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IS THERE SALVATION AFTER DEATH? THE ANSWER TO POSTMORTEM EVANGELISM (Part Three in a three-part series on the place of Jesus in salvation)

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SYNOPSIS

The view that belief in Jesus is necessary for salvation is known as *exclusivism*. It should be noted, however, that some exclusivists contend that those who do not believe the gospel during their earthly lives will be given an opportunity to believe the gospel after they die and so be saved. This view is known as *postmortem evangelism* (PME).

One well-known advocate of PME, Gabriel Fackre, argues that Scripture teaches that each human's destiny is *not* fixed at death. The context of several key Bible passages, however, does not support his interpretation. In fact, these passages clearly say that everyone will die and be judged (Heb. 9:27) and that each person's eternal destiny, either reward or condemnation, will be based on what was done in this life (Matt. 7:21–23; 13:36–43; John 5:28–29). Jesus, moreover, taught that each human's destiny is fixed at death; for example, in His story of Lazarus, who was eternally in paradise, and the rich man, who was eternally in torment (Luke 16:19–31). Finally, the description of the great white throne judgment in Revelation 20:11–15 unquestionably indicates that our eternal destiny is based on our earthly life. In these and other passages, physical death marks the boundary of human opportunity to be saved. Belief in PME, meanwhile, has serious negative implications for Christian evangelism and missions. The weakness of PME arguments and the total silence of Scripture regarding opportunities to hear the gospel after death, therefore, should cause Christians to reject this view.

In parts one and two of this series, I explained and critiqued two false theories about Jesus' role in human salvation. In part one, I dealt with a theory called *pluralism*, which explicitly denies that Jesus is the only Savior. In part two, I warned about a theory known as *inclusivism*, which teaches that Jesus is the only Savior, but denies that knowledge of, or belief in, Jesus is necessary for salvation. In this concluding installment, I will examine the belief that humans can be saved after death, sometimes known as the doctrine of postmortem evangelism (PME). According to this view, those who have not had a chance to hear the gospel in this life (before physical death) will be presented with the gospel *after* death. Some proponents of PME appear to believe that even those humans who do hear the gospel before their death, but do not accept it, will have another chance after death. (The question of salvation in the case of those who cannot understand the gospel, such as children who die in infancy or mentally challenged adults, was covered in part two of this series and in my book *When a Baby Dies* [Zondervan, 1999].)

According to theologian John Sanders, a proponent of inclusivism, the theory of PME is asserted by such nonevangelical thinkers as Joseph Leckie and Yale University professor George Lindbeck. Sanders finds that even some thinkers who represent more evangelical positions at times, such as Donald Bloesch, John Lawson, and Gabriel Fackre, also defend this view.¹

Generally speaking, those who teach postmortem salvation are not inclusivists. They are actually *exclusivists* who believe that a conscious act of faith in Jesus Christ really is necessary for salvation. They reason that if God is going to save people who have not heard the gospel in this life and if explicit faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation, then only one conclusion is possible: the unevangelized *must* have an opportunity to hear the gospel after death.

The reason that the doctrine of PME is inconsistent with inclusivism should be apparent. According to PME, explicit faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation, but according to inclusivism, it is not. According to PME, general revelation cannot bring people to salvation, but according to inclusivism, it can.

A well-known theologian, Clark Pinnock, however, appears to be a proponent both of salvation after death and of inclusivism even though the two theories seem to be logically contradictory.² It is also worth noting that Pinnock thinks the fate of Christian believers *may* be fixed at death. This view leaves open the possibility that their salvation *may not* be. This leaves Pinnock with a theology in which those who are believers in this life might end up being lost after death!

Many defenders of PME deny that they are teaching a doctrine of a “second chance” because, they argue, the people who hear the gospel after death are those who never had a *first* chance. This view, therefore, must be distinguished from a form of universalism wherein all humans, including those who have rejected the gospel in this life, are said to have a second chance after death. Most of the proponents of this form of universalism believe God will grant the unrepentant a third chance, a fourth chance, and so on, until finally God’s love triumphs over all stubborn resistance to the gospel.

