



No Other Name

Many Christians believe that all people who do not accept the gospel before they die are eternally lost and without hope.

On one hand, Christians believe that by the Son of God all things were created (Colossians 1:16), by the Son's word all things are held in being (Hebrews 1:3), and that through the Son's human birth, death and resurrection all things are reconciled to God (Colossians 1:20). Yet, on the other hand, many have the idea that the blood of Christ cannot reconcile humans who die before coming to faith.

Before we start, let's be sure we understand that the Bible is very plain that only in Jesus Christ is there salvation at all (Acts 4:12).

Human religions do not lead to salvation. Only in the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who creates, redeems, sustains and rules all things – is there forgiveness of sin, healing of minds, redemption and eternal life.

The question we are dealing with in this article is whether the Bible says that a person must confess Christ before he or she dies or be automatically damned.

Lazarus and the Rich Man

Let's begin by taking a look at one of the two passages that are sometimes interpreted as proving that all who die without having come to faith are automatically damned. It is the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man, in which Abraham tells the rich man there is a great gulf fixed that keeps those in Hades separate from those who are with Abraham.

It is found in Luke 16:19-31. Before the story begins, however, we can back up a few verses to get an idea of whom Jesus was talking to when he told this story and what was the subject that prompted him to tell it. In verse 14, we read this: "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him" (New Revised Standard Version throughout).

Jesus was talking to a group of Pharisees, and what Luke wants his readers to know about the Pharisees in connection with this passage is that the Pharisees were lovers of money. Now we are getting the context of the story. A group of Pharisees who were lovers of money were ridiculing Jesus because of what he was saying.

We have to go back to chapter 15, verse 1, to get the whole episode. Here we read: “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So he told them this parable...”

Then Jesus proceeds to tell them three parables in a row: The Shepherd Who Rejoices Over Finding His Lost Sheep, The Woman Who Rejoices Over Finding Her Lost Coin, and The Father Who Rejoices Over Finding His Lost Son. Jesus tells these three parables specifically in response to the Pharisees and scribes who were disgruntled over the fact that he welcomes sinners and eats with them. These parables push God’s grace toward sinners right up the Pharisees’ and scribes’ disgruntled noses.

Jesus wants them to know that “there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (verse 7). The pointed remark is not lost on the Pharisees and scribes; they consider themselves righteous and not in need of repentance. Jesus (knowing they are not really righteous) is telling them that heaven is not singing their song.

Money vs. God

If the first two parables irritate the Pharisees and scribes, the third one, The Father Who Rejoices Over Finding His Lost Son, commonly known as the Prodigal Son, takes the cake. Here is a father who gives unbridled love and unconditional forgiveness to a son who dishonored him, wasted half his assets and dragged the family name through the mud. It was a scandalous story that trampled on any sense of common decency, dignity and honor. When Jesus finishes telling it, he turns to his disciples and addresses them with yet another story (Luke 16:1). But the Pharisees are still listening (verse 14).

The moral of this story, Jesus says, is that you cannot serve both money and God; you will find yourself devoted either to the one or to the other, not both (verse 13). If you love money, you will not love God. The Pharisees heard everything, but learned nothing. Instead of repenting so that there might be joy in heaven, they ridiculed Jesus. His words were utter foolishness to them, because they were lovers of money (verse 14). Responding to their ridicule, Jesus says, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God” (verse 15).

He goes on to point out that the law and the prophets stand as witnesses that the kingdom of God has arrived and that everyone is urgently piling into it (verses 16-17). His implied message: “Because you prize the things of men, not the things of God, you are rejecting God’s urgent summons to enter his kingdom, which can be done only through me.”

The next statement (verse 18), which cites divorce and adultery, might at first appear to be completely out of context. More likely, it serves as a further declaration that the Law and the Prophets are in fact part and parcel with the kingdom of God, and that in rejecting the Messiah the Jewish religious leaders have “divorced” the Law and the Prophets, which witness to him, from the kingdom of God, and in so doing have rejected God (likened to adultery throughout the Old Testament; compare Jeremiah 3:6, etc.). Now, as the coupe de grace, he tells the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man.

A Tale of Unbelief

There are three characters in the story, the rich man (representing the Pharisees who love money), the miserable beggar Lazarus (representing a class of people despised by the Pharisees), and Abraham (whose bosom or lap was a Jewish figure of comfort and peace in the afterlife).

