

Can We Be Sure of Heaven?

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Can We be Sure of Heaven?

Welcome to this series of talks on the things in life that matter most. In this first talk we will be considering the question, 'Can we be sure of heaven?' That is, not can we be sure that there is a heaven, but can you and I be sure in this life that one day we will arrive in heaven? This is life's biggest question, is it not? Life is a journey, a journey that is daily carrying us towards its end. We may perhaps be enjoying the journey and finding it full of pleasure and happiness; or we may not be enjoying it but rather finding it full of pain and sorrow. But the most important thing of the journey is where the journey will end.

The Bible tells us that ultimately there are only two ends to the journey of life, the one is God's heaven and the other is hell. Now many people believe this with all their hearts, and consequently they try to live in such a way as to avoid hell and arrive in heaven if they can, when life's journey is done. But when they have done their best to live as they think they ought to live, they are still not sure, not absolutely sure, of where they are going to end up. So they live their lives in uncertainty and travel along life's journey unsure of what their destination is going to be. They fear that, after all, they may be lost at last.

Now that's a thousand pities, for the Bible not only shows us the way to God's heaven, but it tells us how we may be certain of getting there. Now maybe that surprises you, or even perhaps shocks you. You have always thought, maybe, that it is quite impossible for anybody in this life, while still on earth, to be sure that they will arrive in God's heaven. You think that it is perfectly all right to hope that one day you'll be in heaven, but you likewise think that it is impossible for anybody to be sure. And here's me saying that it is possible to be sure! I suggest that what we better do is to look at what the Bible says. The Bible is God's word: it can't be wrong and it will never lead us astray. Now when we turn to the Bible we find that it does in fact tell us of certain people who were absolutely sure of heaven while they were still on earth.

People who were sure of heaven

A dying thief

Let's look at some of those people. The first one we will deal with is the man normally referred to as the dying thief. He wasn't really a thief but was more like a bandit or a freedom fighter. But whatever he was, we read of him in Luke 23:39-43. There we find that while he was still in this life, he received from Christ the assurance that he would be in heaven. Said our Lord to him as he hung upon the cross, 'today you will be with me in Paradise.' What a lovely assurance that was. You will notice the 'today': there was to be no interval, no long waiting

between his dying and his arriving in paradise. And the verse goes on to say 'today you will be with me', so there was to be no distance, no separation from Christ: the moment he arrived in paradise, he would be with Christ, where Christ was, exactly with Christ. 'Today you will be with me in Paradise.' That word *paradise* is a lovely word. Really it meant a pleasure park, and God uses it to indicate all the wonderful glories and pleasures of heaven. And so the dying thief knew from Christ the assurance that that very day he would be with Christ, and when he got there it would be a place where there was no pain, no sorrow, no suffering — for he would be with Christ in *paradise*.

All this the bandit, now converted, knew before he died — and he was utterly sure of it. He was sure he would be in paradise that very day because Christ said so. It was Christ himself who told him: 'today you will be with me in Paradise.' And because it was the Son of God, our blessed Lord, the Saviour, who told him, then the man was absolutely and unshakeably sure that what Christ said was true, and therefore that very day he would be with Christ in paradise.

Presumptuous?

Now let's notice that, when that man became absolutely sure that he was going to be in paradise, it wasn't presumptuous of him to say so. Many people think it is presumptuous for anybody to say that they are sure that they will one day be in heaven. But it wasn't presumptuous of this man, because he was not relying on his own merit to get him to paradise. Had he been relying on his own good works to gain him entrance to God's heaven, then for him to say he was sure of getting in would certainly have been a sign of exceeding great presumption. But the man was not relying upon his good works for he was a self-confessed sinner: he was relying simply upon Christ's word. Christ said it and he believed it. It is not presumption for anybody to believe what Christ says. Christ, after all, is the Son of God and when God says anything we have to believe what he says just because he says it.

In fact if we do not believe what God says, God takes a very serious view of it. Listen to what the Apostle John says:

Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. (1 John 5:10)

If you tell me something and I don't believe you, what I am saying is that you are not worthy to be trusted: I'm making you out to be unreliable. And if God says something and we don't believe him, we are making out that he is not to be trusted, he is not worthy to be believed: he is in fact a liar. That would be an exceedingly serious thing to do. So it is not presumption to believe what God says, but rather our duty to believe implicitly anything that Christ tells us.

