

What  
Good  
Are  
Good  
Works?

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*Chance or choice?*

*My soul's eternal destiny*

*is too important to be left  
to human speculation or effort - -  
even if it seems reasonable and feasible.*

*God's Word -- the Bible --  
makes it flawlessly clear  
that where I spend eternity  
is not a game of chance.  
It's not betting against the odds.*

*There are no odds.  
No one gambles on eternity.*

*It has to do with choice.*

*A simple choice.*

*A personal choice.*

*Your choice.*

The official slogan of the *Boy Scouts* organization is "*Do a good turn daily.*" In other words, do a good deed every day! Extend a helping hand! Perform a kindness or a charitable act each day! Part of the Scout's oath is: "*To help other people at all times.*" I think that is a good thing to do – with or without a motto.

**It seems to me** that most of us readily relate to doing good deeds. I believe all of us have (or once had) an inborn desire to do good. Something prompts us to do a good deed now and then, if not on a daily basis. So we do the good deed. And that's good. In fact, that's very good! Our world needs all the goodness it can get.

At the same time, the good that I do may not be totally selfless altruism. There could be various motives (good and not so good) behind my good deeds. At minimum, I myself have inner needs. I need to be needed, to be of some societal worth, to contribute something to humanity, to justify my existence, to bring balance to my lifestyle. Furthermore, my good works soothe my conscience, give me a sense of satisfaction, provide me with positive recognition and maintain my self-worth. It feels good. Conversely (if I'm an average human being), I feel badly after I do a bad deed or knowingly fail to do a good one.

"...he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed" (Proverbs 11:25).

So, a good deed benefits the giver as well as the receiver. There is always something in it for the good doer. Aside from the gratitude of the recipient, it's a type of self-fulfillment.

It is written about Jesus that he “went around doing good” (Acts 10:38) -- whether or not people thanked him. (See Luke 17:11-17.)

Twenty-first century behavioral scientists have discovered that *givers* are happier than *receivers*. But 2000 years ago Jesus had already taught: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). (In the original Greek text, “*blessed*” also means “*happy*”.)

Anyway, we want to *do* good – some of the time. We also want to *feel* good – all of the time. Maybe we even want to *be* good – at least part of the time. Some people believe they *do* good because they *are* good. Others believe they *become* good by *doing* good.

And, if I *am* good, perhaps my inner goodness and my outward good deeds are good enough to help me earn or deserve my soul’s salvation. That would make it very simple, wouldn’t it? Evil doers will spend eternity in a bad place; good doers -- in a good place.

**But, who decides** what is good and what is evil? Who decides what is good enough and what is bad enough? Do I decide for myself or does someone else determine the degree of my worthiness and the ultimate destination of my soul? Is another human being qualified to judge me and decide my final fate? If “heaven” is *God’s* provision, shouldn’t he be the one to establish the entrance requirements?

If it is God who decides for all of us, does he judge goodness and badness the way I do? Not likely, especially because he sees my deceitful heart, my incurable hypocrisy and my egotistical motives. As much as I would want to, I am unable to evaluate myself objectively and fairly, at least not when it has to do with my getting into God’s good graces and into his everlasting environment. Nor am I (nor is any other human) qualified to determine who deserves to go where.

Fortunately, God *does* have his own extraordinary criteria which, in our spiritually handicapped condition, we cannot fully understand. One thing is evident: *He definitely does not judge worthiness the way we do.*

“People may think they are doing what is right, but the LORD examines the heart” (Proverbs 21:2 NLT).

“...the Lord searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts” (1 Chronicles 28:9).

When *God* grades our deeds, he takes a close look at our intentions and motives. Attitudes, too. “He [the Lord] will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s [people’s] hearts” (1 Corinthians 4:5).

“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit...it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:12-13).

Still, some of us are sincere in believing we can, partially or entirely, be self-saviors. We may have been taught that there are some good deeds we ourselves can do to increase our chances of spending eternity with the good superior force instead of with the evil inferior power.

**And if I can’t *earn my way*** to heaven, then maybe I can *buy* my way in. Some people believe money can buy absolutely everything. But we terribly underestimate the value of a soul if we think it has monetary value. Jesus said: “What good will it be for a man [person] if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

I cannot buy my way (or anybody else's way) into heaven; there isn't enough material wealth in the world to redeem even one human soul. It is priceless. And, anyway, *it's not at all about money or what money can buy.*

Perhaps we will not say God is incapable, by himself, of creating a complete and competent plan of salvation for us. It's just that maybe he wants our input, our help – a kind of joint venture. We may not say it has to be exclusively one or the other - his doing or our doing; we just naturally want to participate in our own soul's salvation. Is there anything wrong with that? We are not absolutely sure our good deeds will save us, but what harm is there in trying? After all, what other options are there?