And the point Jesus uses the story to make is the same point he has been making all along: You consider yourselves the high and mighty blessed of God, but the truth is you love money and hate God – that is why you are so rankled that I spend my time in fellowship with unvarnished sinners, this is why you despise your fellow man and will not humble yourselves and believe in me and find true riches.

But back to the story. The beggar dies. But then, without missing a beat, Jesus again pokes the Pharisees in the eye by saying, “... and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham” (verse 22). This is, as usual with Jesus’ stories, exactly the opposite of what the Pharisees expected would happen to a man like Lazarus. Such people were poor and diseased beggars because they were under God’s curse, they assumed, and therefore it is only natural that such people go to be tormented in Hades when they die. “Not so,” says Jesus. “Your worldview is upside down. You know nothing of my Father’s kingdom. Not only are you wrong about how my Father feels about the beggar, but you are wrong about how my Father feels about you.”

Jesus completes the turnabout by telling them that the rich man also died and was buried, but he, not the beggar as they expected, is the one who finds himself being tormented in Hades. And Jesus draws it out. From his torments in Hades, the rich man looked up and saw Abraham far off with none other than Lazarus by his side. He cries out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames” (verses 23-24). But

Abraham tells him the way things stand. “All your life you loved riches and had no time for the likes of Lazarus. But I do have time for the likes of Lazarus, and now he is with me, and you have nothing.”

And then comes the out-of-context proof text: “Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us” (Luke 16:26). Have you ever wondered why anybody could possibly want to pass from “here to you?” It is obvious why someone might want to cross from “there to us,” but from “here to you” makes no sense. Or does it? Abraham began his words to Lazarus by addressing him as “child,” then points out to him that not even those who might want to get to him are able to because of the great chasm.

The Bridge Across the Chasm

There is one who crosses chasms for the sake of sinners. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). God gave his Son for sinners, not just for sinners like Lazarus, but for sinners like the rich man, too. But the rich man doesn’t want the Son of God. The rich man wants what he always wanted – his own comfort at the expense of others, which is exactly the opposite of what the Son of God wants.

Jesus’ condemnation of the unbelief of the Pharisees in this story concludes with the rich man arguing that if someone would warn his brothers, they would not come into the place where he was. “They have Moses and the Prophets; they should listen to them,” Abraham tells him. (Remember Jesus’ statements in verses 16-17? The Law and Prophets are nothing other than a testimony to him. See John 5:45-47 and Luke 24:44-47.)

“No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent” (Luke 16:30). “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead’ “ (verse 31). And they didn’t. The Pharisees conspired with the scribes and the chief priests to have Jesus crucified, conspired to have soldiers lie about his resurrection (Matthew 27:62-66), and proceeded to persecute and kill those who became believers.

There is a bridge across the chasm, the bridge across all chasms. The bridge is Jesus. But the rich man (the Jewish religious leaders who constantly oppose Jesus) is not interested in putting his faith in Jesus. Permit me to paraphrase Abraham’s reply to the rich man.

“Look, friend, you refuse to come to Christ, so there is no place left for you but right where you are. You won’t even admit that you need forgiveness. You still want

exactly what you always wanted – everybody else zipping around waiting on you hand and foot. You can't get over here because you won't go anyplace where you're no better than old Laz the bum. We can't get where you are to help you because you are precisely nowhere. You made your own chasm to separate yourself from who you are in Christ because you won't come to him to have life.

“You still think like you always thought – that you are something special and Laz here is a nobody, the dirt under your sandals. And now you're still so convinced you've got it all together that you can't even see that you've been the nobody all along and Laz the loser is the one who's in like Flint with me. Well, pal, you've still got just what you've always had – nothing, nothing that matters anyway.

“What's that? Now you want Laz to run some errands to warn others like you? Are you kidding? They won't listen. They've got Moses and the Prophets who told them Messiah would come. If they won't listen to them, you think they're going to listen to Laz? Forget about it. What's that? If someone comes back from the dead they'll listen to him? Oh really? Well, guess what? That's just what Jesus did, came back from the dead, and yet there you are, over there in Nowhereland because you won't put your trust in him.”