Uncharitable?

The thief then was absolutely sure that he was going to paradise. Had you been able to ask him outright, 'Tell me, are you sure where you are going when life is done?' he would have replied, 'Of course I am sure, I shall be in paradise. Christ has said it.' And it wouldn't have

been uncharitable for the dying thief to be sure and to say so. Many people are afraid of being uncharitable in this matter. They observe that many other people around them cannot say that they are sure of being in heaven and because the other people cannot say they are sure, they think they oughtn't to be sure either.

I notice that when I tell some of my friends that I am sure of being in heaven, they seem to think that I mean I am very good and they are not as good as I am. And that's the reason why they resent my saying that I am sure. But their argument is false, as we can see if we look again at our story of the dying thief. There were, you remember, two thieves crucified along with the Lord Jesus. One of them came to be sure of going to God's heaven, the other one wasn't sure. Now it would be foolish to say that because the other wasn't sure, the first one ought not to have been sure either.

What we had better ask is why the second thief wasn't sure of going to paradise. Was it because he wasn't quite as good as the first one? Well no, of course not, both these men were equally and utterly bad. Listen to the first one confessing his sin: 'we are receiving the due reward of our deeds' (Luke 23:41). Both had richly deserved not only the judgment of men, but the wrath of God. Then why was the first one sure of heaven? Although he had lived an exceedingly sinful life, yet now he had genuinely repented, he had confessed himself a sinner, he had called on the name of the Lord, and he had trusted the Saviour: 'remember me when you come into your kingdom' (v. 42). The Bible tells us that 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Rom 10:13).

And so the first man was sure. Why then was the second man not sure of heaven, for he had the same opportunity as the first one did, of calling upon the name of the Saviour? Well the simple answer is that while he could have repented, he didn't, and he wouldn't. Had he trusted the Saviour, he would have received the same assurance. The first thief appealed to him and said, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?' (v. 40). But he wouldn't fear God and he wouldn't repent and he wouldn't trust the Saviour. That was why the second thief was not sure of heaven. I'm afraid he died without Christ and to him applied those solemn words of our Lord Jesus: 'you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come' (John 8:21).

But that does not mean that the first thief had no right to be sure of heaven, for he had repented and trusted the Saviour and Christ had personally told him 'today you will be with me in Paradise.' A few hours later the first thief breathed his last on earth and immediately he went to be with Christ. There was no waiting, no interval. He closed his eyes on this world being in tremendous pain of crucifixion, and when he opened his eyes on the next world he found himself in paradise. No more pain, no more sorrow, no more suffering forever: he was with Christ in paradise.

So here at least was one man of whom the Bible talks that while he was still on earth he was utterly sure of being in heaven. But perhaps you are saying, 'I have repented but I'm still not sure like that dying thief was. Perhaps the thief was a special case and he was able to be sure because Christ spoke personally to him: surely we can't hope to be like him.' Well now let me remind you of what the Bible says:

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. (Rom 10:12–13)

If then the dying thief called on the Lord and was saved, so may you. The Bible says that in this matter there is no distinction.

The chief of sinners

Nevertheless let us look now at another man in the Bible, the Apostle Paul. Immediately you may say, 'It's no good quoting the Apostle Paul to me because he was a great and holy apostle and had a dramatic conversion and was a great preacher. I could never be like him.' Well if that's what you think, listen to what he himself tells us in a letter he wrote to Timothy. It reads like this:

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. (1 Tim 1:15–16).

So then from these verses we learn that Paul was the worst of sinners, the very chief of sinners. But we also learn that not only did Christ save him, but when he saved him he made him an example for the rest of us to show us all how we too can be saved. So that we may argue if Christ has saved the very worst and foremost of sinners, namely the Apostle Paul, then obviously he can save me too, and he can save me on the very same terms as he saved him. That is what Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans:

For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom 3:22–23)

We have all sinned in the past, and in the present we still fall short of the glory of God. But there is no distinction in this too, for Paul says in the next verse that we 'are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus'.

