

(Posted May, 2016. Scriptures quoted are from the New King James Bible, unless noted otherwise. Revised August, 2017; June, 2019; August, 2023)

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Introduction

Following are the main concepts this study will try to clarify and bring

forward:

- 1) A more flexible and inclusive view on who are God's people.
- 2) A better understanding about the Afterlife, in particular, the possibility of salvation in the Afterlife.
- 3) The understanding that to be "*justified by faith*" includes being "*justified by works*".
- 4) The urgency and responsibility of believers to bring the Good News message and way of life into the world of humankind.
- 5) The realization that salvation does not automatically rule out any form of correction or chastening in the Afterlife.
- 6) The understanding that Hell and the Lake of Fire are there for the purposes of refining and correction and are not necessarily permanent abodes.

Sometimes we hear the question, "Where will you spend Eternity - Heaven or Hell?" From a certain angle, the question is positive; for it challenges us to reflect on the reality of life beyond the grave. From a different angle, though, the question sounds threatening, conjuring up fearful thoughts like, "Will I end up in Hell? How straight-laced do I have to be to win God's approval? Is God upset with me?"

A healthy fear of God is needed sometimes. But Christ came "*not... to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved*". (John 3:17) He came to prepare us for and lead us to Heaven, whose gates are wide open for whoever's ready. His desire is to heal and restore our relationship with the Almighty. From that point of view, the "where will you spend Eternity?" question is not a good fit.

The Bible tells us, "*God is love.*" (1John 4:8) He is not a cruel tyrant, not a monster who is trying to frighten everyone into hell, but a God who is trying to love everyone into heaven!

We understand, of course, that God exercises authority over the gates of Heaven and Hell and who goes there and who doesn't and all that. But that doesn't mean the Afterlife existence is so rigidly divided (between Heaven and Hell), so static that there is no possibility of movement or release. That view is over-simplified and overlooks certain realities about life in the Afterlife. Nor does it jibe well with God's aim to "*save the*

world” rather than “condemn” it. (John 3:17) And we should take into account the full import of what Christ meant when He told His apostle, “*I have the keys of Hades and of Death.*” (Revelation 1:18)

In the Christian playbook, there is need for a more welcoming approach towards the non-believer - along with an understanding that there is room for growth, change, and deliverance even in the Afterlife. True, to know the Lord during one’s earthly lifetime brings great advantage, reward, and fulfillment. But the idea that this life provides the only or last opportunity for Salvation over-simplifies a reality that is more broad-based and multi-faceted than we could ever imagine. And it under-estimates the power and love of God.

If we assume that there is no chance after this life for salvation, then we are forced to ponder some difficult questions:

What about the people who never heard the gospel, who never even heard the name of Jesus? How could a God of love send them into everlasting torment... when they never even had a chance to hear the gospel or know how to get saved?

And what about the untold millions of people of different religions who are fairly righteous and are trying to do the best they know how, living up to whatever light they have? How could God send them to hell just because they never heard or understood the gospel or the love of God so that they would want to get saved? Are they going to be sent to eternal torment in the flames of hell, even if they were kind, sweet people who tried their best to worship and please God, even though they never really knew Him or His Word and truth?

(“Heaven, Hell, and In Between” Anchor - Hope for the Soul, February 2018)

Without proper and thoughtful answers to those questions, believers can come across as too narrow-minded and exclusive and leave an impression about God that He is terribly unfair to those who have tried to live decent lives but have not had a real opportunity to fall into the arms of the Savior during their earthly lifetimes; or even to those who did have the opportunity and refused but would turn to the Savior if given a second chance. Thank God for those Christian teachers who are trying to

encourage a more open and accepting attitude towards those outside of Christian fellowships.

Sadly however, many a potential believer has been offended because they just couldn't believe in a God who would turn away innocent people, even send them to Hell. In the Christian world this is a big misconception, that there is no alternative or in-between states or stages, even though the Scriptures teach otherwise. (This is a big subject to be explored in upcoming posts.)

And what about those who do land in Hell? They may deserve it and need it, but is there no possibility of release for them? Is the all-or-nothing-at-all view of the Afterlife more extreme than it needs to be? Is Heaven a private club with high walls and closed gates to insulate a privileged membership while turning away all the uninitiated non-members.

When one views a mountain range from a distance, it looks like one huge single block of towering rock. But as one travels closer, one finds all kinds of foothills and intermediate ranges. It soon becomes clear that there is a whole lot more variety and in-between stages than could be seen at first glance from a distance. And likewise, the Celestial Realm, the World Beyond, is much more complex than the simplified version we often hear - Heaven and Hell with nothing else in-between.

What we human beings can expect to encounter at the end of life's road is no easy topic to address, but the following discussion on the subject, it is hoped, will help to clarify and broaden our understanding of what goes on in the Afterlife... and, during our earthly lifetimes, how we can better prepare for our long-term destiny.

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