell and giving Himself forever, to save us each individually.

Thus we see that the Gospel has the origin and perfection in giving. “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16). “The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister,”—not to be served, but to serve,—and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). “For ye know that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). He had everything, and we had

nothing; so He gave up everything, and He kept nothing, in order that we might have everything.

Most clearly is this set forth in Phil. 2:7, but in the rendering of the Revised Version, where we are told that when Jesus had everything, He did not count it a thing to be desired to hold it, “but emptied Himself” like you turn a bottle upside down to drain it. He “poured out His soul unto death” (Isa. 53:12). The Greek word from which this is translated has the sense of “to drain out.” In a sense He annihilated Himself. Threw Himself away, in order that He might save those who were lost, and in danger of annihilation. He took no thought for Himself; He did not defend Himself against attacks that were made upon Him; utterly regardless, reckless of self, He was lost in solicitude for others. When He died, He was penniless. His executioners even stripped Him of His clothes. He died as a Nobody on a cross, forsaken by God His Father (so it seemed to Him). He was in fact a Citizen of heaven who had “emptied Himself” of all the prerogatives of that Citizenship. He cast in His lot with humanity—for eternity.

This neglect of self was not a momentary enthusiasm, as when one under a strong impulse saves another from the impending death at the expense of his own life. On the contrary, it was a deliberate, settled purpose. Calmly and deliberately, looking over the whole situation, and counting the cost, He laid down His life, that is, He placed it from Him, gave it up to the service of others, and when that was done, the moment of death was but an incident in a long career of the same giving. His life

was just as truly laid down for the sheep before He came to earth, and while He walked and talked and suffered in Judea and Galilee, as when with His expiring breath He cried, "Father, into Thy hands I commend My Spirit" (John 19:30).

In all this history of self-sacrifice there is a lesson for us. We are not simply to admire the example of devotion, but to follow it. In it alone is there salvation. Jesus seemingly threw Himself away, yes, that is what He actually did, for He "poured out His soul unto death" (Isa. 53:12), "emptied Himself," drained the last drop; "wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name that is above every name" (Phil. 2:9). His humiliation was His exaltation; His casting away of self was His salvation. And that was the only possible way of salvation; for to have sought to have saved Himself would have been to deny Himself, that is, to prove false to His nature. Since God is love, unselfishness, the only way that He can preserve His own existence is to give Himself away.

The idea of "in Christ" appears many times in Paul's letters. Sometimes he applies the phrase unmistakably to the personal conversion experience of those who believe. Other times he unmistakably applies it to the entire human race which has been redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ. Both the righteous and the wicked will come up in resurrection because they are all "in Christ" (1 Cor. 15:22). That does not mean that the wicked have had a conversion experience, far from it; but when Adam sinned and lost the headship of the human race, Christ stepped in to become the second

Adam. Paul says he reversed the evil to the race that Adam had done; Christ came to save the world, and He redeemed it. He did more than offer life to "all men," for He *gave* the gift to all men. It's like Esau and his birthright; it was not offered to him, it was given to him. The only reason he failed to reap the blessings of the inheritance was because he despised and sold it (Gen. 25:33, 34).

There was once a lady who believed in Christ whose husband did not. He had firmly, irrevocably fixed his heart against giving himself to the Lord who had died for him. A wise counselor told the wife to be as good to him as she could because her kindnesses to him were the only "heaven" he would ever have. He chose to "perish."

Jesus still loves the world, even the perishing. The Father gave Him and He gave Himself so that whoever believes should not perish but have everlasting life. But if someone chooses not to believe in Him, He still loves that poor perishing soul and wants him/her to enjoy this life as much as he/she can. It's pathetic, but that's how great His love for the lost still is.

There is a precious little book called *Steps to Christ* which presents the gospel of Christ very clearly. Some publishers printed a special edition in which they printed on the back cover these words: "Jesus Wants to Be Your Best Friend." They sincerely thought they were doing the right thing, but they were vitiating the message of the book and transforming its Good News into Bad News.

The implication was clear: Jesus is not your Best Friend and He will not be your Best Friend until you

do something right first which will change Him into becoming your Best Friend. And thus the book becomes a subtle statement of our old-fashioned legalism.

Question: Did the repentant, believing thief crucified with Jesus make Him become his Best Friend? Or was He so already? Had God already loved the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son to save us? Or did we do something first to induce Him to love us?

Was Jesus already the Best Friend of the cruel men who nailed Him to the cross? He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). One of them did repent and we trust he will be saved eternally—the centurion (vs. 47). He came to know Him as his already-Best-Friend Savior!

Caiphas never in his life had such a Best Friend as the Jesus of Nazareth whom he condemned to be crucified. All these deliberately unbelieving people will realize in the final day of judgment how evil and stupid they were not to realize that the Jesus whom they rejected was the only true Friend they had ever had. May the Holy Spirit enable us to present Him thus to every person whom we shall meet! Including children and youth!