

Christ – The Focus of All Saving Faith
Sign Title: Is a Conscious Decision for Christ the Only Way to Be Saved?

November 29, 2009

This morning we are talking about missions and God's heart for the lost. This will be a different type of sermon than you might expect. I don't want to motivate our hearts for missions by striking your emotions chords, rather, I want to go deeper and engage your mind by answering three tough questions.

- Is Hell's eternal conscious never-ending punishment real?
- Is the work of Christ the *only* way to avoid God's wrath in hell and spend eternity in heaven?
- Must people hear of and consciously trust in Christ to be saved?

It is important to settle answers to these questions in our mind. In the last 100 years many people are answering "No" to these questions. If the answer to any of these questions is no, then the urgency for missions is cut. For example, if there is no real conscious eternal punishment in hell, why should anyone sacrifice the comforts and conveniences of the American life to live in another country so they can tell people about the love of Jesus. If Christ isn't the *only* way to escape the fully deserved wrath of God, then why bother the good people of another religion to tell them about Jesus. They are good people. If people can be saved without someone telling them about Jesus, there is no urgency for missions and the church missions budget is really an accessory not a necessity.

There is a lot at stake riding on how we answer these questions. This morning, my plan is to simply open the Bible to let the Bible speak for itself as we search for answers to these crucial questions.

Is Hell's eternal conscious never-ending punishment real?

In recent years the notion of the eternal conscious never-ending punishment become unpopular. How could a loving God be so unfair and punish people forever for a few limited sinful actions on earth? Doesn't that seem unreasonable? In recent years some Bible scholars are teaching the non-existence of the hell many of us grew up learning about. Listen to these quotes by Michael Green and John Wenham, prominent leaders in the Anglican church.

But it [Scripture] does not teach the conscious unending torment of those who are eternally separated from God.¹

I believe that endless torment is a hideous and unscriptural doctrine which has been a terrible burden on the mind of the church for many centuries and a terrible blot on her presentation of the gospel. I should indeed be happy if, before I die, I could help in sweeping it away."²

Is it true? If our friends and neighbors die apart from Christ will hell not be their place for eternity? The Bible scholars I mentioned believe in something called Annihilationism. This means those apart from Christ will go to a place of punishment, but only for a little while. They will eventually cease to exist and their suffering will be over. Is that true? Does the Bible teach hell is temporary punishment?

And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. Matthew 18:8

Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ...And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'" Matthew 25:41, 46

¹ Michael Green, Evangelicalism through the Local Church (Nashville: Nelson, 1992), 72.

² John Wenham, "The Case for Conditional Immortality," in Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 190.

Notice that eternal punishment is used as the exact opposite for eternal life. To say the fate of those apart from Christ is not eternal punishment, is to say the fate of the righteous because of Christ is not eternal life? To say there is no eternal punishment is to say there is no eternal life.

When Matthew 25:41, 46 is compared with Revelation 20:10, the case gets stronger. Matthew 25:41 says the goats (those apart from Christ) are sentenced to *eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*. This is precisely what is described in Revelation 20:10. Look how long this eternal fire lasts.

and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Revelation 20:10

Paul also taught about the eternity of hell in many places.

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, 2 Thessalonians 1:9

The word for destruction in the Greek does not mean *obliteration*, it means *ruin*. Literally it says they will suffer the punishment of being eternally destroyed without the process of destruction ever completing. Things are not looking good for the Annihilationists.

We have to admit, there are some things the Annihilationists have going for them. Annihilationism *feel better* as we think of members of our family who died and didn't know Jesus? Doesn't the doctrine of Annihilationism *seem more reasonable* when we think of our co-worker that is a good, decent moral person who just doesn't know Christ. Of course Annihilationsim feels better. It seems more reasonable. But is it what the Bible teaches?

Doesn't hell seem too bad? Everlasting punishment, simply because of a few earthly sins; it feels disproportionate. Why are the punishments of hell so great? *What matters is not the size or the amount of our sin but the size of the one we sin against.* The infinite punishment of hell is the proper punishment for sin against an infinitely perfect God. Infinite guilt rests on each of our heads because we sin against an infinite perfect God. That is why hell is so bad.

If we think of hell as what feels like the right punishment for sin, we will always end up with some form of Annihilationism because eternal punishment doesn't feel like the right response of a loving God to good, decent moral people who haven't trusted in Christ.

That brings us to our next question.

Is the work of Christ the only way to avoid God's wrath in hell and spend eternity in heaven?

The Chicago Sun-Times interviewed President Obama about his religious beliefs. I want to quote part of that article.

"The difficult thing about any religion, including Christianity, is that at some level there is a call to evangelize and proselytize. There's the belief, certainly in some quarters, that if people haven't embraced Jesus Christ as their personal savior, they're going to hell." Obama doesn't believe he, or anyone else, will go to hell.³

Is it true that if someone hasn't embraced Jesus Christ as their personal savior, they're going to hell? Aren't there good people in other religions who will be saved in a way other than Christ? Aren't there pathways in other religions that are sufficient to bring people to a place of eternal happiness with God?