Some thinkers, like Pinnock, believe there is uncertainty about what constitutes a genuine and fair opportunity to accept the gospel. Maybe the person who rejected the gospel did not understand it because the Christian evangelist did not present it clearly or was having a bad day. Maybe the person who rejected the gospel was distracted. According to this modified view of the second chance doctrine, an unclear or misunderstood presentation of the gospel before death does not constitute a genuine first chance; therefore, any presentation of the gospel after death cannot be considered a second chance.

GABRIEL FACKRE’S DEFENSE OF POSTMORTEM SALVATION

One well-known advocate of the belief that salvation is possible after death is Gabriel Fackre of Andover Newton Theological Seminary. Fackre has published a concise statement of his theory as a chapter in a book titled *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*³ Fackre begins by making two seemingly positive moves: First, he rejects inclusivism. Citing Romans 10:9–10, Fackre declares, “The evidence from Scripture that hearing, believing and confessing the reconciling work of God in Jesus Christ is integral to personal salvation is overwhelming.”⁴ This is an important first step. Second, Fackre talks extensively about the importance of interpreting the Bible correctly. The principles of biblical interpretation he actually uses in his chapter, however, do not lead him to a biblically grounded position on the destiny of the unevangelized.

He begins his interpretation of Scripture with a claim that seems to come out of nowhere. The doctrine of “divine perseverance,” Fackre’s preferred term for PME, “will not deny the saving Word to any, and will contest all the makers of boundaries, including the final boundary, ‘the last enemy, death.’”⁵ Fackre is certainly correct in warning against any human attempt to limit God by placing him within our human boundaries. The specific “human boundary” Fackre has in mind is physical death. It is we humans, Fackre insists, who have said that God’s perseverance in dealing with unbelievers must end at their physical death.

Suppose we concede that God may, if He chooses, continue to pursue unbelievers after their death. That is hardly the issue, I think; rather, the issue is whether that is what God teaches us in His Word. If postmortem salvation is not endorsed in Scripture, we should not be tempted to treat human death as an artificial, human-made boundary that limits God’s power. The reader must not be foolish here and treat Fackre’s assumption as though it were a well-established conclusion; ironically, as we will discover, the human-made boundary about which we should be concerned turns out to be Fackre’s doctrine of salvation after death.

FACKRE'S USE OF SCRIPTURE

Fackre points to several biblical texts to support his view that unevangelized persons are fit candidates for divine salvation after death; however, he says nothing about the biblical texts that historically have been understood to teach that physical death is indeed the end of any human opportunity for salvation. Despite Fackre's exhortation to interpret Scripture reverently, carefully, and contextually, he offers some highly questionable readings of God's Word. I have space to examine only four such texts.

First Corinthians 15:19

Fackre paraphrases 1 Corinthians 15:19 as follows: "If in this life alone human beings have hope, then we are miserable indeed."⁶ According to Fackre, the apostle Paul believed all human beings have hope for salvation beyond their earthly lives. Fackre's paraphrase, however, has done great violence to the text, which actually says, "If only for this life *we* have hope in Christ, *we* are to be pitied more than all men" (emphasis added).⁷ The word *we* as well as the context make it clear that Paul's consolation was for persecuted Christian believers whom he encouraged to look at their glorified life beyond their earthly life. The hope that Paul had in view was not postmortem salvation but the resurrection (vv. 17–18) that awaits believers, and the unending glory that will follow. The text simply is not relevant to the issue of postmortem salvation.

John 10:16

In John 10:16, Jesus states, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." Fackre argues that the "other sheep" are unevangelized people who become Christians after death. I urge the reader to check as many evangelical commentaries as he or she likes; none of them follow this interpretation. The "other sheep" are understood to be Gentile Christians who were to be united with Jewish Christians into one flock, the church of Jesus Christ. Once again, the text Fackre uses has no relevance to salvation after death.

John 5:25–29

Fackre's most creative piece of biblical exegesis involves John 5:25: "I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live." Fackre argues that this verse refers to the unevangelized who will hear the gospel for the first time after they die, believe it, and thus become beneficiaries of eternal life. The context of this passage, however, does not support his interpretation.

