



Discussions with My Friend: An Introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ By David Stewart

Chapter 15: The Need for a Savior



"A man who was completely innocent, offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies, and became the ransom of the world. It was a perfect act." Gandhi

The mid-twentieth century British apologist C.S. Lewis observed that the principal obstacle he found in sharing the Christian message was that most people reject the notion of their own sinfulness and their need for repentance and spiritual healing:

"[T]he greatest barrier I have met is the almost total absence from the minds of my audience of any sense of sin... The early Christian preachers could assume in their hearers, whether Jews...or Pagans, a sense of guilt.... Thus the Christian message was in those days unmistakably the Evangelium, the Good News. It promised healing to those who knew they were sick. We have to convince our hearers of the unwelcome diagnosis before we can expect them to welcome the news of a remedy... I am very far from believing that I have found the solution to this problem."^[1]

Lewis' remark was made from his experience in predominately Christian England: although Christianity offers a savior, most nominal Christians have ironically lost sight of their need for a redeemer or have taken Him for granted. Recent research affirms Lewis' earlier conclusion. Evangelical researcher George Barna reports that most Americans believe that their salvation is already "sown up."^{[2],[3]}

From the beginning of time, ancient man recognized his unworthiness and impurity before the eternal gods in failing to act according to his own knowledge of truth and the expectations of the divine. A proverb in Sumerian, the world's first written language, declares: "Men of experience say a word true and fair: A child without faults? Never did its mother give birth to it!"^[4] The apostle Paul observed: "For all have sinned, and comeshort of the glory of God."^[5]

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If heaven is pure, the entry of the impure would make heaven impure also, and so the impure cannot enter heaven.^[6] Great philosophers like Socrates concluded that "no impure thing is allowed to approach the pure...But he who is a philosopher [lover of wisdom] or lover of learning, and is entirely pure at departing, is alone permitted to reach the gods."^[7] Yet how does one become entirely pure, having once sinned and fallen under condemnation?

Socrates and Buddha recognized the need for purity, yet expounded no mechanism for past sins to be remitted and the mortal body purified. Instead, both theorized that the body was inherently corrupt and evil, and that the only path to purity was to try to escape it. Socrates taught of spirits being freed from the corruption of the body at death; Buddha taught his disciples to strive for a state of nirvana or nothingness in which conscious existence dissolved into harmony with the cosmos. These philosophies provide no solution to the problem of sin in the mortal body, but simply try to eliminate the body from consideration. They failed to see that the physical body is not a tainted prison of the immortal soul, but a creation of God with divine purpose and potential. A man is defiled not because of the flesh of which he is made, but because of evil thoughts and desires proceeding from the conscious soul.^[8] Islam, too, has no answer to the problem of sin. Jesus is reduced to a mere prophet; Muhammad is viewed as a great prophet, but not divine, and is admonished in the Koran for his sins.^[9] The Koran borrows the concept of forgiveness from Judeo-Christian tradition known to Muhammad, yet on what principle is it given without a Messiah or Savior to render an atoning sacrifice?

Man therefore faces a difficulty which he cannot overcome himself. Having sinned, he becomes unworthy to enter heaven and is cut off from the presence of God.^[10] Even future righteous acts do not cleanse him from past errors, just as the subsequent exemplary life of a convict does not absolve him from accountability for an earlier crime.

An intercessor was needed to take upon himself the sins of men in exchange for compliance with requirements that he would set. Cultures from the early times have recognized the need for a savior figure in the form of gods like Sumerian Dumuzi, Egyptian Osiris, Indian Krishna Greek Adonis, Iranian Mithra, or through ceremonies like the scapegoat ritual of the ancient Near East designed to purify individuals and communities by ostensibly transferring the burden of sin to a goat or other animal.

This process of purification in transferring the condemnation of sin from the sinner to an intercessor must involve something more than ritual, as was the case for ancient pagans, or the mouthing "magic words," as believed by many nominal Christians today who attempt to put their sins upon Jesus without sincere and lasting life change.^[11] It cannot be a lottery granted on arbitrary terms, as is believed by some Muslims who claim that sins are forgiven to those who die on Friday, their holy day, or by some Christians who believe that a baptized child who dies will go to heaven but that a child without the opportunity who dies without baptism is forever condemned to hell. An intercessor may pay the price for past sins when his terms are met, but intercession does not turn the beneficiary into someone he is not.

Confucius said, "Heaven is to be one with God;" such oneness cannot be imposed from without through absolution of sin alone. It requires inner transformation of character through sustained personal striving for holiness and perfection. Only one who has purified himself and transformed his character can receive the full benefits of atonement and enter the pure heavens.

Atonement is essential, but cannot be the only criterion for making the former sinner fit for heaven: personal effort is also needed. An atonement does that which we cannot do for ourselves after we have done all that we can.^[12]

Conversely, the need for personal strivings in no way diminishes the necessity of the atonement nor does it render salvation earned by human works. The prophet Amulek explained the efficacy of Christ's atonement:

"And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircles them in the arms of safety, while he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice; therefore only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption."^[13]

A savior is necessary for the righteous to be able to enter the pure heavens by overcoming sin. As we have seen, major world faiths including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and various philosophies do not offer the necessary savior. Only in Christianity can we find the supreme exemplar who is the "Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe:"^[14] Jesus Christ, who made an infinite and eternal sacrifice.^[15]

^[1]C. S. Lewis, "God in the Dock", God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics (1970)

^[2] "Most Americans believe in afterlife; few going to hell: Poll." wordnews.org/most_americans_believe_in_after_death.htm. Accessed 16 June 2007.

^[3] Barna, George. Second Coming of the Church, p. 28.

^[4] Jacobsen, Thorkild. The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, 153.

^[5] Romans 3:23

^[6] 1 Nephi 15:33-34

^[7] Socrates, Phaedo.

^[8] Matthew 15:17-20.

^[9] need reference

^[10] 2 Nephi 2:5, Alma 42:1-30

^[11] George Barna, The State of the Church 2002 [Ventura, CA: The Barna Group, 2002], 126, as quoted by Sider.

^[12] 1 Nephi 25:23

^[13] Alma 34:16

^[14] 1 Timothy 4:10

^[15] Alma 34:14