For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of

³ <http://www.suntimes.com/news/falsani/726619.obamafalsani040504.article#>

righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. Romans 5:17-19

The crucial point here is the *universality of the work of Christ*. It is not done in a corner just for the Jews. As the sin of Adam leads to condemnation for *all humanity* that come from Adam, so the obedience of Christ leads to righteousness for *all humanity* who are adopted into God's family and have Christ as their head. The work of Christ's death, burial and resurrection is God's answer to the plight of sin for the entire human race, not just the Jewish race.

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 1 Timothy 2:5

According to the Scriptures, there are no other mediators who can restore a broken relationship between God and man. Think of whatever religion you want to. Think of their central figure. Nothing they say about getting to heaven is true. Did I say that *nothing* they said about getting to heaven is true? Yes, there is only one way to deal with sin, one mediator, Jesus Christ.

And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth." Revelation 5:9-10

The book of Revelation pictures Christ as the King of kings and Lord of lords and the universal ruler over all people and powers. This verse tells us Christ purchased a people for himself from all the tribes and languages of the world. His atonement is the only means that anyone in every culture will be part of his eternal kingdom. (John 11:51-52)

And there is salvation in no one else, for *there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*" Acts 4:12

Here it is clearly stated. There are not other ways people of another religion can be saved. If anyone is to be saved, and become part of Christ's eternal kingdom, they must be saved *by the name of Christ*.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

Religions of the world give people a path they must follow to obtain salvation. If someone is successful, and their good outweighs their bad, they hope to earn the right to heaven. It doesn't work this way according to the Bible.

Remember Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis? How many acts of sin did it take for them to be cast from God's presence in the Garden of Eden forever? One. That doesn't sound proportionate, of course their good outweighed their bad. Remember what we learned earlier, *it is not the amount of sin that is the issue, it is who we sin against that matters*. Any sin against the infinitely holy God is reason for us to be cast from his presence forever. There is no way *anyone* can *behave* themselves into heaven. The simple presence of *any* sin results in separation from God. This is why the only way to heaven can be *by faith* in Christ. Christ did, what we are incapable of doing.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, Romans 3:23-24

All humans, no matter what country they live in, no matter what religion they follow, are sinful and separated from God. The only way, not one of many ways, the only way to have a restored relationship with God will result lead us to

the joy of his presence for eternity is through receiving Christ's death on the cross as payment for our sin.

If we believe good moral people in other religions will spend eternity with Christ because there are multiple paths to God, the urgency for missions and the urgency to share Christ with our friends and neighbors, is greatly diminished. After all, why give up the comforts of the American life to be a missionary overseas? Why suffer the embarrassments of trying to share Christ with our neighbor, if good people in all religions can be in heaven anyway.

Must people hear of and consciously trust in Christ to be saved?

I assume many of us are tracking rather nicely with the last two points. We are now stepping into an area I found my thinking clarified and sharpened as I studied for this message.

Are there people who will be saved even though they never heard of Jesus? In other words, are there devout people in other religions who will be in heaven because they relied on the grace of God they knew through nature, even though they never hear about Jesus? In other words, is God busy saving people without sending people to do it? This is a sticky question so let's turn to our Bibles to think this through. I want to start with a story found in Acts 10 and 11, it is the story of Cornelius.

Cornelius was a Gentile centurion for the Roman army this is how the Bible describes him.

a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. Acts 10:2

If there was a good religious guy, Cornelius fit the bill. On one occasion, an angel says to him...

'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. Acts 10:31-32

Meanwhile Peter had a vision involving a sheet from heaven that teaches him not to call Gentiles like Cornelius, *unclean*. When Peter and Cornelius meet here are the words Peter uses.

So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. Acts 10:34-35

This is a sentence that leads many people astray. At first it sounds as if Peter says the good guy, God fearing, temple worshipping, Cornelius was already saved from his sin even before Peter shared with him the good news of Jesus Christ. Is this what Peter meant? Was Cornelius already saved? Did Peter just inform Cornelius he was saved? If that is all Peter did, then we can draw the conclusion that the good guy, God fearing Cornelius' of the world are already saved. The task of missionaries would be to tell them the good news they already have.

Lest we draw conclusions too hastily, let's read a little further in our Bibles. Look at how Peter recounts to the church in Jerusalem what Cornelius said the angel told him about why Cornelius was to find Peter.

he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' Acts 11:14

Cornelius wasn't saved. To be saved, he needed to hear Peter's message. Hearing the message of Christ was essential for Cornelius' salvation.

Notice it is future tense. Cornelius wasn't saved until he heard the message and responded to it. If Cornelius sends for Peter and hears the message and believes on the Christ of that message then he will be saved. And if he doesn't, he won't be saved. Even though Cornelius was a good person, apart from responding to the literal message of Christ, he would not be saved. This means people in unreached ethnic groups who fear God and do what is right *still need to hear the gospel of Christ to be saved.*

Look with me how Peter ends his sermon to Cornelius and his house.

