



DISCOVERING THE BIBLE & OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGES

Providing factual information about our Bibles, beliefs, movements, institutions and events of historical Christianity & Judaism.

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Many Biblical Ways to Get to Heaven?

By Jim Myers

I was searching for something to listen to on the radio the other day while I was driving home from a meeting. I just happened to come across a preacher talking about what it means to become a new Christian. What initially caught my attention was this – *“When you become a Christian it is like being a kid in the candy store, but this time you get everything and it’s all paid for! Jesus did everything and you don’t have to do anything!”*

He went on to list things that the new believer received – *forgiveness, grace, love, heaven, hanging out with God in heaven, etc.* He also said that *every word of his Bible was the literal truth*, which resulted in an interesting call from a listener. The caller wanted to know if *heaven* and *paradise* were the same place. The preacher said that the Bible, when taken literally, made it clear that they were not the same place. He said that when people die everyone goes to *paradise* and stays there until Jesus returns and judges them. After that the saved ones go to heaven and the unsaved are go to hell -- *where they will burn in eternal fires*. This was a new one for me. I had witnessed a number of arguments between preachers over where people go after death. Some said everyone sleeps in the grave until Jesus returns, while others said the saved go straight to heaven. Of course, others said some people go to **Purgatory**.

Death is a real problem for humans. We know that it is in our future and a bunch of people would like to know what they can do here that affects what will happen there. The places people find most of their answers are religions. As most people know, all the answers are not all the same, and, according to many religions, choosing the wrong answer could have very bad consequences. This creates a huge “afterlife” market in which a wide range of “religious products” are offered. Maybe someone should set up an “**Afterlife-Mart?**” But, many people fail to take a serious look at the available options.

If someone did set up an Afterlife-Mart the largest section would contain Christian options. Each would explain what one needs to do while alive to affect what happens after death. Let’s return to the radio preacher and his message to the

new believer who said the first thing a person was required to do was "believe." What did he have to believe? According to the preacher, he had to believe what the preacher taught about who Jesus was, what his death meant and what will happen at the end of time. Therefore, acquiring correct beliefs while one is alive determines what will happen after death. *People who have the correct beliefs will go to heaven and those who don't will go to hell.* **The most important thing to God then, are correct beliefs. The most important thing a person can do in his or her life is find the correct beliefs and believe them.**

There are others however, who believe in predestination. According to them, **God predetermined who will go to heaven and who will go to hell at the beginning of time.** God made the decision before creating mankind and that determined exactly where each person would spend eternity. **What one does during their lifetime is irrelevant.** This does present an interesting problem for people during their lifetimes, however, because no one knows which group they are in. Of course, as with this belief and a number of others, if it is wrong and something did need to be done before death – *oops!*

Some believe that **only the people that belong to their church will be saved and go to heaven.** *The thing that must be done while one is alive is find that church and join it!* Once you are in, and if you can keep from being excommunicated, you are on your way to heaven. This does create an obvious problem for the folks living in places that do not have local branches of that church or visiting missionaries. I guess the internet might be a partial solution, if the church has online membership options. Anyway, according to this belief, **belonging to the right church is the most important thing to God.**

And then there are others who teach that what people believe and what they do or do not do to others while they are alive determine what happens after death. This clearly changes the playing field. A person could have the right beliefs but do the wrong things to others and not go to heaven. Or, they could do the right things to others and have the wrong beliefs and still not go to heaven. According to this belief system, **right beliefs and right actions to others are the most important things to God.**

I bet someone reading this article is thinking – *why don't you just go to the Bible and find out what it says?* **One of the popular beliefs is that the Bible has all of the correct answer for every question.** Therefore, all we have to do is find that answer in the Bible. A few months ago I wrote an article, *Noah's Ark: Where Beliefs & Facts Collide (Discovering the Bible & Our Biblical Heritages; 2012 Number 5)*, which addressed this belief. In the article I asked this question: **How many of each kind of animal did Noah take on the ark?** Most people are quick to respond "two of each kind." That is the answer found in Genesis 6:19-20, however, it isn't the only answer the Bible gives for the question. In

Genesis 7:2-3 we read that the answer is 14 of the clean animals and 2 of the unclean. **The point is that the Bible has two completely different answers for the same question – not just one.**

It is important to understand that a religious institution's claim of being an "authorized agent of God" is also linked to the Bible. Fundamentalist religions have doctrines that require members to believe that "*their Bible is the inerrant and infallible word of God*" and that it contains no errors or contradictions. Obviously, the question about the animals Noah took on the ark creates a problem for this position **because 2 does not equal 14**. *Beliefs that fail to acknowledge the facts are equivalent of getting a virus on a computer. It makes it impossible for it to work correctly. Make sure you keep a "facts firewall" up so you don't get a BS virus (belief system virus) in your mind!*

