

THREE THINGS THAT CAN'T GET YOU INTO HEAVEN

Romans 2:17-29

By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Today I want to talk to you about heaven. The Bible is very clear that there is life after death. When you die, you will not cease to exist. Your soul will continue living for all eternity.
2. And the Bible is very clear that there are two possible destinations for the departed: heaven and hell (Mt 25:46). Heaven is the kind of place that you would want to go to. Imagine a place with no sin, no sorrow, no suffering, for all eternity. And hell is the kind of place that you want to avoid. The Bible describes it as a place of eternal affliction and distress (Rm 2:8).
3. Now, you may not believe in heaven and hell. But I would rather believe in them and be wrong, than not believe in them and be wrong. If I believe in heaven and hell and turn out to be wrong, and we just cease to exist, then I haven't lost anything. But if you don't believe in heaven and hell and you turn out to be wrong, then you will regret that for all eternity.
4. While hell is an interesting subject, today I want to talk about heaven.
5. There are many unbiblical ideas about heaven in our culture today. Here are seven popular misconceptions about heaven.
 - i. **"You will see Fido again in heaven."** Sorry, the Bible doesn't say that your pets will go to heaven. People were created to live for eternity, but it doesn't say that pets were. However, when Jesus comes back, heaven will become a place on a newly created earth, and it is safe to assume that there will be animals there, and that you will be able to fully enjoy them. I think you will be able to have a bear as a pet in heaven. However, it's hard for me to imagine that snakes will be in heaven.
 - ii. **"You will be an angel in heaven."** Some people think that in heaven we will have wings and play harps – that we will be angels. No. You are a human being, and you will be a human being in heaven.
 - iii. **"You will be married in heaven."** An interesting fact is that Mormons believe there are three degrees of heaven, and to get to the highest one you have to get married, and marriage lasts for all eternity." Jesus clearly stated that there won't be any marriage in heaven (Mt 22:30). That doesn't mean that you and your spouse won't see each other or be friends, but your relationship in heaven will be different than it is on earth.
 - iv. **"You can be sure that heaven is real because of the testimony of people with near-death experiences."** False. You can be sure that heaven is real because the Bible says. I am not interested in near-death experiences, and I don't put any stock in them. Usually near-death experiences contradict what

the Bible says about heaven, or they add more information than the Bible gives, and therefore there's no way to know if it is true. Some of the near-death experiences have been exposed as hoaxes. In 2010 a book came out called *The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven: A True Story*. It claimed to tell the story of a boy named Alex Malarkey and his experiences in heaven after a traffic accident in 2004. It was published by Tyndale House, a large Christian publisher, and it became a best-seller, and a movie. Later Alex admitted in writing that the story was made up and he never went to heaven, and he disavowed the book. Don't be captivated by those kinds of books and stories. Yes, heaven is real. But the only place where you can get solid, trustworthy information about heaven is the Bible.

- v. **“Everyone goes to heaven.”** The Bible is very clear that not everyone goes to heaven. In fact, Jesus said that more people will be in hell than in heaven (Mt 7:13-14).
- vi. **“You will experience soul-sleep before you go to heaven.”** Let's be clear about what we mean by heaven. Usually when people talk about heaven they are referring to what theologians call “the intermediate state.” When you die, your soul immediately leaves the earth and goes into the presence of Jesus. There you will experience no pain or sin, and you will have perfect communion with Jesus. It will be awesome. But the intermediate state is only temporary. When Jesus comes back to earth, we will come back with him, and heaven will become a place on earth. God will remake the earth to be perfect again, and that is where we will spend all eternity. Some groups, like Seventh-Day Adventists, don't believe in an intermediate state. They believe when you die your soul will go to sleep until Christ returns. But the Bible doesn't teach a soul-sleep; it teaches that when you die you will immediately go to heaven. One of the clearest Bible passages on this is Philippians 1, where Paul says to “to live is Christ, and to die is gain... I long to depart and be with Christ.” In other words, if you are a Christian, the moment you die, or depart, you wake up in heaven with Jesus. There are some verses in the Bible that use the language of sleep for death (1 Cor 11:30; 15:6; 1 Thess 4:13), but that was a common euphemism. A euphemism is a figure of speech in which a mild or indirect word or expression is substituted for something that is more harsh or blunt. For example, today, instead of saying that someone died, we often say that they “passed away.” Or instead of saying that someone committed adultery, we often say that they had an affair. In the Bible days going to sleep was a euphemism for death; it did not mean that the soul actually goes to sleep until Christ returns.
- vii. **“Unless you are perfect, you will have to go to purgatory before you go to heaven.”** That's what Roman Catholics believe. Accordingly, there are two

