

# Entry to Heaven

## The Question:

Many people around us appear to live 'good' lives in the sense they seem to be living out God's will. They have not been directly confronted with the truth about Jesus and so have not consciously (intentionally, deliberately) rejected Him. Are they going to heaven as well as the sinner who hears the gospel and repents?

## 1. A real-life story

Two women (one Christian, one Muslim) run a child rescue project in Bangladesh. Their objective is to rescue little girls from the filthy streets and slums of Dhaka, and to show them love and care. This is never-ending, exhausting work with only the minimum of resources, and probably they have little time to work out their religious differences. Are they *both* going to heaven?

## 2. Knowing God – evangelical Christianity

Jesus said:

*"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."* (Jn 14.6)

*"If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also."* (Jn 8.19)

*"Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him."* (Mat 11.27)

What is the significance of these verses? Answer: they underpin an important belief in orthodox evangelical Christianity, that is, it is impossible to know the one true God (our Father in Heaven) without first coming to Him through Jesus Christ. It is impossible to have a real relationship e.g. dialogue with God without Jesus. The importance of knowing Jesus is at the heart of the Gospel:

*"Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."* (Mat 18.3)

*"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* (Jn 3.3)

*"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."* (Jn 3.16)

Here Jesus is talking to people who sincerely wish to follow Him, and so He omits parables and comes straight to the point: for them entry to the kingdom of heaven is via a heart change and forgiveness through the work of Jesus on the cross. And this heart change involves repentance:

*"Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will likewise perish."* (Lk 13.2,3)

**Summary:** For the people confronted by these teachings, dialogue with their Father in heaven, and entry to the kingdom of God (and heaven) was via repentance and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Having been confronted by Jesus, their only tenable option was to repent and follow Him.

### 3. Being known by God, and knowing Him

What about the other way round? Does God our Father and Jesus His Son know us? Jesus said:

*"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word: My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with Him."* (Jn 14.23)

*"... the sheep hear His voice; and he calls his own sheep by name ... I am the good Shepherd and I know My sheep ..."* (Jn 10.14)

Clearly, all those who accept and follow Jesus are known by God (by the Father and the Son) - and they are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Rom 8.9). The disciples were told to rejoice because their names were 'written in heaven' (Lk 10.20). They were definitely known by God.

#### A Chilling Thought

But Jesus also gave a sharp warning. It is possible to do and say all the right things as a 'born again' believer, and yet be *unknown* by God:

*"Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me you who practice lawlessness!'"* (Mat 7.22,23)

The acid test here appears to be; 'what good fruits are their lives bearing?' (Mat 7.20).

#### What About the Rest?

What about all those people who have never really been confronted with the gospel? In 2007 it was estimated that some 1.9 billion people worldwide (28% of the world population) had yet to hear the gospel message ([Christianity Statistics](#)). What hope do they have? On what basis will they be judged? Will they all perish in the John 3.16 sense? Surely this would be unjust since they have never had the chance to accept or reject Christ? And what about our Muslim woman who is busy rescuing the little girls in Dhaka?

### 4. Being known by God whilst not knowing Him

We all know people who appear to live a just and upright life (in our eyes) and yet do not know Jesus. They appear to be doing God's will *without knowing it and without knowing Him!* Is there scriptural justification for assuming they are acceptable to God? Consider:

*"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."* (Mk 2.17)

*"I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just (upright) persons who need no repentance."* (Lk 15.7)

Jesus follows up this theme in the subsequent Parable of the Lost Son (Lk 15.11-32). Here, the older son never transgresses his father's commandment and is angry at the warm welcome his father gives his younger son after he returns from hedonistic living! His father's reply is, 'Son, you are always with me'.

Who are the 'righteous' and 'upright'? We can view these texts in two ways:

1. Either: Jesus is referring to those already in His 'fold' (those already made righteous) and to the few sheep that have strayed from the fold. He could also be having a cynical dig at the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees. The theology would be that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom 3.23), and that it is essential to be 'born again' by believing in Jesus in order to enter the kingdom of God and have eternal life (Jn 3.5,15). This is the only way to be accepted by God under the new covenant.
2. Or: Jesus is making the point that some do indeed have God's law written on their hearts, and do it, even though they have never encountered the gospel. Some may implicitly follow their heavenly Father's will, and hence are accepted by Him, *without really knowing Him*.

The concept of doing God's will *without knowing it, or Him*, again arises in the parable of the separation of the sheep and goats at the final judgement (Mat 25.31-46). The parable describes those who clothe the naked, feed the hungry and take strangers in (just like our Muslim woman). They are really doing it for Jesus, *but don't know it*. They say in the parable:

*"When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You?"* (Mat 25.38)

And Jesus replies:

*"Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."* (Mat 25.40)

Again the implication is that it is possible to do God's will *and hence be known by Him*, without even recognising it and without even knowing Him. The Muslim woman may be in this scenario. The difference between the two women in Dhaka seems to be that one may indeed be known by God, but has no relationship with Him, and the other is both known by God and knows God. The latter has truth revealed to her, the former does not. The latter walks in light, the former in darkness.

