

# Who Shall Be Saved?

By *Darren Morton*

**Q**uite literally, the “gospel” means good news. It speaks hope to a wayward creation. It testifies to the passionate love our Creator has for us, despite our inadequacies. Indeed, the gospel is something to get excited about! Or is it?

I recently attended an evangelistic crusade where the message was overt: accept Jesus Christ as your personal Savior and you shall be saved, reject his invitation and you have made a decision for destruction.

Here is my question: what of those who will never be given the opportunity to hear the gospel? Are they lost? Global statistics indicate that only one-third of the world's six billion inhabitants belong to Christian nations. Would a passionately loving Creator write them off for not committing to something they may never be introduced to? Is salvation geographical?

And what of those born before Christ? Or those who have heard of Jesus but to whom he is portrayed in a negative light? For instance, the child who is sexually abused by a church leader—God's so-called ambassador. I struggle to believe that my God who is “not wanting anyone to perish” (2 Pet. 3:9)<sup>1</sup> would

exclude one of his children on such a basis.

Is the narrow gate really that narrow? Is space so tight in heaven that God needs to be exclusive? These are difficult questions and I know that I am not the first to be perplexed by them.

## The Criteria

While I wrestle with the concept of a loving God turning some of his creation away from heaven, the Bible makes it clear that not all will be saved. In fact, Jesus gives the impression that the road to his kingdom is but a trail in comparison to the highway that leads from it (Matt. 7:13–14). That being the case, there must be some criteria by which our eternity shall be decided. So what is it? It is difficult to pass an examination if you do not know what to study.

The speaker at the crusade I attended



was clear on the criteria for salvation: it all rests on how we respond to Jesus. In recognition of the inherent questions that arise with this proposition, as I have highlighted above, others have claimed that our salvation is determined more by the kind of person we become in our short time on earth. I would like to suggest that the simple criterion for salvation is neither of these, but at the same time incorporates both.

I have come to believe that there is but one criterion for salvation: you will be welcomed through the pearly gates if you would be happy inside. That is it, *you will be in heaven if you will be happy there*. This perspective has been

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liberating to me as it truly speaks *good news* to all creation. Importantly, it helps resolve some of the questions I presented above as it provides for those heirs of salvation Jesus alludes to in the parable of the sheep and goats (Matt. 25:37–40), who in their time on earth may never have known him personally. But before the debating commences let's flesh out this concept of "happy in heaven" a little.

Firstly, it could be argued that everyone would be happy in heaven. I mean who wouldn't? Well history tells us that it is indeed possible to not be happy in God's realm. Lucifer wasn't, and neither was his entourage. So why weren't they happy there? Quite simply, the Bible tells us, because they were corrupted by pride (Isa. 14:12–13).

C. S. Lewis notes in *Mere Christianity* that pride is essentially competitive. We do not become proud because of something we can do, or something we have. We become proud because we can do something *better* than others, or because we have *more* than others. Yet heaven is a place of order, a place where, unlike our realm, hierarchy and humility merge harmoniously. But pride flies in the face of "he who is least among you all—he is the greatest" (Luke 9:48). An individual who entertains pride will constantly strive to climb the hierarchy for their own purposes. That was Satan's downfall and I am certain it was the promise he used to entice those who would fall with him. That, too, is our downfall: we strive to serve ourselves rather than our Creator, who gives us meaning.

Pride is the complete anti-God state of mind and being. In this sense, pride is akin to hell for both are as far from God as one can be. Heaven would not be heaven to those who have willingly allowed pride to infiltrate their hearts. Such individuals would simply not be happy there.

So what is God's solution to the problem of pride? I believe that the traditional model of Christian salvation is a lesson in putting our pride behind us. To illustrate, consider the fruits of pride when we allow it to take hold of us.

### 1. You don't believe you have done wrong.

Pride was responsible for our fall. The thought of being "like God" (Gen. 3:5) had enormous appeal to Eve. But the result was predictable: choose a path other than the one God ordains and you invariably journey away from him. In their chosen exile it is interesting to note their response when God inevitably goes in search of Adam and Eve. The

words rolled effortlessly off Adam's tongue: *it was her fault!* Not to be outdone in the blame game, Eve palmed the responsibility for her actions onto the serpent. Perhaps they were motivated by fear, but as I recall times in my own life that mirror their experience I sense they also wanted to convey the message that it was not their fault.

As humans, we have come a long way toward perfecting the art of presenting ourselves blameless. We devalue the wrongs we do, and if backed into a corner we generate extenuating circumstances that make our actions acceptable or excusable. It is startling, and can even be comical at times, just how young we develop the ability to blind ourselves to the reality that we are sinners.

### 2. You believe you can do it on your own.

Isaiah 14 provides an interesting insight into the mind of Satan shortly prior to his expulsion from heaven. The overriding theme, mentioned five times in verses 13 and 14 alone, is "I will." Satan asserted, "*I will* make myself like the most high" (Isa. 14:14).