A little theological background will be helpful. In Ephesians 2:1–4, Paul described Christians as people who were spiritually dead prior to their conversion, but because of God's great love for them, God "made [them] alive with Christ even when [they] were dead in transgressions." Taking our cue from this text, we must realize that two kinds of death, two kinds of life, and two kinds of resurrection are in the New Testament. The two kinds of death are physical death (the death of the physical body) and spiritual death (separation from God in this life). Paul's concern in Ephesians 2 was spiritual death. What John called "the second death" (eternal separation from God) in Revelation 20:14 is actually the extension or outcome of spiritual death if salvation does not occur. Corresponding to these two kinds of death are two kinds of life: physical life (the kind of physical existence we have prior to physical death) and spiritual life (the new life God gives our spirit after regeneration, as described in Eph. 2). Corresponding to these two pairs, there are physical resurrection (the raising of our bodies from death; see 1 Cor. 15:52–54) and spiritual resurrection (the raising of our spirits from death; see Eph. 2:4), which is the same as *regeneration* or the *new birth*.

Throughout John 5:24–29, Jesus referred to these parallel concepts of death, life, and resurrection. He said, "I tell you the truth, a time is coming [a reference to a future event] and has now come [the present] when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live" (v. 25). The present fulfillment of Jesus' words is found in the growing multitude of the physically alive but spiritually dead who hear and accept the message of the Son of God and pass from spiritual death to spiritual life (see v. 24). The still future fulfillment is found in the coming bodily resurrection of believers.

This understanding is clear from John 5:28–29, verses that Fackre conveniently ignores: “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.” Jesus, obviously, was referring to the general resurrection at the end of the world when all who are dead will hear His voice and come forth from the grave. A preview of this was when Jesus ordered Lazarus to come forth from his tomb (see John 11:43–44).

Perhaps the reason Fackre ignores John 5:29 is that it clearly teaches that what differentiates those who rise to life (eternal communion with God) from those who rise to condemnation (eternal separation from God) is what those persons did prior to death. Not only does this passage not teach what Fackre claims it does, but it also goes on to teach things that flatly contradict his myth of salvation after death. I must say that I find the kind of creativity Fackre demonstrates in his approach to Scripture to be irresponsible.

Fackre’s theory of salvation after death lacks biblical support; moreover, he fails to deal with the passages of Scripture that contradict his theory. His doctrine, I conclude, is a product of his imagination, and I fail to see how it reflects compassion to offer people a totally false hope about the eternal future of the unevangelized.

First Peter 3:18–4:6

It is not surprising that Fackre appeals to 1 Peter 3:18–4:6 to support the doctrine of salvation after death. Every advocate of PME does this. Peter wrote in 4:6, “for this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead.” PME advocates argue that the “dead” mentioned here are identical with “the spirits in prison,” mentioned in 3:19, to whom Jesus preached. There is, however, no reason to think this. “The dead” in 4:6 were most likely people who heard the gospel during their lifetime but who were, at the time Peter wrote, deceased.

WHAT JESUS TAUGHT ABOUT ETERNAL DESTINY

Let us leave the speculative wanderings of Dr. Fackre and turn to the teachings of Jesus. Wise students of Scripture know that a proper approach to the parables of Jesus is to distinguish between the main point of the parable and secondary points that sometimes may simply provide helpful background. Jesus’ parable about the rich fool in Luke 12:16–21, for example, is a warning against greed. The rich man kept building bigger and bigger barns until he finally thought he could rest on his stored wealth; but God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you” (v. 20). Jesus then made clear the essential message of the parable: “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.” Let us not be too quick to close our Bibles, however; it is not irrelevant that Jesus added the point that the rich fool’s eternal destiny was sealed when he died.

Jesus taught the same thing in His parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19–31. We read that Lazarus died, and “the rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side” (vv. 22–23). I am well aware that the primary message of this parable warns against using our resources in this life improperly; but, I note again, the fixed destiny of the two men in Jesus’ story is not irrelevant to Jesus’ teaching. In these and other teachings of Jesus that we will examine shortly, He repeatedly taught that physical death seals our eternal destiny.

Other teachings relevant to the issue before us appear in Matthew 7. Jesus issued a warning about false prophets who come in sheep’s clothing (vv. 15–20) and concluded by saying, “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (v. 19). The emphasis, once again, is on what occurs during an earthly lifetime. In verses 21–23, Jesus spoke of those who will come to Him at the judgment, saying, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?” (v. 22). Jesus reports that He will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” (v. 23). Once again, postmortem judgment is based on premortem conditions. The point likewise appears in verses 24–27, Jesus’ well-known story of the two men who built their respective houses, one on rock and the other on sand. Some decisions in this life have eternal consequences.

