

Good People Need to Be Saved

What will be the eternal destiny of good people? By "good" I mean kind, decent, caring, morally upright folks. They may or may not be religious. Nevertheless, you won't find finer folks: your helpful neighbor, your kind friend, your sweet grandmother. It is easy to assume they will be in heaven; indeed, is hard to think anything else. But will that be the case? All we know about anyone's eternal destiny is what God says in Scripture. A case recorded in Acts 10 sheds considerable light on the question.

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The focus of this text is a man named Cornelius. He is pictured in the finest way (vv. 1, 2, 22). He was a devout man, one who feared God. (Fearing God was a technical expression used to denote Gentiles who accepted the Jewish religion in part.) He feared God with all his household, including one of his soldiers (v. 7), indicating that he was spiritually-minded enough to influence others to follow his example. He gave many alms to the Jewish people, not just the token gestures that are the common marks of "generosity." He prayed to God continually. In the story, we find him praying at 3:00 in the afternoon. He was a righteous or just man, dealing fairly with his fellow-man. He was well spoken of by the entire Jewish nation. That would be a remarkable reputation for any man, but is especially so in this case because Cornelius was a Roman centurion!

Could there be a finer man? How many of us measure up to this description? How many would view Cornelius as lost in sin and headed for hell? That is precisely what he was. As he was praying, an angel appeared to him and gave him a single instruction: "Send to Joppa, and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; and he shall speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household" (11:14-15).

Why Good People Need to Be Saved

It is almost startling for the Bible to present this man as one in need of salvation. Yet he was. The problem was not his goodness; it was his sin. What sins had he committed? We do not know. But he was guilty of some. All are. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). And the consequence of sin for Cornelius was death. "For the wages of sin is death..." (Romans 6:23). So it is for all. People's "goodness" has nothing to do with their being lost. Sin is the problem.

What is the solution to sin? Too many think good works will somehow make up for their wrongs. That was not the message Peter brought to Cornelius. Oh, he mentioned the essentiality of doing what is right (v. 35), but that is not enough. Peter preached that peace with God is through Jesus Christ (v. 36), that forgiveness of sins is in His name (v. 43). His sermon spoke of the proofs that Jesus offered to sustain the claim that He alone is the way to God: His miracles (v. 38), especially His resurrection from the dead (vv. 40-42), and countless Old Testament prophecies that He fulfilled (v. 43).

All have sinned, sin separates us from God, and salvation is only in Christ. These are the facts, no matter what we might like to believe. We must come to grips with them. Our failure to do so explains why we struggle so with the concept of good people being lost.

How Good People Are Saved

The text identifies four components of Cornelius salvation (and ours):

1.. He had to hear the gospel. The words by which he and his household would be saved were Peter's message that Jesus died for our sins.

2.. He had to believe that message, put his trust in Jesus as the means of being right with God. "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes receives forgiveness of sins" (v. 43). This is so foundational that it is often stated as the summary of man's response, just as "grace" is for God's provisions (Ephesians 2:8).

3.. He had to repent (11:18). Repentance leads to life. It is a change of heart that says I will live as God directs from now on. Of course, to be genuine it must be demonstrated in a change of life. One has not repented who persists in the same sinful way of living.

4.. He had to be baptized in water. "...Then Peter answered, 'Surely no one can refuse the

water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he? And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (vv. 46-48). In his first sermon, Peter explained that baptism is for forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38).

Knowing what you now know, do you want to stand before the Lord in judgment based solely on your own "goodness," or would you rather be there having accepted His offer of salvation in Christ?

- by Frank Himmel