

# Salvation

## Introduction

Traditional evangelical teaching about salvation paints a picture of God which is harsh and unloving, a God Who will send you to Hell unless you meet the criteria for salvation. But other pictures of God are available, and may even be more Biblical.

You will appreciate that this can only be a brief sketch: the subject matter deserves, I suspect, a book to itself, but it might go some way towards setting minds to rest on this matter. The task has been done before, probably many times, but I am not aware that an easily readable presentation of this material is readily available at present.

## Relationship

It is vital we get the 'big picture' of salvation right, as everything else flows from that. I believe that our personal salvation is fundamentally about a loving relationship with the creator God Who wants to be our Heavenly Father. It's about love not law, relationship not rules. He loves us, He wants the best for us and He wants us to love Him back.

In the Bible, salvation is about much more: it is about the transformation of the universe; what happens to you and me is one part of a much larger whole, but that larger whole is also somehow essentially relational, and linked to what happens to you and me.

For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. (Romans 8:19, NASB)

Aspects of the relationship can be expressed, to some extent, in terms of economics and debt, or law and contracts, or honour and shame, but these are tools, scaffolding, pictures, to help us build a strong, healthy relationship.

Our parents teach us all kinds of rules and principles as we are growing up. The rules are given to help us grow and learn, but life does not consist of following rules; and it certainly does not consist of spending all your time and energies establishing the final, correct and definitive set of rules to follow.

In some Christian circles, faith has become part of the structure, believing certain doctrines has become one of the rules which must be followed. In some Christian circles, faith has been turned into some kind of strange, mystic tool which enables us to benefit from Jesus' death. It is presented as a vital part of a process which is both spiritual and mechanical at the same time: it provides us with spiritual blessing, just like the right signature on a cheque will cause the bank to provide us with money.

Faith, at a basic level, can be mechanical: I sit in this chair because I believe it will bear my weight, I catch this train because I believe it will take me to London. Most of the time in the Bible, faith is not mechanical. Neither is it intellectual and doctrinal, understanding and agreeing with doctrines, creeds and articles of faith; and neither is it mystical, a strange spiritual ‘gift’ which God bestows on people at random and granting certainty about things we cannot, humanly, be certain about.

In the Bible, faith is primarily personal and relational: it is about trust, which is the only basis for a strong, healthy relationship.

We sometimes mistake the *description* of faith in Hebrews 11:1 – “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” – and take it to be a *definition*, which has the effect of confusing Biblical faith with mental illness.

The various aspects of faith are, of course, linked in various ways. If I ask you to do something difficult or dangerous, and I tell you to believe in me, there is an element of ‘believe that I know what I’m doing’ and ‘believe that it’s probably going to work out okay’ but it is mostly ‘trust my character and motives: I would not ask this of you if it was not important.’

When Jesus says, “Believe in me”, He is not saying, “Believe that I am God incarnate, the Second Person of the Trinity,” instead he is saying something much closer to, “Get on board! Trust me enough to join in with what I’m doing, become part of the team.” Faith in the Bible is not something which produces intellectual assent or inner certainty, but something which produces action. “At once they left their nets and followed him” (Mark 1:18) – that is faith.

Even when the language talks about believing a fact or a doctrine, this is often shorthand for something deeper.

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. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. (Romans 10:9-10)

The resurrection, for Paul’s hearers, was not just an item of doctrine to be believed, not even the most important item of doctrine. Let us consider just two strands of New Testament teaching about the resurrection.

Firstly, if God raised Jesus from the dead, then God has confirmed Jesus’ claim to be acting on His behalf and speaking for Him, so Jesus was telling the truth: we have to believe Him, believe what He told us, and act on his instructions. If the resurrection is true, everything else follows. Belief in the resurrection means belief that Jesus was Who He claimed to be.

And secondly, resurrection is the way our Father works. The resurrected Jesus is ‘the firstfruits of them that sleep’ (1 Corinthians 15:20) because this is what all the followers of Jesus will experience; if we are called to live here and now in the reality that is to come, then we are called to live resurrection lives, impossible though that may be on a human level.

The whole point is that resurrection is impossible – impossible to us, but not to

God. Following Jesus means I have to become a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1), I have to embrace death in many ways, death to my plans, death to my hopes and dreams, maybe even physical death, but it is only in dying that we find eternal life. Belief in the resurrection shapes the life I live in following Jesus, just as much as it shaped His own life.