Well then, what did Paul say on this matter of being sure of heaven? The passage where he speaks most about it we find in 2 Corinthians 5, and in this chapter he points out that our physical bodies are like tents. Tents, as we all know, are only temporary and are formed of fairly collapsible material that can easily be taken down; and let the wind be too strong and it will blow the thing down. Just like a tent, one day our bodies will perish and be laid in the grave. But listen to what Paul says:

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. (5:1)

But then what exactly happens to the believer when his time comes to die? Paul describes that in verse 6:

So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

How lovely those words are and how direct and how simple they are and easy to be grasped. What is it then for the believer to die? Says Paul, 'It is to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.'

The picture that Paul has in mind is of a man who is away from home, away from his own country in a foreign land on business. While he is in that foreign land he is absent from his home. But the day comes when he's going to leave the foreign land and return home. He gets on the aeroplane and leaves the land of his exile and presently he is home once more with those he loves. So the day will come for us to leave our bodies. But for the believer, when that day comes, he will, so to speak, walk out of the tent of this frail mortal body. The body will die, but in that very minute he will be at home with the Lord. The thought of it fills Paul with courage, knowing that for the believer to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

The basis of assurance—the Holy Spirit

You say, 'But how could Paul possibly be so sure, what gave him that assurance?' Well he tells us in this same chapter.

He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.
(5:5)

That is the Holy Spirit. When we repent of our sins and personally put our trust in the Saviour, then the Bible tells us that God gives us his Holy Spirit who comes and lives within us, and we read that:

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ. (Rom 8:16–17)

So when we trust Christ and receive the Saviour, he gives us the Holy Spirit in our hearts. And that Holy Spirit, says God, is my guarantee that one day I will give you all the rest of the things I have promised, and among all the rest of those things is heaven itself.

How can the believer be sure of heaven? Why because when he trusted the Saviour, received him personally, then God guaranteed to him that one day God would give him his very heaven to enjoy. He guaranteed it to him by giving him, the very moment he believed, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the part-payment, the guarantee that one day God would give him heaven as well. And if God has given us the first payment, the part-payment, God will never let us down and will most certainly give us the complete gift, for he will bring the believer home to heaven.

No interval

In another letter Paul says: 'My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better' (Phil 1:23). But perhaps you're saying to yourself, 'Well Paul was certain that when he left his

body he would be at home with the Lord, but could it not be that there would be some interval between the time when Paul would leave his body and the time when he would arrive with the Lord? Or if there was no interval for Paul, could it not be that there would be an interval for us, an interval during which we would have to be purified and go through some kind of purgation? Well if you put that question to the New Testament, the clear answer is NO, there isn't to be any interval at all. We can see that because of what the Bible says is going to happen at the second coming of Christ. So let's remind ourselves of what we mean by the second coming of Christ and what is going to happen. First of all let us read what Christ himself told his disciples about his second coming and we find that in John's Gospel.

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. (14:1-3)

What delightful verses! We notice first the promise that they contain. Says Christ, 'I will come again'. The promise certainly will be fulfilled, and we may know that because of the reliability and the truthfulness of the one who gave it. Then notice the purpose of his second coming: 'I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.' So the believer is promised that when the Lord comes again, the Lord Jesus will take the believer to himself, and the purpose of that coming is that where Christ is, the believer may be also. Where will that be? Our Lord has just told us in the opening verse of this chapter. He says, 'In my Father's house there are many rooms' and Christ has gone now to prepare for us one of those rooms so that when he comes he may take the believer to himself so that where he is, the believer may be also.

You may ask, 'Well, how will all this take place and in what order will the events come?' Well of this we read in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Again let me read you the verses.

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (4:15-18).

Now in these verses we notice that two groups of believers are mentioned. The first group are what is called *the dead in Christ*, that is the physically dead. These were people who in their lifetime repented of sin and personally trusted the Saviour but now they had died physically, and their bodies had been buried or burned. But because in life they received the Saviour, they are now called 'the dead in Christ'. The second group come under this phrase: *we who are alive and are left*: that is the believers who are still living on this earth when the Lord Jesus comes back again. You will notice there is nothing said in these verses about those who are unbelievers—what happens to them is a very big topic and we cannot now speak of it here.

