

# WILL GOD SAVE MY UNCLE?

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**M**y brother and I grew up without our father who was killed in a tragic car accident. I was four years old at the time, and my brother was two. I would not wish to single out for special mention any one of our wonderful extended family who supported and surrounded us and our widowed mother with their care in the years that followed.

Hopefully though, you will forgive me if this one time I do single out a dear uncle (my mother's brother) only because we recently attended his funeral and memories have come flooding back. This uncle (along with my other amazing uncles) treated my brother and me with the care of a father, it must be said. He would take us fishing, to international football and cricket matches, on holidays, camping, and many other activities young boys need.

However, one of my sadnesses is that this uncle apparently died without a personal faith in, and love for our Saviour Jesus Christ. For decades he gave every indication he had become agnostic about his earlier trust in the Bible and its God.

There was a time in his younger years when my uncle gave every indication of being solidly Christian. He was an enthusiastic youth leader and also served as a deacon --- which activities in and of themselves are no guarantee of a personal faith, of course. My uncle's exit from the church and faith is repeated by others *ad infinitum*.

Only very recently did I learn of the catalyst that led to my uncle becoming agnostic. His third baby was born with some serious physical handicaps (is it politically correct to say that these days?). Apparently, a leader in the church told my uncle that this must be the result of some sin in his life, and this was a sign of God's displeasure. Can you believe that level of insensitivity, to say nothing of the warped theology?

That despicable comment resulted in my uncle and his wife and his children giving up on God altogether. They never went back to worship in the church. Now, you may say, that's no reason to give up one's faith in Christ. But you were not in his place nor are you aware of all the facts.

But from my perspective, I am heart-broken. To all intents and purposes --- in spite of the years of earnest prayers offered up to our Father God for my uncle (and his family) to come to a living faith in the Gospel --- my uncle died outside of Christ.

So, what does the Bible teach about good people, like my uncle who are devoted and loyal to their families, who have a social conscience and love for their neighbour, but who die without an evident vital relationship with Jesus? Are they irreversibly and forever lost to the Kingdom of God? For me, this is not just an academic question. When I ask it, I see my precious uncles' face.

The broader question also comes to mind. What about all the multitudes of humanity who have died without ever having heard *in the first place* that God loved the world and proved it by sending His beloved Son to be the atonement for our sins and to bring us the gift of the life immortal in the Age to come? And what about all those born *before Christ*? Or of those who grew up indoctrinated into other world religions or cults? What chance do most of them have of ever holding a Bible in their hands, or having the Gospel message come within their hearing?

Must the “accident” of birth and time forever seal most peoples’ eternal destinies? Or will there be a “second chance” to repent and believe the Good News as some have pondered? Is there, as some hold, a “Wider Hope” beyond death?

Furthermore, throughout church history there have always been serious Bible students who held strongly to the doctrine of “universal salvation” (or Universal Reconciliation) which believes that at the end nobody will finally perish --- God will save everyone in the end. Is this wishful thinking?

I don’t know about you, but I have prayed, studied, meditated on this question for many years. Let’s try to explore this with a prayerful heart and an open mind! I want to start at the end to get to the beginning, to finally get to the end, okay?

## THE TWO RESURRECTIONS IN REVELATION CHAPTER 20

According to **Revelation chapter 20** there will be two stages in the resurrection of all humans who have ever lived on planet earth since Adam. There is **the first resurrection** and there is **the second resurrection** and they are separated in time by the **Thousand Year Reign** of Christ upon a renewed earth (**vs. 5-6**).

**1.) The first resurrection** includes all of God’s people who have been faithful **martyrs** during their lifetimes (**v.4**); **And I saw thrones ... and the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God ... and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years ... but the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection.**

This **first resurrection** is the one which **the apostle Paul** so desperately aimed to be a part of. He prayed that he might have the righteousness which is not of his own making but which comes **through faith in Christ** and which is **on the basis of faith that, “I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, in order that I may attain to the [out-]resurrection [out] from the dead” (Phil. 3: 8ff). ( <sup>1</sup> )**

This blessed group is described as **those who belong to Christ (I Cor. 15: 23)**. It surely does not include only those who were physically **beheaded because of their testimony**

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<sup>1</sup> Notice there are *two outs*. The English reader would not see that when Paul speaks of sharing in **the resurrection out from the dead** that he uses a Greek word that literally reads **“the out-resurrection from [out of] the dead” [ἐξανάστασιν]**. Thus, Paul speaks of **two** resurrections **out from the dead**. He wants to be in the first out-resurrection!

for Jesus (Rev. 20: 4)?

