

### *Salvation Later*

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Last week we explored how salvation isn't just about going to heaven after we die. In fact, in the Old Testament, salvation always refers to rescue from troubles in this life. The Hebrew writers speak of God as their salvation, God who rescued them from slavery in Egypt and God who rescued them from exile in Babylon. At the time of Jesus, the Jews were praying for salvation, seeking to be rescued from occupational forces in their land, seeking salvation from the oppression of the Romans. With the knowledge that salvation can be about our present life, we found several New Testament scriptures that spoke about salvation as something to be found in this life, here and now. But the New Testament also talks about salvation in a life after death, about resurrection of the dead and what comes after that.

Sometimes salvation refers to a glorious life after death where we live in the very presence of God in idyllic conditions, saved from the alternative situation of never-ending torture in hell. The question in everybody's mind is, who ends up in each destination, who is in glory, who is in torment? Or, put differently, what do I have to do, how good do I have to be, to go to heaven? There are a wide variety of suggested answers to those questions.

As a child, I heard a lot of sermons about the straight and narrow path to heaven and the broad superhighway to hell. Maybe you did, too. Many people understand that only a small portion of humanity will be saved in heaven and that hell will have a much larger population. The most extreme form of this view says that there will only be 144,000 souls in heaven. That number is based on Revelation 14:1-4 where verse three speaks of "the 144,000 who have been redeemed from the earth." What doesn't get mentioned very often is that verse four says that these are people who have not defiled themselves with women and they are all virgins. Reading this passage as an exact and literal description of heaven's citizens is not good news for almost all of us. However, nowhere else are we told that non-virgins need not apply! In Revelation 7:4, we're told that there will be 144,000 from the tribes of Israel. Perhaps we're to understand this as an additional group, bringing the total to 288,000. Even so, this is a pretty small number, roughly two people out of every million of all the people who have ever lived. That would be 600 people in the whole US today. I think if that were really the situation, a lot of people would say, why even try, if the odds are that steep and you have to either be a Jew or a virgin.

Obviously, I think that claiming that 144 thousand or 288 thousand are all that will be going to heaven is a misuse of scripture, in fact, it's manipulative and toxic. Preaching that tiny number to be saved will either motivate people with great fear and anxiety to do exactly as they are taught, or cause them to give up on God in despair. But, we can see that taking the few hundred thousand numbers as exact really is a misuse of the Bible because chapter 7 in Revelation also says, "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands." (Rev. 7:9) A great multitude, too big to count, from every race, every ethnic group, every nation, and every language, is truly big and inclusive. And, it agrees with other scriptures that describe God's dream, God's hopes and plans for the creatures he made in his image.

Many of us are familiar with John 3:16 which reads, "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. The next verse is just as important, but less often quoted, **John 3:17 NRS** Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. God's intent, God's purpose in sending Jesus is not to condemn, but to save. It doesn't say, "For God was so disgusted with people that he sent his only Son, that whoever never heard of him or didn't obey him in every detail, would be in terrible agony for time without end. You mess up sometime in your 70 years and God will make you pay with excruciating pain for thousands and thousands of years." Think about how Jesus lived his life. He didn't go around condemning people. He went around healing people, feeding people, comforting and blessing people. Think about how Christ loved outsiders, how he hung out with day laborers, prostitutes, thieving tax collectors, crazy folks, lepers, and the poor. We tend to see Christianity as a religion that limits God's love to just people on the inside, to the believers, to those who walk in some prescribed path. What if we saw Christianity as a religion where people spend a lot of their time and energy in the same way that Christ did?

How good do we have to be to have God's approval? The eleventh chapter of Hebrews has an interesting list of people who had that approval. There's Abraham, who told people that his wife was his sister and let Pharaoh add her to his harem. Abraham gave up on God's promise of a son and took a concubine to have a son. There's Rahab who worked at the world's oldest profession, Samson the womanizer, David the murderer and adulterer, and Jephthah who sacrificed his own daughter. These are people who are held up as examples of those who had God's approval. How good do we have to be? This list should impress us with God's unimaginable mercy and forgiveness.

How merciful is God? While Revelation mentions 144 thousand Jews being saved, Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, chapter eleven, verse 26, that all Jews will be saved. That's pretty audacious! What about people who aren't Jews, and who have never heard of Jesus? Turning again to Paul's letter to the Romans, we find in chapter two that "<sup>14</sup> When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves.<sup>15</sup> They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts." Commenting on this passage, Emil Brunner reminds us that everybody knows something about right and wrong, or good and evil.<sup>1</sup> This passage offers a lot of hope for those who instinctively seek to do what's right and who love their neighbor as themselves. This passage also reminds us that God's favor doesn't rest on one nation alone, or on one culture or ethnic group.

