

2. The Unanswerable Question

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like to speak today particularly to those whose faith in the Lord Jesus is wobbly or even non-existent. Now, many of you, I know, are convinced Christians and have been for many years, and I hope that what we look at today will be a real encouragement to you and a reminder of what it means to belong to Christ and to be a Christian.

But I do particularly want to speak today to those who are unsure of their faith and to those who know that they're not Christians at all, and yet who are here and who want to know more.

So what I'm going to do is to read a short passage from the New Testament, from the letter to the Hebrews, and you'll find this on page... Thank you very much. Ah, it doesn't give the page number here, does it?

1,001, thank you. Page 1,001 on our big visitor's Bibles. Hebrews chapter 2. Now, I've said on the sheet that we're going to be reading from verses 1 to 4, I actually want to start now at chapter 1, verse 13, and I'll just go down to the first few words of verse 3 in chapter 2, where there's a great question.

Have a look at verse 3 in chapter 2, and you'll see that the verse begins with this question, which I've called the unanswerable question. Now, in this little Bible passage, God's angels are being contrasted with God's Son, Jesus, and Jesus is shown to be the one who really brings salvation and hope to people in a way that the angels could never do.

[1 : 34] So just bear in mind this contrast between the angels and the Lord Jesus. Chapter 1, verse 13. And to which of the angels has God ever said, You see, God has said that to his Son, Jesus, but not to the angels.

Are they, the angels, not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation? Therefore, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

Now, this is not an easy passage to understand if you're not familiar with it. So let me give a little bit of historical context, which I hope will help. This letter to the Hebrews, Hebrew Christians, this is, Jewish Christians, Jews who had become Christians, was probably written in about the year 65 AD, when the dreaded Emperor Nero was on the throne in Rome.

Now, Nero, especially towards the end of his life, did not like the Christian church at all, and he persecuted them viciously. In fact, in the later years of his reign, he allowed Jews to continue to practice the Jewish faith.

[3 : 03] So Judaism was an allowed or legal religion. But Christianity became an illegal religion. So just think of the possibility, if you were a Jew who had become a Christian, then when the thumbscrews of persecution began to be turned upon you, it would have been very tempting to slip away from the Christian meeting and go back down the road to the synagogue.

You see, if you could go to the synagogue and be, as it were, a Jew, in peace and quiet, but if you could only belong to the church in fear of Nero's henchmen, you might feel rather safer if you left the church and went back to the synagogue.

Now, the author of this letter is saying to his readers, don't even think about it, my friends. Don't desert Jesus and go back to Judaism. Because if you desert Jesus, you desert the only one who can finally rescue you.

Don't deceive yourselves into thinking that there is any possibility of being eternally saved except through Jesus Christ. Now, the angels who are mentioned here in Hebrews are all part and parcel of the Jewish faith.

And the writer is saying in chapter 1, verse 14, that the angels of the Jewish faith cannot win salvation for anybody. They're wonderful servants of God's people, but they can't do what only the Son of God can do, which is to rescue people for eternity.

[4 : 23] So the writer here is contrasting the weakness and the limitation of the angels with the power of Jesus. The angels, he is saying, can serve us, but only Jesus can save us.

And yet, these angels are not to be despised. It was widely believed by the Jews that the angels were the ones who brought the law of God to Moses on Mount Sinai, that they were mediators between God and Moses.

And that's what our writer is talking about here in chapter 2, verse 2. In that verse, the message declared by angels is the Old Testament law. And that was a powerful and effective law, as you know.

If a Jew transgressed it, he was in trouble. Its sanctions, which included the death penalty, were effective and they were applied. So the force of verses 2 and 3 is this, that if the Old Testament Jews did not escape the penalty for disobeying the Old Testament law, how shall we, who live after the coming of the great Son of God, Jesus himself, how could we possibly escape the penalty for disobeying or neglecting the gospel?

If the message declared by mere angels could only be disobeyed at great peril, what ultimate peril we are in if we neglect such a great salvation, which is the salvation brought by Jesus.

[5 : 45] So do you see why this is an unanswerable question? How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? There's no answer because there's no escape. If we neglect this salvation, this rescue, which is offered to us by Jesus, we shall not be able to escape the just penalty for our disobedience to God, which is that we be eternally cast away from him into hell.

Now it's possible that you're sitting there and thinking to yourself, is this preacher a bit soft in the head? I mean, do people really in the 21st century AD still believe in salvation and rejection in some eternal way?

Do they still believe in heaven and hell? Did Jesus really come to bring an eternal rescue? Didn't he just come to live a model life, to show us what it's like to be a mature and grown-up human being and how to live under pressure and so on?