## Event and process

We inevitably want to know: who will go to Heaven, and why? Frustratingly, the Bible does not tell us – not in any simple, straightforward way; it seems to give a number of different answers in various places. Part of our problem in understanding the Bible’s teaching on the subject is that we have a very narrow understanding of salvation – we often think we are talking about salvation when we are only considering one small part of it.

In the New Testament, salvation (‘sótéria’ in the Greek) is about much more than going to Heaven: it covers health, welfare, prosperity, deliverance, preservation, salvation and safety. So salvation in the Bible is a much larger, all-encompassing concept than the limited thing we focus much of our attention on.

Simplifying horribly, the Bible talks about salvation as both an event and a process: Evangelicals typically focus so much on the event that they can easily ignore the process; and Liberals, when they talk about it, often focus so much on the process that they can easily ignore the event. In the Bible, both are vital.

The salvation event is described in many ways. We have been born again, adopted into the family of God, rescued, redeemed, ransomed and restored, forgiven, set free from bondage to sin and released from captivity in Egypt; we have entered the Kingdom of God; we are a new creation, we have the gift of eternal life and because we have been saved we can look forward to joining our brothers and sisters in Heaven when we die.

The salvation process is also described in many ways. We are being sanctified and transformed into the image of Christ; we are to follow Jesus, abide in Him, imitate Him, join His mission, obey His commands, do His work; we are to bear fruit, grow and become mature; we are called to be and to make disciples, people who are learning and growing.

## The traditional model of the salvation event

The traditional Evangelical model of the salvation event says that the only thing which really matters is going to Heaven when you die, which will only happen if you explicitly choose to put your faith in Jesus. It says that everyone will go to Hell unless they acknowledge their sins, believe that Jesus died (in their place) for their sins, ask Him to forgive their sins and receive His gift of salvation.

This raises all kinds of difficulties – most importantly, what if you cannot put your faith in Jesus?

- What of those who have not heard? If only those who know about Jesus can

be saved, most people throughout most of history were given no chance.

- What of people who lived before Jesus? Was there a different set of rules in place, and if so, what?
- What of the Jews? Were those who lived before Jesus saved, and if so, how? What of those who lived at the time of Jesus but never got to meet or hear of Him – are they automatically lost?
- What about babies who die? Or young children who can't understand what sin is, let alone their need to be forgiven for it? Or people with learning difficulties?
- What level of theological understanding is required for salvation? What depth of understanding of the nature of sin, the fact that you are a sinner and the doctrine of substitutionary atonement (an understanding of the way in which Jesus' death on the cross opens the path of salvation for us) are needed before you can be saved?

And then there are the difficulties of reconciling the Evangelical model of salvation with other aspects of the Bible's teaching. Take, for example, the question of how many people will be saved: is it many, or just a few?

Jesus describes the situation quite plainly.

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

But He also commands us to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) and John seems to be telling us something quite different when he describes the scene in Heaven.

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. (Revelation 7:9)

Are we supposed to understand that our disciple-making will be largely unsuccessful, and the great multitude of the saved will be outnumbered by a much-greater great multitude of the unsaved?

As a second example: it is hard to reconcile the Evangelical model of salvation with New Testament's emphasis on Christian living and discipleship. If the only thing which matters is going to Heaven when you die, and believing that Jesus died for your sins guarantees you a place in Heaven, why do you need to do anything else? Job done! Just sit back and wait for glory!

So there are numerous questions. I'm not saying the traditional Evangelical has no answers, but these answers are not easy, straightforward or obvious – which means that the nature of salvation, who is saved and how, are all very difficult to understand and living accordingly is almost impossible. If I don't understand it, how can I even attempt to do what is best? It is not surprising that many Christians effectively give up on the idea of living out their Christian faith beyond the basic details of attending church and being good people.

Of those who don't give up, many reach the point where they simply accept that these are mysteries beyond our understanding, and we must trust the Holy Spirit to guide us. In the real world, what this means is that I am guided to do some things, and you are guided to do others; we will sometimes be working together and sometimes working in opposition, and because neither of us understand what we are supposed to be doing, we have no way to begin to talk about it beyond the basic "I feel led to do this."

