

What Must I Do To Get to Heaven?



Aaron J. Werner

A Christianity which will bear witness to God's Word . . . will not be afraid to engage in an intellectual and philosophical contest with the prevailing dogmas of its day.

--Oliver O'Donovan, University of Edinburgh

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What Must I Do To Get to Heaven?

The Bible says, “*No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again*” (John 3:3). I want to go to heaven when I die—so what do I need to do to become born again? The answer is called the Gospel or the Good News. A proper understanding of the Good News, however, requires an accurate grasp of the Bad News.

The Bad News

The Bible says, “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*” (Genesis 1:1). Afterward, “*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good*” (Genesis 1:31). However, the goodness of God’s creation included a degree of human freewill—the ability to choose to do right or wrong. With this liberty, the first humans brought evil and rebellion (sin) into God’s good creation. Since then, all humans have continued to rebel against God by sinning. In fact, the Bible says, “*There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins*” (Ecclesiastes 7:20). In other words, “*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23). Unfortunately, God is perfectly just. That means he cannot simply forgive a person’s sins without becoming unjust—without sinning himself. A good judge in a modern court cannot simply forgive a guilty criminal. Instead the good judge must dispense justice. Likewise, God (as the judge to the universe) cannot forgive guilty sinners without dispensing an appropriate punishment. Justice must be served. If God simply forgave sinners then he would be sinning himself because he would be failing to uphold justice in the universe. Therefore, God, as the divine judge of the universe, must dispense justice to all sinners. Unfortunately, the just punishment for our crimes is eternal and

everlasting. Jesus said that those whose sins have not been paid for “*will go away to eternal punishment*” (Matthew 25:46).

Everlasting Conscious Punishment?

How could an all-loving, all-merciful God send people to hell for all eternity for a mere seventy or eighty years of sinning? If God is perfectly just, why is his punishment so severe? Even if a person sinned every day, all day long, for ninety-nine years, an eternity of punishment seems to be a little harsh. Why not one thousand, or one million years in hell? Why does perfect justice demand an everlasting punishment?

The answer to this question requires a full understanding of the nature of a sin against an *infinitely* holy God. Moral crimes vary in their severity depending on the sort of being upon which they are committed. For instance, it is morally wrong to torture an animal. In fact, I believe that it is wrong to torture even insignificant animals such as cockroaches and maggots. However, pulling the legs off a cockroach is not nearly as wrong as doing the same thing to a puppy dog. The reason is that a dog is a greater being than a cockroach.

Likewise, torturing a human baby is a greater crime than torturing a dog. The *same* offence, therefore, committed against a greater being is a greater offence.¹ There are, however, degrees of offence even among humans depending on their social status or office. For example, suppose this article offends you—inciting

¹I'm not sure where a cat fits into the spectrum of greater and lesser beings, but I think most would agree that a cat is a greater being than an amoeba, or a maggot, and that harming a kitten is a greater moral crime than killing a virus or bacteria. Of course, this argument presumes the idea that morality exists. For more information concerning the basis and idea of morality see the first few pages of my article titled “Is Homosexuality Morally Wrong?”

you to slap me in the face and spit on me. Such a crime would probably result in a relatively small fine, but that would most likely be the end of it. However, if you committed the *same* offence against the President of the United States of America, then your penalty would be significantly higher. Correspondingly, if you performed the *same* offense against a king—say the King of Saudi Arabia—while his was sitting on his royal throne, the consequence would be even greater even. Although the crime you committed was the same one that you did to me, most likely, you would be executed—probably without a trial.

Here is the catch. When we sin, we are committing a crime against God. Sin is rebellion against him. When we sin, it's like slapping God in the face. The difference, though, between slapping an earthly king in the face, and the infinitely righteous and infinitely holy king of kings, the king of all creation, is *infinite*. In fact, assaulting the infinitely holy king of the universe is so wrong that it is an infinitely vile offense. In other words, a crime committed against God is infinitely wrong, making the offender *infinitely* guilty.

Unfortunately, God is infinitely just. That means he cannot simply forgive us infinitely guilty rebels. Instead, he is obligated (by his nature) to dispense perfect justice. Unfortunately, perfect justice for an *infinitely* wrong offense is an *infinite* punishment—all eternity. That's why God must send guilty sinners to Hell for all eternity—because it will take all eternity (an infinite amount of time) for us finite beings to atone (or pay) for an infinitely vile offense. Hence, those who make the objection that God is unjust in sending sinners to Hell for all eternity do not seem to understand the infinitely vile nature of our sins against God.

Incidentally, I believe this line of reasoning also demonstrates—without the Bible—that Jesus is the only possible

way to heaven. My rationale is that only an infinite, uncreated being (God) could suffer for a finite amount of time for an infinite amount of sin. If Jesus is a created (finite) being, then he would have had to suffer for an infinite amount of time to pay penalty for even one sin of on sinner. However, because Jesus is God (an infinite being, of which there can only be one), he could suffer for a finite amount of time (several hours on the cross) and pay the penalty for an infinite crime. Consequently, the finite (created) Jesus of Islam, the Jesus of Mormonism, the Jesus of Arius and Jehovah's Witnesses, is impotent. He could, potentially I suppose, pay for sin, but it would take him an infinite amount of time (all eternity) to accomplish. Therefore, no one could ever be saved by a finite (created) Jesus who is not fully God.