Even if you don't like my interpretation of this passage, you still have to admit one thing: it is bad business to base a doctrine on one verse alone, and especially on one in a story designed to make a different point altogether. This story is primarily about the refusal of the Jewish leaders to believe in Jesus and the willingness of others to do so, and secondarily about the reversal of common assumptions about riches being a sign of God's favor.

It is not there to paint us a portrait of heaven and hell. It is a parable of judgment against the unbelieving Israelite leadership and the unkind rich, using common Jewish imagery of the afterlife (hades and “being with Abraham”) as a literary backdrop to make the point. In other words, Jesus was not commenting on the validity of Jewish imagery of the afterlife; he was simply using that imagery as scenery for his story.

Jesus was not in the business of satisfying our itching curiosities about what heaven and hell must be like. He was in the business of filling us in on God's secrets (Romans 16:25; Ephesians 1:9, etc.), the mystery of the ages (Ephesians 3:4-5) – that in him, Christ, God has always been reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). Our preoccupation with otherworldly geographical trivia leads us away from the very point missed by the rich man in the story: Believe in the One who came back from the dead.

Who Is Lost?

None are lost but those who will not trust in Christ. Since God made the world and called it good (Genesis 1), and calls humanity “very good” (verse 31), and since God loves the world and sent his Son that whoever would believe in him would enter into life (John 3:16), it is not unreasonable to conclude that God will provide an opportunity for every person to respond to the gospel, and since most people die before they hear the gospel, it is not unreasonable to conclude that God will also provide such an opportunity for them even if it is after they die.

“Maybe it is not unreasonable, but that does not make it true.”

You are right about that. But the Word of God, we agree, is true. And the Word of God is good news for humanity, not bad news. And what is good for humanity is whatever is God’s will for humanity. And God has demonstrated his will for humanity by sending Jesus Christ. His will is not that the world be condemned, but that it be saved (John 3:17).

“I admit it doesn’t seem fair that people who don’t hear the gospel before they die are damned, but just because something doesn’t seem fair to us doesn’t mean it isn’t fair in God’s sight. If God wants to save only a few, that is his prerogative. After all, the damned are only getting what they deserve!”

We don’t argue with that. Certainly, if God wanted to, he could do things that way. We simply argue that the Bible does not reveal God that way. It reveals God in Christ as 1) graciously and faithfully procuring the reconciliation of all people (1 John 2:2), and 2) graciously desiring the salvation of all people (1 Timothy 2:3-4).

Deep Current of Scripture

The deep current of Scripture is nothing other than the gospel. Scripture exists, we could even say, as testimony to the gospel. The Bible, in other words, is the Spirit-inspired revelation of God’s Word of redemption and salvation by his grace through faith in his Son made flesh for our sakes, Jesus Christ.

The Bible, this testimony of God’s good news to humans, reveals God the way he really is: the God of creation, redemption and salvation. The Bible, inspired by the Holy Spirit, shows us that God loves his creation, a creation over which he is sovereign and almighty, and that he loves the people he has created. He made his creation, including humanity, very good (Genesis 1:31), and because humanity botched itself by going into its own God business, he also, in Christ from the foundation of the world (1 Peter 1:20), reconciled his creation to himself (Romans 5:10).

The Bible tells us that God longs for humans to repent and to turn to him (Acts 17:20; 2 Peter 3:9). He wants them to know him and experience him for who he really is as their Creator, Deliverer, Redeemer, Father and Friend. He wants them to dwell eternally in him and with him.

The apostle Peter wrote: “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). This is how the Spirit consistently reveals God as feeling and thinking about the people he has made. He made them in his image; they became sinners, alienated from him, and he, loving them intensely even in their sins (Romans 5:6-8), has forgiven and redeemed them through the blood of his Son (John 12:32; 1 John 2:2).

The Judge is the Savior

“You said there is another passage that is often used to prove that those who die without knowing the gospel are automatically damned.”

Thanks for the reminder. The second passage is this: “And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:27-28). The only way to read into this passage the idea of automatic damnation for all who die without the gospel is to begin with that very assumption.

In other words, the passage doesn't say that. It doesn't even address that question. It simply says that judgment follows death. It says nothing about what that judgment might include, nor anything about whether God will allow people to trust in him after they die. This passage proves nothing one way or the other about whether the dead are given the gospel.