The 'God is leading me' line is not restricted to Pentecostals and Charismatics: I have heard many anti-charismatics argue that "You have to trust me because God is leading me on this matter." But if theology is too difficult, what else can we do?

The traditional model pushes ordinary believers towards giving up – either giving up attempts to live their faith, or giving up attempts to understand it. Fortunately, there is another possibility.

## Another model of the salvation event

I would like to suggest that when we bring together all the various strands of the Bible's teaching on the subject, we find it gives us a different model of the salvation event – one which uses many of the same elements as the traditional model, but reverses them.

The traditional Evangelical teaches that everyone is damned unless they explicitly choose to put their faith in Jesus, but the Biblical picture is quite the opposite.

- The **good news** is that everyone is saved unless they choose to reject God.
- The **bad news** is that most people, unless they get to know Jesus, choose to reject God.

We know that all have sinned, but we also know that Jesus died for all our sins.

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

If Jesus died for our sins, then our sins have been forgiven; if Jesus died for the sins of the world, then the sins of the world have been forgiven. This may sound strange to us, but it is the language of the New Testament.

If we don't like this conclusion, there are really only two alternatives. Either Jesus paid the price for the sins of the unbelievers, but they have to pay the price as well, so God demands payment twice; or Jesus did not die for the unbelievers. It is hard to square either one with the New Testament's teaching. Few people attempt to teach the first, and (in my experience) few people actually believe the second, despite all the hard work many Calvinists have put into explaining and expounding 'limited atonement' (the 'L' in the traditional five point Calvinist 'TULIP').

The usual approach to this problem is to transform the harsh Biblical language of 'payment' into the much cosier language of an 'offer'. Jesus did not, within this framework, actually pay for the sins of unbelievers; instead, He *offered to pay* for their sins, but His offer was refused. Like the guilty man in court who cannot pay the fine, the unbeliever has a friend who offers to pay the fine for him, but he rejects that

offer and chooses to suffer the penalty of the law. It's a nice image, but it is not what the Bible actually teaches.

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. (2 Corinthians 5: 14-15)

Jesus died for all: that is not an offer, or a possibility, but a fact. There is a possibility in the picture here, but it is not the possibility that He might have died for some people – it is the possibility that we might respond appropriately to His death. He died for us so that we should live for him; our response is unforced, we are not required to live for Him, but through His death we are enabled to do so.

We, who are saved, were by nature enemies of God. While we were enemies, Jesus died for us; His death justified us through His blood and reconciled us to God – all while we were enemies. At this point, we were still enemies of God, but nothing other than our own willingness stood in the way of a restored relationship. A relationship, by its very nature, has to be two way.

We have been justified; through Jesus' death, we can leave the court as free people, but we are still free to turn our backs on the God Who loves us so much. We are only saved, fully saved, if we embrace the life He offers, living in relationship with our Heavenly Father.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! (Romans 5:9-10)

It was his enemies that he died for – without his death, we would all have been enemies; without His death, even the few who walk the narrow way would have found, at the end, the path to the God they desired to know would have been closed to them. But He did die, and the New Testament message could not be much clearer. Jesus died for us all.

And it is, after all, what we tell people in our evangelistic messages: Jesus died for you! We do not say, "Perhaps He died for you" or, "I hope He died for you." We do not tell them, "If you respond and believe in Him, then He will have died for you." No, he died for you and He died for me, whether we wanted Him to or not. He died for those of us who love Him, and He died for those who have never heard about Him. He died for us all; and if Jesus died for our sins, then our sins have been forgiven.

Paul tells Timothy we should pray for everyone and especially those in authority so that we may live peaceful and quiet lives.

This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. (1 Timothy 2:3-6)

Jesus gave Himself as a ransom for all people. The ransom has been paid, so there

is no barrier keeping us out of Heaven: the gate is open wide. You may choose to turn your back on Him; you may choose to reject His love; if so, then you will perish – not because you have sinned, but because you have refused the life he offers you.

Paul summarises the ministry we have been given in this simple message:

God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them (2 Corinthians 5:19, NASB)

Whether or not you believe, trust and follow Jesus, God does not count your trespasses against you. This sounds like good news to me! The good news that Jesus died for the sins of the world is one of the two main planks upon which the structure of Universalism is built. (The other main plank is the doctrine that suffering will end one day.) The Universalist argues that because everyone's sins have been forgiven, everyone will be saved and end up in Heaven. The starting point is sound but the conclusion is mistaken.

