



LOST • Robert Mcquilkin

“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).

Have you ever experienced the terror of being lost—in some trackless mountain wilderness, perhaps, or in the labyrinth of a great, strange city? Hope of finding your way out fades, and fear begins to seep in. You have likely seen that fear of lostness on the tear-streaked face of a child frantically screaming, or quietly sobbing, because he is separated from his parent in a huge shopping center. Lost. Alone.

Equally terrifying and more common is the feeling of being hopelessly entangled or trapped in a frustrating personal condition or circumstance: alcoholism, cancer, divorce. Incredibly alone! Lost.

The Bible uses the word “lost” to an even more terrible condition. Those who are away from the Father’s house and haven’t found the way back to Him are “lost.” Jesus saw the crowds of people surging about Him as sheep without a shepherd, helpless and hopeless, and He was deeply moved.

Worse than being trapped and not knowing the way out, is to be lost and not even know it, for then one does not look for salvation, recognize it when it comes, nor accept it when it is offered. That’s being lost.

How many are lost in our world? We are told there are 200 million evangelicals. Some of these are no doubt lost, but at least that many people believe Jesus is the only way of salvation, and that through faith in Him one is forgiven, and made a member of God’s family. Surely, some who are not evangelical have saving faith. So let us double the number to a hypothetical 400 million. Those who remain number more than four billion people or nine of every ten on earth. These are the lost—longing for salvation but not finding it, or trusting some other way to find meaning and hope.

The tragedy of this century of exploding population is that three of four people have never heard with understanding the way to life in Christ; and even more tragic, half the people of the world cannot hear because there is no one near enough to tell them. As we approach the end of the second millennium A.D., one of every two on planet Earth lives in a tribe or culture or language group that has no evangelizing church at all. If someone does not go in from the outside they have no way of knowing about Jesus.

But are these people in the “dark half of the world” really lost? What of those who have never had a chance, who have never heard—are any of them lost? Are all of them lost?

Throughout Church history, there have been those who teach that none will finally be lost. The old universalism taught that all ultimately will be saved because God is good. Not much was heard of this position from the days of Origen in the third century until the nineteenth century when it was revived, especially by the Universalist Church. Simultaneously with the founding of the Universalist Church, which was honest enough to be up front and call itself by that name, this teaching began to spread in many mainline denominations.



There are problems with this position. Philosophically, such a teaching undermines belief in the atoning death of Christ. For if all sin will ultimately be overlooked by a gracious deity, Christ never should have died. It was not only unnecessary, it was surely the greatest error in history, if not actually criminal on the part of God for allowing it to happen. Universalism, therefore, philosophically demands a view of the death of Christ as having some purpose other than as an atonement for sin.

Another problem the Universalists face is that Scripture consistently teaches a division after death between those who are acceptable to God, and those who are not. This teaching, and that concerning the atonement, are so strong in the Bible that Universalists did not accept the authority of Scripture. Thus the marriage between the Universalist Church and the Unitarian Church was quite natural.

A New Universalism arose in the twentieth century which took the Bible more seriously. It was Trinitarian. Christ did die for sinners, and all will ultimately be saved on the basis of Christ's provision.

Karl Barth and many of his neo-orthodox disciples took such a position. All will be saved because God is all-powerful. His purposes will be accomplished. And He purposes redemption.

There were philosophical and biblical problems with this position also. Philosophically, if all will be saved eventually, for whatever reason, preaching the gospel is not really necessary. Why did Christ make this the primary mission of the church if all will ultimately find acceptance with God, with or without the gospel? The more serious problem is biblical: Christ clearly taught of an eternal hell, of a great gulf between the saved and the lost (Luke 16:19-31). In fact, He clearly taught that the majority are on the broad road that leads to destruction (Matt 7:13-14).

Because Universalism cannot be reconciled with biblical data, there were those who promoted what was called a "Wider Hope." Not all will be saved, but many who have not heard of Christ will be saved because God is just and will not condemn the sincere seeker after truth. The problem is that if sincerity saves in religion, it is the only realm in which it saves. For example, it does not save in engineering. The architect who designed the magnificent John Hancock building in Boston was sincere. The builder was sincere. The glassmaker was sincere. The owner, especially, was sincere. But when the giant sheets of glass began to fall on the streets below, sincerity did not atone for error. Neither does sincerity save in chemistry. We do not say, "If you drink arsenic, sincerely believing it to be Coca-Cola, according to your faith be it unto you." Sincerity does not alter reality. We shall consider the question of God's justice later.

