

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 18

Is Jesus the only way of salvation?

People sometimes object to the Christian belief that salvation is available only through Jesus Christ. In our pluralistic society, tolerance is expected, even demanded, and the concept of freedom of religion (which permits all religions) is sometimes misinterpreted to mean that all religions are somehow equally true.

All paths lead to the same God, some say, as if they have traveled all of them and have come back from the destination. They are not tolerant of the narrow-minded folks who believe in only one way, and they object to evangelism, for example, as an insulting attempt to change the beliefs of other people. Yet they themselves want to change the beliefs of people who believe in only one way.

What about it—does the Christian gospel really teach that Jesus is the only way of salvation?

Other religions

Most religions are exclusive. Orthodox Jews claim to have the true path. Muslims claim to have the best revelation of God. Hindus believe that they are right, and Buddhists believe what they do, not surprisingly, because they think it is right. Even the modern pluralists believe that pluralism is more right than other ideas.

All paths do not lead to the same God. The different religions even describe different gods. The Hindu has many gods, and describes salvation as a return to nothingness — certainly a different destination than the Muslim emphasis on monotheism and heavenly rewards.

Neither the Muslim nor the Hindu would agree

than their paths eventually lead to the same destination. They would rather fight than switch, and the Western pluralists would be dismissed as condescending and uninformed, and an offense to the faiths that the pluralists do not want to offend.

We believe that the Christian gospel is correct, while at the same time allowing people to not believe it. As we understand it, faith requires that people have liberty not to believe.

But while we affirm the right for people to believe as they decide, this does not mean that we believe all faiths are true. Allowing other people to believe as they wish does not mean that we have to quit believing that Jesus is the only way of salvation.

Biblical claims

Jesus' earliest disciples tell us that he claimed to be the one and only path to God. He said, If you don't follow me, you will not be in the kingdom of God (Matthew 7:26-27). If you reject me, you will not be with me in eternity (Matthew 10:32-33).

Jesus said that God "has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him" (John 5:22-23). Jesus claimed to be the exclusive means of truth and salvation. People who reject him are also rejecting God.

"I am the light of the world," he said (John 8:12). "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as

well” (John 14:6-7). People who claim that there are other ways to salvation are wrong, Jesus said.

Peter was equally blunt when he told the Jewish leaders, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Paul also made it clear when he said that people who did not know Christ were “dead in your transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). They had no hope, and despite their religious beliefs, they did not have God (verse 12). There is only one Mediator, he said—only one way to get to God (1 Timothy 2:5). Jesus was the ransom that everyone needed (1 Timothy 4:10). If there were any other law, or any other path that offered salvation, then God would have done it (Galatians 3:21).

It is through Christ that the world is reconciled to God (Colossians 1:20-22). Paul was called to spread the gospel among the gentiles. Their religion, he said, was worthless (Acts 14:15). It is like the book of Hebrews says: Christ is not just better than other paths—he is effective whereas they are not (Hebrews 10:11). It is an all-or-nothing difference, not one of relative benefit.

The Christian teaching of exclusive salvation is based on what Jesus himself said, and what the Scriptures teach. And this is tightly linked to who Jesus is, and our need for grace.

Our need for grace

The Bible says that Jesus is the Son of God in a unique way. As God in the flesh, he gave his life for our salvation. Jesus prayed for some other way, but there was none (Matthew 26:39). Salvation comes to us only through God himself entering the human world to suffer the consequences of sin, absorbing the penalty himself, to free us from it, as his gift to us.

Most religions teach some form of works as the path of salvation—saying the right prayers, doing the right things, hoping it will be enough. They teach that people can be good enough if they try hard enough. But Christianity teaches that we all need grace because we cannot be good enough no

matter what we do or how hard we try.

It is impossible for both ideas to be true at the same time. The doctrine of grace teaches, whether we like it or not, that no other paths lead to salvation.

Future grace

What about people who die without hearing about Jesus? What about the people who lived before Jesus was born, in a land thousands of miles away? Do they have any hope?

Yes—precisely because the Christian gospel is the gospel of grace. People are saved by God’s grace, not by pronouncing the name “Jesus” or having special knowledge or special formulas. Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, whether they know it or not (2 Corinthians 5:14; 1 John 2:2). His death was an atoning sacrifice for everyone—past, present, future, Palestinian or Peruvian.

We are confident that God is true to his word when he says he “wants everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Although his ways and times may often be invisible to us, we nonetheless trust him to love the humans he has made. Jesus said plainly: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16-17).

We believe that the resurrected Christ has conquered death, and therefore not even death can pose any barrier to his ability to lead people to trust him for salvation. We don’t know the hows or whens, but we can trust his word. Therefore we can believe that one way or another he urges every person who ever lived, or who ever will live, to trust in him for salvation—whether before they die, at the point of death, or even after they are dead. If some people in the last judgment turn to Christ in faith when they at last learn what he has done for them, then he will certainly not turn them away.

But no matter when people are saved, or how well they understand it, it is only through Christ that

they can be saved. Well-intentioned good works will never save anyone, no matter how sincerely people believe that they can be saved if they try hard enough. The whole point of grace, and of Jesus' sacrifice, is that no amount of good works, no amount of religious deeds, can ever save anyone. If such a path could have been devised, then God would have done it (Galatians 3:21).

If people have sincerely tried to attain salvation by working, meditating, flagellating, self-immolating or any other humanly devised means, then they will learn that their works do not earn them anything with God. Salvation is by grace, and only by grace. The Christian gospel teaches that no one can earn it, and yet it is available to all.

No matter what religious path a person has been on, Christ can rescue them from it and set them on

his own path. He is the only Son of God who provided the only atoning sacrifice that everyone needs. He is the unique channel of God's grace and salvation. This is what Jesus himself taught as true. Jesus is exclusive and inclusive at the same time—the narrow way and the Savior of the entire world—the only way of salvation, yet available for all.

God's grace, shown most perfectly in Jesus Christ, is exactly what everyone needs, and the good news is that it is freely given to all. It's great news, and it's worth sharing.

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