

## SALVATION: WHAT ON EARTH DO WE MEAN?

### *The Afterlife!*

Today we conclude our series *Salvation: What on Earth do we Mean?* by talking for a few minutes about the afterlife. We do this in light of our series premise that salvation, relationship with God, is primarily about this earthly life. Salvation is about healing the wounds of existence. It is about liberation from guilt and shame; and reconciliation with God.

I remind you once again that the ancient Israelites did not have an understanding of an afterlife; yet, they clearly spoke and wrote about salvation. The significance of this has to do with motivation. The Israelites were motivated by a desire for relationship with God in this earthly life. Unfortunately, I have come to believe that today far too many are only desirous of salvation because they are scared to death of the popular, yet suspect, notion of going to an eternal torturous death in hell. How sad it is that one's motivation for relationship with God is a desire to escape a less attractive alternative. I do not know about you but I do not want someone to desire relationship with me because they think I am better than their alternative choices. I believe that God is disappointed that there are people who want salvation not for relationship with God but to escape hell.

I cannot tell you how many times I have been approached by people, well meaning I am sure, who will ask, "*Do you know where you will go when you die?*" These well meaning people begin their salvation message with the afterlife. They want me to be in relationship with God because of the afterlife. And rarely in these conversations is there anything mentioned about the earthly benefit of salvation—as if God is totally unconcerned with my earthly welfare. I feel sorry for these well meaning, yet misguided, people. They are desirous of sharing with others about Jesus yet they misunderstand the focus of his mission which he stated clearly when he read from, and identified with, the words of Isaiah, "*The spirit of God is upon me...to bring good news to those who are poor...to proclaim release to those who are captive...to bring sight to those who are blind, and to let those who are oppressed go free.*" An earthly mission!

The afterlife! I begin by stating that there is much about the afterlife that I do not know or even have beliefs about. If you came today hoping to get details about the afterlife then I am afraid you will be disappointed. Friends, I have never experienced the afterlife; therefore, I can only speak from supposition and belief. However, there are people who have had near death experiences. When you talk with them there are four common

elements in these experiences—light, a tunnel, observing their physical bodies while being suspended over them, and a choice that is offered to either continue through the tunnel or to return to their physical bodies. I am not sure what all of this means but I do believe that it occurs. Why do I believe this? Because I have confidence that there is more to life than what we see with our eyes and what we experience in the time that we live on this earth. I do believe there is an afterlife and I further believe that the veil or wall between the afterlife and this life is very thin and perhaps at times, as demonstrated in near death experiences, very porous.

When it comes to Christianity there are many varying beliefs about the afterlife. It depends on whom you talk with and their understanding of scripture, life and salvation as to how they will perceive and believe in an afterlife. The following questions, which Christians of varying persuasions will answer differently, will help to explain what I am saying. Does the afterlife begin at the moment of death or at the end of time (soul sleep)? Is entry into the afterlife, heaven, by grace or by requirement? If it is by requirement does this mean that Christianity is of works and not by grace? What about predestination? What are the afterlife destinations? Some will say heaven and hell; but what about purgatory? Will we have bodies in the afterlife—or will we be as spirits? Will, as popular Christianity suggests, earthly relationships persist in the afterlife? Will we know each other? Is there an awareness of personal identity in the afterlife?

Friends, I do not know the answers to these questions and further, I have no need to know the answers to these questions. I do not even spend time thinking about most of these questions. My relationship with God is not based on what the afterlife will be like. My theology about the afterlife is quite simple—just as I trust God with my earthly life I will trust God with my afterlife. That's it! I leave my afterlife in God's hands. I have far too much on my plate in this life to stress out over the next life.

Martin Luther expresses our not knowing the details of an afterlife with a particularly apt analogy: we can know as much about life beyond death as a fetus traveling through the birth canal and about to be born can know about the world he or she is about to enter—which is nothing! Yet, the analogy affirms that just as there is life at the end of the birth canal although the fetus knows nothing about it, so is there life at the end of our earthly journey. I may not know the details of afterlife but I have confidence that I do not die into nothingness; rather, I die into God. Paul wrote, to the church at Rome, *“If we live, we live to God; and if we die, we die to God. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we belong to God.”*

Some Christian groups focus their entire mission on the afterlife and end

of time issues—continually asking the question, “Are you going to heaven when you die?” And further, if you do not believe exactly the way they have determined then they consider you spiritually lost and doomed. My mother shared with me what one woman who lives in her building said during the viewing and funeral of Pope John Paul II. *“I do not know why they keep going on about him. They act like he was so close to God. He and all of those Catholics are going to hell.”* My mother painfully told me that the woman said this with a smile on her face. No wonder so many people are turned off to Christianity, because somewhere along the line some Christians have decided that they, and not God, are the gatekeepers of the afterlife!

Joel Osteen, pastor of the largest church in the United States, has been greatly criticized by many for his preaching style; a style that I might add I really like. His preaching is positive, life affirming, uplifting and encouraging. So what is there not to like? Those who are afterlife driven criticize him for not being more direct and condemning. I heard Osteen on *Larry King Live*, when asked why he is not more direct about people accepting Jesus in a traditional evangelical approach, say, *“I trust God with that. I do not know what is in people’s hearts. I am not in charge of what happens when this life is over.”*

Diametrically opposite Osteen is the 18<sup>th</sup> century preacher Jonathan Edwards. Edwards is best known for his sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. In that sermon Edwards used images of a torturous hell and a vengeful angry God to convince people to be converted to his understanding of the Christian message. I want to read a few excerpts from that sermon. *“God is not only able to cast wicked men into hell, but he can most easily do it... We find it easy to tread on and crush a worm that we see crawling on the earth—thus easy is it for God, when he pleases, to cast his enemies down to hell... The wrath of God burns against them, their damnation does not slumber; the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them; the flames do now rage and glow.”* Not quite the Joel Osteen approach; or for that matter, the Gary DeBusk approach—and never will be!

My views about hell are just that, my views; yet, I feel I need to share them with you but remember it does not mean that you are expected to embrace them. I do not believe in a torturous place of eternal punishment called hell. I am not even sure that **any** will be **forever** separated from God because I believe that God has a way of drawing all people unto himself. For some this may be startling. But it is very consistent with the New Testament understanding of salvation as described by Paul. *“For by **grace***

*(God's unconditional love) we have been saved through faith (fidelity, trust, and belief), and this is not our own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”* For me the faith response in salvation is not about heaven or hell—it is about God!

All authentic religions, including Christianity, teach that we are to love God and love others. Why? Because as John writes, *“Let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent God's own child into the world so that we might live through that child. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us...Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”*

Friends, when I speak of afterlife I am most fully speaking of a life in closer relationship with God than what we experience in this earthly life—what many think of as heaven. The difference is I understand afterlife to be more of a relationship than a place. When I die I will die into a more full relationship with God and I will leave the details up to God.

Although we cannot know the details of the afterlife, we can know what salvation means in this life. As a Christian I understand my relationship with God through the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ. The gifts of knowing God through Jesus life and teachings are joy, peace and love. Salvation in this earthly life provides liberation from guilt and shame, and reconciliation with God—the healing of our woundedness and our resurrection to wholeness.