The 19th century doctrine of the Wider Hope has been superseded by what I call the "New Wider Hope." According to this teaching, those who live by the light they have, may be saved on the merits of Christ's death through general revelation. Or, at least, they will be given a chance—at death or after death. This is a more conservative version of the New Universalism. Richard Quebedeaux identifies this position as held by some "younger evangelicals," the New Left. A practical problem is that preaching the gospel seems almost criminal, for it brings with it greater condemnation for those who reject it, whereas they conceivably could have been saved through general revelation had they not heard the gospel. It certainly seems less urgent to proclaim the way of salvation to those who may well be saved without that knowledge. A mutation of this view is the idea that only those who reject the gospel will be lost. This viewpoint is not widespread because it makes bad news of the Good News! If people are lost only if they hear and reject, it is far better not to hear and be saved. According to this view, it would be better to destroy the message, than to proclaim it!

For one committed to the authority of Scripture, our debate concerning the reasonableness of each position must yield to the authority of Scripture. What does Scripture teach concerning the eternal spiritual condition of those who have not heard the gospel? "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. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:16-18).



“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).

Scripture teaches clearly that there are those who perish and those who do not. Notice that it is those who believe on Christ—not simply those who, through their encounter with creation and their own innate moral judgment, believe in a righteous Creator—who receive eternal life. God’s intent is to “save the world through Him [Christ]” (3:17). The word “through” speaks of agency: it is by means of Jesus Christ that a person gains eternal life.

The passage does not deny other agencies, however. The Japanese proverb assures us that many roads lead up famed Mount Fuji, but they all reach the top. This is the Japanese way of expressing the viewpoint that all religions will have a good outcome. But Jesus Christ Himself said, “No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6). In other words, Jesus Christ is the only agency of salvation. The New Wider Hope would affirm this. Salvation is by Jesus Christ alone. But, it would hold, that does not mean Jesus Christ must be known by a person for that person to be saved.

Jesus assures us that people will be judged because they have not believed on the name (John 3:18). Peter is even more explicit in telling us that there is no salvation in any other name given among men (Acts 4:12). Surely, it is no accident that the name is so prominent in the Bible, especially in teaching on saving faith. Peter did not say, “in no other person. When a person is named, the identity is settled and ambiguity is done away with. Peter does not make room for us to call on the Ground of Being or the great “all.” You will be saved, he tells us, if you call on and believe in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah. John, Jesus, and Peter are not the only ones with this emphasis. Paul also speaks to the issue:

“For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” (Rom 10:13-15).

The ones who call on the name are the ones who will be saved. But what of those who have not heard so they cannot call? Paul does not assure us that those who have not heard may simply believe on whatever they have heard. Rather, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17).

Scripture is very clear that there are two kinds of people, both in life and in death: the saved and the lost. It is also very clear on the way of salvation. But still, for those who truly care, questions may remain: Is God loving, powerful, fair, just?

Is God loving? Yes, God is good, and that is why men are lost. In love, He created a being in His own image—not a robot programmed to respond as the Maker designed. In creating such a being to freely love and be loved, God risked the possibility of such a being rejecting His love in favor of independence or even self-love. Humankind did, in fact, choose this option. Still, true to His character, God provided a way back even though the cost was terrible. But the way back must not violate the image of God in man and must not force an obedient response. Rather, the God of love chooses to wait lovingly for the response of love. Those who wish to reject Him may do so.

But is it fair and just for God to condemn those who have not had an opportunity to respond to His offer of grace? The Bible does not teach that God will judge a person for rejecting Christ, if he has not heard of Christ. In fact, the Bible teaches clearly that God’s judgment is based on a person’s response to the truth he has received.

“That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:47-48).



“When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The kingdom of God is near you.’ But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near.’ I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town. Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (Luke 10:8-16).

Judgment is against a person in proportion to his rejection of moral light. All have sinned; no one is innocent. Therefore, all stand condemned. But not all have the same measure of condemnation, for not all have sinned against equal amounts of light. God does not condemn a person who has not heard of Christ for rejecting Him, but rather for rejecting the light he does have.

Not all respond to the light they have, by seeking to follow that light. But God’s response to those who seek to obey the truth they have, is the provision of more truth. To him who responds, more light will be given:

The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” (Matt 13:10).

He replied, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables:

‘Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.’ In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear” (Matt 13:11-16)

He said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.”

“Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him” (Mark 4:21-25).

This repeated promise of additional light, to those who obey the light they have, is a basic and very important biblical truth concerning God’s justice and judgment. Cornelius, the Roman officer, responded to the light he had with prayer and good deeds. God did not leave him in ignorance and simply accept him on the basis of his response to the initial light he had received. God sent Peter to him with additional truth (Acts 10). To him who had, more was given. Since this is revealed as God’s way of dealing with men, we can be very sure that every person has received adequate light to which he may respond. God’s existence and His power are made clearly evident to all people through creation (Rom 1:18-21) and through each person’s innate moral judgment or conscience (Rom 2:14,15). To the one who responds obediently, God will send additional light.

Of course, His method for sending this light is a human messenger. Paul makes clear in his letter to the church at Rome (Rom 10:14,15) that the solution to the terrible lost condition of men is the preacher who is sent, the “beautiful feet” of him who goes. Ultimately, then, the problem is not with God’s righteousness, but with ours.