I think that if God left it entirely up to us, there probably would be as many options as there are people. And, we'd be right back where we started because, if all of us could get to heaven on our own terms, it would not be heaven – at least not for long. Throughout human history, we have amply demonstrated our talent for creating chaos wherever we go – intellectual, environmental, economic, political and moral. God's heaven will be totally different because its people will be supernaturally changed. They will be driven by a different spirit. They will be perfect. (See Hebrews 12:23) *And the same Bible that tells us about heaven also tells us precisely how to get there.*

The Bible makes it clear that Christ successfully completed our salvation – all by himself, with help from no one. "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1Peter 3:18). "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree [wooden cross]..." (1 Peter 2:24). Human nature not only wants to get to heaven on its own merits; it also wants to live its earthly life on its own terms. We want to believe in some kind of god (as though belief in a supernatural being is some sort of asset or advantage), but we don't want him to interfere with or determine our lifestyle. Even if we do make some kind of commitment to him, we certainly do not want him to direct or control our lives. As far as we are concerned, it is convenient and reassuring to have God around, especially in times of emergency or crisis, but nothing much beyond that. The thought that God might want something from us is usually the furthest thing from our minds.

**Where did this notion originate** - that good works are important to humanity and to divinity? I believe this concept, in its earliest meaning, comes from our Creator, from that part of what is left in us of his image and likeness. (See James 3:9.) But, like other good things that have their origin in God, it is misinterpreted and misapplied by our inherited, corrupted human nature.

At any rate, we think we ourselves have to be *doing something* in order to spend eternity in the preferred place. Moreover, many of us insist that what we need to do shouldn't be easy. In fact, it should be somewhat difficult, almost impossible. But, with reasonable effort on our part, it would still be within our reach, so that, if we did get to heaven by our own endeavors, we could say: "Look at us! We made it! Others failed, but we succeeded!" It would set us apart, make us feel special. In a way, it would be our ultimate achievement - something to be proud of, something to brag about for all eternity. (Ephesians 2:9) The Lord might even decorate us with something like, but superior to, the *Purple Heart*. (Conversely, there are people who feel totally undeserving of salvation.)

It's entirely natural for humans to think this way. Even when it comes to a matter as serious as soul salvation, we think and act competitively and selfishly. With pride. There's only one problem with this scenario: it is pure fiction.

As I said in the introduction, my soul's destiny is too important to be left to human speculation or effort, even if it seems reasonable and feasible. God makes it quite clear that where I spend eternity is not a game of chance. It's not betting against the odds. There are no odds. No one gambles on eternity. It has to do with choice. Simple choice. *My personal choice*. No one is *born* a bona fide believer. No one can *make* you a

true Christi follower - not your parents and not your religious leaders. You yourself have to make that choice, that decision. You can *call* yourself a Christian but not be one.

As far as God is concerned, we don't have to "be good" (*do good*) to be saved. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). The quantity and quality of our personal goodness has nothing to do with the salvation the Lord is offering us.

"You were dead because of your sins ... Then God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all our sins. He canceled the record that contained the charges against us. He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ's cross" (Colossians 2:13-14 NLT).

The potentially godly life begins after we receive Christ and are implanted with his nature. It does not mean we will not sin anymore (we still have our sinful nature) but, "If we confess our sins, he [God] will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

The "sin question" has plagued humanity from day one. The manmade religions of this world are helpless to deal adequately with the problem of sin – its presence, its power and its accompanying feelings of guilt. But, God found a way to deal decisively, thoroughly and effectively with sin.

Consequently, when we come in true repentance to God through Jesus Christ, *all* of our sins (transgressions, failures, shortcomings) are forgiven *and* forgotten. (See Jeremiah 31:34; Micah 7:19; Ephesians 1:7.) And if that's not enough, he takes away all feelings of blameworthiness. We can continue life with a clear conscience. But, that's not all! He provides us with *power* over our sinful nature and even over the temptation to sin! The Lord thought of everything. What a good, great God we have!

**Our evaluation of ourselves** is probably inaccurate. Some of us underrate ourselves; some of us overestimate our personal goodness. Apostle Paul knew the precise truth about all of us, but only because the Lord revealed it to him. "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature" (Romans 7:18). There was a time when Paul (formerly called Saul of Tarsus) would have disbelieved and disputed this truth. (See Philippians 3:4-6.) So, it's perfectly natural if we disagree with this humbling disclosure.