Now let's go back to the question above – *why don't you just look it up in the Bible and find out what it says about salvation?* If you go back and review the different beliefs above about salvation – **they all are based on verses found in a Bible!** I don't have enough room to provide all of the references, but you can Google any beliefs and find the verses that support it. There are other beliefs in the Bible, too. For example, **one must be a Jew to be saved!**

And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, "Unless you are **circumcised** after the manner of Moses, **you cannot be saved.**" (Acts 15:1)

Circumcision is one of the primary requirements that a Gentile male has to meet in order to convert to Judaism. Some of Jesus's followers thought that **only believers who were also Jews could be saved.** Therefore, **if any of the Gentiles following Paul wanted to be saved, they had to convert to Judaism too.** A meeting of the apostles and elders was called to resolve the conflict over this issue. *Obviously, being required to have the foreskin of one's penis cutoff was a subject of great interest to potential male Gentiles converts.* I am sure that if Paul had been teaching that message as he traveled in Gentile territories he would have heard a lot of remarks like – "*We have to cut off what!*"

The apostles ruled against circumcision as a requirement for salvation. But, they ruled that there were other requirements.

- *abstain from food polluted by idols*
- *abstain from sexual immorality*
- *abstain from the meat of strangled animals*
- *abstain from eating blood*

In just one chapter of one book of the New Testament we have two different options for being saved – (1) **everyone had to be Jewish to be saved**, or (2) **people couldn't practice idolatry and be saved**.

The radio preacher's requirements for salvation wasn't based on either of the above options. It came from the teachings of Paul:

If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

According to Paul the following requirements must be met for salvation.

- *a spoken declaration*
- *a declaration that "Jesus is Lord"*
- *a belief in the heart*
- *a belief that God raised Jesus from the dead*

Believe it or not, what seems to be a very simple verse ignited a tremendous amount of controversy that dominated Christianity for the next 300 years. Below are some of the questions that were at the heart of the controversy.

- *To whom is the declaration to be made? Could it be made to anyone or just to an official of the Church?*
- *Does the word "Lord" mean "master" or "God"?*
- *How do you know what another person believes in his or her heart?*
- *Are God and Jesus the same, or are they two different beings?*
- *Why does Paul only require belief in the resurrection of Jesus?*

You probably noticed that what one does or does not do to others isn't a factor. If Paul meant that Jesus and God were the same being it is very doubtful that either of the believers mentioned in Acts would have considered him a Jew, because Judaism is a monotheistic religion with only one God. *God wasn't born, He doesn't die; therefore He can't be resurrected.* If the information in Acts is correct about Paul, then the Paul in Romans is a different person. In Acts, a controversy among Jewish members of the Jesus Movement erupted over Paul. Jacob (James) and the elders went to him and told him what to do to resolve it:

"You see, brother, **how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the Torah. They have been**

informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses (Torah), telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. . . . Take these men, join in their purification rites (in the Temple) and pay their expenses . . . Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the Torah." (Acts 21:20-24)

This was after the meeting of the apostles and the elders about the requirements for Gentile males to join the Jesus Movement. Here, the question was whether Paul was a Torah observant Jew or not. When he took the men to the Temple he did it to make it clear to everyone that he was kept the Law of Moses and practiced Judaism. But, like in the story of Noah, the Bible also contains another option about Paul's religion.

For you have heard of **my previous way of life in Judaism** (Galatians 1:13a)

Here Paul says Judaism was his former way of life. This raises many questions since the only other options would come from outside Judaism, which would be some form of "Gentile-ism" in the Jewish culture. Was Paul a Jew or was he a Gentile? A better question from that period of time might be – *Was he a Roman or a Judean?* However, maybe even better questions, after examining the context of the writings of the New Testament, might be – *Which Paul? The Paul of Acts or the Paul of the Epistles?*

The Paul of the Epistles is credited for another salvation doctrine well-known to many Protestants regarding "works vs. grace."

And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. (Romans 11:6)

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith —and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:8)

The point made by salvation doctrines based on the above verses, which formed the foundation of Martin Luther's new religion, is that one cannot do anything to earn their salvation. *Everything was done by Jesus, i.e., the beliefs of the radio preacher above*. But, when we look at Paul's writings in context, we find something else that is very interesting. Another doctrine could also be created by using verses from the context of the verses above. It would be that what you do may not save you, but **what you do could keep you from being saved:**

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19-21)

Only those who "inherit the kingdom of God" are going to be the ones who are saved. If "factions" keeps people from going to heaven, then Christianity has a problem because today there are an estimated 40,000 factions (sects, denominations) in the United States. I would imagine that sexual immorality, fits of rage, selfish ambition and drunkenness might knock a bunch "believers" out of the kingdom too.