You may ask when it is that Christ will come again. Well we do not know and we must not attempt to place dates on his coming. We are told however that we must be sure that we are ready for his coming. But now I want to ask this question: suppose Christ returned tonight, what would happen, according to our verse? Well what would happen is this, the first group, the dead in Christ, would rise first. That is, they would be raised from the dead and given new bodies like our Lord's glorified body. Then the second group, the believers who are alive and remain, will be caught up together with the other group to meet the Lord in the air. Now notice what happens. There is no interval, no waiting, no period of purgation, for the very next phrase says 'so we will always be with the Lord'. There is no uncertainty: the believer may be absolutely confident and that is why Paul adds, 'Therefore comfort one another with these words.' What a great comfort they are, for we may know that if the Lord were to come tonight then, whether dead or alive, the believers would be raised and caught up to meet the Lord in the air; and in that very moment we would be with the Lord and thereafter will always be with him.

You say to me, 'I know what these verses are saying, but there may be an interval after all—perhaps these verses just don't happen to mention it.' Well we can find the answer to that question in another of Paul's letters. In 1 Corinthians 15, we read these words:

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. (vv. 51–52).

Notice again our two groups. The dead first of all, the physically dead, the believers that have died, will be raised. Then the believers who are still alive will be changed. But notice how long that operation will take. We are told it will happen in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. So there is to be no waiting, no interval. And so the believer looks forward to the second coming of Christ with great joy and with great certainty, not with gloom and fear. He does not fear the coming wrath of God since God has plainly told him that he will never suffer that wrath. I read you now further words of the Apostle Paul from 1 Thessalonians. Speaking to the Christians in this city Paul says:

For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. (5:9–10)

The believer therefore will not come into wrath. As the Saviour said: 'whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life' (John 5:24).

You may now ask how that can be, and how the believer can be sure that he will never come into judgment. The answer is found in the verse I just read to you and I will read it again:

For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.

What exactly then, we might ask, did Jesus do for us when he died on Calvary's cross?

No doubt

Now many people think that when Jesus died, what he did for us was first of all to deliver us from the curse and taint of Adam's sin, and then secondly to obtain redemption for us—in the sense that he opened for us the gates of heaven. But they believe that the fact that he freed us from the taint of Adam's sin and opened the gates of heaven does not mean that we are fit to enter those gates, and it certainly gives no guarantee that we ever shall enter those gates. Opening heaven's gates then means that he has made it possible for us to get in if we, on our part, behave well enough and live our lives well enough to qualify to enter. What we have got to do therefore is to try, by God's help and grace, to live in such a way and do such good works that eventually we qualify to get in through those gates; but we are to know that if our works are not good enough we shall not get in.

Now people who believe this try most sincerely to live as best they can so that one day they may enter heaven, but they have no certainty that they ever will. This will prove how true Scripture is when it tells us that all have sinned in the past and do still come short of the glory of God: they know in their hearts that they still come short of the glory of God and, in and of themselves, they are not fit to enter heaven. What is more, they suspect in their hearts that when life ends, they still will not be fit to enter heaven's gates; and that's why they hope that there is going to be a purgatory, and that somehow purgatory is going to do for them what life didn't manage to do and thus make them fit to enter the gates of heaven. But when all is said and done, they have no certainty.

How different it is when we look at what the Bible says about what Jesus did for us when he died. Here are the words of holy Scripture and I read from Hebrews 10:

For by a single offering he [that is, Jesus Christ] has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds', then he adds, 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.' Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. (vv. 14–18).

Now in these verses let us notice there are some exceedingly important statements. First of all, we are told that our Saviour has offered one single sacrifice for sin. In contrast to the Jewish sacrifices which had to be offered day after day and year after year, our Lord offered one sacrifice for sin forever, then sat down at the right hand of God. Secondly we are told the result of his one sacrifice: 'For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified' (v. 14). And the third important thing is to notice that according to the new covenant, God says 'I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds.' That is to say that when a person trusts Christ, then God gives them the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit gives them new life and a new nature so that the very laws of God are written on that person's heart.