But what's the point of arguing with God? Let's face it; if anyone knows what human nature is really like, it is God. It is of no significance that we live up to our own self-made value systems but fail to live up to God's standards. Would you feel better about it if the Lord gave you his sinless nature to counteract your sinful nature? Well, that's exactly what he does when you invite Christ into your being.

"His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may *participate in the divine nature* and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Peter 1:3-4. Emphasis added.)

We deceive and hurt ourselves when we play the perilous game of comparing ourselves with other people. "I am not as bad as he is." "I don't do this and I don't do that." "I am better than she is." "Don't we all make mistakes?" "No one is perfect." What's the use of comparing ourselves with others or of trying to hide behind people whom we perceive to be worse than we are or of minimizing our "mistakes" or shifting blame to somebody else? We're just deceiving ourselves and making it worse for ourselves.

After all, *God* will not compare us with other people, so why should we? When we stand before him to give an account of our earthly lives, we will not answer for others but only for ourselves. He deals with us personally, individually. We need to plead guilty before

God, because we can't hide from him, nor can we hide anything from him. He knows us inestimably better than we know ourselves.

God will not grade us using the same measure, because his expectations vary from person to person. Strengths and weaknesses differ from person to person. "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded [by God]; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much will be asked" (Luke 12:48). Conversely, from those who were entrusted with less, less will be expected.

The Lord says, "The [human] heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (Jeremiah 17:9). We don't see ourselves the way God sees us. We don't think the way God thinks. Example: "For whoever keeps the whole [Mosaic] law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10). The sooner we stop arguing with God and start agreeing with him, the better off we will be. You can fool yourself but you can't fool God.

Sometimes, the Evil One (the devil) tries to mislead us, to trick us into thinking we can save ourselves. At the same time, he himself would never take seriously or accept any human effort at self-saving. He knows it's not a valid option. He must, however, accept *God's* effort; he cannot find any moral shortcomings or legal loopholes in what Christ did on and off the cross. (That's why God accepts us when we come to him *through Christ*, and the devil can't do anything about it.) What Christ *did* was universally effective only because of who he *was* and what he *did*. But keep in mind that *while God's salvation is universally available, it must be individually accepted*.

(By the way, if you do not believe in the existence of Satan, then you should not believe in the existence of God. The same Bible that says God is real also says Satan is real.) We humans are in no condition or position to even think about getting into perpetual paradise by our own effort. And, anyway, God is not asking for our assistance in this particular project, no matter how well intentioned and humanly impressive our unsolicited contribution might be.

### **Three reasons we have no part in our soul's salvation:**

~ **We don't qualify.**

~ **Heaven is a pride-free environment.**

~**The origination and consummation of this project (human redemption idea) is strictly limited to the work of the Holy Trinity.**

For millions of years, even God's angels were unaware of his brilliant, unprecedented plan of salvation. (See 1 Peter 1:12.) So, why should we dispute or resent being left out of the process? Quite the opposite, we should be instantly relieved and eternally grateful to him for his great grace and mercy.

A sinner cannot save a sinner – herself, himself or someone else. (We have already begun to see from Scripture that every human being – *without exception* – is a sinner before God.) Even if a sinner *died* for a sinner, it would not result in eternal salvation for anyone.

Again, my *doing* good will never *make* me good. My good deeds can never take away my depraved human nature. So, what good are good deeds? Good works are important to God, as we shall soon see.

Some people believe being a theist is better than being an atheist. But, by itself, belief in God is neither good nor bad. For example, some believers feel only fear for God. Others

get a false sense of security and even a dangerous feeling of immunity by believing in him.

Your belief in God does not impress or satisfy him, if it goes no further than an intellectual acknowledgement of his existence. *His desire is to have a direct, personal and mutually-beneficial relationship with you.* For him, there is little difference between a self-reliant, self-serving theist and a forthright atheist. *What difference does it make whether or not I believe in God, if he is not a conscious and dominant part of my daily life?* And, anyway, without the *Jesus Factor*, both the theist and the atheist are without any kind of reliable hope for the future.

All the religions in the world cannot be right. Where, then, is the true way? The God of the Bible said this of Jesus, "This is my beloved Son; hear [listen to] him" (Luke 9:35). The Holy Spirit, speaking through Apostle Peter, says of Jesus: "Salvation is found in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven given to men [humanity] by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

"Therefore God exalted him [Jesus Christ] to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11).