types of sins – mortal sins and venial sins. If you commit a mortal sin and die without going to confession, you go to hell. But even if you die with your mortal sins confessed, you still have venial sins, or less serious sins. And since nothing unclean can go to heaven, you will have to go to purgatory to be purified before you can go to heaven. But neither the word “Purgatory” nor the concept are found in Scripture. After death, all Christians go directly to heaven with God because all of their sins have been forgiven in Christ.

6. While we could spend literally hours talking about what heaven is like, today we’re not going to do that. Just know that it’s amazing and you don’t want to miss it.
7. Instead, today we’re going to focus on the most important question regarding heaven – how to get there. What do you need to do to go to heaven?
8. One time a rich young man approached Jesus and said, “Teacher, what must I do to have eternal life (Mt 19:16)?” On another occasion a scribe – a Jewish rabbi – asked Jesus the same question. “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life (Lk 10:25)?” This is the most important question you can ask in life. And the good news is that the Bible tells us.
9. Right now we are studying Romans verse by verse. We are just getting into it. The theme of Romans is expressed in Rm 1:16-17, and is the good news of Jesus Christ. It’s about how God has provided salvation through Jesus Christ. But Paul understands that in order to understand the good news, you must first understand the bad news. Before you can understand salvation, you need to understand why you need salvation. So, beginning in 1:18, Paul’s purpose is to show why people need a Savior. In 1:18-32, Paul focuses on why irreligious people need a Savior – they rejected God and ran to sin. In 2:1-16, Paul explains why self-righteous religious people need a Savior – they too are sinners and have a date with the final judgment. And in this passage, 2:17-29, Paul explains why the Jews need a Savior. Paul exposes three things that can’t get you to heaven. These were three things that the Jews were hoping in. And these apply to us as well.

II. TEXT: Romans 2:17-29

17 Now if you call yourself a Jew, and rely on the law, and boast in God, 18 and know his will, and approve the things that are superior, being instructed from the law, 19 and if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light to those in darkness, 20 an instructor of the ignorant, a teacher of the immature, having the embodiment of knowledge and truth in the law—21 you then, who teach another, don’t you teach yourself? You who preach, “You must not steal”—do you steal? 22 You who say, “You must not commit adultery”—do you commit adultery? You who detest idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? 24 For, as it is written: The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you. 25 Circumcision benefits you if you observe the law, but if you are a lawbreaker, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. 26 So if an uncircumcised man keeps the law’s requirements, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? 27 A man who is

physically uncircumcised, but who keeps the law, will judge you who are a lawbreaker in spite of having the letter of the law and circumcision. 28 For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, and true circumcision is not something visible in the flesh. 29 On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit, not the letter., That person’s praise is not from people but from God.

III. THREE THINGS THAT CAN’T SAVE

1. Heritage.

- i. **Romans 2:17** Now if you call yourself a Jew, and rely on the law, and boast in God
- ii. Paul is talking to the Jews.
- iii. It was very special to be a Jew. God appeared to their ancestor Abraham and made a permanent covenant with them to be their God. God delivered them from Pharaoh and gave them the land of Canaan. God gave them His word – the law and the prophets. God set up His house – the temple – in their midst. And God promised that one day He would send them the Messiah – a king whose rule would never end. The Jews were God’s own possession out of all the peoples, a kingdom of priests, God’s holy nation (Ex 19:4-6).
- iv. While all of that was true, the Jews thought that their Jewishness would get them into heaven. But that’s not true.
- v. Look at what Paul said in the previous passage.
- vi. **Romans 2:9-11** 9 There will be affliction and distress for every human being who does evil, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek; 10 but glory, honor, and peace for everyone who does what is good, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek. 11 For there is no favoritism with God.
- vii. What is Paul saying? If you sin against God, then you deserve to go to hell. And it doesn’t matter if you are Jew or a Gentile.
- viii. Why isn’t Jewishness enough to get you into heaven? Because what matters is not your heritage, but your relationship to Jesus.
- ix. **Galatians 3:28-29** 28 There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to the promise.
- x. It doesn’t matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile. Are you “in Christ”? Do you “belong to Christ”? In other words, have you put your faith in Jesus?
- xi. If you’re not careful, you can end up making the same mistake as the Jews. You might assume that your heritage will get you to heaven. Your dad is the preacher; your mom is the worship leader; your grandfather helped build the church; your grandmother was a woman of prayer who read her Bible every day and never missed church. But none of that will help you get into heaven.
- xii. Why?
- xiii. The key to heaven is not your blood, but the blood of Jesus.