One thing that all of the above options for salvation have in common is that they are based on verses from the New Testament. There is one thing that we know for sure about the original Jesus Movement and the first and second generations of Christians – ***they did not base their beliefs on the New Testament!*** Why? The answer is simple – **the New Testament did not exist.**

Jesus didn't create or teach verses from a New Testament and neither did the apostles. The first version of the New Testament was created in Rome over a century after the crucifixion. The Bible of Jesus and his followers was the Jewish Scriptures, which Roman Christianity demoted to the rank of being the "**Old**" Testament. But for the Jewish Jesus and early believers it was the "**ONLY**" Testament. Below is the key to understanding salvation in the Jesus Movement:

Anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. But unless your **righteousness** surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Torah, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:19-20)

"Righteousness" is the key to being in the kingdom of God, i.e., *being saved*. Gentiles would ask how one becomes "righteous," but members of Jesus's Jewish culture would ask a very different question -- **What does one have to do to be righteous?**

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' . . . He will reply, 'Amen! I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' Then they will go away to eternal

punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. (Matthew 25:37-39, 45-46)

Righteousness, in Hebrew **TZEDAQAH**, is a major theme of the Jewish Scriptures. It is found in the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings. The first act of salvation in the Torah was based on it. The man's name was Noah and he was saved from drowning in the Great Flood because of it:

Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God. (Genesis 9:9)

The foundation of the message of Jesus was from Isaiah:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen; to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; **then your righteousness will go before you**, and the glory of YAHWEH shall gather you in. (Isaiah 58:6-8)

Doctrines of salvation reveal some very interesting and important things about an institution's views of God and people. The words of Jesus, the Torah, and Isaiah reveal that God is very concerned about people and their living conditions. He places providing food, shelter, clothes, water, healing, etc. as very high priorities and links them to salvation. **He saves the people who are actively involved in saving others**. *In other words, He saves people who do what He wants done on the earth.* In Jewish literature, there are many examples that reflect God's feeling about those in need.

When a beggar stands at your door, **the Holy One**, Blessed be He, **stands at his right hand**. (Wayyikra Rabbah 34:9)

He that feeds the hungry **feeds God also**. (Agadat Shir ha-Shirim)

The message is absolutely clear – *God cares about people and saves the people that reflect His image on the earth by doing what He would do.*

*What do the salvation messages that base salvation on correct beliefs or belonging to a specific religious institution reveal? **The first thing they reveal***

is that God's highest priority would be authority. It is their claims of possessing divine authority that make it possible for them to create their doctrines. Paul's authority, according to the book of Romans, was received after the resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, belief in the resurrection was essential for his claim of apostolic authority. The original apostles, however, based their authority on being personally called and taught by Jesus before the crucifixion.

Institutions that teach that salvation is based on correct beliefs are also usually involved in helping people or encouraging their members to help people – *but those activities are secondary to correct doctrines and are not their highest priority*. There is no telling how much time and money they spend on trying to persuading others to believe their doctrines. ***Think about what would happen if all that money and time was invested in doing righteousness!***

Some religious institutions have gone to the extremes to protect their doctrines and held inquisitions to keep false doctrines out of their communities. People were put on the rack, whipped, tortured, and executed to accomplish the institutional goals and protect their authority. *Somehow, doing such things doesn't fit a belief system in which God places the needs of people and enhancing their quality of life as His highest priority.*

Today, in America there are over 93 million Americans who believe **the Bible is the actual word of God**, absolutely accurate, and that it should be taken literally word for word. Another 141 million Americans believe **the Bible is the inspired word of God**, but should not be taken literally word for word. Over 230 million American consider the Bible as a sacred text. But, at the same time millions of Americans homeless, over 50% of American children live in poverty, millions go to bed hungry every night, millions cannot get the medical attention they need, etc. **How could those conditions exist in a nation with over 230 million Americans carrying around the above teachings of Jesus?**

What people believe has real life implications. Believers fly airliners into buildings and murder people. Believers do everything in their power to persuade as many people as possible to accept their doctrines as the divine truth while ignoring their immediate needs. Believers think that what they do or do not do to others is of no concern to God. *If your beliefs are important enough to base your salvation on – then should you check out where they came from & why?*

Believe it or not, this kind of information makes it much harder to get people to contribute financially than promising that some doctrine will get them in heaven. It is not as popular as what the radio preacher or TV evangelists say about God giving people free rides. Listen to your heart and if you think this information is important – *help fund our work us so we can help others. Regardless of the hereafter, we can make the here-and-now much better!*

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