**I cannot save myself, no matter how sincere and devoted I am.**

**Nobody else can save me, no matter how revered and powerful she or he is.**

**No religion can save me, no matter how respectable and impressive it is.**

"All roads lead to Rome," but all religions do not lead to God. The hard truth is that *no* religion leads to God. *Humans* originate religions; *God* originated a redeemer. Even if you take the best parts from this world's religions, you still have no assurance; you still find no real peace, no lasting satisfaction. Nothing changes. People continue to cope with sin as best they can. Some justify it, some downplay it, some whitewash it, some ignore it and some deny it. But it never goes away and it is resolved neither by religions nor by religious individuals. Only the God of the Bible has a realistic solution.

An angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds and said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people." And what exactly was the joyful news for all people? "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10,11. Emphasis added.)

If, in fact, Jesus Christ is "...the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), then there is nothing left for us to do but to accept this generous provision. "...he [Jesus] became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him..." (Hebrews 5:9). "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter [the starter and completer] of our faith..." (Hebrews 12:2). "...that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith" (Ephesians 3:17). "...a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16).

On this peopled planet there are countless humanistic religions - all criticizing, contradicting and competing with each other. They all speak and act in the name of god or gods. But the biblical God has nothing to do with any of these religions because he is not the creator of confusion. (See 1 Corinthians 14:33.) He is not proposing a *religion*; he is presenting a *person* - the Lord Jesus Christ, who wants to be your Savior. All of Christian doctrine and theology focuses on him and explains God's plan of salvation through Christ alone.

**To make it as simple as possible** (for people like me) and to avoid human misunderstanding and bewilderment, God himself provided only one way, only one person, only one saving name – the name of *Jesus*! Jesus is *not* one of a long list of more-or-less equal spiritual leaders, any one of whom can lead you or me to God, through whom people can be saved. Only Christ and he alone, can save me! Everyone and everything else is excluded, doesn't apply, doesn't count, and isn't needed! All others are either human fabrications or imperfect humans; only Jesus is *divinity* who took on *humanity*. Only he was perfect; only he could and did die for our sins and was resurrected by God to validate the whole mission. On the cross, Christ said it concisely but profoundly: "It is finished!" Assignment accomplished! Nothing more to be done. And to the believing, repentant thief on a cross next to him, Jesus said: "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43. See also 2 Cor 5:8). No deals, no delays, no detours.

Jesus made it crystal clear that there are no other ways, choices or options, when he said of himself, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved" (of John 10:9).

He also said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). You want to know how to get to heaven? Jesus is the way. You want to know the truth? All truth is embodied in him; he is truth personified. You want to have eternal life? Jesus said of himself: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies" (John 11:25). Aren't you relieved that there is only one true way to the one true God? I certainly am!

Jesus said, "...small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to [eternal] life, and only a few find it" (Matthew 7:14). Yes, it's true: the way to God is narrow. But you can find it, because Jesus is the Way. Our big-hearted God was looking out for our best interests when he presented us with one costly but completed plan of salvation. It is so simple, a child can understand it.

Jesus Christ is the only way to God, but not just because he *says* so. He *earned* that position. No manmade religion provides a person who loves me so much that he dies for me, and who is *qualified* to take the full punishment for my sins. His becoming my substitute was not challenged or disputed by Satan. As proof that the entire series of events were recognized and blessed by God the Father, Christ was raised from the dead, made the Head of The Church and became the Supreme Sovereign of the universe.

"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death -- even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:5-11)." Every knee should bow" -- not because they want to, but because they will be obligated to do so.

So, if we don't allow Jesus Christ to get us into heaven, we will never get there. Since God is just, our condition in the confines of the evil spirit underworld will be eased somewhat because we did some good things and didn't do certain bad things. But that is small consolation for someone who rejects Christ's outright gift of salvation and, doing that, rejects God's heavenly habitat.

The Bible says we will go to one of two places. God has abundantly proven that he does not want us to find ourselves in *the unseen underworld* – the literal meaning of the word *hell*. But, he will not force us into *the skies* - the literal meaning of the word *heaven*. He



leaves the choice with us. He gave us a free will and he will not violate it. We go to hell by default; we go to heaven by (only one) option.

We don't need to do anything to end up in Satan's dark domain since, by natural birth, all of us are (or were) already headed that way. (See John 3:18,36) But there is something we have to do to enter God's *Sky Country*. We need to ask Jesus Christ to airlift us from the broad way and set us on the narrow way. Whatever "hell" is or isn't, we don't want to go there! And, thanks to God's goodness, we don't have to.

Jesus already has complete, eternal salvation for anyone who wants it. As my pastor, Jim, says: "Jesus didn't make a down payment on our salvation; he paid for it in full."