The bad news is that most of us reject the light we have received, we reject life and truth and love, and instead choose darkness because our deeds all too often are evil and darkness is so much more comforting than light when we are ashamed of our actions. Our sins have been forgiven and the gates of Heaven are open to us, but we choose to walk in the other direction. Very few of us have the courage and strength to choose the light, or the determination to find and walk the narrow way.

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. (John 3:19)

The good news is that, when we are in Jesus, we don't need to find the way. Jesus is the way: when he is alive in us, we have the way; when we walk with Him, we don't need to ask for directions, we simply continue in fellowship and the way opens up before us, all we have to do is walk it.

A quick word of caution is required here: when we talk about the 'narrow way' and the possibility that a few people who have not explicitly been told about Jesus might find it, we need to be careful about where this takes us. What is the nature of the narrow way and the people who find their way along it? It is too easy to populate Heaven with people like us. And the people like us – especially the ones who preach and write books – tend to be respectable (even if they are newly-respectable), upright folk who follow the rules.

The truth is: we are not told about these people. But, nevertheless, when I ask about this, people seem to be pretty clear much of the time: the people, it seems, who find their way to Heaven without the help of a church or an evangelist pointing them to Jesus – they are good people, upright citizens. People, for the most part, like you and me. I simply ask: is this likely to be the case?

When we look at the people who responded to Jesus – who responded to God made flesh – were they the good, respectable members of their community? A few were, true. But most of them were nothing like the sort of people we would expect.

Part of the problem, I suspect, is that our idea of good and God's idea are quite different. We tend to be terribly worried about not doing things: I must not sin, I must not be selfish, I must not believe false doctrines. Those things matter, of course, but

God seems to be far more interested in what I actually do. When Jesus summarises the law, He does not tell us that we must not lie, cheat and steal; instead, He tells us to love God, our neighbour and ourselves.

It seems to me that the person who embraces life and love, even if they make terrible mistakes, is far more likely to be seeking God than the one who shuts themselves away from people in a vain attempt to avoid sinning. We find God and relate to Him in the messy chaos of life, not in the sanitised order of the tomb: we find Him and He finds us, whether we recognise Him at the time, or not.

In short, the picture painted for us in the Bible seems to suggest that those who manage to find and walk the narrow way will be those who embrace life, not those who cautiously follow rules.

One of the main points of the Nativity narrative is that Jesus comes – God comes to us – where we would not expect Him, when we are unready, into imperfect circumstances – into a dirty stable and a manger, not a palace. As Richard Rohr points out:

There is no indication in the text that Jesus demanded ideal stable conditions; in fact, you could say that the specific meaning of his birth in a “manger” is making the opposite point.<sup>1</sup>

My life does not need to be perfect, or even good in the traditional sense, for God to come and meet me; I simply need to know I need Him and make space for Him. The older brother followed the rules all the time, but it was the younger brother, wasteful and sinful, who was embraced by their father.

In Jesus is the answer to all our deepest needs. When we encounter Jesus, we discover the One Who is the way, the truth and the light, the One Who calls us to walk with Him and Who gives us His Spirit to encourage us, empower us and direct our faltering steps. Without Him, it is so hard to find the way and muster the strength to walk it; with Him, it is wonderfully easy.

This is why evangelism is so important: not because it is impossible for people to find eternal life unless they encounter Jesus, but because it is terribly unlikely that they will, and also because even the best of people without Jesus will not be able to enjoy the delight and security of His love while on the journey. It is hard to find life without Jesus; it is impossible to find abundant life without Him.

## The salvation process

The abundant life Jesus offers us is a part of salvation – part of the process, rather than the event. The salvation event secures our eternal destiny: while this is important, absolutely vital, it is not the whole story.

The New Testament writers never tell us to consider things only from the perspective of our eternal destiny; they never suggest that this is a good, helpful, worthwhile thing to do. However much we may focus on the event, the New Testament is far more interested in the salvation process, how we live here and now:

<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, *Falling Upwards*, page 14.

not on salvation as rescue and ransom, but on salvation as healing and wholeness.