After all, many of the saints of God have been killed by means other than by being beheaded by sword or guillotine. Some have been burned alive, some asphyxiated by hanging and being buried alive or by drowning, some have been starved and slowly tortured to death, and so forth. It is unimaginable that God will not bring up from the grave all who have faithfully given their lives for His Name in **the first resurrection** unto glory.

Indeed, **Hebrews 11** tells how the faithful from the OT era are going to be raised up *conjointly* with all the believing New Testament Christians at the return of Christ. Some of the OT saints were martyred for their trust in God. Others died of natural means in a good old age. But however they died, all God's children from the beginning of the world will be **made perfect** [immortalised] **together** at the *Parousia* (v.40).

So yes, many of those blessed to share in the first resurrection will have been those who have had their lives cut short for their Lord --- from the first martyr **Abel** onwards.

But what of the multitudes of others who have never been called upon to die a martyr's death? Will they also be included in **the first resurrection**? At first glance **Revelation 20: 4** might lead us to think it's only those **who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus** because they **had not worshipped the beast or his image** who are privileged to share in this first resurrection (presumably in the context of the final **Great Tribulation?**). But not so fast.

Notice that this first class is also described as containing those who faithfully testified of **the word of God** (v. 4). We have the promise of Jesus himself that any believer who has not been ashamed of him will also be honoured by him before his Father and the holy angels at his return (**Matt. 10: 32,39**).

Our English word "martyr" is actually a transliteration of the Greek word [\[μαρτυρίαν/martyrian\]](#) which means a witness. Thus, any believer who testifies to the Lord Jesus and to his Gospel-word is a martyr, or literally, a witness who speaks out for the truth!

Thus, I think it is clear that every faithful follower of Christ Jesus will be raised up to immortal life in **the first resurrection**. All who have **taken up their cross daily** to follow Christ and have died to self will be raised in this **first resurrection**. **The second death has no power over them ... and they will reign with [Christ] for a thousand years** (v. 6). Oh, I want to share in that first out-resurrection, don't you?

**2.) The second resurrection**, which occurs a millennium after the first resurrection, brings to life all the rest of humanity who have died and been buried in land and sea.

This group, consisting of **the small and the great**, is resurrected to face the fearful prospect of **standing before the great white throne and him who is seated on it**. They

will be judged out of **the books**, which are an accurate record, **according to what they have done** during their lifetimes (**vs. 11f**);

**The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades [ie. gravedom] gave up the dead that were in them, and each person will be judged according to what he has done (v. 13).**

What a shock this will be. People who have lived their lives as though there is no God, as though they can do whatever they like to others and to God's world with no reckoning, will suddenly find themselves in their physical bodies standing before the Judge of the world. People who imagined they could get away with anything and everything and that nobody was looking are going to find themselves alive again in their mortal bodies, and facing a terrifying prospect.

These folks will stand before the man who once was rejected and crucified by the world, but whom God vindicated by raising up with all authority in heaven and on earth. They will realise God has appointed **that man** to be the judge of their everlasting fate (**Acts 17: 31**). We are assured that **every eye will see him, even those who killed him, and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him (Rev. 1: 7)**.

The risen Jesus testifies that he once was dead, but is now alive forevermore and holds the keys of death and Hades in his mighty hands --- your everlasting destiny and mine (**Rev. 1:18**).

#### **CHRISTIANS WILL NOT COME INTO JUDGMENT TO FACE THEIR SINS!**

I must hasten to give the most incredibly good and reassuring news at this point. Every believer in Christ will **not** come into judgment for his or her sins. The blood of Christ Jesus has entirely acquitted us. We are declared clean. Our sins are forgiven and God has promised never to remember them again. We now stand declared righteous as His children and long for the day when we shall enter His glory completely (**Rom. 5: 1f**).

If only we Christians could learn to live in the power of that truth! Our Father has declared us by His grace fully and entirely justified before Him. Jesus promises that whoever believes in him does not come into the judgment (**John 3: 18**).

However, Christians will still be examined and rewarded according to our works which result from our faith in Christ. We are told that some Christians will be rewarded with great honour, some with lesser degrees of praise from our Lord, and some will enter the Life of the Age to Come with no rewards, suffering loss yet still saved --- like one who barely escapes through the flames [of examination] (**I Cor. 3: 10ff**).