Then we come to the fourth and perhaps the most interesting thing in light of our question: 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more' (v. 17). That doesn't mean that God will forget that they have been sinners. The word *remember* here is a special word and is being used in a legal or judicial sense. It means to bring up before the court a man's sins, to

try the man for the misdeeds he has done, to find him guilty and to punish him. So in Revelation 18:5 we read of that wicked city Babylon and of her judgment: 'for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.' Well what will happen when God remembers her iniquities? Verse 6 tells us: 'Pay her back as she herself has paid back others, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double portion for her in the cup she mixed.' When God, the great judge, remembers Babylon's sins, it means that they will come up before him for judgment and they will receive the punishment due.

What a lovely thing it is therefore to be told in Hebrews 10, in those verses we read earlier, that for the believer, because Christ has offered the one sacrifice for sin, God will never again remember the believer's sins. They will not come up for judgment; the believer will never have to suffer the punishment for their sin. That is why the Apostle Paul can say,

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Rom 8:1).

Of course, the fact that Jesus died does not mean that everyone will be in heaven. If we wish to be there, we must personally repent and personally receive the Saviour. By faith we must do what Paul did personally, when he spoke of 'the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20). Those who have thus trusted the Saviour, the Bible describes them as people who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Let me read you some lovely words from the book of the Revelation.

And he said to me, 'These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.' (7:14-17)

What a lovely prospect lies before the believer, and how wonderful life will be in the presence of God.

Can we really be sure?

So let's come back to our question. Can we be sure of heaven, of enjoying the life of heaven? The answer is yes, because Christ died for us, and because the person who has trusted the Saviour is said by God to have washed his robes in the blood of the Lamb. Let me read some verses from the last chapter of the book of the Revelation.

Blessed are those who wash their robes [that is, in the blood of the Lamb], so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. (22:14)

Can I ask you this question: have you washed your robes, have you the right of entry into that city? Your eternal happiness depends on that. How solemn a thing it would be to fail to enter in, and what a million pities when every one of us can freely wash our robes in the blood of the Lamb and so have the right to enter the city.

A barrier removed

Matthew tells us in his Gospel that when Jesus died on the cross of Calvary, God tore the curtain¹ in the Jewish temple from the top to the bottom. Let me read you the story.

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. (Matt 27:50–51)

We need to understand what the function of this curtain was, and the significance of tearing it. In the Jewish temple in Jerusalem there were two parts: there was first of all the *Holy Place* and then secondly there was the *Most Holy Place*, or the holiest of all. Between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place there hung a curtain, which was there because in the Most Holy Place the presence of God dwelt. The Jewish priests were allowed every day of the week to enter the first part, the Holy Place, but into the second part, past the curtain, no-one was ever allowed to come except the high priest; and he was only allowed to come once in the year. Why was that? Because, in this second part, the holiest of all, behind the curtain, the presence of God dwelt; and the Jewish priests and people were not clean enough, not holy enough, to come past the curtain to meet God.

The Bible itself tells us that, by putting the curtain in between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place, the Holy Spirit was signifying that the way into the holy places was not yet open (see Heb 9:8). So then in the Jewish temple people could not come past the curtain into the immediate presence of God, except the high priest, and he only once a year. Oh, but when Christ died, God changed all that; and God tore the curtain in the temple to show that it was all changed.

So let us notice two very big differences between that Jewish temple and what has happened now since Christ has died. In Hebrews 9:24 we read the first big difference:

For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

When Christ died and then rose again, he entered not a temple on earth, but he has entered into the heavenly temple, into the heavenly tabernacle, into the very presence of God. And he appears in the presence of God for us.

Now let us notice another big difference. In chapter 10 of Hebrews we read these words:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (vv. 19–22)

¹Also known as 'the veil' in older translations. It was a substantial and very ornate curtain which separated the two main sections of the tabernacle and, later, the temple in Jerusalem.

So then, because Christ has died, the way into the holiest of all has been opened and all may come who will. Not of course the way into the holy places in the temple in Jerusalem, but the way into the holy places in heaven itself where God is, where Christ is, where Christ has entered. Says the verse, we have confidence to enter into the holy places, and so that we should see where that is, it adds 'by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain'. We have boldness to enter the other side of the curtain into the very presence of God. That means that, right here and now, the believer in Christ has that confidence, that freedom, to enter the presence of God. Here and now in spirit a believer can raise his heart to God in heaven and in spirit enter the immediate presence of God and know himself welcome beyond the curtain. He may come confidently to the throne of grace.