Did he really come to rescue people for eternity? Is there such a thing as the eternal world, some world that we cannot see? Now I willingly concede that what we see and hear and touch, this physical material world, appears to be the only reality.

What are the things that at the moment we're particularly conscious of in this material world? Just stop and look around and listen for a moment. People bustling around, pigeons just flying past, dogs, buses, the people here in this room, the music, cats and dogs.

[7 : 20] Our bodies. Are you very conscious of your body and its aches and pains? If you're over 50, you probably are, aren't you? We get very conscious of these things. And then we ask, is there anything more than this world?

When we die, will it not simply be oblivion? Is there really more to life than these things that we can see and hear and touch? Now the Bible says, yes, there is very much more to reality than the material world.

Now interestingly, the Bible has a lot to say about the material world and how life is to be lived in it. It has a lot to say about how to live life under the loving authority of God. It has a lot to say about human beings and human relationships, about work and sex and money and pain and suffering and death.

But it always speaks about these things as God sees them. In other words, in relation to God. It never treats them in an atheistic context.

But as well as its teaching about life on planet Earth, the Bible teaches us about the God who made it all. The invisible God. The God who is far more real than the Himalayas and the Rocky Mountains put together.

[8 : 30] And the God that the Bible teaches us about is a God who deeply and passionately loves each one of us. Deeply and passionately because He's made each one of us.

But there is a problem. And that is that all of us, every one of us, from our mother's milk stage onwards, have rebelled against Him and have thought that life would be better if lived without Him.

Isn't that true? Haven't we all by nature wanted to plough our own furrow? We've wanted to live life on our own terms. We've heard Frank Sinatra sing, I did it my way.

And we've said, good on you Frank, I'm going to do it my way too. You're singing my song. Now that is why we cannot keep company with God. And that is why God is not willing to keep company with us.

We've lost touch with Him. That's the reality. We're rebels. We're what the Bible calls sinners. And because we have turned away from God, God has had to turn away from us.

[9 : 37] When we turn against Him and His great love for us, He has to turn His face away from us. I read in the newspaper just the other day of a woman, a middle-aged woman, who had a teenage son.

And this boy began to take cannabis at the age of about 15. And he took a lot of it over the next few years. In fact, he was half out of his mind most of the time. And his whole life began to fall apart.

And eventually, the behavior of this boy began to destroy the life of his family. So that his mother finally had to lock the door against her own son. Now you can imagine that was heartbreaking for her.

But in the end, there was nothing else that she could do. She loved her boy deeply, deeply. But because he rejected her and her way of life and her teaching, in the end, she had to lock him out.

Now it's like that with God. He loves us very deeply. But because we reject His company and His way of life, He has, in the end, to close the door against us and bar it.

[10 : 42] Now that is why we need to be saved. Heaven's door is barred against us. And we can't get in, however hard we knock, from our side. The only way back into God's presence and love and acceptance is through the salvation that Jesus Christ offers to us freely.

That is why God sent Him. That's why He came. To rescue and to save those who were standing outside the locked gates of heaven with no way to get back. Now this is where our question comes in from Hebrews 2 verse 3.

How shall we escape the anger of God and God's everlasting rejection of us if we neglect the great salvation that He offers to us in the Lord Jesus?

So I'd like to talk about two things in this verse. Two things about this great question. First, I want to say something about the great salvation and why it is a great salvation.

And then secondly, something about the terrible danger that we're in. So first of all, this great salvation that Jesus offers. Look at the way it's described here in verse 3.

[11 : 49] Not simply as a great salvation, but as such a great salvation. Now why should the writer choose that term? What is there about this salvation of Jesus that makes this writer describe it as such a great salvation?

Well in the first place, it is very great in what it cost. It was no light thing or easy thing for God to provide it. It was very costly to both God the Father and God the Son.

I don't think it's too fanciful, because of all we learn from the Bible. I don't think it's too fanciful for us to imagine the kind of conversation that might have taken place in heaven between God the Father and the Lord Jesus before Jesus came to the earth.

The Father may have said something like this to Jesus. My son, I deeply love the men and women that I've made. But they've disobeyed me from the first man and woman onwards.

They've rejected my instructions and they've lived without me. Often barely stopping even to ask whether I exist. Their sin has separated them from me. And that's why they're so miserable and lost.

[13 : 00] Now I cannot just say to them, I forgive you. Because their sin must be punished. My holy and righteous standards demand it.