But there is no cause for alarm, my dear fellow believer. For we will not face that testing investigation in our present, mortal, weak bodies. Hallelujah, no! When we are presented before Him, we will have already been clothed with our new, powerful, glorious bodies that **will be like his glorious body (Phil. 3: 21)**.

The fiery test which “the saved” will pass through will not destroy anything that will positively contribute to their eternal welfare and blessing. Rather will that **revelation by fire** remove from them whatever would cause hindrances to that perfect bliss. These blessed ones will be thrilled to be free at last of all dross and useless baggage. (Don't you daily long to be free from the drag of your mortal, weak body of humility that is so prone to wandering from the Lord?)

Perhaps this is why the apostle Paul was *already* glad he had **suffered the loss of all things** so that he might gain in this life **the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ, and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own ...** “ (Phil. 3:7ff).

*In a sense, Paul says he has already gone through the fire;*

He has already anticipated it and begun preparing for it.

He has already burned his wooden doctrines of pride in Jewish race and religion.

He has already burned his own righteousness which came by the old Law.

He has already forfeited *in this life* all which will not pass that future test to gain everything in Christ.

Christian friend. So it must be with us. Some things we should give up now, no matter how painfully they cling to us --- or we cling to them --- otherwise we will have them burned up before the Judgment Seat of Christ. May God give us grace to surrender now whatever has no lasting value, so that it will not pass through that final test.

#### THE SAINTS WILL NOT STAND BEFORE GOD AS SINNERS!

According to **Romans 5: 12** it is our present mortal condition controlled by death which constitutes us as sinners. It stands to reason then, that having been raised to immortality at **the first resurrection**, every saved person will **not** stand before the Lord as a sinner! We will stand before the judgment seat of Christ as glorified immortals in spiritual bodies --- not spirit-bodies but bodies controlled by the Spirit! --- with no further inclination to sin.

In other words, we will be fit to endure the searching of his fiery eyes. And because of his great love and compassion for his own, we will *want* to be rid of anything and everything that tries to linger which could possibly mar our fellowship with him and his people for eternity.

Just as our mortal bodies and dying natures presently drag us down and cloud our walk with Christ, so that future refining test will finally burn up that dross and our new bodies forever empowered by His Spirit will incline us to always please him. Can you imagine what it will be like to always walk before Him in perfect obedience and love! Our soulish bodies will no longer sap the vim and vigour from us. Our new spiritual bodies will be so eager for the life of God. We shall enjoy His glory evermore!

Oh glory! We know that all who are blessed to have been raised in **the first**



**resurrection** will not have to face that great day of judgment for their sins. But, will there be another hope, another chance, for any who have been raised in this **second resurrection**?

Is there any possibility of this vast group of joining the throng of the blessed who were raised to immortality a thousand years previously and who have already been reigning with Christ on earth during the Millennial reign of Christ? Will all who have been brought back to life in the second general resurrection be forever lost and **thrown into the Lake of Fire which is the second death** with no prospect of escape (v. 14)?

For those resurrected out from the grave at **the second resurrection**, it will not be so. They will come up with their old, mortal, sinful bodies. That is why standing before the **Great White Throne** in judgment will be a most fearful prospect.

Those raised in this **second resurrection** will have all their accounts settled. Crimes of injustice will be faced. Compensations will be made. Reparations will be paid. Innocents will be justified. Cruel acts will be corrected. Good deeds (even those committed by the unsaved) will be rewarded. Even a cup of water given in a disciple's name will receive its fair rewards (**Matt. 10: 42**).

This must be for we live in a moral universe. That's why the books are going to be opened and balanced. There will be severe trembling and grinding of the teeth for many at the **second resurrection**! Jesus said so.

Bottom line: We are not saved by our own good works, but by the all-sufficient and finished work of our Lord Jesus on our behalf. But our good works prove the reality of our salvation in Christ. Once we receive God's love and life in His Son the outflow of our relationship is one of praise and loving obedience. As the hymn so beautifully expresses it;

My sin --- oh the bliss of this glorious thought!  
My sin --- not in part, but the whole,  
Is nailed to his cross and I bear it no more,  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

Returning to our original question: What is to be the final end of my dear uncle? And of your loved ones who appear to have died without Christ and without hope? Does Scripture hold out any possibility for a Wider Hope, of another chance beyond the grave? And just exactly what is the fate of those who are cast into that Lake of Fire anyway? Eternal conscious torment? Ultimate destruction from all consciousness?

Our emotions must not determine theology. Our hearts cry out for answers ...

(To be continued ...)