- The **good news** is that as we get to know Jesus and trust Him, we can follow Him and become a part of His mission to redeem the world, to bring about the Kingdom of God; as a child of God and a member of His family, we love and serve Him and love and serve our neighbour; the Holy Spirit guides, empowers and transforms us; and we increasingly experience the joy of knowing Him and knowing we are secure in His love.
- The **bad news** is that, unless you get to know Jesus, you cannot really know what God is like (so you cannot fully live), and you cannot know what Jesus has accomplished for you (so you cannot know you are saved).

All the way through the Bible, we are taught that obedience produces blessing. It is vitally important that we understand this. God is not a disciplinarian, Who demands our obedience and bribes us with rewards if we will do what He says: He is a loving Heavenly Father, Who wants the best for us, Who wants us to enjoy all the blessings we can get, Who knows how we can fully enjoy those blessings, and Who tells us what we need to know.

The full salvation Jesus offers us is about living in the goodness of what God has for us, and sharing it with others: love God and love your neighbour as you love yourself; but there are lots of ways to have less than the full experience. As with many things in life, you get out what you put in: if you are half-hearted about living your faith, you will only be partly enjoying the benefits. You may have been given a piano as a free gift, but if you really want to enjoy it to the full, you have to sit down and practice.

Our God is not mean, rationing out the good things he has to offer, denying people His blessings unless they put in the work He demands; the wonderful, astonishing truth is that He generously pours out His blessings on everyone He can. There are blessings which flow from commitment and obedience, but there are also blessings which flow purely from grace.

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:44-45)

He shares the blessings of the Kingdom as widely as possible. Enjoying life and getting to know God are intimately connected: we do not only get to know what God is like through hearing about Him and watching from a distance, we discover what He is like through experience – “Taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8). God wants His children – all His children, whether they know Him or not – to enjoy all the blessings they can.

So it is possible to have a deep and profound encounter with God over an extended period of time, to have tasted and seen, to have experienced the power of the Holy Spirit and have benefited in many direct ways from His goodness – in short, to have benefited in many ways from the blessings of salvation – and yet not be saved.

That is how the whole ‘taste and see’ thing works: we are offered a free taste without commitment. God shares His blessings because he loves to bless us, and

without any commitment on our part to sign up for the whole deal.

His blessings are not like a magic potion, transforming a person on the inside whether you understand what you have drunk or not; blessings may reveal Him, they may encourage us, but on their own they do not convert. In fact, some people may confuse the blessings of salvation with salvation itself; they may get disillusioned by experiencing the joy without the substance; they may decide in the end that a real relationship with God gets in the way of the life they want.

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. ... Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation. (Hebrews 6:4-6,9)

Note that this passage talks about people who have been blessed in many ways, but the writer is convinced that his readers have better things – and the better things accompany salvation. So, despite our expectations, the blessings he lists do not only accompany salvation: you can be blessed in many ways, you can taste the powers of the coming age, and still not be saved.

When you think about it, this is actually what we would expect. It doesn't really matter what your motives are – nobody can see them, anyway – if you do the right things, it works. If you are honest, kind and helpful, people will like you and you will enjoy much better relationships and quality of life than you would if you chose to act in ways which were dishonest, unkind and unhelpful. It makes sense. And we also know if you pray, God will often answer your prayer: not because you are good but because he loves you, not because you deserve it, but because he is gracious.

We do not get blessed by *believing* the right things: we get blessed by *doing* the right things – by loving God, by loving our neighbour, by loving ourselves ... and by asking for help when we need it. We think that God cares a lot about what we believe and what we do in church, but He cares more about what we do, and about the world. What we believe matters because it affects the way we live, the way we love. What we do in church matters because it spills out – it ought to spill out – into what we do with the rest of our lives.

Loving our neighbour involves personal, private acts of kindness and love; it involves working together to love the people around us in a structured, systematic and efficient way; and it involves working to change the systems and structures which harm people and damage the environment. We may call these activities kindness, social action and politics, but it is all, at heart, simply loving our neighbour as best we can, in all the ways we can.

We cannot live happy, fulfilled, purposeless lives: it is just not possible. We need a purpose in life, we need to know it and be working towards it. The Bible talks about our purpose in many places, including this familiar passage.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

As saved people, we turn from being the enemies to God into His friends, from fighting Him to working with Him, from resisting His will to bringing His will into being. We have been created for a purpose, that purpose is to do good works, and fundamentally the working out of our salvation, the process aspect of our salvation, is about doing good to all people, just like Jesus did. Sound doctrine matters, but we were created to do good works, not to believe good doctrines. To put it another way, we cannot have a loving relationship with our Heavenly Father if we turn our back on loving relationships with the children He created and continues to love.