How often do we forget to rely on God and attempt to do it all under our own power? I prefer not to recall the number of times I have begun to feel certain of myself and instructed God to, "leave it to me," only to come crashing down. The Lord instructs us, "not by might or by power, but by My Spirit" (Zech. 4:6). So why are we so reluctant to let go and let God? Quite simply, it serves our ego to achieve under our own strength. There is no glory for the instrument, only the musician, and so time and again our pride causes us to strive to be more than "just" the high calling of an instrument in God's hands. We foolishly believe that we can do it on our own.

### 3. You believe that you are better than others.

Humans see themselves as more valuable than other humans based on color, gender, socioeconomic status, age, race, and the list goes on. How many of the world's ills are a direct result of this fruit of pride? It is clear to see why Jesus instructed us to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 19:19). If we were to practice this seemingly simple principle our world would undoubtedly be a little more like heaven.

## The Christian Solution

What is the Christian solution to dealing with our pride? Repentance, justification, and sanctification.

Obviously the process of repentance relates to recognizing and acknowledging that we are indeed sinners. We have done wrong! God has a habit of being drawn to those individuals who experience the greatest depths of repentance—or is it that they are drawn to him? Genuine repentance is the first step in dealing with our pride.

Justification implies being made right with God. How? By recognizing and acknowledging that through our own efforts there is nothing we can do to obtain salvation. Instead we must accept that which was done for us by Jesus. Only in the desperation of our deficiency does Christ become our Savior. We acknowledge that we are lost and cannot do it on our own, and in so doing turn our eyes from ourselves to God—step two in overcoming our pride. To be sure, the sacrifice of

communicate how well our pride is restrained.

Essentially, the model of Christian salvation is the perfect and complete exercise in overcoming our pride. Christianity combats the fruits of pride by forcing us to acknowledge our sin, relent that we cannot make it on our own, and crush the belief that we are better than others. Many religions address one or two of the fruits of pride, but only Christianity challenges all three. Some eastern religions, for example, espouse humility and service, but also preach that we are gods waiting to be realized. Salvation or enlightenment, they teach, can be found through introspective discovery. In other words, we can make it on our own.

This perspective of salvation offers an interesting insight into the debate of salvation by faith or works. Both save us, as both are indicators of our willingness to put away our pride. Salvation by faith acknowledges that we cannot make it on our own. Salvation by works involves loving the Lord with all our heart, mind and soul, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Faith and works unite in demonstrating a life dead to pride.

## A Problem

The speaker at the crusade I attended climaxed by stating that those gathered had now been presented with the gospel and so were without excuse. I couldn't help asking myself the question, "If that is the case, would we not do ignorant souls a favor by not telling them about Christ?" Are "gospel" evangelists the voice

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Jesus provided the avenue for us to be redeemed back to God and no one comes to the Father except through Christ (Acts 4:12), but whether or not we accept the gift is a test of pride.

When we have come to a mood of true repentance and begun to grasp what Christ has done for us we cannot help but be changed. The process of sanctification begins. A difference will be witnessed in our behavior, in the way we perceive and deal with other people. In the parable of the sheep and goats it was the way in which they treated their fellow man that differentiated the two classes. Belief drives behavior and so our actions do not lie about what is on our heart. It is our actions that

of good news, or the catalyst for judgment? Viewed from another angle, if people will be saved irrespective of whether or not they have accepted Christ as their personal Savior, why bother evangelizing? In fact, this question can be asked whenever we espouse a philosophy that accommodates the entrance of non-Christians into heaven.

Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). I have come to be convicted that life on God's terms is real living. As C.



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S. Lewis observes, when you draw close to a fire you naturally get warm, when you fall into water you naturally get wet, and when you cohabit with the source of life you cannot help but get life—and an abundant measure of it! The Christian life provides the ultimate opportunity for our well-being, happiness, and fulfillment. Hence, one reason Jesus tells us to spread the good news is for our own, everyday benefit.

The second reason we are charged to “go out” is for God’s benefit. It has been remarked, “love that remains unrevealed and unuttered is torture.” How much more must this be the case for the originator of love? As a parent seeks a relationship with their child, God eagerly desires an intimate relationship with his children. And so for his sake also he commissions us to spread the word.

## Conclusion

Who shall be saved? Those who will be *happy in heaven*, those who have willingly battled their pride as God’s global Spirit has spoken to them. How liberating to think that God does not have a complex array of tasks that we must satisfy and to realize that he will welcome us home into his kingdom if that is where we will find joy. And how comforting to know that those who will not make their eternal home with him are the same who would not have been happy there anyway. A loving God would not force an unwilling party.

I understand that the criterion I have presented for salvation is challenging and on first impressions can generate a spark of discord. But I ask what could make us as Adventist Christians uncomfortable with such a proposition? Is the view too simplistic? Often reality is simpler and yet more complex than we expect, but something being simple should never be grounds for dismissing it. Is it too inclusive? I hope not. I hope and pray that heaven’s gates are thrown even wider open than portrayed by this proposition of our salvation being determined by whether or not we will be happy in heaven. Any wish to the contrary would suggest that our own pride needs attention.

## Notes and References

1. All references are from the NIV Bible.

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