

Mary met Rob in college. What started as a friendship blossomed into a relationship. After a few blissful years of dating they graduated college and tied the knot. Six years, two kids, a dog, and a home near the city later, and Mary and Rob seemed to be fulfilling the happily ever after life they both envisioned on their wedding day.

But then the housing bubble burst, the economy tanked, and Rob found himself the low man on the totem pole at work. Rob had always enjoyed unwinding with a beer or two after a long day, but now unemployed, disillusioned, and frustrated the drinking began to escalate.

At first Mary and Rob tried to ignore it, but Rob got mean when he got drunk. The first time Rob shoved Mary it caught them both by surprise. Rob had never done anything like that before but the frustration, the alcohol, the building resentment of nightly quarrelling had changed him.

The verbal and physical abuse escalated until a year later, Mary found herself a divorced mother of two, with a dog, and a mortgage she couldn't afford. So much for happily ever after.

Mary yearns for salvation, for things to be made right again. Mary, a Christian, has been forced into this wrestling match with God... he's supposed to work all things for the good of those who love him, right?...

Aaron, a 32 year old husband and father of three, is speechless. His hands are shaking. His stomach is in knots. The doctor is still talking but he can't seem to stay focused on what he's saying.

He thought it was just a harmless mole. A nurse friend suggested he get it checked out just in case. Two words, melanoma and metastasized, changed everything.

Just one whirl-wind of a year later – a year hallmarked by body-poisoning chemo, and endless doctor appointments – Aaron lies in his hospice bed dying.

Aaron yearns for salvation, for himself from the cancer, for his wife and his three little children from having to live on in this world without him. Aaron, a Christian, lies in that hospice bed wrestling with God... the work of his doctors, the prayers of his family, friends, and strangers weren't bringing about the desired results. Where is his God? He's supposed to work all things for the good of those who love him, right? ...

Karen prays for death every night. She feels guilty for it, but she's just so lonely. At 94 it has been over 20 years since she felt the warmth of her husband beside her at night. She's stood by the grave of a husband, two of her own children, and more of her friends than she cares to count.

At night she tosses and turns because 94 years of wear and tear make comfort a mirage. Day in and day out she sits in her room alone – her friends are dead, her family is busy with the tyranny of the urgent that young life is so wrapped up in.

Karen yearns for salvation. She has been forced into this wrestling match with God. She can't understand why he has let her linger on so long. He's supposed to work all things (even this lonely waiting to go to heaven) out for her good, right?

Three people, three, unfortunately, very ordinary stories of human existence - Stories like those of Mary, Aaron, and Karen play out all around the world day after day.

Right now there are Christian brothers and sisters all around the world, in this very congregation, yearning for salvation from our God. And you don't have to be riddled with cancer or alone in a nursing home to yearn for God's salvation.

The toddler who wakes up crying at night because it hurts when a molar forces its way through your gums, may not be able to articulate it, but he's yearning for salvation. The teen who every day wrestles to fit in at her school, and find her place in this world, yearns for salvation. The mother who hasn't slept through the night in months, who is up to her elbows in dirty laundry, dirty dishes, and dirty diapers yearns for salvation. From broken bones, to traffic jams; from a stomach flu, to depression; from special needs parenting, to cancer, we Christians live in a world full of people suffering the wages of sin – yearning for salvation.

And almost always, the salvation we yearn for, *from our perspective*, seems slow to come... if it comes at all.

Hence the wrestling... when we Christians come face to face with the sufferings inherent in a sin-wrecked world, faith is challenged. We believe God loves us. We believe that God is in control of our lives and this world. We believe that he has promised to save us from the sin of this world.

The challenge to faith comes when God doesn't love us in the way that we would if we were calling the shots. The challenge comes when God doesn't use his control to do the things we would do if we were in control. The challenge comes when God doesn't save us on the timetable we would set if we were God.

The simple truth that plays itself out in the lives of so many Christians, the simple truth that we are forced to accept in so many big and small ways in this world is this:

Our God will save us, but almost never in the way we expect him to. The Bible, through story after story, passage after passage, proves that our God is not a God who works the way we expect him to. Whatever seems *to us* to be the right and proper way for God to operate in this world – he almost always does the exact opposite.

His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. He works in mysterious ways, the Bible, and our experiences remind us.

So, in a world like this, where we yearn for salvation in so many ways, from so many things, as we wrestle with our God, there is a vitally important truth we need to wrap our hearts and heads around. God through his word needs to wrap our hearts and heads, the arms of our faith around the truth that **our God will save us, but almost never in the way we expect him to.**

That is a truth that Ezekiel and his fellow Israelites needed to God to teach them.

God's people, including Ezekiel were yearning for salvation.

Ezekiel was a Priest in Israel. He had the privilege of serving God and his people in the Temple that King Solomon built. But then the suffering came. The Israelites who were frustratingly stubborn when it came to their God – so quick to think that they could find in everyday things like money, sex, and power, the purpose and comfort that only God could give them – they had finally worn out the patience of God.

God sent the foreign super-power Babylon to punish his people.

Ezekiel and the brightest and best of Israel were ripped from their homes and carted off into captivity.