We do well also to study Jesus' parables in Matthew 13. Explaining the parable of the weeds (vv. 24–30, 36–43), Jesus states, "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil" (vv. 40–41). The sin and evil referred to here must pertain to things done prior to one's death. There are no qualifications in this or other passages; there are no hints of exceptions arising from events after death. A similar point appears in Matthew 24:41–46.

In Revelation 20:11–15, John recorded a vision of the judgment before the great white throne, where "the dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books" (v. 12). The clear message again is that judgment is based on our earthly lives.

In these passages and others, I contend, one simple point stands out: physical death marks the boundary of human opportunity. Anyone who wishes to argue that Jesus and the authors of the New Testament believed otherwise must shoulder the burden of proof. Given the serious implications of a belief in postmortem salvation for evangelism and missions, the total silence of Scripture regarding opportunities after death should convince us that this idea is wrong; moreover, the theological arguments offered by Fackre and others are highly suspect.

AN INTERESTING SOURCE OUTSIDE SCRIPTURE

The early Christian writing known as 2 Clement is not part of the New Testament; nonetheless, it reflects the thinking of Christians during the church's first century. Second Clement 8.3 states that "after we have gone out of the world, no further power of confessing or repenting will there belong to us."⁸ It is possible that this assertion became necessary because some may have raised the prospect of salvation after death as the first century drew to a close. I also suggest that comments as clear as 2 Clement 8.3 do not appear in the New Testament because they simply were not needed among the members of a community whose every action recognized that physical death marked the boundary of human opportunity to be saved.

HEBREWS 9:27

Let us not forget Hebrews 9:27 as well: "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." Many proponents of PME claim that this verse is the only New Testament text that even comes close to declaring death as the boundary of human opportunity. Even if it is the only explicit passage, we have just examined several other New Testament passages about divine judgment that presuppose this fact. It is clear from this verse, nonetheless, that the judgment of each human reflects that person's standing with God at the moment of death.

THE BURDEN OF PROOF

With few exceptions, evangelicals believe that after the death and resurrection of Jesus, explicit personal faith in Jesus Christ before death is a necessary condition for salvation. John Sanders and Clark Pinnock (my two representatives of inclusivism) and Gabriel Fackre (my representative of postmortem salvation) speak for the still small number of people within evangelicalism who dispute this understanding of the Christian gospel. Sanders and Pinnock would have us think that what all or most of us have regarded as bedrock on many issues is simply wrong; and Fackre, who wants us to think that physical death is not the end of a human's opportunity for salvation, is asking us to make a remarkable shift. The seriousness of such claims advanced by these men surely will result in their assuming the burden of proof for their positions, and this burden thus far has not been met. Their arguments, rather, have proven to be logically inconsistent and lacking in biblical support.

I am not suggesting that large numbers of Christians cannot be wrong about some commonly accepted interpretation of Scripture. In fact, I think this is the case with regard to some widely held beliefs about the second coming of Christ. Such beliefs, however, seldom touch any matter so central to the Christian faith as the scope of salvation. It is one thing to disagree over the timing of the second coming in relation to the tribulation and the millennium; it is quite another to discover that we have been mistaken about the meaning of such essential passages as Romans 10:9–10 and John 3:17–18. Sanders, Pinnock, and

Fackre, nevertheless, are asking Christians today to reshuffle the deck and commit themselves to a totally new understanding of who and how God saves. I believe, as my articles in this series make clear, their work marks a major break with Christianity's historic stance on these issues and poses a serious threat to the future work of the church.

NOTES

1. See Joseph Leckie, *The World to Come and Final Destiny*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1922); George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984); Donald Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978); John Lawson, *Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Wilmore, KY: Francis Asbury Press, 1980); Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). For Sanders's list, see chapter 6 of his book *No Other Name* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).
2. Pinnock's views about PME can be found in early chapters of his book, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). For a more complete discussion, see Ronald Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 149.
3. Gabriel Fackre, "Divine Perseverance," in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 97.
6. Ibid., 98.
7. All Scripture quotations are taken from the *New International Version*.
8. Vol. 7 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (repr., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985), 519.