How welcome is he? He is as welcome as Christ himself. In chapter 6 we have a lovely word used: it is the word *forerunner*. We are told that our Lord Jesus Christ has entered into that inner place behind the curtain 'as a forerunner on our behalf' (Heb 6:20). He has gone into heaven, not merely for himself alone, but for us. He has entered as our forerunner. In the ancient world if a king of one country was going to meet the king of another country, he would take the precaution of sending a forerunner before him. And the idea was that when the forerunner reached the foreign country, the king would watch how his forerunner was received. If he was received well by the king of the second country, the first king would know that when he arrived, he too would be welcomed. But if his forerunner was rejected, then the king would be warned in time that if he arrived he too would be rejected, and so of course he wouldn't try to go to that foreign country.

Now Christ is the believer's forerunner. He has entered heaven as a forerunner for us who trust him, so that we can know how welcome we are in that heavenly country. If you can see how Christ has been welcomed, then you will know how welcome every believer in Christ is. And we know how Christ has been welcomed. He has entered beyond the curtain and sat down at the right hand of God. He appears in the very presence of God for the believer at this very moment. He has been welcomed one hundred percent and those who have trusted him are to know that we shall likewise be welcomed into God's presence.

We can come with confidence, and we may come beyond the curtain into the presence of God. Well now let me point out to you what that means. Here am I, a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, and I am told I may enter in spirit right into the presence of God right now, because Christ has died and his sacrifice has put away all my sin. I have peace with God and am welcome in his presence. And if today I may enter in spirit into the presence of God and I am urged to do so, and if every day I may thus come, how can you say sensibly that when I come to die, or the Lord comes, that I can't be sure of entering in? In spirit I enter in every day of the week, so that when the Lord comes, or when I die, I shall go to be with the Lord bodily where now I go every day of the week in spirit.

Does that assurance mean we can live as we like?

There are those who argue that if it is true as the Bible says, that a person can be sure of getting into heaven because of trusting in the Lord Jesus, then might believers feel that they can live as they like and still get into heaven at last? Well of course that kind of reasoning is not true, for Scripture itself tells us that it will make a great deal of difference how a person has

behaved. So now let us look at two Scriptures that talk about the genuine believer in the Lord Jesus who is sure of heaven, but that show us that it will make a very big difference to that person how he or she behaves.

The first Scripture is found in 1 Corinthians 11 and here the Apostle Paul is telling the believers how they ought to live and warning them that they ought not to partake of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner, and the consequences that will follow if they do partake unworthily.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. (vv. 27–32)

Now these are very solemn verses and they are written to people who had trusted Christ and they are told that they are to see to it that they live worthy of Christ. And if they sin they are to judge themselves and confess their sin to the Lord. Moreover they are to discern themselves, that is, they are constantly to examine themselves in the light of God's word and ask God to show them those attitudes of heart that are wrong and displeasing to the Lord, and ask his forgiveness and ask the help of his Spirit to change those attitudes. Then says the apostle, if we thus discern ourselves and judge ourselves we shall not be judged.

But suppose a believer, because he is sure of heaven, begins to live carelessly, then what will happen? Well the believer will be judged by the Lord and when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined by the Lord (v. 32). That can be a severe thing, and in verse 30 the apostle mentions some of the possible consequences—believers who have been misbehaving and careless and have not judged themselves so that the Lord has had to judge them, and under God's judgment they have taken sick and some have died prematurely. So it makes a tremendous amount of difference whether a believer behaves properly or not.

Disciplined but not condemned

But now let us notice an exceedingly important thing. Paul tells us that when a believer who was thus living carelessly, is judged of the Lord; suppose the extreme case in which God has had to take away his physical life. Paul explains why God disciplines him: he does it so that we might not be condemned with the world. The Bible is emphatic that the believer will not be condemned with the world, because there is this eternal difference. This man, if he is a true believer, and has trusted Christ, trusted his sacrifice, Christ has for his sake borne the wrath of God, and in that sense the believer will never perish, never come into condemnation, he will never be judged, never condemned with the world.