Let's move on. We are told in Acts 17:30-31: “While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Not only will the whole world be judged in righteousness, but the Judge will be none other than the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ. God doesn't only command all people everywhere (that's everyone) to repent, he does so because he has appointed Jesus, who died for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2), to be Judge.

And if anybody wants assurance that God is serious about all this forgiving and reconciling of all people, all they have to do is notice that he raised the Judge from the dead after the very people who need redemption (that is, all of us) killed him. God will not be thwarted in his faithfulness to his covenant to be our God and we his people.

Revelation 20 depicts the Judgment this way: “Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened.

“Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:11-15).

When the judging is over, every person is either saved or condemned. But first, before any distinction is made, to everyone’s surprise, death and hell themselves are thrown into the lake of fire. If I might be allowed to personify death and hell for just a moment, just imagine them sitting there in the heavenly courtroom, barely able to contain their grins, knowing that everybody on trial is guilty as sin. Waiting for the verdicts, their thoughts are delightfully occupied with the cruelty and torture they have in store for this innumerable multitude of sure-to-be-condemned wretches.

Then suddenly, their wicked daydreams are rudely interrupted as strong angels grip their arms and muscle them out of the courtroom to the Judge’s own furnace and hurl them screaming into oblivion. A hush falls on the court. What can this mean? With death and hell destroyed, how can anybody remain their slaves?

All Are Judged

The Bible teaches that there is one and only one way to be saved – by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). As we see from Revelation 20 and other passages, such as Matthew 25:31-33, there are only two kinds of people in the final judgment, the saved and the condemned. So what of those who seem never to have had the gospel presented to them before death? Some conclude that such people are automatically doomed eternally for the simple reason that before they died no Christian ever told them about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Consider Paul’s statements in Romans 10:14-21. Here, Paul highlights the unbelief of Israel by citing the words of the Psalms and of Isaiah. First, he asks a question regarding the hearing of the word of Christ (v. 17-18), “But I ask, have they

not heard?” His answer: “Indeed they have; for [quoting Psalm 10:18] ‘Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world’ “ (v. 18).

Next, Paul quotes Isaiah to illustrate the irony of Israel’s unbelief in light of the salvation of the gentiles: “I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me” (v. 20, quoting Isaiah 65:1). God’s word is the decisive word for all time to all humanity; it is not merely the word to those who are contacted by Christian missionaries and evangelists. Jesus is the incarnate Son of God and Word of God – the supreme Good News for all time past and all time future and extending to every corner of the cosmos.

It is strange that we should be asked to believe that God is incapable of confronting humans with the gospel in ways we do not understand and by means in which we have little or no role. Through his superintendence of Scripture, the Holy Spirit presents the atonement of Jesus Christ as thoroughly sufficient for the redemption of the whole cosmos, the cosmos Christ holds in the palm of his hand for his Father and to which he gives life and existence every moment. Yet, we are asked to believe, as one preacher put it, that “millions are going to hell this week because nobody is getting to them with the gospel!”

God is consistent with his word – he does not want any person to perish. Jesus said he will draw all people to himself. Since salvation comes by no means other than trusting in the word of God’s grace through Jesus Christ, this means God does, in ways and at times to which we are not privy, give every person the freedom to accept God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Righteous Judge

Returning to Revelation 20:11-15, we find the two great truths of human destiny, attested continually in Scripture, once again jumping out at us: 1) All, that is, everybody, gets judged, no exceptions, and 2) Jesus is the judge.

Now let’s sit down and give a little serious thought to that. What sort of judge is this Jesus? Well, for one thing, he is not like any human judge we’re ever going to meet. No human judge takes on himself every criminal’s punishment and then declares the criminal “not guilty!” But this one does. In fact, he already did. In fact, he did it from the foundation of the world. Which means that the power of his redemption precedes even the very first salivating of Eve’s mouth for the forbidden fruit.

This is no ordinary judge. This judge holds all the universe every moment in the miraculous dance of existence by the word of his mouth. This judge not only gives existence to every single human, he became one of us for the express purpose of forgiving us all crimes against him and giving us eternal life in himself. This judge

draws all men, women and children to himself in his death and resurrection from the dead. This judge is no ordinary judge.

He is perfectly fair and just, but not just fair and just, because that would leave every one of us dead. His perfect fairness and justice are overpowered by his perfect mercy (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13; 12:7; James 2:13). He has gone to extraordinary lengths, through his own incarnation, to see to it that people are saved. He took all our sinfulness upon himself and so destroyed sin in the flesh (Romans 8:3). This is no ordinary judge.

