

## 4. WILL GOD SAVE MY UNCLE?

### Some Reflections on The “Wider Hope”

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And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.

The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.

If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20: 11-15).

We have seen that all who are raised up from the grave at the **Second Resurrection**, must face their moment of reckoning before **the Great White Throne**. What a fearful prospect to suddenly find oneself standing again in the mortal body to give an account of one's life as recorded in the **books**.

*Is there any hope of salvation* for these “living dead” who have not been found worthy one thousand years earlier to enter the Kingdom of God *via* the **First Resurrection**?

*Is there any hope* for these whom **Hades** has, so to speak, ‘coughed up’, to also receive the gift of immortality?

*Is there any hope* that some might escape damnation in **the Lake of Fire** to finally share in the resurrection-glory of the redeemed?

If I read these verses fairly, I am encouraged that some, perhaps even many, will *probably*, or at the very least, *possibly* be given this marvellous privilege if their names are found in **the book of life** which is opened alongside the other books.

Is this the same book as **the Lamb's book of life** (Rev. 13: 8; 21: 27)? I am not sure, for we are told that that book contains the names of the faithful who have devoted their lives to the testimony and service of Christ Jesus. Many of those names had been martyred for their loyalty to the Gospel-word of Christ.

So **the Lamb's book of life** contains the names of everyone who has trusted in Christ and who has already come to life in the **First Resurrection**. But here before the **Great White Throne** stand all who were not found worthy **earlier**. The search is on to find their names in **another book of life**. It all depends on what kind of lives they lived.

Is it reasonable then, to propose that at least *some* from the **Second Resurrection** will **not** be **thrown into the Lake of Fire**? Why else would we be told that this **other book of life was opened** if no genuine search be made to find one's name entered therein?

What percentage of those who may be saved from destruction in the **Lake of Fire** in this **Wider Hope** is beyond our purview here. We are now only interested in the *possibility*.

## THE PROPOSITION

This hopeful scenario has been dubbed **The Wider Hope** or, **The Larger Hope**. It's proposition is that billions of people who died without ever having heard the Gospel of Christ will be offered **not** another chance, **not** a second chance, but the very first chance they have ever had to hear and to believe the Gospel-offer of salvation in Christ.

There are billions of people who have died before and after Christ without ever having heard the Good News presented to them. Surely the God of all righteousness will not hold them guilty for a failure to receive the Gospel which they have never heard!?

## LIGHT AND RESPONSIBILITY

The Lord Jesus laid down this universal principle of justice when he said;

**If I had not come and told them, they would not be guilty of sin, but now however, they have no excuse for their sin (John 15: 22,24).**

Willful rejection of Jesus and his Kingdom-offer left those religious folks without excuse. Jesus says they were **guilty of sin**. The principle is that we are responsible only for the light we are given; God will not ask us for what we never had. The corollary is that the greater the privilege, the greater the accountability. **To whom much is given, much shall be required (Luke 12: 48).**

Now someone will say, **"So, wouldn't it have been better if Jesus had not come and told them the truth?"** As if darkness and ignorance are to be preferred to light and knowledge! But a moment's reflection will banish that thought. Don't forget that if Jesus had not come they would have still been guilty sinners, for they had the OT revelation in the Law and the prophets --- which they were not listening to. They were in dire straits anyway So ignorance is not bliss.

## ROMANS 2

The Apostle Paul brings out the same principle in **Romans 2**. There he mentions the Gentiles who had never had the Law and the prophets, but who nevertheless had God's "law" **written on their hearts**. This class of humanity either obeyed the inner light which God has put in every man and woman from birth (Paul says they have it **by nature**) or else they disobey and sin against the light in their consciences. Their behaviour either **accuses** or **excuses** them (**vs. 14-15**).

Paul says these folks will be judged by the standard of 'natural revelation' **on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my Gospel declares (v. 16)**. On that **Great White Throne** judgment day, **God will give to each person according to what he has done (v. 6)**. The Lord **will give eternal life and honour and immortality** to all those who have tried **by persistence** to be **doing good**. This is reason enough surely, to expect a **Wider Hope** for some from the **Second Resurrection (v. 7)?**

## “I KNOW YOU ARE BIGGER THAN THAT!”

Many decades ago (possibly more than 50 years now) I remember reading the story of a Chinese boy who was taken to the temple by his parents to burn incense to the ancestors and to pay homage to their idol-gods. At the end of the ceremony, that boy ran out the back of the temple, looked up into the expanse of the sky and said, “I know You are bigger than that!”

It was not until certain missionaries came to his village many decades later proclaiming that the God who had created the world had also loved the world and sent His only begotten Son to save the world, that the old man’s heart leaped out, and the tears flowed, and he confessed, “You are the God I called upon in my boyhood!”

One of the things all will be judged on is whether they have acknowledged the God of creation as the one true God, or whether they have been idolaters who have corrupted this evidence by **suppressing it by wickedness**. All men’s lives the truth of God keeps trying to bubble up, but most keep pushing that **manifestly plain** voice down (**Rom. 1: 18**)!