There are some texts in the Bible that stretch God's mercy and pardon beyond our ability to comprehend. 1 Timothy 2:3-6 reads, "This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, <sup>4</sup>who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. <sup>5</sup> For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, <sup>6</sup> who gave himself a ransom for all." This passage clearly says that God wants everybody to be saved. With overflowing love God pursues each and every one of us, the good and especially the bad.

An even bolder claim is made two chapters later. **1 Timothy 4:10 NRS** "For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe." The phrase "savior of all" certainly claims again that God doesn't have a favorite race, ethnic group, or nation. When "Savior of all" is followed by "especially of those who believe" then the surprising thought expressed is that God is also the Savior of unbelievers, as well. Some people read this passage and understand it to say that all people, both unbelievers and believers, will be saved. That's certainly a radical interpretation. But, with that in mind, listen to the scripture again. ". . . we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe."

We find the same sort of pronouncement in Titus 2:11. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all." In this text, too, we can hear the concept of universal salvation. You might protest, "But that isn't fair. Evil people should be punished and good people should be rewarded." I

agree, it isn't fair. But it's a risky thing to ask God to be fair. We might not be as good as we think we are. Don't pray for God to be fair! Pray for God to be forgiving!

"But it isn't rational," you may say. Again, I agree. It isn't rational. But it wasn't rational for God to choose a tiny, weak, and flawed people to be a light to the nations of the world. It wasn't rational for God to repeatedly forgive the people of Israel despite all of their complaining, and railing against God, and generally being ungrateful pains in the neck in the wilderness of Sinai. It wasn't rational for God to come in the flesh of a poor peasant in a dirt water town in the boondocks of a conquered country. And it isn't rational of God to forgive us for ignoring our Lord Monday through Saturday and then we complain if worship takes more than an hour out of our Sunday! Be glad that God isn't rational. Before we complain that God might save someone who is less deserving than us, we need to be very glad that God is merciful and generous, and that God can chose to do whatever God wants to do, without being restricted to fairness or logic.

Don't fret that someone who doesn't deserve it might make it to heaven. Don't worry about that one bit – because it is bound to happen! After all, you will be there! The Apostle Paul explained the good news of the gospel this way. He told the folks in Corinth, "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." God was doing the reconciling, not us. God wasn't counting up their sins and keeping score. That's good news for all of us. "O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good; for his mercy *endureth* forever." (1 Chronicles 16:34, among several texts)

Scripture gives us various descriptions of who is going to heaven. But, the overarching theme of the Bible is that God has loved us from the beginning, God has been patient beyond belief, and God has pursued us and forgiven us of terrible misbehavior. It is God's prerogative to draw the circle around the saved – and God will draw the circle larger than we would. Don't focus too much on heaven. Don't be so preoccupied with heaven that all you think about is whether you will get there. Don't be so preoccupied with the future that you fail to live in the present. Some people are so focused on their final destination that they fail to enjoy the journey. You can be so wrapped up in looking for salvation later that you fail to live in salvation now. We can be so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good. God isn't out to get you – God's out to save you. We don't get what we deserve – we get forgiven! "O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good; for his mercy *endureth* forever." Amen!

Sisters and brothers:

God loves the worst of us more than we love the best of us  
Don't be so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good.

**NRS Revelation 14:1-4** Then I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion! And with him were one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. <sup>2</sup> And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, <sup>3</sup> and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the one hundred forty-four thousand who have been redeemed from the earth. <sup>4</sup> It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

**Revelation 7:4 NRS** And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel.

**Romans 11:26 NRS** And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, "Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; he will banish ungodliness from Jacob."

**Romans 2:12-16 NRS**<sup>12</sup> All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. <sup>13</sup> For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. <sup>14</sup> When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. <sup>15</sup> They show that what the law requires is

written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them <sup>16</sup> on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

**2 Corinthians 5:18-19 NRS** All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup> that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

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<sup>1</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Letter to the Romans*, (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1959) – "if there are Gentiles who do what is commanded in the law, then they too will be a knowledge for it on the day of judgment. There is a law written in the heart; in their God-created natural disposition they are a law unto themselves. Everyone knows something of right and wrong, good and evil. Thus there also exists a conscience, which according to that secret rule judges the action, consenting or rejecting. But how things are in actual fact will be revealed at the judgment which Jesus Christ will carry out at the last day and until then, what is true and that accusing and excusing remains hidden."