This universe springs from the gracious freedom of the triune God to be who he will be. By his grace the worlds exist. By his grace every person exists. And by his grace the eternal Son of the Father became flesh for us, atoning for the sins of the whole world, that God's gracious purpose for us might be fulfilled in him, the eternal Son, Jesus Christ.

When all the people of the world, the great and the small (Revelation 20:12), including all the dead (verses 12-13), stand before the judgment seat, they are facing none other than Jesus Christ. Imagine the scene. Their judge, the one who holds their eternal fate in his hands, is none other than the Lamb of God, the atoning sacrifice not only for our sins but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1-2). They are in the hands, the spike-pierced hands, of the risen Son of God, the crucified and glorified Christ. They are at his mercy – at the mercy of the Author of mercy.

Judgment Day

Imagine you are sitting in the Court of the Universe, waiting with pounding heart for the Judge of All Things to walk in and pass judgment on you. You had never really taken seriously the idea of a final judgment. You had heard people talk about God and such, but it never really meant anything to you.

Now you realize that there really is an accounting to be given. The piper is going to be paid, after all. You are heartsick. Your breathing is shallow, rapid. Sweat is trickling down your spine. Your eyes focus on the signs above two doors behind the bench. One reads, Exit for Perfectly Sinless and Righteous Saints. The other reads, Exit for All Others. Flooding through your mind is a hideous collage of your lies, lust, meanness, betrayals, selfishness, greed. And now this is it, the day of reckoning. You feel numb. You know you've got no hope. You hear yourself groan.

Then the Judge walks in and takes his throne. His presence overwhelms you. He is like nothing you could have expected. The whole courtroom seems to come alive in response to him. He is the definition of power and of authority, yet he radiates peace, serenity and love. He is so compelling that your thoughts are no longer on yourself and

your dread. Your body relaxes, an unexplainable joy bubbles up from the center of your being. As awesome as he appears, you suddenly feel you would rather be smothered in his embrace than live another moment without him. You know that whatever his verdict, it will be good, and you are no longer afraid of anything.

“How do you plead?” the Judge asks. His voice seems to draw the truth from your lips. “Guilty,” you respond, and as you do, you realize two things at once, that you are deeply ashamed of your sinful life, and that the Judge has already dropped all charges against you. Your shame melts into grateful tears of joy and peace of heart as you receive his life-giving gaze into the depths of your soul.

“Guilty of what?” the Judge asks, with a playful smile. “There doesn’t seem to be any record against you. Are you ready to join the celebration? Good. Let’s go eat.” And he holds open the Exit for Perfectly Sinless and Righteous Saints and beckons you to enter with him.

Or, of course, you could plead not guilty and try to argue your case, demanding to demonstrate that you really are a right decent sort of fellow in the main and should be counted among the saints because of all the quarters you put in that donation jar in the grocery store line. Or you could try to argue that you should be let off the hook because God has no right to impose his arbitrary rules on you in the first place.

Or you could simply tell God to leave you alone, he can keep his gospel, you don’t need it, you want none of his lovey-dovey stuff, you’d rather keep what works for you, your survival of the fittest, dog eat dog, fend for yourself way of life, at least you’re the master of your own domain. All these avenues allow you to exit with your nose in the air through the All Others door and find yourself where you like it best, in the dark, free to stew in your own self-satisfied juice.

No Need to Worry

Even if you don’t like my little tale of the heavenly courtroom, the point is that there is no need to worry that our departed loved ones, nor any of the rest of the masses of humans who have died, are consigned to the eternal flames simply because no missionary reached them with the gospel message before they died. Jesus knows the gospel too, and yes, ladies and gentlemen, he can present it even better than we can.

Sad to say, the Bible tells us that some will not accept the grace of the Creator and King (Matthew 25:46; Revelation 19:20; 20:15). They will not trust the Son of God and his Father. And there could be no greater tragedy, indeed, no greater stupidity, than for guests invited to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb to reject God’s free gift of grace in favor of their own pitiful and miserable attempts to make life worthwhile. But that is exactly what our broken human nature is bent toward doing.