But suppose no one goes? Will God send some angel or some other special revelation? Scripture is silent on this, I believe for good reason. Even if God did have such an alternative plan, were He to reveal that to us, we who have proved so irresponsible and disobedient would no doubt cease altogether obedience to the Great Commission.

But the question will not go away. How does one respond in a Japanese village when a new convert inquires, “What about my ancestors?” My response is simple: I am not the judge. “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25). Abraham pleaded with God for the salvation of innocent people who did not deserve to be condemned and destroyed along with the guilty. He was appealing to God’s justice, and God responded with grace more than Abraham dared ask. This crucial question recorded in the first book of the Bible is answered in the last: “Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments” (Rev 16:7). We are not called as judge—either of God, whose ways we do not fully know, nor of man, whose destiny we are not called upon to settle. Rather, we are commissioned as His representatives to find the lost, declare amnesty to the captive, release the prisoner.

We may not be able to prove from Scripture with absolute certainty that no soul since Pentecost has ever been saved by extraordinary means without the knowledge of Christ. But neither can we prove from Scripture that a single soul has been so saved. If there is an alternative, God has not told us of it. If God, in His revelation felt it mandatory not to proffer such a hope, how much more should we refrain from such theorizing. It may or may not be morally right for me to think there may be another way, and to hope there is some other escape. But for me to propose it to other believers, to discuss it as a possibility, is certainly dangerous, if not immoral. It is almost as wrong as writing out such a hope so that those who are under the judgment of God may read it, take hope, and die. As long as the truth revealed to us identifies only one way of escape, this is what we must live by and proclaim.

Consider the analogy of a security guard charged with the safety of residents on the 10th floor of a nursing home. He knows the floor plan is posted in a prominent place, and it is his responsibility, in case of fire, to get the residents to the fire escape, which has been clearly marked. Should a fire break out and lives be put in jeopardy, it would be his responsibility to get those people to the fire escape. If he discusses with the patients, or with a colleague, the possibility of some other unmarked fire escape or recalls to them the news report he read of someone who had jumped from the 10th floor of a building and survived, he could surely be charged with criminal negligence. He must live and labor in obedience to the facts that are certain and not delay to act. He must not lead people astray on the basis of conjecture or logical deduction from limited information.

When all has been said that can be said on this issue, the greatest remaining mystery is not the character of God, nor the destiny of lost people. The greatest mystery is why those who are charged with rescuing the lost have spent two thousand years doing other things—good things, perhaps—but have failed to send and be sent, until all have heard the liberating word of life in Christ Jesus. The lost condition of human beings breaks the Father’s heart. What does it do to ours?

In a dream I found myself on an island—Sheep Island. Across the island, sheep were scattered and lost. Soon I learned that a forest fire was sweeping across from the opposite side. All were doomed to destruction unless there were some way of escape. Although there were many unofficial maps, I had a copy of the official map, and there discovered that indeed there was a bridge to the mainland, a narrow bridge, built, it was said, at incredible cost.

My job, I was told, would be to get the sheep across that bridge. I discovered many shepherds herding the sheep which were found, and seeking to corral those which were within easy access to the bridge. But most of the sheep were far off and the shepherds seeking them few. The sheep near the fire knew they were in trouble and were frightened; those at a distance were peacefully grazing, enjoying life.

I noticed two shepherds near the bridge whispering to one another and laughing. I moved near them to hear the cause of joy in such a dismal setting. “Perhaps the chasm is narrow somewhere, and at least the strong sheep have opportunity to save themselves,” said one. “Maybe the current is gentle and the stream shallow. Then at least the



courageous can make it across.” The other responded, “That may well be. In fact, wouldn’t it be great if this proves to be no island at all? Perhaps it is just a peninsula and great multitudes of sheep are already safe. Surely the owner would have provided some alternative route.” And so they relaxed, and went about other business.

In my mind, I began to ponder their theories: Why would the owner have gone to such great expense to build a bridge, especially since it is a narrow bridge, and many of the sheep refuse to cross it even when they find it? In fact, if there is a better way by which many will be saved more easily, building the bridge is a terrible blunder. And if this isn’t an island, after all, what is to keep the fire from sweeping across into the mainland and destroying everything? As I pondered these things, I heard a quiet voice behind me saying, “There is a better reason than the logic of it, my friend. Logic alone could lead you either way. Look at your map.”

There on the map, by the bridge, I saw quotation from the first undershepherd, Peter: “For neither is there salvation in any other, for there is no other way from the island to the mainland whereby a sheep may be saved.” And then I discerned, carved on the old rugged bridge itself, “I am the bridge. No sheep escapes to safety but by me.”

In a world in which nine of every ten people are lost, three of four have never heard the way out, and one of every two cannot hear, the Church sleeps on. “Why?” Could it be we think there must be some other way? Or perhaps we don’t really care that much.

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