The Good News

Fortunately, in addition to being perfectly just, God is also all-loving and all-merciful. Although he would be entirely justified in sending every sinner to eternal punishment, he has provided an alternative—a way to satisfy justice. His solution was to punish himself in our place. As a result, God appeared in human flesh as Jesus of Nazareth—the Messiah. Jesus suffered and died on a cross in our place. He paid the penalty for all who will receive him. The Bible says, “*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8). Jesus Christ “*is the atoning sacrifice for our sins*” (1 John 2:2). He proved that he was God when he defeated death by his resurrection. Unfortunately, not every person receives the full benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection.

More Bad News

Speaking of the way to heaven, Jesus said, “*Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it*” (Matthew 7:13-14). He also said, “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6). In other words, Jesus is the gate and the road to heaven. Therefore, his atonement (his payment) is limited to those who enter heaven through him. The Bible says that we become heaven-bound children of God by receiving Jesus. John wrote of Jesus, “*To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God*” (John 1:12). But, how do I receive Jesus?

What Must I Do?

Jesus, Peter, and Paul were each asked the question “*What must I do to gain eternal life?*” Each of them gave a different answer. Jesus answered, “*If you want to enter life, obey the commandments*” (Matthew 19:17). In other words, if you want to get into heaven then be perfect and never sin. Unfortunately, the Bible says, “*If we claim we have not sinned, we make him [Jesus] out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives*” (1 John 1:10). I think the reason Jesus employed the Ten Commandments was to show the man who asked this question that he was a guilty sinner, undeserving of heaven—unable to earn heaven. Paul and Peter also addressed this question. Paul responded, “*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved*” (Acts 16:31). Peter replied, “*Repent and be baptized*” (Acts 2:38). So who’s right—Paul or Peter? They are both correct. Repenting and believing are two sides of the same coin. One cannot truly believe without repenting, and one cannot truly repent apart from believing. When

the Bible refers to repentance, belief is implied. When the Bible speaks of belief, repentance is implied. Even Jesus used the terms belief and repentance interchangeably. In one place Jesus said, “*Unless you repent, you too will all perish*” (Luke 13:3). In another place he said, “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him*” (John 3:36).² Therefore, receiving Jesus involves turning from sin (repentance), and turning (in belief) to Jesus.

Can I Earn Salvation?

Doesn’t the Bible say that we cannot do anything to earn salvation? Yes, it says that God “*saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy*” (Titus 3:5). The Bible also says, “*It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast*” (Ephesians 2:8-9). If these verses are true, how, then, can the requirements for salvation be faith (or belief) and repentance?³ Although it is true that repenting and believing are actions—things that we do—we are not saved by our works or actions. Even though we must repent and believe in order to be saved, we cannot take credit for these actions. The reason is that we humans will not repent or believe unless God first changes our hearts. That’s why Christians take time to pray before they attempt to share the gospel—they pray that God will open the hearts of those they will encounter. Lydia’s conversion is the clearest example of God opening a person’s heart—enabling her to

² Notice that God’s wrath does not come upon us for rejecting Jesus. Instead, it remains us because of our sin. Nobody goes to hell for rejecting Jesus, or for failing to ever hear about Jesus. We go to hell because we are rebellious criminals.

³ Although many Americans tend to make a distinction between faith and belief, the Bible seems to employ these words interchangeably.

repent and believe. In her case, God “*opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message*” (Acts 16:14). God explained this process when he stated, “*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws*” (Ezekiel 36:25-27).

When God changes our hearts, we simultaneously repent and believe. The entire process can be called conversion and the result is a born-again child of God. In short, we cannot take credit for our salvation—it is an undeserved gift. All we can do is receive it.

Do I Have The Right Kind of Faith?

I think I have the right kind of faith, but how can I know for sure? This is an excellent question because Jesus said, “*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven*” (Mathew 7:21). In other words, some people think they are born-again, heaven-bound Christians, but they are not because they do not possess the right kind of faith. They might believe in God, and may even believe that Jesus died on the cross for their sins. However, such persons will not enter heaven because they lack *saving faith* or *true belief*. Saving faith is the kind of faith that results in certain actions, which the Bible calls “fruit.” Jesus said that false Christians will “*come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them*” (Matthew 7:15-16). Good actions cannot save a person, but true faith (or true belief) will produce certain actions or fruit. For this reason James wrote, “*Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead*” (James 2:17). Put another way, saving faith, or saving belief is the kind of belief that results in certain actions. For instance, if several reputable astronomers

warned the people of a particular city that a meteor was going to strike their location sometime in the next few days, then all who truly believed the astronomers would leave that city.⁴