Our “just desserts” oriented minds find it distressing to put all our eggs in the one basket of the Father’s outrageous grace. Such a deal would mean not only that our hard work at being good didn’t really matter in the end, but worse yet, that some pretty unsavory types might be allowed to stroll into the kingdom alongside us as well – just by nothing more than believing in God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

There must be some way to distinguish the deserving, like us, from the undeserving, like that weed-smoking pimp on the corner. There must be some way the good, decent people will get a better deal than the blatant sinners will get. This free, undeserved grace thing just has too many question marks around it for us to be entirely comfortable with it. It is the Judgment of God’s grace, and it works off its own logic, a logic as high above ours as heaven is above earth (see Isaiah 55:8-9 and Psalm 103:11-14).

Two Sets of Books

A remarkable thing takes place during this heavenly judgment sequence of Revelation 20. First, all the dead are gathered and some books are opened (Revelation 20:12). Then, another book is opened, not the “books” just mentioned, but “another book,” distinct from them. This book is called the Book of Life. And then these dead people are judged “according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.”

These “books” contain the record of their works, all the evidence needed to judge them, and on the basis of the evidence, where do you suppose it leaves them? It leaves them, naturally, in the same spot you and I are in – red-handed guilty. That is the hideous predicament of every one of these people, and the predicament, in fact, of all people who have ever lived.

“There is none righteous, no not one,” God says. “All your righteousness is as filthy rags,” is his assessment of where we humans stand in terms of judgment. “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God,” just in case anyone is still wondering who “made it” and who didn’t.

Just to be sure we understand that absolutely nobody is left out of this judgment, we are again told that everybody who has ever died is there: the sea gives up the dead in it and Death and Hades give up the dead in them (verse 13). Don’t get the idea that anybody has slipped through the cracks. Everybody stands before this judgment seat. And all are judged “according to his works.”

At this point, things seem to have taken an ugly turn. There is indeed not one righteous. Everybody who has ever lived and died is condemned by their own actions as recorded in the books. And they have to stand there and wait their turn while Death and Hades get tossed into the ultimate incinerator (verse 14).

But wait! What is this? That “other” book turns up again. The judgment according to their works by what was written in the books is not the end of the story! There is another book, the Book of Life, and the only ones who wind up in the lake with Death and Hades are those whose names don’t appear in this Book (verse 15)! It was sitting there all along. Everybody whose name is in it gets a full pardon. And how do names get in it? By the atoning blood of Christ. The great mystery is that through Christ’s Atonement, everybody’s name is in it. Believers simply receive what was there for them all along.

“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24). Those who will not believe, on the other hand, are unable to make the leap. This has been the message of Scripture all along, Old and New Testaments alike – a testament to Jesus Christ. “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40).

There is only one way to be saved – faith in Jesus Christ. The very Law that brings condemnation by our failure to keep it also brings salvation through its proclamation that God would send his Messiah to rescue us from our sins. The curse of death does not have the last word! In Christ, all things are made new. The Word of Life is himself the final word for humanity!

Sinners Welcome

In Matthew 25:31-46, all people come before the judgment seat of Christ. On what basis does Christ separate the sheep from the goats? The Bible gives only one basis for salvation – either accept God’s gift or reject it. One of the fascinating things in this parable is that the people who have been displaying the self-sacrificial love of Christ do not even realize they have been doing so. They have no personal sense of having been particularly good or holy or righteous. “When did we do all these things?” they ask, surprised.

Ironically, those who are rejected are also surprised, surprised that the judge would think they have done nothing worthwhile for God. “When did we fail to do all these things?” they ask, incredulous. They have no need, they believe, for this free and undeserved grace reserved for dirty sinners. They have a stack of good report cards and a pocket full of merit badges, and if that is not good enough for this so-called judge, then they want no part of his kingdom of losers.

It’s about Grace

Who will love Jesus more – the one who is forgiven much or the one who is forgiven little? Jesus poses the question in Luke 7:41-50. The point? People who think they are decent moral folks don't seem to be looking for grace. People who know they are big sinners tend to be hungry for grace. Big sinners will get into the kingdom ahead of some big righteous people, Jesus says (Matthew 21:31). A friend of sinners, he was called, and that is just what he is (Luke 7:34). He is your friend and mine, after all.