It seems to me that many Christians are working with a limited and distorted understanding of salvation, and this causes problems in their faith and life. If you understand salvation primarily as living in a loving relationship with your Heavenly Father, then many of the details people struggle with, they cease to be a problem.

If you understand salvation primarily as a financial or legal transaction, then you can get tied up with the rules and processes, what happens when and under what conditions. It can get very complicated. After all, if the good news is that everyone is saved unless they choose to reject God and salvation includes the gift of eternal life, does this mean that everyone has been given eternal life? Clearly, this is not what the Bible tells us.

When we say that everyone is saved unless they choose to reject God, we are saying that God's default setting is to accept people and welcome them in: they will be welcomed into the eternal home unless they really don't want to come in. He is not suspiciously looking for reasons to keep us out; he is not looking for excuses to punish us, and there would be no point because the punishment has already been taken by His Son.

How does this relate to eternal life? In short, it doesn't – not in a simple way. We are told that when we believe in Jesus, we receive the gift of eternal life. We are not told that if we never explicitly put our trust in Jesus, we will never receive the gift of eternal life: our Father doesn't work that way; He is not looking for reasons to keep us out.

Imagine a human father promising his children on a hot Summer afternoon: if you help me weeding the garden, you will get an ice-cream. Some help, and some don't. Maybe some are sick in bed, or studying for an exam the next day. At the end of the day, all the children get an ice-cream. Those who helped with the weeding not only enjoyed the assurance of an ice-cream at the end of their labours, but they also enjoyed fellowship with their father in the garden all afternoon; and, hopefully, they will not resent their siblings enjoying the treat alongside them. The father never promised that those who did not help would get nothing, and the children who know the character of their father would not expect him to. Jesus told a similar story in Matthew 20:1-16.

We are told that when we believe in Jesus, we receive the gift of eternal life. We are not told what happens if we never believe, perhaps because we never hear, or if we always believed because we grew up in a Christian home. It doesn't matter, because

eternal life is a free gift which our loving Heavenly Father gives; He can give His gift to whomever he chooses, and we can be confident that He gives it rightly – to the right people, at the right time.

Some people have a clear conversion experience, when they turn from sin and receive eternal life. That can be a wonderful experience. But some people die before they reject God, other people come to faith gradually, and a few who never get to hear of Jesus in this life still manage to find the narrow way. Exactly when any of these are granted the gift of eternal life is not spelled out, nor does it need to be. What do I need to know of His dealings with other people?

You and I are called to focus on living and loving and serving, on discovering what it means to live in relationship with the living God. How he relates to other people, and what He does in and with and through them, is between them and Him. Peter was told much the same thing in John 21:22 when walking with Jesus after the resurrection.

## The salvation choice

For those who are able to choose, salvation is a choice; those who are unable to choose are unable to reject God, so He will not reject them. Of the rest, very few will find God unless they have been introduced to Jesus – but even when you are introduced to Jesus, you have to choose to follow Him, because if you have the choice and you do not choose to follow Jesus, then you choose to reject Him. The threat of Hell is not torment but destruction, and the people who will suffer this destruction are those who choose to reject God.

One obvious question is: does this tie in with our experience? Is it the case that we choose either to embrace or reject God? Objections to this claim come in several forms:

- there are too many gods to chose from;
- we may not be aware that there is a God to choose; and
- our response to God may be more nuanced than a simple ‘for’ or ‘against’.

### *There are too many gods to chose from*

A standard atheist objection is that every religion tells us we have to believe in their god, and promises damnation if we believe in any of the others; but there are thousands of religions (according to Wikipedia, some estimates say there are roughly 4,200) in the world. Presumably there have been many more which have died out; but, we may also presume, if there is one right religion, then the deity will have a vested interest in ensuring that it does not die out. However, given that there are thousands of religions and, at most, only one can be ‘the right one’, your chances of getting it right and avoiding damnation are as near to zero as makes no difference.

The situation is actually worse than this, as many religions have various competing sects, each of which claims exclusive rights to the truth and offers the sole means of access to their god. The human race seems to enjoy promising damnation to anyone

who does not agree with me; and if we don't do it in the realm of religion, the chances are good that we will do it in the realm of politics.