- xiv. It's not about your earthly relationships, it's about your relationship to Jesus Christ.
- xv. When you go to the movie theater, you need a ticket. They don't care if your mother has a ticket, or if your date has a ticket; all they care about is if you have a ticket.
- xvi. If you want to go to heaven, it doesn't matter if your wife knows Jesus, or if your husband knows Jesus, or if your parents know Jesus, or if your children know Jesus. All that matters is this: Do you know Christ?
- xvii. Heritage won't get you to heaven.

2. Knowledge.

- i. **Romans 2:18-20** 18 and know his will, and approve the things that are superior, being instructed from the law, 19 and if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light to those in darkness, 20 an instructor of the ignorant, a teacher of the immature, having the embodiment of knowledge and truth in the law
- ii. The Jews were special because they knew the law. They were the recipients of God's special revelation. At age six, a Jewish child in the first century would begin elementary school at the local Synagogue to learn the Torah – the first five books of the Bible. He would memorize one verse a day, beginning with the book of Leviticus,¹ and eventually learn every detail of the law. The Jews knew God's law. So, they assumed that since they had God's law, that would get them to heaven.
- iii. But Paul told the Jews that knowledge of the law is not enough to get you to heaven.
- iv. Why not? Paul is about to get very personal with his readers.
- v. **Romans 3:21-24** 21 you then, who teach another, don't you teach yourself? You who preach, "You must not steal"—do you steal? 22 You who say, "You must not commit adultery"—do you commit adultery? You who detest idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? 24 For, as it is written: The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.
- vi. Isn't implying that every Jew commits all these sins. He is using these sins to imply that every Jew is a sinner. Every Jew has broken God's laws.
- vii. And what did we just learn about those who do evil (see Rm 2:9-11)? Those who do evil deserve to go to hell.
- viii. Here's the point Paul is trying to make: Knowing God's law won't get you to heaven. What matters is doing God's law, and nobody has kept God's law.
- ix. If you're not careful, you can make the same mistake. You might know all about the Bible. You might read the Bible cover to cover every year. You

¹ <https://beaconlights.org/sermons/jewish-education-in-the-time-of-christ-the-synagogue-rabbi-system-2/>

might read the Bible every day. You might read Christian books and know a lot about Christian theology. But knowledge of the Bible won't get you to heaven. What matters is obedience, not knowledge. And nobody is obedient. All have sinned.

- x. You might say, "Well, then, how do I get to heaven?"
- xi. That's exactly the question that Paul wants the Jews to ask. He wants them to realize that heritage and knowledge won't save them, because they are sinners who deserve judgment. Because when you finally realize that, then you understand your need for a Savior. Then you see why God sent Jesus – to save sinners by dying for their sins.
- xii. Here's what you need to know: Your heritage won't save you, and your knowledge won't save you, because you are a sinner and you deserve judgment. You can't save yourself. You need a Savior.