Religious people tend to think they have an inside track on who is going to be saved and who is not. The rule keepers, the good boys and girls and the holy people are in, and the troublemakers, the stinkers, the porn stars, the lowlifes, the unwed mothers and the like are out.

“Don't count on it,” Jesus says. “You think you know about righteousness? Why won't you trust me to be your righteousness, because you can't even see you're nothing more than a dolled up corpse, so rotten your nose can't smell your own stink. I will have mercy on whom I want to, pal, so take what you've earned and get out of here” (forgive my loose paraphrase of Matthew 20:13-15).

How many sinners have died longing for justice, for righteousness, for peace, for hope, for truth, for freedom, but having no clue where to find it? In Christ, and in Christ alone, these ageless quests are finally ended. “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

Remember what happened when Jesus touched the lepers? Everybody else stayed as far from lepers as possible. But not Jesus. Not only was he unafraid to touch lepers, but when he touched them, the lepers got healed. Our minds are like lepers' bodies, hopelessly deformed and rotting. But when Jesus took human nature upon himself, not only did his mind not catch corruption from our minds, he healed the human mind.

That healing is open to everyone. All it takes to receive that healing, to begin to experience the joy of that healed mind, to enter the kingdom of God, is accept his free gift – to trust that in Christ's death and resurrection the astonishing almighty God of lavish love has done everything that needed to be done to secure our place at his table.

The Will of the Father

In the last book of his Narnia Chronicles series, *The Last Battle*, Christian author C.S. Lewis presents a symbolic picture of the final judgment. A man who was well acquainted with the intimate love of our Savior, Lewis was not afraid to depict the gracious salvation of a soldier who died having never believed in the only name under heaven whereby people must be saved. When Emeth, the Calormen soldier, came face to face in the final judgment with Aslan, the Christ figure in the story, he immediately loved Aslan, knowing Aslan was the true longing of his soul.

Is this concept so far-fetched? The Lord who died for us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8) knows those who are his (2 Timothy 2:19). Jesus tells us that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (John 3:17). John tells us that Jesus died not only for our sins but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). Is this same Jesus not the Lord of all space and all time?

Perhaps Lewis' depiction is not far off. In Matthew 25:31-46 we learn that Jesus lives in those who are his and that his works are accomplished in them even though they are not entirely aware of it. Is it too much to say that by God's grace such people might know and love the glorious risen Lord as the deepest longing of their souls?

And is it too much to say that those whose hearts have become fully committed to whatever opposes the kingdom of God – some to the egotistic pursuit of their own ends, some to cruelty and hatefulness, some to evil and rebellion against whatever is good and pure – will be filled with terror and hate for him?

And yet, even so, there is still the element of surprise, of supreme reversal, in which even the blackest human heart can be melted and transformed by the radical grace of our radically gracious God. "Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last," Jesus declares (Luke 13:30).

Human expectations of justice and fairness are knocked on their ear when God's Son starts shelling out the fabulous grace of his Father. Witness the parable of the workers in the field (Matthew 20:13-15). He is dangerous, this One, because he forgives where we can't muster forgiveness, and he blesses where we can't see any justification for blessing. He saves the undeserving, the "deserving" get mad about it, and he tells them to shove off.

What is God's will? Jesus said, "This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day" (John 6:40). Now some argue that God's will is also that a great many not see the Son and not believe in him and not have eternal life so that he will not raise them up at the last day. But let them take their rain cloud somewhere else. That is not what the Bible says.

Other Objections

Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). Through Jesus Christ, God is pleased to reconcile all things to himself whether on earth or in heaven by making peace through Jesus' blood on the cross (Colossians 1:20). The vast majority of humans died without ever hearing the gospel. Therefore, we must take

into consideration the possibility that their decision of faith, or decision of non-faith, may well be one that takes place in the realm of death.

Objections to such a suggestion include the idea that the church is a little flock, so God intends to save only a few. The church may be a little flock in this age, but we are not talking about the church of this age. We are talking about those who have not known the gospel before they die. We are talking about the new creation in its full flower.

Another objection is that such trust in the grace of God for all humans would destroy any impetus for spreading the gospel. To that, I can only say Nonsense. Jesus our Lord commanded us to spread the gospel, and that is sufficient motivation for any of us. Besides, one who possesses by God's grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit such good news cannot help but spread it. How can forgiven sinners like us want the rest of the world to continue living in the misery of not knowing that God loves them and has reconciled them to himself through the blood of his Son? As the Spirit dwells in us, how can we not care whether others continue to live hopeless in their sins without the healing balm of the Savior?