But, however many competing religions we have to choose from, it really doesn't make any difference. This would be a valid criticism if there were, in fact, thousands of competing gods promising salvation and only one capable of delivering it. But if there is only one God, then the teaching of every religion will bear some relationship to the truth: it is extremely unlikely that any organised religion (or sect) has got it 100% right, or, for that point, that any has got it 100% wrong.

After all, within the Christian faith, we have Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and a few other smaller groups: they can't all be right. We have Christians who believe that God torments the unsaved for all eternity, those who believe that everyone will in the end be saved, and those who believe that those who reject God in the end will be destroyed: they can't all be right. But we don't have to be. None of the mainstream Christian traditions claims that your theology has to be 100% correct in order for you to be saved; none of them claim that salvation is available only to members of their group.

If the central claim of the Christian faith – that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself (2 Corinthians 5:19) – is true, then how you respond to Jesus matters, and everything else is just a detail. And, if you are not presented with Jesus, then it matters how you respond to that of Jesus in the teaching and traditions of the religion or religions you do encounter.

If God really is love, then it follows that any religion which teaches of a god of love is teaching truth about God, and anyone who responds to teaching about a god of love, by whatever name, is responding in some way to that one true God. If God really wants me to love my neighbour, then any religion which teaches its followers to love their neighbour is, to that extent, teaching the truth.

And if the Christian claim is true that God “rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6) then anyone, from whatever religion they belong to, who earnestly seeks God, will be rewarded. At the risk of repeating myself, if Jesus died for the sins of the world, then he died for the sins of people who have never heard of Him, even if they follow other religions.

This is not to argue that all religions lead to God and are therefore essentially the same. The religions of the world are clearly not the same, and I would argue that most religions contains many things which are wrong and harmful to spiritual life and health; but even so, they also contain many things which are good, true and helpful. The important thing is to distinguish between the good and the bad – and, if good and bad really are different, then distinguishing between them can be done.

The various religions and sects differ in their teaching so, on each point, some will be closer to the truth than others. Truth matters; and how we live affects our reward, our blessing. But while bad theology leads to bad living which leads to lack of blessing, bad theology does not mean you are damned, it simply means that you are wrong and missing out on the fullness of life you could be experiencing.

Because Jesus died for our sins, we are saved unless we choose to reject God. It

seems to me that if someone rejects a god of hate, then they are not rejecting God, because that is not Him. Rejection of a falsehood cannot be the same as a rejection of the truth.

On the other hand, just because a religion may teach true things about God and about how we should live, that does not mean that a follower of that religion is responding to God and therefore saved. We are not saved because we believe the right things, and we are not saved because we do the right things: we are saved because Jesus died for us to make it possible, and we are saved because we respond to the God Who loves us and Who wants us to love Him in return. It seems to me that the picture of God painted by most religions would make it very hard for their followers to respond to that God in love, however true some of the doctrines they teach may be.

I am not saved by a religion, I am saved by embracing a relationship with the living God and opening up my life to Him; if you want to get to know God, he promises you will succeed, but if you believe lies about Him, it is very unlikely you will want to get to know Him in the first place.

### *We may not be aware that there is a God to choose*

Some people claim that accepting or rejecting God is a choice they have never made: they do not choose to reject God because they are not aware of having being presented with the challenge to accept Him in any meaningful way. They just get on with their lives, and God is never really part of the picture. God, for them, is a children's story, rather like Father Christmas, and impossible to take seriously as an adult in the modern world.

I suspect this claim, when made, is often based on a faulty view of the world, probably resting on the myth of a secular society which much of the Western world has bought into.

The myth says that we live these days in a secular world based on science; a few odd people cling onto comforting religious fables, probably because they were indoctrinated as children, and this is largely acceptable because we allow people to believe what they choose in private as long as it doesn't impact the public realm in any way. In the past, they had religion instead of science, but we know better now.

The truth is almost exactly the opposite. Science is a brilliant, exciting human activity which only functions successfully in a context where faith and morality are working well; moreover, science enables us to build great bridges and cars, but to build a successful life and a flourishing society we need morality, values, purpose and human significance – none of which can be obtained from science.