And so wicked is their rebellion against me that I must punish it with death. The only proper wages of sin is death. But there is a way in which I can punish their sin fully and righteously and yet still rescue them.

And that is if you, my spotless son, will go to earth and die for them in their place. If you will take the penalty that they deserve.

Now my son, will you do that for me? Of course, Father. Of course. My will is to do your will. And if this is the purpose that you have for me, then I gladly accept this commission, however hard it is.

And so Jesus came. Jesus, the Prince of Heaven. He left the magnificence of the courts of Heaven and he was born as a human baby in a dirty stable.

[14 : 09] The legitimacy of his birth was questioned. He worked with his hands at a carpenter's bench until the age of 30. And it was then that he began his great and costly work.

He was misunderstood. He was opposed, hated, reviled. He was called a blasphemer and somebody who was in league with the devil. And after three years of persecution, eventually, on trumped up charges, he was brought to a mock trial.

And then on that Friday morning, they took a crown of thorns and jammed it down upon his temples. They stripped him of his clothes and clothed him in purple, a king's robe, in mockery.

And then he was marched out through the streets of Jerusalem, carrying the great heavy cross beam of his cross. A little bit later, he was nailed to it by Roman soldiers using long, sharp, heavy nails, four-inch nails.

The cross was then set up and dropped into the hole in the ground which was prepared for it. And there he hung between heaven and earth, bearing our sins, accepting the wages of our sin, which is death.

[15 : 22] And as he hung there on the cross, God forsook him. There was no comforting or soothing voice from heaven to help him. He was anathema.

He was ruined. He became sin for our sake, as the Apostle Paul put it. As Martin Luther put it, the greatest sinner ever. He went to the cross as the second Adam.

And on the cross, he bore the penalty with which God had long before threatened the first Adam. On the day you eat of it, you will surely die.

That's what it cost him. It cost him more to bear the penalty for our sins on Good Friday than it cost him to create the 11 trillion trillion stars that make up our universe.

So this salvation is very great in what it cost. But this salvation is also very great in what it achieved. It displayed the glory and righteousness of God across the face of the globe.

[16 : 30] It showed the world something which you would have thought, I would have thought, impossible. Who could have thought it possible? And listen to this. Who could have thought it possible that God could acquit the guilty and yet be in the right as he does so?

If you were to go across the river here to the sheriff's court and attend a trial, would you expect the magistrate or the judge to acquit somebody who was obviously guilty?

Of course not. If the magistrate did that, you'd roast him alive, wouldn't you? So would the Glasgow Herald. Judges can't just acquit guilty people and remain just.

But God acquits guilty sinners and remains just because he pays the penalty for our sins himself in the person of his son who went to the cross in our place.

Yes, justice is done because our penalty is paid and it's paid in full, which means that our sins have been dealt with, forgiven. And billions of people over the last 20 centuries have put their trust in Christ and his salvation and have been rescued by God for eternity.

[17 : 39] Now isn't that a mind-boggling achievement? That's why our writer speaks here of such a great salvation. It's great in what it cost and it's great in what it achieved.

And yet, if we are not Christian believers, we're in very great danger. Just look with me again at the question in verse 3. The salvation is great, but how shall we escape if we neglect it?

If we neglect it, we shall find that heaven's door is indeed barred against us. Now let's particularly notice this word, neglect. That word hasn't just crept in there by accident.

Our writer uses it very carefully and very purposefully because he knows human nature so well. He knows our reluctance and our unwillingness. He's really saying to us, friends, this salvation is so great.

It's all about eternal life with God to be enjoyed forever in the bliss of heaven. But many people never benefit from it simply because they neglect to accept it.

[18 : 48] Just to illustrate the way in which things can be neglected. I remember reading the story of a doctor, an experienced general practitioner, who used to go and have his hair cut regularly at the same barber's.

And one day as he sat there in the barber's chair, you know what it's like in the barber's chair, you sit up and there's a great big mirror in front of you. You look at the barber, you look at the other customers coming in, you chat about the weather and this and that.

And this doctor, as he sat there in the barber's chair, noticed that the barber was beginning to develop some kind of a growth or lesion on his lip. And being an experienced medical man, he said to this barber, look my friend, forgive me saying this, but as you know I'm a doctor and I've noticed that you've got this problem on your lip.

How long has that been coming? The barber said, oh, the last few weeks. So the doctor said, my advice is that you go and see your own doctor and get it sorted out as quickly as possible. Maybe nothing, but it could be dangerous.

Anyway, a few more weeks passed. The doctor's hair grew again. He had to go back to the barber, came and sat down in the chair. His usual barber came and the doctor noticed that this growth was bigger, looked worse.