Now, Jesus is the only representative, the only go-between you need. "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all men [humanity]..." (1 Timothy 2:5,6). Jesus Christ is both man and God – the perfect peacemaker. No human being, no matter how allegedly saintly, can qualify for that position.

Jesus is not just an outstanding human being. He is not just a world-renowned philosopher and exceptional teacher. He is not just a compassionate person. He is God the Son who took on human flesh. If he is *not* the Savior of the world, the King of kings and Lord of Lords, then he is an impostor; he is delusional; he is not to be trusted; he is not to be taken seriously.

**Earlier, I mentioned religions, but not churches.** The New Testament speaks often about Christ and his church. The word *church* in Greek refers to *people* and means "called out ones." Today, *church* has different meaning to different people. For example, some people think a church is an actual, physical building. Since it is Christ's or God's *living* church, it shouldn't be hard to identify the churches (fellowships of believers) that are closest to the biblical definition. Still, to do that, we need to know Scripture well enough to recognize the true church.

We will not go into a thorough identification at this time. For now, I only want to point out that a New Testament church is made up of individuals who (1) are "*in Christ*," (2) have received him by faith, (3) have been born of his Spirit, (4) have had their sins forgiven, (5) have become the children of God by new birth and (6) have assurance of salvation.

While on earth, they will be performing the two church ordinances: believer's (water) baptism and the Lord's Supper (Communion), instituted and practiced by the head of the church himself – the Lord Jesus Christ. (See John 6:53-63.) The followers of Christ will also be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. (See Matthew 5:13,14.) They will share God's good news with the rest of the world. (See Luke 24:47.)

So, it's true: Jesus is enough, more than enough, for my soul's salvation. In fact, he said it is impossible for a person to save herself or himself; it is something only Almighty God can do. His disciples once asked Jesus, "Who then can be saved?" His reply? "What is impossible with men [humans] is possible with God" (Luke 18:26, 27).

Since it was God himself who put in us the desire to do good, he also enlightens us about the place and purpose of our good deeds. While our good works do not apply to the process and price of saving our souls, there are many legitimate ways and means of exercising good deeds. And for these Christ will publicly credit and compensate us at the time of our future accounting to him.

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men [humans]. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious

appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own [private property], eager to do good works" (Titus 2:11-14. Emphasis added.)

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

"For we [God's true children] must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10). This has nothing to do with losing or keeping one's salvation; it's about receiving or forfeiting rewards. (See 1 Corinthians 3:12-15.)

"...the holy Scriptures...make you wise to accept God's salvation by trusting in Christ Jesus. The whole Bible was given to us by inspiration from God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives; it straightens us out and helps us do what is right. It is God's way of making us well prepared at every point, fully equipped to do good to everyone" (2 Timothy 3:15-17, TLB).

"And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Hebrews 13:15).

"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people..." (Galatians 6:10).

*God will accept our good deeds once we have accepted his good deed – redemption. The eternal salvation of a soul is solely God's responsibility and ability; our ability and responsibility is to do a lot of divinely chosen virtuous acts - not to save us, but because we are saved.*

The Lord gives us numerous areas where we can work to our heart's content, knowing that none of our efforts will be wasted in his economy. As sure as there is a God in heaven, the day will come when he will praise, honor and reward us for the good deeds we did *after we accepted his gift of salvation*.

Generally speaking, I think there is a big basic difference between good deeds done *before* our spiritual birth and those done *following* our conversion to Christ. The good deeds we did *before* Christ came into our lives are motivated by faith in ourselves; those done *after* - by faith in God. Before: faith in what *I* did. After: faith in what *he* did.

We already know that God not only sees our thoughts, he also knows our hearts and our motives - not surprising, if we remember he put us together. "...God... searches minds and hearts..." (Psalm 7:9). Jesus knows everything about everybody. (See John 4:16-18,39.) "...he knows everything" (1 John 3:20). "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). In Proverbs 5:21 we read, "For a man's ways are in full view of the Lord, and he examines all his paths." "...God will judge men's secrets..." (Romans 2:16). Why would God do this if not to hold us accountable?

**To start with, we can help the needy**, the poor, the hungry, the suffering, the widows and the orphans. And, through our local church and para-church organizations, we can help carry out Christ's current mission on our aquamarine globe – preaching the "Evangel" (Good News) domestically and internationally. By doing all this, we can benefit from his generous proposal to store up for ourselves (yes, for *ourselves!*) treasures in heaven. (See Matthew 6:20; Luke 18:22.)

We can count on Christ to get us into God's celestial home. However, the scope and quality of our life in heaven is largely up to us and what we do *now*. (See I Corinthians

3:12-15.) He is providing a *place* for us (See John 14:2). What *position* we have in that place depends entirely on us. (See Matthew 25:21.)