3. Ceremony.

- i. **Romans 2:25-27** 25 Circumcision benefits you if you observe the law, but if you are a lawbreaker, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. 26 So if an uncircumcised man keeps the law's requirements, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? 27 A man who is physically uncircumcised, but who keeps the law, will judge you who are a lawbreaker in spite of having the letter of the law and circumcision.
- ii. Now Paul gets into the topic of circumcision. The founder of the Jewish nation was Abraham. God made a covenant with Abraham that if he and his offspring would obey God's commands, then God would bless them (Gen 17:1-8). As a sign that Abraham agreed to the covenant, he and all of his offspring were to get circumcised. Abraham was to circumcise every male in his household, and every newborn boy was to be circumcised on the eighth day. If a man refused to be circumcised, he was to be cut off from God's people (Gen 17:14).
- iii. Eventually, circumcision became its source of pride for the Jews. They proudly called themselves the circumcised, and the Gentiles were called the uncircumcised. They came to believe that circumcision was a guarantee of God's favor; that their circumcision would get them to heaven. Some rabbis even taught that Abraham sat at the entrance of hell and he would not let any circumcised Jew to enter.
- iv. But Paul said that circumcision can't get to heaven.
- v. Why not?
- vi. **Romans 2:25** Circumcision benefits you if you observe the law, but if you are a lawbreaker, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.
- vii. Circumcision is only one of the many laws in the Old Testament. You can keep the law of circumcision, but if you break the other laws then you are still a sinner deserving God's judgment.

- viii. Paul made this point in his letter to the Galatians.
- ix. **Galatians 5:3** Again I testify to every man who gets himself circumcised that he is obligated to do the entire law.
- x. If you want to earn your way to heaven by keeping the law of circumcision, then you need to keep all the other laws as well.
- xi. In other words, if you want to earn your way to heaven, then you need to keep the law perfectly. And nobody is perfect. That's why you need a Savior. That's why you need Jesus.
- xii. The Jews cherished the ceremony of circumcision, but Christians have their own cherished ceremonies, such as baptism and communion and Sunday worship. And if you're not careful, you might put your faith in ceremonies and rituals. While they are very important, religious ceremonies can't get you to heaven. The waters of baptism can't save you. The elements of the communion can't save you. Going to church can't save you.
- xiii. Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to McDonald's makes you a Big Mac.
- xiv. Why can't ceremonies get you to heaven? Because ceremonies are just good works – they are just commands we are given to observe. And if you are going to earn heaven by good works, you need to be perfect. And nobody is perfect.
- xv. Theoretically, there are two paths to heaven: law and grace. You can rely on the law, or you can rely on grace. If you are going to rely on the law, then you need to keep the law perfectly. But if you are going to rely on grace, then you just need to trust in Christ as God's payment for your sins.
- xvi. In other words, only two kinds of people go to heaven: perfect people and forgiven people. If you're perfect, then you don't need Jesus. You can get to heaven on your own. But if you're a sinner like the rest of us, then you need God's forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ.
- xvii. Here's another way to think about it. Heaven is the difference between "Do" and "Done." It is not based on what you do, but on what Christ has done. What you do can't get you to heaven unless you are perfect. But if you will trust in what Christ has done for you, then God will forgive you and give you eternal life.
- xviii. Let's look at how Paul finishes the passage.
- xix. **Romans 2:28-29** 28 For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, and true circumcision is not something visible in the flesh. 29 On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit, not the letter. That person's praise is not from people but from God.
- xx. Paul says that a true Jew is not one outwardly, but inwardly. What he means by "Jew" is a child of God, one of God's people, one who is heaven-bound.

- xxi. Being heaven-bound is not about outward circumcision, but inner circumcision. It requires a spiritual circumcision in which God changes your heart and makes you a new person. This is what happens when you trust in Christ and get saved (Titus 3:3; 2 Cor 5:17). The moment you put your faith in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit indwells you, and changes you, and gives you a new heart with the desire and power to please God (Phil 2:13). He transforms you into a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). That's the circumcision that matters.

IV. CONCLUSION

1. So, the Jews were putting their hope in three things to get to heaven:
 - i. Heritage – their Jewishness.
 - ii. Knowledge of God's will.
 - iii. Ceremony – circumcision.
2. But those things don't save, because even if you do those things, you are still a sinner deserving God's punishment.
3. The only way to be saved and go to heaven is to believe in Jesus Christ as God's payment for your sins.
4. What does it look like to believe in Jesus for eternal life?
 - i. A – Admit you are a sinner in need of a Savior. Admit you deserve hell and you can't save yourself through good works.
 - ii. B – Believe in Jesus. Believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins and rose again, and that through faith in Him God will forgive your sins and give you eternal life.
 - iii. C – Call on Him to save you. Talk to Jesus and invite Him to save you – to be your Lord and Savior. Ask Him to forgive your sins, and hand over the steering wheel of your life to Him.