AM I GOING TO HEAVEN?

The Nature of Belief

by
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A pagan jailor once asked the Apostle Paul and his companion Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" To this simple question they gave just as simple an answer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30-31). However, there are many people today who profess to believe in Jesus Christ but are not saved. The reason is not necessarily that they do not in fact believe what they claim to believe, but rather that there is a distinction between mental assent to certain historical facts about Jesus and a belief in Him which saves. The explanation of this distinction begins with a review of the historical facts involved.

The most basic fact of Christianity is the existence of God. "He who comes to God must believe that He is" (Hebrews 11:6). The second great fact is that Jesus is the Son of God. The angel said to Mary, "The Holy Ghost will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). The third key fact of Christianity is that Jesus, the Son of God, came down from Heaven for the salvation of mankind. "I did not come to judge the world but to save the world" (John 12:47).

Now suppose someone, perhaps even the reader, believes these facts. He believes in God; he believes that Jesus is the Son of God and that He came down from Heaven for the salvation of the world. Is such an individual saved? That is, will he go to heaven?

It is possible to affirm these basic tenets of Christianity and still not be saved. Mere mental assent to the historical facts, though it be honest, is quite distinct from belief which produces salvation. There are at least five aspects to a saving belief in Jesus.

1. The historical facts of Christianity must be *individualized.* It is not enough to believe that Jesus came to save mankind. The one who is about to "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" must believe that Jesus came to save *him* personally. Paul believed that when he said, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief" (1 Timothy 1:15). That the mission of Jesus included explicitly the salvation of the specific individual must be a vital and highly relevant part of that individual's belief in Him.

2. The individual must realize his condition before God. Each person must experience something of what Isaiah felt when he was in the presence of the absolutely holy God. An angel had just cried, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" Isaiah's reaction follows: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (Isaiah 6:3-5). A person may be living as morally as he can or as morally as the proverbial "next guy." He may think, in fact, that he has never done anything actually sinful. However, the Apostle Paul states the fact clearly: "All have sinned and fall

short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

3. The individual must realize what he personally deserves. God declared, "The soul who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:20), and Paul adds his word: "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Each person who exercises saving belief in Jesus must realize that he has offended a holy God and deserves only judgment.

4. The individual must realize that it is the death of Jesus and the shedding of His blood on the cross which procures the forgiveness of sins and, therefore, salvation. Read some of the statements of Holy Scripture: "Christ died for our sins" (1 Corinthians 15:3). "In Him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace" (Ephesians 1:7). "Who Himself [Christ] bore our sins in his own body on the tree (1 Pet. 2:24). Christ "bore our sins" on the cross in the sense that He was, then and there, paying the penalty for the individual's sin as his substitute. "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Concerning this aspect of belief, the distinction from mere assent to a historical fact is most poignant. Every nominal Christian believes that Jesus came to earth to die for sins. The belief which saves is a positive belief in the substitutionary death of Christ. It is a belief that creates the very real and satisfying assurance that one is saved because Christ by dying and shedding His blood paid the price for one's own personal and specific sins.

5. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" As in the case of that pagan jailor in Acts 16:30-31, a belief in Christ that saves is an act, a decision of the will. No one is born a believer. It is not a process. It is not living a moral life according to Christian principles. It is not trusting in external acts like the ordinances or sacraments of the church. Now someone raised in a Christian home may not remember when as a child such a decision was made or when he placed his trust in Christ for the forgiveness of his sins. But there was such a point, even if God alone knows it. For an adult who has never made such a commitment and who is concerned about going to heaven when he dies, he must make a definite and conscious decision and ask God to forgive him of his sins and *to entrust his life and eternal destiny to Jesus and what Jesus did for him at Calvary*. From that moment on, he is saved.

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." May today be the day for this saving experience in the life of any reader who has not trusted in Jesus Christ as his personal Savior.