So the truth is that we all live in a world dominated by spiritual issues, struggles and realities. Throughout history, every society has taken religious faith seriously, even the occasional atheistic ones which find they need to turn political dogma into religious faith and the state into a god. Religion is only the language we use to talk to each other about the things which matter most to us, and the habits and structures we build to help us help each other to hold onto what matters.

The world we live in is spiritual in nature, and even the physical world reveals

Him, as Paul reminds us.

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. (Romans 1:18-20)

Note that the wrath of God has been revealed, not against people, but against the godlessness and wickedness of people. God does not hate people: He hates sin, He hates the things which harm and limit and discourage people.

So people encounter God and get to know Him in many ways, whether they are aware of this or not, and whether they use the word 'god' or not. All the important aspects of human life are lived in the spiritual realm, in His company.

### *Our response to God may be more nuanced than a simple 'for' or 'against'*

We claim that people choose to accept or reject Him, but is this fair? From the outside at least, most people seem to rub alongside Him, neither fully embracing nor fully rejecting Him.

However, we don't actually find it possible to be neutral for significant people in our lives. You may neither love nor hate the person who sells you sandwiches at lunchtime, but you can't stay neutral about the people whose lives impact yours: as you get to know them, they tend to become friends; and if they are significant but not friends, you will probably find yourselves in opposition. And, like it or not, God is the most significant person in your life.

At a more abstract level, we are told that God is love (1 John 4:8). In our experience, love can easily get twisted into something selfish, manipulative and destructive, but the fact that love can be twisted and misused does not change the nature of true love as it exists in God and as it is known in the person of Jesus.

In the end, love must be accepted or rejected; it must be welcomed, embraced and lived, or turned away, rejected and avoided. We can take up the challenge and accept the risk of discovering what it means to embrace love – love of God, of neighbour, of self – or we can decline the challenge and refuse the risk, choosing to remain with what we think we know and what we can seek to control.

The love we embrace or reject is not a warm, fuzzy feeling, or the thrill of a Hollywood romance; it is the love which says, "I am on your side"; it is a love which desires the very best for the beloved, even if they hurt and reject me; it is a love which seeks to understand their needs and respond to them, visiting when lonely, feeding when hungry, offering help but not imposing it.

It is a love which does good to the unkind and the unlovely, because that is the nature of the life which animates us, and at the end we will be surprised to hear that "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of

mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40) because when we try to love a needy person, we may not be aware of God at all, but it is the act of love which matters and not the theological interpretation we place on it.

The love we find in Jesus is one which embraces, through God, the whole human race; it is costly, and impossible to express fully or successfully; living and loving that way is beyond us, but we learn and are given strength as we try, and the attempt is all that is asked of us. The central focus of a person’s life is either self-giving or self-getting; my life is either centred on me or on the God I love; love is, in essence, an all-or-nothing thing. We cannot, in the end, sit on the fence.

## Postscript

This brief summary was written as an appendix to *Jesus and the Other Place*, a book which demonstrates that the Bible teaches that the people who reject God will in the end perish, rather than suffer eternal torment. This doctrine is called ‘conditional immortality’ and it has been believed since the earliest days of the Christian faith.

The aim of this summary was to offer an understanding of salvation which does not assume eternal torment, primarily so that those who have never considered this issue can be assured that they can embrace conditional immortality without throwing away the rest of their theology

The doctrine of eternal torment has been around in the church for a long time, and many good and intelligent people have believed it. The doctrine has, therefore, become incorporated into mainstream theology, as have the assumptions which underpin it, so an attack on this one ‘small’ doctrine can be seen as an attack on the whole edifice.

One reason why people reject conditional immortality is because they believe that embracing it requires that they reject other key aspects of the Christian faith – this has clearly been taught at times (John Wenham describes a number of examples in his book, *Facing Hell*.). It matters to many people that you can have an orthodox theology and still embrace conditional immortality.

Whatever your response to this summary, my aim will have succeeded if it convinces you that it is possible to construct a coherent theology which does not have eternal torment at the heart of it. You may be familiar with systematic theologies in which eternal torment makes sense and in which conditional immortality does not fit, but it is possible to construct a coherent theology within which conditional immortality not only fits but reflects and enhances the wider whole.

For more information about *Jesus and the Other Place* and ways of exploring the links between how we live and what we believe, please visit the Stong Foundations web site: <http://strongfoundations.pbworks.com>