

## Who Will Go to Heaven?

A few months ago, one of the sisters here suffered a miscarriage. That's certainly a difficult time for any woman, but in this sister's case, she also found herself wondering about the spiritual situation of her baby. She came to Shawn and asked him, "Does my baby have a soul? Will they go to heaven?"

Shawn was able to help her out, of course, but the conversation helped both of us to realize that this was a topic that we should be preaching on. After all, "Heaven Bound" is our theme for this year. We've preached multiple sermons on how important it is to go to heaven, but we haven't really specified who is going to go there. This morning, then, let's answer the question, "Who will go to heaven?"

There are several different groups who will spend eternity with God, and the first of these is **THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER SINNED**. Consider what God says in Ezekiel 18:19-20. This text, of course, is not primarily a discussion of life under the sun. We all know that somebody's righteousness doesn't have a whole lot to do with their lifespan. Instead, the righteous will live spiritually, and the unrighteous will die spiritually.

What's more, though all of us are responsible for our own sins, none of us will be held accountable for the sins of others. My father was a good man, but even if he had been the most wretched sinner ever to live, I would not share in the guilt of his sin simply because I'm his son. Of course, that doesn't help me a whole lot by itself because I have sinned on my own, but it matters a great deal for those who have never sinned. Because they have not sinned, they will live.

In this category, we must include those who die as children. Look at what our Lord says about children in Mark 10:13-16. Our sins separate us from God, but children have not yet developed the moral capacity to understand sin. As a result, the kingdom of God belongs to them. Their personal purity offers no obstacle to spending eternity in the presence of God. In fact, if we want to go to heaven, Jesus tells us that we have to become like children.

This should be a source of tremendous comfort to everyone who, like me, has lost a child. We can be assured that if we are faithful, even though we have been parted from those children here, we will be reunited with them there. This is true for those who die at a young age. It's true for stillbirths. Indeed, it's true for miscarriages. We know that even in the womb, children have identities and souls, and that soul is eternal. Even the child who never sees the light of day will behold the light of the presence of God.

Additionally, this is true for those who may live longer but never develop a knowledge of good or evil. For instance, somebody who has the mind of a 7-year-old will never sin, no matter how long they live. They may become adults in their bodies, but they remain children in their minds, and they are no more subject to sin

than a child is. People like this also do not need a Savior because they are sinless on their own.

The other groups we're going to talk about this morning, though, do need the grace of Jesus to make it to heaven. The first of these is composed of RIGHTEOUS JEWS. We know that those who served God under the old covenant received the eternal reward from passages like Luke 13:27-28. In context, "the kingdom of God" here refers to heaven, and it's clear that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets will be feasting in that kingdom. The same will be true of the Israelites and Jews who were less famous than those the Lord mentions, but were no less faithful. Here, for instance, let's think of the 7000 mentioned in 1 Kings 19 who never bowed their knees to Baal. God counted those people as righteous too.

However, even though these people were counted as righteous because they faithfully followed the Law of Moses, the Law is not the source of their salvation. Instead, Jesus is. Look at the contrast that appears in Hebrews 10:11-14. Under the Law of Moses, the priests continually offered animal sacrifices because of the sins of the people. However, those sacrifices were not effective. They weren't powerful enough to truly take away sin.

When Jesus offered Himself on the cross for sin, though, His sacrifice was incredibly effective and powerful. It cleansed from sin everybody who believed in Him during the time of the New Testament. It reaches forward and cleanses us from sin today. What's more, it even reached backwards and cleansed everybody who was faithful to the terms of the old covenant. God promised them forgiveness of sins if they were faithful, but He only fulfilled that promise in Christ. Throughout the time of the Old Law, that promise was like an IOU that would only be paid with the blood of Jesus. As a result, those righteous Jews will spend eternity in heaven, but they needed the Lord's help to get there too.

Like righteous Jews, RIGHTEOUS GENTILES will also go to heaven. Paul makes God's perspective on them clear in Romans 2:9-10. As he often does, Paul here is using "Greek" not to refer to people from the nation of Greece, but to refer to anybody who wasn't Jewish. Even though these non-Jews weren't part of the Sinai covenant with God, they still could please Him by doing good and be justified at the judgment.

Gentiles before the time of Christ were subject to what are called the Noahide laws, the laws that God gave to all people before the Law of Moses. Among other things, these laws forbade dishonoring God, murder, sexual immorality, and theft. In some ways, it was more difficult to be a righteous Gentile than a righteous Jew. The Jews had God's expectations for them written down, but the Gentiles had to follow their own conscience.

However, we do know that some Gentiles were pleasing to God even before Christ came. Consider, for instance, God's comments on Job in Job 1:8. Job lived during the

time of the patriarchs, a time when God's word came directly to heads of families. There's no evidence that Job appears anywhere in the lineage of the Jews, so both by time and blood, Job wasn't a Jew. However, God clearly considers Job a righteous and God-fearing man.

Nonetheless, even Job couldn't be justified by his own human perfection. Other than Jesus, there has never been any man who did good continually and never sinned. Job must have sinned too, even though his sin is not recorded for us. Consequently, even though he was faithful to God, he still stood in need of the grace of Christ, and he was saved by that grace, even though he lived thousands of years before Christ was born.

Finally, and most relevantly to most of us, FAITHFUL CHRISTIANS will go to heaven. Once Jesus died on the cross, the old Jew-Gentile distinction was erased and those separate categories abolished, at least in a spiritual sense. Now everybody is required to seek salvation through Him.

If we do so, though, we can be assured of a reward. Consider the Hebrews writer's words in Hebrews 4:9-11. Like the Sabbath came at the end of the week and was a day of rest, at the end of our lives, we can anticipate a Sabbath rest, a time when we can enjoy eternity in God's presence.

However, resting is for then. Working is for now. It is possible for every one of us to fall away, to be disobedient to God like the Israelites who died in the wilderness. Thus, we are responsible for striving to enter that blissful Sabbath rest.

This is a thought that makes many Christians anxious. They're worried that if the Lord came back tonight, He would determine that they weren't striving hard enough and so cast them into the outer darkness rather than admitting them to His rest. As a result, they're never quite sure of their salvation.

This is an important issue, and Shawn and I have already determined that we'll use our last Heaven Bound series of the year to examine it. However, I'm going to give you a sneak peek this morning. Yes, we do have to strive. We do have to work toward heaven. However, striving does not mean the same thing as perfection.

Here, let's read together from 1 John 1:7-9. Did you get all that, friends? To Christians who struggle with sin and are aware of their struggles and their imperfections, I say—good! As John says, if we don't admit that, we're only lying to ourselves.

What's important is not whether we sin or not. It's whether we are walking in the light. John tells us that if we are walking in the light and sin, the blood of Jesus will cleanse when we confess those sins. This implies that it is possible to walk in the light—to be in a right relationship with God--and still have sin struggles. In fact, this is where every faithful Christian is!

This text calls us, then, to walk a path between two extremes. On the one hand, nobody gets into heaven without trying to get there. We need to strive toward that goal.

On the other, though, it's not our job to make ourselves perfect. Jesus does that for us. Yes, we should be sorry for our sins, but we should also trust Him when He promises us forgiveness. As long as we are faithful to Him, He will surely be faithful to us, so that one day, we will live with Him forever.

Matt Bassford