Without hesitation, as children of God by new birth, we can and should be acting on that desire our Creator placed within us - to win or earn something in the sight of our good, generous, loving heavenly Father. Like a caring earthly father, he watches us perform; he encourages us. We can gain his approval and praise. One day, we will want to hear him say to us: "Well done! You have been faithful with a little for a short time on earth; now, I will reward you generously throughout all eternity."

Tragically, there are far too many people for whom even Christianity is only a formality, a superficial religion. Many professing, nominal (in name only) Christians think they might go to heaven because they believe in Christ as a historical figure. They know about him with their heads but they do not know him with their hearts and lives.

**Profile of unsaved believers:** Book of Acts, Chapter 8

They can be very attentive, verses 6-7

They can be well impressed by miracles, verse 8

They can believe what is preached, verse 12

They can be baptized, verse 13

But they do not have the Holy Spirit, verse 15

It is possible to have respect, admiration and even affection for Jesus and still not know him. There is only one way to know Jesus Christ: through a spiritual birth. Jesus told Nicodemus, "You must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the [Holy] Spirit" (John 3: 7-8).

Whether we are talking about manmade religions or even about Christianity as just another religion, there is nothing more self-deceiving, misleading and futile than the belief that we can serve God with nothing more than with our sinful nature. And there is nothing more bigoted and cruel than zealous religion (in the name of God) without the indwelling love, compassion and mercy of the true God.

**To believe the Gospel is to obey it, to live it.** It's not enough to know *about* Christ; I need to know *him* and have a personal relationship with him. It does me no good to believe what's written about him in the Bible or elsewhere, if I don't invite him to live in me and be my Savior and my Lord. Jesus Christ is a living being (equally divine and human) who wants to communicate with me – person to person.

There will be many people who will think they are entitled to go to heaven. The time will come when they will say to the Lord Jesus Christ: "We believed in you; we went to church and gave money; we did good things in your name. Let us in!" Sadly, he will have to say to them, "I don't know you... Away from me, all you evildoers!" (Luke 13:27). (See also Matthew 25:11-12.) "...if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ" (Romans 8:9). It is possible to be "...zealous for God..." but not know him or his Son - Jesus Christ – personally. (See Romans 10:2.)

Listen to the kind of personal relationship Christ wants to have with you.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

"...you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave...but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Romans 8:15-16).

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20).

There is a right way, a biblical way to make peace with God. Be sure you become a true child of God by coming to him the way he tells you to do it.

No matter how good our intentions are, no matter how much we try, we cannot be accumulating awards, prizes, rewards, riches and responsibilities in heaven, if we are not sure heaven is our final destination. If you are not confident that you are saved; that is, you do not "...know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13), then it's possible you are still on "...the broad road that leads to destruction" (Matthew 7:13).

**"I know I am saved; I know I'm going to heaven."** Have you heard people speak such words? How did you react to these people? Were you happy for them? Were you envious? Were you resentful? Did you think they were presumptuous, conceited, even arrogant?

Whom does the Lord appreciate more: those who mistakenly think they can buy or earn their own way to heaven, or those who take God at his word? What's better: hoping (in vain) to boast about how I saved myself by my good works, or boasting about the Lord and how *he* saved and changed me?

Like Mr. Yevsukov, a lot of people believe that only in eternity will they find out whether or not they will be saved or lost - based on their personal worthiness or unworthiness. If that were true, God's message to us would not be called *good news*; it would be called *good luck*. When it has to do with such an important matter as the eternal destiny of my soul, would God keep me waiting and guessing until after my death? Our loving, caring, merciful Father in heaven does not work that way. Jesus Christ is offering heaven to *you today!*

Why would Jesus tell his followers to store riches for themselves in heaven, if they couldn't know for sure that they were going there? Without God's guarantee of salvation, Jesus' generous proposition is worse than worthless.

**If you are a spiritual leader** or an influential theologian who chooses not to go to heaven, then at least don't interfere with those who want to spend eternity with God. I will not be surprised if, in hell, part of your punishment will be the lost souls who will keep coming to berate you for misleading them.

Tragically, what was true in Jesus' time on earth is true today, but on a much broader scale. His words: "Woe to you, teachers of the law ... you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's [people's] faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to" (Matthew 23:13-14). Fortunately, it is not too late for you to receive Christ yourself and help others to accept him.