To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” Acts 10:43

Peter doesn't conclude his sermon by saying “I am here to tell you that those of you who fear God are already forgiven.” He says, “I am here so that you may hear the gospel and receive forgiveness in the name of Christ by believing in him.” So it is very unlikely that Acts 10:35 meant that Cornelius was already forgiven because he was a good religious guy.

Elsewhere in the book of Acts, even people who were more God fearing and ethical than Cornelius, still needed to believe on Christ to be saved. Peter ended his message in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost as he was talking to devout God fearing Jews by telling them to repent and be saved *in the name of Jesus.*

So the book of Acts is not telling us devout, God-fearing people who practice what's right as best they can are already saved and don't need to hear the name of Jesus. Rather, in the Bible, devout religious people are told again and again that sincere devotion to God and good works are not enough to solve the problem of sin. The only hope is to believe in Jesus.

What was implicit in Cornelius' salvation is explicitly stated by Peter when he stood before the Jewish rulers in Jerusalem.

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Acts 4:12

I want you to feel the force of what Peter says in a situation where he is carefully crafting his words. He says salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name *under heaven*, (not just Israel but Spain, Ethiopia, America, Thailand, you name it.) given *among men* (not just Jews, but among all humans everywhere) by which we must be saved. Christ is the universal solution to the universal problem of sin.

But there is more. Peter says Jesus is not just the *source of salvation* but *his name is the means to salvation*. This verse is important for answering the question, "Can those who have not heard the name of Jesus be saved?" Peter says more than Jesus is the source of salvation but he is saying the name of Jesus *is the means of salvation*. Peter's point is we are saved by calling on *the name of Jesus*. Calling on the name of Christ is the only door for entrance into God's family. If people can be saved apart from the name of Christ, why would Peter be so adamant they must be saved in the name of Christ? In order to believe on Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, we must believe *on his name*. This means people everywhere must hear of him. They must know Jesus as a particular man who did a particular saving work and rose from the dead to save us from our sin.

Paul understood the significance of what was going on here. He picks it up and talks about it.

For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” Romans 10:13-15

Paul gives us a series of rhetorical questions to clarify things for us. Each question is designed by Paul to rule out an argument from those who say there can be salvation without hearing the gospel of Jesus.

First, “How can they call upon him whom they have not believed? show that if calling upon the name of the Lord is the only way to be saved, people can not call upon Christ if they do not believe in Christ. This rules out the argument that people in other lands can call upon Christ without necessarily hearing about Christ.

Second, And how are they to believe in him whom they have never heard? This shows that the only way to believe in Christ is to hear about Christ. This rules out the argument that a person might have saving faith without knowing or trusting Christ.

Third, And how are they to hear without a preacher? This shows that the only way people will hear of Christ, so they can trust in Christ and be saved through Christ is if someone goes and tells them about Christ. Missions is the *only* way the salvation of Christ can be experienced by others in this world. There is no eternity with Christ in heaven because someone was a good person, or even if someone looked at nature and appreciated God and tried to hope in God. According to the Bible, apart from literally trusting in the name of Jesus and what he has done for us in a real, tangible, historical way, there is no plan B.

I know the exclusiveness of Christ is rattling some of us. That is good for us. I want us to think about what we believe and sharpen our thoughts to be more Biblical.

The question we are answering is, “Are their people alive today who will be saved by God’s mercy through Jesus without ever hearing the name of Jesus? Are there devout people in other religions who humbly rely on the grace of God they know through nature that will be saved?”

The Bible is clear,... *No*. With the coming of Christ, a decisive shift took place. Saving faith was once focused on the nation of Israel and God’s acts of redemption upon that chosen people.

Once Christ came, the focus of faith narrowed down to him and him alone. He is what everything in the Old Testament pointed to. Since Christ purchased redemption through his blood, to honor him, all saving faith must be directed to him. With the coming of Christ and the narrowing of saving faith to the name of Christ alone, God correspondingly broadened the focus of the mission from the nation of Israel to all people in the world. God sends his messengers, everywhere calling everyone to repent and believe in Jesus, for the forgiveness of sin because there is no other way to be forgiven of sin. There is no heaven *by mistake* for those who haven’t trusted in Jesus.

The verse, “How can they believe without a preacher?” should reverberate between our ears. Unless, I tell others about what God has done for them in Jesus, they have no hope. What a privilege we have to be part of the greatest process in the world where God is bringing to himself people from every tribe,

language and nation to give glory to Jesus for eternity. The exclusive way he has chosen to do it is through us, his people, carrying the message to the world.

One of the questions you may have is how salvation worked in the Old Testament times, before Christ. Let me summarize all of Romans 10.

Paul understands that Christ is the fulfillment of everything the Old Testament was point toward. Before Christ, faith focused on the mercy of God to forgive sins and care for his people in a coming redeemer. When Christ came, all faith narrowed its focus to the name of Christ as the One who purchased and guaranteed all the hopes for the people of God. From the time of Christ onward, God is honoring Christ by making Him the sole focus of saving faith. Therefore, people must call upon Christ and believe in Christ and hear of Christ and be sent to share the good news of Christ to be saved.



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