Perhaps the best illustration of the relationship between true belief and insufficient belief is that of Charles Blondin—the famous tightrope walker. Blondin performed his feats over Niagara Falls. In order to attract audiences, he had to perform increasingly daring acts. One such daring act involved carrying an audience member across the tightrope on his back. Blondin would ask, “How many of you believe that I can carry a man across the river on this tightrope?” Almost everyone in the audience would raise their hands—expressing their belief. Then he would inquire, “If you really believe that I can do this then please volunteer yourself.” As expected, Blondin had a difficult time acquiring volunteers. They claimed to believe him, but they were not willing to entrust their lives to him. Saving faith, or saving belief, involves the same kind of trust. We cannot simply believe that Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave—that is not sufficient belief. Saving belief involves entrusting ourselves to Jesus—getting on his back and letting him carry us to heaven. Saving faith is the kind that puts all trust in Jesus. It’s the kind of faith that a skydiver has in his parachute—complete trust.

How Can I Know If I’m Really Saved?

I think I’m saved, how can I know for sure? Assurance of salvation must not come from our pastors, or our friends, or anything that we have done. It must come from God. Fortunately, an entire book in the Bible (1 John) is dedicated to this question. John explained, “*I write these things to you who believe in the*

⁴Of course, this argument is assuming that no one wants to be killed by a meteor.

name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). What are “these things” that John claimed would give us who believe in Jesus assurance (or knowledge) of our salvation? They are the following fourteen evidences.

We have the spirit of Jesus. According to 1 John 5:10-12 anyone,

who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

But, how can I be sure that I have Jesus living in me? The remaining thirteen tests can shed some light on that question.

We walk in light. 1 John 1:6-7 says *“If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”* In other words, if we are saved, we will not live in sin, but will live our life the way Jesus lived his.

We admit we are sinners and confess our sins. 1 John 1:8-10 says, *“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.”*

We obey God’s commands. 1 John 2:3-5 says, *“We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word,*

God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did."

We love others. 1 John 2:9-11 reads, *"Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him."* Likewise, 1 John 3:10 states, *"This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother."* Similarly, 1 John 3:14-16 explains,

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

Finally, 1 John 4:20-21 declares, *"If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother."*

We do not love the world. 1 John 2:15-17 says, *"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."*

We overcome the world. 1 John 5:3-5 declares, *“This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.”*

We remain part of the church. 1 John 2:19 reads, *“They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.”*

We acknowledge Jesus as the only way to God. 1 John 2:22-23 says, *“Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist-- he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.”* Likewise, 1 John 5:1 says, *“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well.”* Jesus said, in John 14:6 *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*

We continue believing. 1 John 2:24-25 declares, *“See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us—even eternal life.”* Similarly, Matthew 10:22 records, *“All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”* Likewise, John 15:4-6 reads, *“Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he*

is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.”

We do what is right. 1 John 2:29 says, *“If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him.”* Also, 1 John 3:10 explains, *“This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.”*

We do not continue to deliberately sin. 1 John 3:6 warns, *“No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.”* Likewise, 1 John 3:8-9 states, *“He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.”*

Similarly, 1 John 5:18 says, *“We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.”* Finally, Hebrews 10:26-27 alerts, *“If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.”* I think one must understand these verses in light of ones such as 1 John 1:8 which says, *“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”*

In order to reconcile these verses, I think one must distinguish between falling into sin, and diving into sin. I believe that Christians can fall into sin, but a person who says “I don’t care what Gods says about,” say, “getting drunk,” and does it anyway (diving into sin) should have no assurance or expectation of salvation.

We will help those in need. 1 John 3:17 exhorts, “*If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?*” The answer to this rhetorical question is “it cannot.”

We have the Holy Spirit’s assurance. 1 John 3:24 assures, “*Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.*” Likewise, 1 John 4:13 claims, “*We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.*”

A person is not saved by doing these thirteen things. Salvation is a gift from God that cannot be earned, only received. Salvation cannot be bought—it’s not for sale. It is completely free. There is nothing we can do earn it or to deserve it. The great paradox, however, is that this gift will also cost us the thing dearest to us—our hearts. When Jesus exchanges our heart of stone with a new one, these thirteen traits, or fruits, will characterize our lives.

What If I Failed These Tests?

So what should I do if I fail John’s tests? The Bible says, “*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*” (Romans 10:13). Calling on the name of the Lord does not mean praying a prayer, or saying God’s name. Instead, it involves repentance. So, in faith cry out to God and ask him to change your heart and grant you the gift of repentance. An example of this kind of “crying out to God” is found in Psalm 51:1-17. It reads,

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely

you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it, you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

If this prayer represents the desire of your heart, then pray something like it, and continue to call on the name of the Lord until you have assurance from the Holy Spirit that he has transformed you into a child of God. In the meantime, stop willfully, deliberately sinning, and give God fewer reasons to judge you today. When you receive assurance that God has forgiven you, find a Bible-teaching church, and ask to be baptized (our public acknowledgement of Christ) and ask to be disciple by a “fruit bearing” church member.⁵

⁵ I’m using the term “fruit-bearing” in two senses. The first is bearing the fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22. The second is bearing fruit in terms of active personal evangelism.