If, somehow, our salvation did depend on our good works then, yes, we would probably have to wait until the end of our earthly life to learn of our final destination. But, since it has nothing to do with what *we* do but with what *God* has already done, we can know *now*. *God wants us to know now!* It's not something *people* are presuming. It's *God's* idea; it's *his* initiative; it's *his* invitation. With all my heart I urge you to receive Jesus as your Savior and Lord. Without delay, accept his forgiveness and his gift of eternal life. (Tomorrow might be too late.)

Since “There is no one righteous, not even one...there is no one who does good, not even one” (Romans 3:10,12), then no one can ever be personally worthy of salvation. That’s why it has to be “...by [God’s] grace, through faith...” (Ephesians 2:8).

**By the way**, if you insist on paying a price for going to heaven, you will have that opportunity – *sooner* than you think but not the *way* you think. *You may very well pay a high price for becoming a truly committed follower of Jesus.*

It is inevitable that you will experience criticism from society for believing the Gospel, which is “foolishness” to the natural mind.

Your family and friends might persecute and ostracize you (or worse) for having chosen to fully and faithfully follow Christ.

God will allow big and small trials into your life to test your beliefs, to help you grow spiritually, and to prove how much you love and trust him.

The enemy of your soul – Satan – will make persistent efforts to compromise you and neutralize your effectiveness as a representative of Christ.

Then, there will be the daily, on-going task of denying the old sinful self and living to please God in thought, word and conduct. But, with God’s presence and power, you will overcome - joyfully!

Are you prepared to pay *that* kind of price? Let me assure you that living for Jesus and going to heaven are worth *any* price you may have to pay. He gave his life for you. Are you ready to give yourself to him and for him – be it through life or death? Remember that the truly good life is still ahead – in eternity!

**Not so incidentally**, God’s primary interest is not simply to get us to heaven. Heaven is not just a desirable place to live forever; it’s a venue for something far more important. The Lord is much more concerned about our *relationship* with him than about our *residence*.

He wants to reestablish - with humans - the communication, the fellowship that was lost in the earthly Paradise. That task is more complicated than simply relocating us. However, he can manage it – if we trust him, if we cooperate with him. His intention is to be intrinsically involved in our lives – for time and for eternity.

A relationship with God is a two-way street. If I want him to be my *heavenly Father*, I should be his *trusting child*. Jesus said: “I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15).

Do you want to feel comfortable with God now and feel at home in heaven when you get there? You can but, for that, you will need to experience radical renewal: a new heart and a new attitude, which come from a *new nature*. God needs to begin to change and adapt you to an environment totally different from the one you’ve been used to – internally and externally.

In any case, he does not want you to continue living in uncertainty and fear. He wants you to experience the joy of the assurance of salvation – starting now! And, if you are one of those who has been sincerely and regularly asking the Lord for his mercy, there is good news for you, too! You can stop begging and start thanking him, because he has already extended his mercy to you.

Zechariah prophesied about his son, John the Baptizer, “And you, my child, will ...give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God...” (Luke 1:76-77).

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...” (1 Peter 1:3).

“...you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:10).

“But, when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:4,5. Emphasis added.)

. If you wish to start walking on "...the narrow road that leads to [eternal] life..." (Matthew 7:13,14), if you want to pass from *death to life, from darkness to light and be certain you have eternal life*, then read and believe God's words of assurance which will soon follow. If you have a New Testament, you can find the salvation passages yourself. Anyway, the assurance of salvation quotations are meant for *you*.

***Let me reassure you that, with the help of the Holy Spirit (the author of the words of God given to the penmen of the Word of God), you can understand what God wants you to understand as you read the Bible. It is a compilation of divinely inspired writings penned by ordinary people for ordinary people.***

For example, Luke addressed both his “*Gospel*” and the “*Acts of the Apostles*” to a man whose name was Theophilus. The so-called *epistles* were actually *letters* written by various people to various individuals and groups (churches). Apostle Paul concludes his epistle to the Christians in Colosse like this: “After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea” (Colossians 4:16).

Even the highly futuristic last book of the Bible is addressed to church members: “To the seven churches in the province of Asia [today's Turkey]” (Revelation 1:4).

If the ordinary people of the first century could understand the Gospels and New Testament letters, so can you! Apostle John said he wrote his Gospel “...that you [the reader] may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have [eternal] life in his name” (John 20:31).

So, a careful, prayerful reading of the Gospels – without human explanation or commentary – can bring you to salvation. The Holy Spirit is the author of the Bible. And he is available to explain the Bible to us. We only need to request his help as we read.

“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13).

“...the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things...” (John 14:26).

“Then he [Jesus Christ] opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45).

“All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right” (2 Timothy 3:16 NLT).