Unfortunately, the history of the nations is that there are not too many peoples and nations that have not wilfully failed to **glorify Him as God nor give thanks to Him**. It appears most have become **foolish** and **darkened** because **they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator --- Who is forever praised. Amen (Rom. 1: 18ff)**.

Unfortunately, Paul goes on to conclude that the whole world --- Jews and Gentiles --- stands guilty before God and is in need of His mercy on offer through the Gospel due to this wilful ignorance.

But there are individual exceptions. There are examples in Scripture, not to mention accounts by missionaries, of individuals (and occasionally whole villages) who have not succumbed to idolatry. <sup>(**1**)</sup>

I am of the opinion that once given their first chance to hear of God’s mercies in Christ, that their consciences will **excuse** them and that they will immediately fall on their knees and confess the Lord Jesus, like that Chinese boy (more of this next article).

Those brought up from the dead at the **Second Resurrection** will be judged as to how they have responded to the light God had given them in creation, in nature, in their own consciences. Most it seems will be condemned on the basis they did not follow the light.

Think of your own situation for a moment. You and I in this life were already condemned as sinners before we had the privilege of hearing the Good News. Oh, how marvellous did God’s offer of mercy and salvation in His Son appear to us! How thrilling did God’s offer of “eternal life” in Jesus and his coming Kingdom sound to our ears! How gracious for God to give us another chance! We ran into His loving arms!

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<sup>1</sup> OT examples would be **Naaman the leper, the Queen of Sheba** (whom Jesus declared in **Matt. 12** would have believed him if given the chance his generation had!) and NT examples would be the centurion in **Matt. 8: 5f** and **Cornelius** in **Acts 10**.

So the argument that it would have been better if God did not send His Son, and that it would be better if the Gospel-word did not get preached to the world, falls on its head.

Evidently, many will stand condemned by their own deeds and consciences. But it seems there will be some who have to the best of their ability and knowledge tried to do good, tried to follow the light, and whose names may be found in that **other book of life**.

At least that is what the **Wider Hope** proposes in such verses as;

Then Peter began to speak, 'I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right' (Acts 10:34).

Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God (I John 4:17).

He who does what is right is righteous, just as He is righteous (I John 3: 7).

## THE CORPORATE DIMENSION

The late **Francis Schaeffer** in his book *Death in the City* challenges those who hold that so many are to be eternally lost to present a theodicy (i.e. a defense) as to how God remains just in condemning so many.

**Schaeffer** argues that all human beings deserve everlasting separation from God. The greatest sin of all is to worship the creature rather than the Creator, which is the failure to submit to God and his sovereignty. This sin manifests itself in explicit idolatry --- or a much more subtle idolatrous form in self-worship --- all those things in our lives that find a place outside of the will of God.

**Schaeffer** takes a corporate dimension of humanity into account. All individuals who are lost, are lost either because they or their ancestors personally refused the knowledge of God. The refusal of this knowledge creates God-deficient cultures which are rightly under the judgment of God. So *lost-ness*, according to **Schaeffer**, includes the dimension of a corporate judgment; it is not only an individual matter. A person's rejection of God is an enormous evil in God's eyes because none of us lives in isolation and we influence others. **Schaeffer** concludes this is why humans "deserve Hell". ( <sup>2</sup> )

**Schaeffer** alludes to the first chapter of Romans which presents a view of a humanity that has rejected the revelation of God in nature and culture. Because God judges individually as well as corporately it is only by the preaching of the Gospel that a new opportunity for salvation is given to people who have rejected the former revelation.

This view also answers the question of the fairness of the historical process whereby the Gospel has been offered to some peoples' centuries before it was offered to others. Jesus indicated the historic principle that the Gospel would first go to **Jerusalem**, then to **Judea**, then to **Samaria and then to the ends of the earth** (Acts 1: 8).

Corporately, those who embraced the historical revelation in Scripture (first the Jews and then the First Century Messianic Jews) bring the Gospel of Christ to all others over

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<sup>2</sup> Jesus himself talks about whole generations being condemned. For example in **Matthew 12: 41-42**.

chronological time --- believing the Gospel creates new communal connections that bring people into the Kingdom; this modality fits perfectly within the ways of God's justice.

Thus, creating a new corporate reality is part of God's way of justice. It is not merely an individualistic matter as is often embedded in Western views. Justice is *both* a matter of individual and social context. Tragically, by and large, on both counts, the natural laws of God have usually been violated.

This adds weight to why we should consider the often neglected dimension about why God judges cultures. The Bible says there is a corporate responsibility in ancestral rejection of revelation. And we are responsible for not passing that blindness on! ( <sup>3</sup> )

This is good reason to believe that we in the West who have had all the blessings of a Judeo-Christian heritage will be judged and held accountable on a stricter level than others from, say, a Buddhist or Hindu or Islamic or animistic ancestry.

We are all born into societal darkness. From birth, as individuals we are "baptised" into traditions and so are incorporated into our own native cultures. According to [Schaeffer](#), motivation to bring the Gospel to others is not only to rescue any responsive individual within that culture, but it is to also bring a new corporate reality in Christ.