A loss of reward

Now let's look at another Scripture that helps us to understand these things even more clearly. In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul is exhorting his fellow-Christians to work for the Lord, and if they

work well he says they will get a reward. What happens then if they don't work well? Well, let's read the passage.

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (vv. 10–15)

There are several very important things to learn from those verses. First, Paul tells us that the foundation for life, for eternity, the very foundation for our salvation, is Christ—and there is no other foundation on which to build. Secondly, if I am on that foundation I am safe, but now I'm asked to build on the foundation and if I build well I shall get a reward. But please notice what it is I get it for—my good works. I don't get salvation for my good works because salvation is not by works. We learned that in Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (2:8–9).

Salvation then is not of works—I never get salvation as a reward for work done: salvation is a gift. But when I have received that gift of salvation and am sure of heaven, then I am allowed to work for the Saviour, and if I work well I shall get a reward for my work. Other Scriptures tell us what the reward will be—we will be given tasks of reigning with the Lord Jesus when he comes again. But suppose the believer doesn't work well, or doesn't work at all for the Lord, and grows careless; or suppose his work is shoddy and doesn't satisfy Christ, what will happen to him? We are told, 'If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss'. Yes most certainly he will, because his work is burned up so there will be nothing to show for all those years he lived. Secondly, he will not get a reward. So there's nothing to show for his work and no reward for doing the work. He will suffer loss and that will be sad.

But now notice what the passage says: 'he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved'. You say, how can that possibly be: the man's works have all been burned up? They have indeed, but salvation is not by works. Reward is by works and because he worked so very badly he does not get a reward: his works do not survive Christ's criticism. But he himself will be saved because his salvation never did depend on his works, for you have been saved by grace through faith; it's not of your own doing but is the gift of God. He will be saved but only as by fire.

The blessings of salvation

So let's go now to that letter to the Ephesians from which we have just read that salvation is not of works but is by grace through faith. What then does salvation mean, what does it bring us? Well in the first chapter we read these words:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses. (1:7)

So the first thing salvation brings us is forgiveness. And then in chapter 2 we read the second thing:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. (2:4–5)

So the second thing salvation brings us is new life, new spiritual life. Then the next verse tells us the third thing that salvation brings us:

[God] raised us up with [Christ] and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. (2:6)

When a person trusts Christ then Christ gives him or her the gift of eternal life and that life is the very life of Christ. Christ receives that person, who becomes joined with Christ and receives the very life of Christ. And as in the human body every member of the body shares the common life of the body, so when we trust the Saviour we receive the very life of Christ, we share the same life as Christ himself. And because of that we are joined to Christ who now is at the right hand of God in heaven. He is seated in heaven and because the believer has the same life as Christ has, then God says that, in that sense, the believer is already seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. What nonsense that makes of the argument of those who say that a believer cannot be sure of heaven. In a very real sense God says the believer is already seated with Christ in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus!

A glorious prospect

And finally, let us read those lovely words that Paul has written in his letter to the Colossians:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (3:1–4)

Two lovely things are told us here. The believer has been given this new life in Christ: it belongs to the believer—‘your life’, says Paul, the eternal life, the spiritual life that a believer has been given. He is already in possession of it—‘whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me *has* eternal life’ (John 5:24). Now where is that life? It is hidden with Christ in God. Because I have trusted Christ, I am to understand that God has given me this life and it is with Christ in God, in heaven. My very life is there, and I am to set my thoughts on things above where Christ is, where my very life is.

What will that mean for me when Christ comes again? Well the apostle tells us here: ‘You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.’ I can be sure of heaven. As a believer, my life is already there; and when Christ comes again it will be shown what now is already true—that I am joined with him, my life is in him, I am seated with him in heavenly places. I have access

into the presence of God beyond the curtain. And when Christ comes out and is revealed from heaven at his second coming, then every believer will appear with him.

May God bless these simple talks—to lead all the believers who hear them into the glad assurance of eternal life, that they are right with God—and can be sure of heaven.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING (1925–2019) was Professor of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a Member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.