### 3. God is just

When asked 'which is the first commandment', Jesus gave the two most important ones (which embrace the rest):

*"You shall love the Lord your God ... (and) ... You shall love your neighbour ..."* (Mk 12.30,31)

There are no doubt some (and the Muslim woman may be one) who genuinely wish to love God and love those around them, and yet do not *know* God. They have never encountered a personal Father in heaven, or Jesus, or heard the gospel in the Mat 28 sense, yet they may well be known by God because they implicitly do His will. It seems to be written on their hearts. Paul alludes to this idea:

*"... for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things of the law ... show the work of the law written on their hearts ...."* (Rom 2.13-15)

Paul implies that even those who are ignorant of God can implicitly follow His law since it is written on their hearts.

Paul says those who have never heard the law or the gospel will die (and be judged) *without* the law, but those who know the law (have heard the gospel) will be judged *by* it (Rom 2.12). God is just and judges righteously:

*"... He is coming to judge the earth. He shall judge the world with righteousness ... "* (Ps 96.13)

See also Mat 25.31-46, Isa 9.7, Jer 11.20, and Rev 19.11. God tests the heart. So someone like this Muslim woman who (we assume) has never encountered Jesus and yet has implicitly and unknowingly lived a 'just' life in the Lk 15.7 sense, may well be acceptable in the eyes of a just and righteous God. After all, what does God really require of us?

*"He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"* (Mic 6.8)

The Muslim woman seems to be doing this, although we assume she has no real relationship with God (no one comes to the Father except through Jesus, Jn 14.6). Formally, Islam has a 'master-slave' vision of God and man; it rejects the concept of sinfulness from birth and hence rejects the work of Christ on the cross. Nevertheless, if this woman was truly ignorant of Jesus' work on the cross, the foregoing texts could imply that she is 'just' in God's sight through her compassion and good works, and therefore goes to heaven.

In contrast, there are many who do not know God and are not known by Him, and yet their conscience convicts them of wrong within (Rom 2.15). They are aware of sin and God and yet ignore God and deliberately carry on sinning (Rom 1.18-32). It is this majority of mankind that surely needs to hear the gospel.

### **The Book of Life**

According to the Bible there is a *book of life* and only those reconciled to God (the 'righteous') will have their names written in it (Ps 69.28)(Phil 4.3)(Rev 3.5). This is the Lamb's book of life - a book foreseen from the beginning of time that contains the names of all God's people (Rev 13.8). Revelation 13.8 does not imply predestination; rather, it is just one more illustration of the foreknowledge of God (like all prophecy). So everyone has the opportunity to have their name in this book. It is our choice.

Other books are written to record the things we do in this life (Rev 20.12); they are a permanent record of our earthly activity. These books are testimony to our failings and wrong deeds in the sight of God. In contrast, it is interesting to note that the book of life records none of the failings of the righteous since their sins have been erased by Christ's atonement on the cross. They are born again and the slate is wiped clean!

At the 'second resurrection' - the resurrection of *judgement* (Jn 5.29), those whose names are *not* in the book of life are raised from Hades and stand before God (Rev 20.12,13). The books are opened, their written deeds are used as a testimony against them, and they are found guilty:

*"And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."* (Rev 20.15)

This is not annihilation. Jesus was quite explicit. All those who deliberately reject the offer of reconciliation to God through Christ, all those who deliberately refuse to believe Jesus when He said "You must be born again", all those who just ignore Christ's teachings having heard them - these spend eternity in the absence of God:

*"And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Mat 25.46)*

Now the key question: will the Muslim woman have her name in the book of life?

It is interesting to note that both OT and NT refer to the 'erasing' of a person's name from the book of life (Exod 32.32)(Ps 69.28)(Rev 3.5). Does this imply that *all* names are *initially* written in the book of life and only those who deliberately reject the gospel are removed from the book? If so, her name would be in the book of life, and she would go to heaven. In essence, the woman's compassionate deeds and ignorance of the gospel is judged righteously:

*"(God) will render to each one according to his deeds: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honour, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness – indignation and wrath." (Rom 2.6-8)*

#### 4. The role of the gospel

As of 2007 it is estimated that some 72% of the world population had heard the Christian gospel ([Christianity Statistics](#)). This is not surprising given the widespread broadcasting of the gospel via short-wave radio, satellite and the Internet. By this it is assumed they had heard of man's inherent sin, the need for repentance, salvation through Christ, the assurance of eternal life in heaven and reconciliation to God. But by observation only a small fraction of these (a few %) appear to have accepted Christ's offer of life and are born again. What of the rest?

There could well be a crucial difference between this complacent, sometimes rebellious unregenerate majority and our Muslim woman. It could well be that the majority has heard the gospel, and rejected it, whilst the woman has not heard the gospel due to her busy life and Islamic restrictions, and so has not rejected it. Crucially, Jesus underscored the need to respond positively to Himself *once confronted with the truth*:

*"He who believes in Him (God's Son) is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." (Jn 3.18)*

To 'not believe' requires a conscious, deliberate, intentional response on the part of the hearer; they consciously reject Christ. It is of course conceivable that the Muslim woman *has* heard the gospel and has consciously rejected Christ, in which case she will be found guilty under John 3.18. She would have heard the law (as fulfilled in Christ) and be judged guilty under the law. Gospel preaching therefore carries with it not only hope, but also great responsibility.

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