[19 : 55] And he said to him, as he was paying for his haircut, have you been to your doctor about that problem on your lip? The barber said, no, I haven't. It's nothing, it's just a little thing, isn't it?

And the doctor said, look, take my advice. You go and see him. Anyway, a few months passed. The doctor had to go elsewhere. He was out of the country. And he returned some months later, needed a haircut, went to his usual barber, sat down, and a different man came out to cut his hair.

And he said to this other barber, where's my friend so-and-so that usually cuts my hair? And this other man said, oh, didn't you hear? He had a growth. He had a malignant tumor on his lip and he died just a few weeks ago.

Now that barber did not die because he took an overdose of paracetamol, not because he shot himself or slashed his wrists, but simply because he neglected to take the advice that could have saved him.

He just didn't bother about it. Now that's the way it is with many folk who hear the gospel, who begin to see how important the gospel is, and yet they do nothing about it.

[21 : 00] They neglect it. They can see that God's salvation is so great. They can see the transformation it brings to the lives of Christians. But they never actually get around to coming to Christ and submitting to him and accepting his salvation.

So let me say this, friend. If you're here today and you're not a Christian, you are in danger of neglecting God's salvation. There was a preacher once who produced a little card with writing printed on the front and the back, a small card, like a visiting card, and he used to hand it to people.

On one side of the card, these words were printed. What must I do to be saved? Question mark. And underneath, the answer was given in words from the Acts of the Apostles.

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. Then it said PTO. You turned the card over and there was writing on the other side too. And it said, What must I do to be lost?

Question mark. The answer was given in one word. Nothing. Nothing. If you're not a Christian, all you have to do to be lost from God is to do nothing about it at all.

[22 : 21] You haven't got to distribute atheistic tracts and declare yourself to be an atheist. You haven't got to proclaim yourself as anti-God or anti-Christ or anti-church. You haven't got to take Bibles out into Buchanan Street and burn them and dance on the ashes.

All you have to do to be lost is to go quietly out of the door at the end of the service and do nothing. How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

So if you're not a Christian, don't neglect this a moment longer. Come to the Lord Jesus today. Pray to him and ask him to be your master and your saviour from this day forward.

Countless people drift into hell simply because they neglect the great salvation that Jesus offers them. So what does a person do who wants to stop neglecting Christ's salvation?

A person who actually wants to accept it. Well let me suggest a very simple ABC just so we can remember it easily. A. Admit your need. Admit to the Lord and indeed to yourself that you're a sinner who needs to be rescued and forgiven.

[23 : 33] Just imagine that you'd been on the Titanic the day that it sank. And imagine you'd been one of the more fortunate ones who managed to get onto one of the life rafts and you were waiting there for a rescue ship on the following morning.

It was a calm day I think, calm morning. And the rescue ship, the Carpathia, eventually appeared. Can you imagine sitting in that raft and shouting up to the captain, it's okay, I don't need to be rescued, thank you.

I can get to New York under my own steam. You wouldn't do that, would you? You'd accept the rescue gladly because you would admit your need. You'd admit your desperate plight. That's the first thing we must admit our need.

B. Second, believe that the death of Jesus on the cross really has dealt with your sin and taken it right away. The Bible says that he died for the sins of the world.

And that includes the whole catalogue of every sin that you and I have committed. He has dealt with every one of those sins on the cross. Everyone you say? Yes, every last one.

[24 : 37] We can believe it. Thirdly, see. Come to him. Come to him. Turn to him in prayer. He's ready to hear and to answer straight away. Tell him that you're a sinner and tell him that you're so thankful to know that Jesus died on the cross for your sin.

And tell him that you don't want to neglect his salvation for a moment longer. You can do that quietly, right here and now, in the next few minutes. And then when you've done that, make sure that you start coming regularly to church so that you can be taught the Bible and that you can learn the joy, and it is a great joy, of following Jesus and serving him in the company of many other Christians.

So friends, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? Everything is at stake here. Let's not neglect it a moment longer.

Shall we bow our heads and we'll have a moment of quietness. Lord Jesus, in our mind's eye, we look up again to the cross and to you hanging upon it.

And we know that it was love for us that sent you there. It was because you were determined to go through this terrible thing so that you might bear our sins.

[26 : 00] We do pray now, especially for those who have been neglecting your salvation. We ask you to have mercy upon each one and to draw them to you so that they might accept your love, your lordship, your goodness, and might begin to experience the new life that you give to all those who turn to you.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. For your dear sake. Amen.