But to say that God depends on our puny and often destructive efforts is to limit God. God loves us so much that he grants us the grace to participate with him in his joy of bringing people to faith, but surely we can admit that our track record is such that he has to do more clean up after us than we are of actual help to him.

Universalism? No. God gives humans freedom to trust him and also allows them not to trust him. Relationships are built on trust, and those who finally will not trust God will remain alienated from him. The Bible indicates that some people will not trust God to forgive them, but will instead by their own choice, in spite of their God-given freedom to believe, remain his enemies.

On that topic, though, let's never get the idea that hell is on any kind of par with heaven. Hell is only a tiny weed bed in a dark corner under a porch on a little street in the outskirts of the vast immeasurable expanse of all things made gloriously new in Jesus Christ. Those who choose to cower there in the dark do so not because that is where God wants them, but because God, in his free grace, allows them to trample on his love and huddle in the nowhere place they have "created" for themselves in their darkened minds.

I have received letters from some readers who strongly disagree with what I have written on this topic. But it is interesting that nearly every letter that disagrees also grants in essence that the Scriptures lead us to trust that God will indeed deal righteously with those who die without knowing the name of Jesus. I offer that he will

deal with them in no other way than in accord with his eternal faithfulness and mercy as demonstrated supremely in Jesus Christ, the great Judge.

Not a “Religion”

An amazing thing about the kingdom of God is that it is nothing like a religion or an exclusive society or club or institution. The religions and institutions of this world erect barriers and rules to keep the riffraff out. But the kingdom of God is designed to encompass everybody – everybody whom God has created.

Everybody is born, because of Jesus Christ, with a golden invitation to his kingdom, only they don't know it yet. Some, upon finding out about this invitation, don't want it. They have better things to do, more important fish to fry. Others figure they have better ways of getting in, working for it instead of taking charity. Others don't want to be in a kingdom that lets in so many losers. When all is said and done, the only people who will be excluded from the kingdom of God are those who refuse to accept it on the terms it is offered – absolutely free to the completely undeserving by simply trusting in the grace of the Giver.

It is not that hard to be a Christian. There is no secret handshake, no riddle or maze to figure out. And thank God, it certainly doesn't depend on how competent the church is as spreaders of the gospel, even though our Father in his grace has blessed us with such a wonderful role in that task. Jesus says simply, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). He doesn't say when. He doesn't say, “Oh, by the way, beat the deadline or you're burnt toast.”

This Savior has all the ends sewed up. The final judgment is rigged. Not only did the Father send his Son into the world that whoever believes on him would not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16), indeed, not only did he send his Son into the world precisely not to condemn the world but so that the world might be saved through him (verse 17), he also committed all judgment to him – he made his Son the supreme presiding Judge of the final judgment.

This is not the God of popular imagination! This is not the God people grow up on, the stern stone-face God who blows away the sinners and sends winning lottery tickets to the pious and obedient. This is the God of the Bible, the one who can't be stopped from lavishly dishing out his grace to anybody and everybody who will accept it.

God is not a “butterfingers.” No one is going to slip through the cracks. Jesus Christ has a personal and intimate interest in every person who has ever lived, and he has gone to incredible lengths to see to it that they will take their place at his Father’s table. He will not force anyone. But neither will he consign anyone to condemnation simply on the basis that one of us Christians did not get to the poor unfortunate wretch with the gospel message before he or she died. God’s grace is not geared to our level of competence in evangelism.

When people die they get judged (Hebrews 9:27). It is a final judgment. But the one who sits on the judge’s bench is none other than the One who bore the marks of slaughter for them, and boy, has he got good news! You will find no teaching in the Bible, regardless of what many Christians believe, that Jesus is powerless to confront and save people when their physical life has ended. In the words of the finale from the musical *Les Miserables*: “For the wretched of the earth, there is a flame that never dies, Even the darkest night will end and the sun will rise.”

Whatever the author of the verse intended, this is not just a lovely sentiment. It is God’s own truth. Jesus is that eternal Flame, and even the darkest night has found its end in the rising of the Sun of righteousness (Malachi 4:2), the only name under heaven by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

J. Michael Feazell

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