Only the Good News of Jesus Christ has heaven's power to create that new corporate truth in the one God. (Cf. Paul's **one new man** in [Eph. 11f.](#)) Personally, I find a lot in [Schaeffer](#) to agree with here. ( <sup>4</sup> )

When [Billy Graham](#) was on [Larry King's](#) show and was asked concerning the destiny of those who have not accepted Jesus of Nazareth, he made two statements. One was that Jesus was the way to God and that he was called to proclaim salvation through believing in him as that way of salvation. He made it clear that there was a danger of being lost.

Secondly, [Billy Graham](#) also said that the destiny of those who have not had opportunity to receive Jesus Christ was a mystery and that God was the judge, not [Billy Graham](#). He trusted that God was merciful and would save all that He could. He held out hope for God's mercy. This seemed to satisfy [Larry King](#) and did not look like narrow minded bigotry. ( <sup>5</sup> )

I am perfectly well aware that there are many Scriptures which will rush into our minds at this point: "[But what about this verse, that verse...?](#)" Patience! We shall get there in due course. But for the moment, let's lay out a few of these general principles of the [Wider Hope](#).

**Firstly**, we are to act on the basis of the general "lost-ness" of all people, both Jew and Gentile. Jesus stated that, "**The Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost.**" And Paul assumed **all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3: 23).**

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<sup>3</sup> Many historic examples of corporate accountability could be proffered: The Antediluvians who perished in the Great Noahic Flood; the Cities of Sodom & Gomorrah; the Caananites in the Promised Land, Israel and Judah at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians, etc.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to [Daniel Juster](#) for this refresher to my earlier love of [Francis Schaeffer's](#) writings in [Keshet: A Journal of Messianic Judaism](#) in his article, [The Narrow Wider Hope](#), April 3, 2008

<sup>5</sup> *Op. Cit.*, [Daniel Juster](#).

So, we are only to be at rest with regard to anyone's eternal destiny (my dear uncle's included) when they have explicitly confessed and embraced Jesus and have given evidence that this embrace is sincere.

Such evidence is seen in authentic transformation (repentance and faith in the Gospel as proclaimed by Christ and his apostles) and a growing ability to bring forth good fruit. We may meet people who give evidence that they know and walk with God, but have not yet embraced Jesus and his Gospel of the Kingdom. We need not condemn them as lost nor judge their hearts before the time, but we are not to have confidence in their destiny unless they embrace Jesus as Messiah.

They may be on the road to him --- think of Saul the persecutor on the Road to Damascus! And we can at least adopt **Billy Graham's** attitude by not unnecessarily looking like narrow-minded bigots by condemning them to the **Lake of Fire** just yet!

**Secondly**, there is enough hint in Scripture for us to hold open the possibility of a **Wider Hope**. The goodness of our Father God would give us reasonable hope that all who have not been presented with the true Gospel and had space to weigh it up may be given the opportunity in the future.

This hope enables us to give a more powerful theodicy when arguing for the justice of God in the face of evil --- and giving answers to those who ask (like **Larry King**) concerning the destiny of those who have not explicitly embraced Jesus.

#### PRACTICAL EVANGELISTIC CONSIDERATIONS

If the **Wider Hope** turns out to be true, then that would be wonderful. In the end, we will have lost nothing by holding it. I believe the reason against holding to it too dogmatically though, is that the evidence of Scripture is more tenuous than certain.

Thus, I add a cautionary aspect to this **Wider Hope**. We might feel better by holding it, but it should be held in a way that does not blunt our zeal to see people embrace Jesus as the **only Name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4: 12)**. Feeling better must not lead us into apathy. It must not rob the urgency to share the Gospel of God today!

I appreciate those who are reluctant for these pragmatic reasons to accept the **Wider Hope**. Anecdotal evidence shows that those who believe the wicked will either **burn on** or **burn up** are the ones who have taken the **Great Commission** the most seriously.

I appreciate such hesitancy. Preaching the Gospel is the way to maximize the opportunity for salvation for all people, yes. Only the Gospel gives all mankind a new opportunity to respond to the Kingdom-offer for a humanity trapped by ancestry and by its present sinful orientation.

Practically, we must put forth with all our energies the case for the importance of both Jew and Gentile to urgently embrace Jesus of Nazareth for assurance concerning their eternal destiny, while yet holding to the possibility of God's wider mercy to those who have died without a fair Gospel presentation.

So yes. The **Wider Hope** doctrine must be held in tension otherwise it may lead to a flagging of evangelistic zeal by the church. This much we certainly do know: Outside of Christ every single person faces the fearful prospect of an eternity lost to God's life.

Also, we certainly do know the Scriptures are very clear on the destiny of those who sincerely confess the Lord Jesus. Their names are written **in the Lamb's book of life**. That's why we must do our utmost to see all people embrace Him now, in this life, for **it is appointed unto to men once to die, and after that to face judgment (Heb. 9: 27)**.

Our only clarity is in the destiny of those who truly embrace the Gospel of the Kingdom as taught by, and as atoned for, by God's saving grace in Christ Jesus. If this position makes us "narrow" then at least it hopefully makes us graciously narrow!

(To be continued ...)