While Ezekiel wrestled with God in Babylon, a priest far-removed from his temple, God came to him and began to use him as a prophet. But God had some pretty harsh and uncomfortable things to say to his people through Ezekiel.

The suffering wasn't over. In fact, the first attack of Babylon would feel like a slap on the wrist compared to what was going to happen to them next.

It turns out that God's people hadn't learned their lesson. Instead of hearing in the conquest by Babylon a call to trust in their God again, the Israelites stayed stubborn. They looked to everything and everyone but their God to fix their suffering. They didn't like God's ways and God's timetable, so they tried to make their own. They tried to reach out to Egypt to come and bail them out, but in the verses right before this God made clear that wouldn't work.

Ezekiel and the Israelites were yearning for salvation... when God's timing didn't match their own, they tried to force the issue and take matters into their own hands.

But, as God does throughout the pages of the Bible and history, he resists human effort to strong-arm him into action.

God would save and deliver his people, but not in the time or way they expected or wanted him to. And that is the message that God sent Ezekiel to share with his people. They would be saved, but not in the way they expected, and not on their timetable.

In Ezekiel chapter 17 Israel is pictured as this magnificent cedar – a cedar whose top had been lopped off by a great eagle. The eagle is Babylon. The eagle takes the lopped off part and plants it away from home. The plant begins to grow (God's promise that even though they were suffering God was still with them). But the plant wasn't happy with that. It decided to reach out and grow its branches toward another Eagle. The second eagle was Egypt, and Israel's attempt to find salvation in Egypt rather than God.

But salvation comes only from God. God made clear that their attempt to save themselves wouldn't work, but then comes the promise (and don't fail to notice how little the Israelites deserved this promise). God's promise of salvation is the verses Pastor Adams read just a few minutes ago.

I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and pant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; It will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches.

In other words: I will give you the salvation you yearn for. How?

A shoot or a sprig from this cedar of Israel would be plucked off by God, panted and grow into this amazing fruit-bearing, shelter giving tree.

Any guesses on what God is promising here?

Well, I can assure you it wasn't in the kind of salvation the Israelites expected or wanted. It wasn't the immediate downfall of Babylon. It wasn't a return to the earthly glory of David and Solomon. It wasn't the immediate removal suffering.

God's fulfillment of this promise didn't happen in Ezekiel's lifetime – or any of those who yearned for salvation in Babylon. God's people would have to wait almost 600 years for God to keep his promise.

God would save them, but not in the way they expected – he makes that clear in the last verses: **“All the trees of the forest will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.”**

Any guesses on what God is promising here?

It's not a coincidence that one of the titles given to Jesus is shoot of Jesse.

Almost 600 years after this promise was made, one man, an offspring of Jesse, who was a descendent of Jacob (who was renamed Israel) – a shoot of Jesse, the decedent of Israel would bring about the salvation God's people yearned for.

Israel was suffering and God sent them Ezekiel with the message that God would save them, but not in the way they expected. God would save them through Jesus.

It wasn't the salvation they expected – but make no mistake about it, it was the salvation they needed. Because of this sprig, Ezekiel, and all the rest of God's people who suffer in this world because of sin were guaranteed entrance into the shade of a new, magnificent cedar.

In short, God's message to suffering people 2600 years ago was: I will save you, but not the way you expect. I will save you not by fixing your life here and now, but by bringing you home to heaven through Jesus.

Now, what about Mary, and Aaron, and Karen? What does God say to them? What about you and me? What does God say to us?

Your God has promised you, through Ezekiel, through Jesus, through the pages of the Bible that he will save you, that he has saved you, and we need God to wrap the arms of our faith around the fact that this salvation doesn't always come the way you expect – but it does come.

The Sovereign LORD (note Sovereign; we talk about sovereign nations as nations that are free to do what they want, for whom it is not my right to tell them what to do) – your Sovereign LORD, whom you have no right to tell what to do, says that when his salvation is realized **“All the trees of the forest will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.”**

We humans think there is a right way to find peace and security and happiness and salvation – we trust in the tall trees, the green trees, the powers and successes of this world to bring us peace and security and happiness and salvation.

For the Israelites that meant running to Egypt to help with Babylon. For us those green trees are the accumulated wisdom, power, and wealth of mankind that we are so quick to run to when the suffering starts. But our God makes clear that he is not going to save us through the power and might of this world.

Our Sovereign LORD chooses to save us (though we certainly don't deserve it), but not in the way we expect. The salvation of our God is found in small, dry trees... a small, dry tree, like a cross...

Friends we have a God who saves us, but not in the way we expect. He saves us through the cross of Christ.

When your life inevitably begins to play out like Mary's, Aaron's, or Karen's; when you find yourself yearning for salvation from your God; when you are forced to wrestle with your God because he seems slow to answer your cries for salvation, if he even answers at all; remember your God's long history of saving his people from trials and suffering in unexpected ways. Remember your God's promise to save you and the many proofs you have that he is a God who keeps his promises. Remember most of all that small, dry tree on a hill called Golgotha.

Remember that small dry tree with the shoot of Jesse dying on it and know that because of him you have access to the fruit and shade of a mighty cedar.

When suffering comes, wrap the arms of your faith around that small, dry tree and know that your God will save you, even if it's not in the way you expect.

Amen.