If the Bible is not personally for you, it's for nobody. So, read it freely and believe it wholeheartedly! The Spirit of God will give you understanding, if that's what you want.

**As a temporary solution** to the divine-human disparity dilemma, God is able to implant Christ's nature in us even now. With his residing in us, we are empowered to live a life pleasing to him – relatively speaking - as long as we are on earth. (See 1 John 3:22.)

We will be relieved of our sinful nature only when we get to heaven. "...we know that...we shall be like him..." (1 John 3:2). And we will have different bodies. "...the Lord Jesus Christ...will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:20,21).

Why doesn't God evict our old nature when his new nature moves in? If he did, I imagine there would be immediate and serious ideological and practical repercussions, counterproductive to God's purposes. My guess is it would have drastic, unbearable social consequences. Our old nature keeps us on the same level with other people and helps us identify with them more acceptably and effectively.

The world was able to tolerate only three and a half years of Jesus' perfection. No, not even that long. For, if it had not been for periodic supernatural action and intervention, he would have been killed almost as soon as he first opened his mouth in public. (See Luke 4:28-30; John 7:19,25,30.)

I believe that, for now, God wants all the inhabitants of the universe to see that less than perfect people can voluntarily (by choice) be committed to loving and serving him. Also, unsaved people need to see tangible proof of changed lives – the *before* and the *after*. Furthermore, God's grace, power and wisdom are *magnified* in redeemed, reclaimed *sinner*s. "The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more; so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 5:20,21).

God always has good reasons for what he does or doesn't do. Of that we can be sure. Let's just believe God knows what he's doing, and he is tenderly reaching out to you and to me through his special extraterrestrial emissary - Jesus Christ.

### **Here are the assurance-of-salvation Bible verses**

(I encourage you to read them aloud!)

"...to all who received him (Jesus Christ), to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God" (John 1:12). (Believe him! Receive him! Become a child of God!)

"You should not be surprised at my [Jesus'] saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:7,8).

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). (Believe in him and receive eternal life!)

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him” (of John 3:36). (*Has eternal life - present tense, starting right now!*)

“I [Jesus] tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24).

“For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:40).

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). (*Receive God’s gift through Jesus!*)

“...if you will confess 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). (*How will you be saved? By believing in and confessing Jesus!*)

“...Christ died for our sins...” (1 Corinthians 15:3).

“For it is by grace you are saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves; it is a gift of God – not of works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8,9). (*See also Romans 3:21-28.*)

“...God...has saved us...not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace” (2 Timothy 1:8-9).

“...because Jesus lives forever...he is able to save completely those who come to God through him...” (Hebrews 7:24,25).

“He [the Lord] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

“...the children of God [have] been born of God. [The child of God] “...has eternal life in him. Those who obey his commands [who believe in his Son and love one another] live in him [Jesus Christ] and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: by the Spirit he gave us” (1 John 3:9,10,15,24).

“We accept man’s testimony, but God’s testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God, has made him out to be a liar...”

“And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:9-13). (*Not that you may think or hope, but that you may know that you have eternal life!*)

God himself offers you this assurance of salvation. *He* wants you to be able to say with complete and grateful confidence: “I don’t deserve it but, by God’s grace, I know I’m saved because, by faith, I have accepted his gift of eternal life.”

If you find yourself believing what the Lord has just said to you through his living word, and you sense the Holy Spirit prompting you to accept God’s wonderful gift of salvation, consider yourself extremely fortunate. It means God is focusing on you, attempting to connect with you. You are free to invite the living, loving Christ into your life right now.



Receive him by faith; trust him; believe him; believe his word. Stop doubting and start believing. Do you *want* to believe? If yes, then, *do* it! Don't delay! Ask God to help you.

Share your heart with the Lord as sincerely as you can. Don't let anything or anyone stop you in this - the most important, the most right thing you will ever have done for yourself. Your destiny depends on what choice you make. It's your life. It's your eternity. It's your decision.

If you don't know what to say to God, here is a prayer you can make your own as you begin to establish a personal relationship with him, through Christ.

Dear God:

I am a sinner in your holy eyes  
and am not worthy to approach you.  
But, I come to you in the name and worthiness  
of your Son and my Savior, the Lord Jesus.  
Thank you for accepting me, just as I am.  
I believe Christ died on the cross  
to pay for my sins  
and rose from the dead  
for my justification.  
I accept your gracious gifts  
of forgiveness and eternal life.  
I invite Jesus Christ into my heart right now.  
I want his Spirit to help me live a life  
that is pleasing to you.  
From this moment and throughout eternity,  
I am your devoted child  
and you are my compassionate heavenly Father. Thank you!  
Amen!