

# Soteriology and Wider Hope

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I just returned from a UMJC symposium that was titled Thinking Together About Soteriology. Soteriology is the study of the Bible's position on who is saved, and through what criteria, and what process. On first impression, the issue of Salvation may seem elementary, it being the first thing that many of us were taught both before and shortly after we became believers. For example, the well-known Scripture of John 3:16:

*"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."*

Okay, but according to James 2:19, "*even the demons believe and tremble,*" so John 3:16 is not without a need for interpretation, and even Billy Graham once said of that verse and the devil:

"Intellectually, he believes in the dogma. He believes in the creeds. But the devil has never been saved, and he is not going to heaven. You may be able to recite theology, but I tell you that is not enough."

Of course the devil believes in God – he once lived with Him. Remember that according to John 1:1-3, Yeshua was there from the beginning, and through him all things were made. So the devil once lived with Yeshua also, and he knows him well. For the devil, it isn't even faith – it is absolute knowledge that Yeshua is the son of God.

So the formula for salvation is not as simple and straightforward as some would have us believe, because it has to do with the condition of the heart, and no one but God can read hearts. And as you begin to consider this subject, the mysteries and questions surrounding salvation grow and grow. For example, are we saved if we believe in our heart but never confess our belief to another person? Are we saved if we believe in our heart but are never immersed for our faith? What if today we believe and confess, but tomorrow we deny God? And one more (although there are hundreds of other such questions) – if we are immersed in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but the one who immersed us neglected to say "in the name of Yeshua," was the immersion defective and therefore insufficient for our salvation? There are some people who would answer "yes" and others who would answer "no" to each one of those questions.

To many of us, these rhetorical questions are familiar because we have encountered them early in our Bible learning. And if we were to poll each other on our beliefs about such things, we would find differences because we have all been indoctrinated by the individuals and the institutions that first taught us, for whom there always seemed to be a precise answer, and only one right way of looking at everything. And so long as we remained at our original congregational homes, we very likely encountered only those who believed as we did. But we did not remain there, for look around us; we are here – not there. And in the process of coming here, we brought with us many deeply held convictions and presuppositions, and we therefore find it disturbing that the

persons to our left and right don't necessarily share our views. All I can say to that is "smile, you're now part of Messianic Judaism."

Anyway, the Soteriology conference I attended did not attempt to address all aspects of salvation; rather it focused on a recent hot-topic in both Evangelicalism and Messianic Judaism, over whether or to what extent there is biblical latitude for an individual's eternal life with God other than what is most commonly taught in evangelical and Fundamentalist circles – that to be saved, a person must, during his lifetime, confess the historic Yeshua as Lord and savior, and be baptized. This latitude, should it exist, is what theologians call "Wider Hope."

David Rudolph, the chairman of the UMJC's Theology Committee organized and moderated the meeting. And a good moderator he was, the proof being that everyone left the meeting as friends. There were five papers presented, and a total of twenty of us attended and were able to pepper the presenters with questions. The presenters and the titles of their respective papers were:

Derek Leman: "The Fourth Gospel, Soteriology, and the Necessity of Belief"  
Dan Juster: "The Narrow Wider Hope"  
Barney Kasdan: "Vital Questions for Messianic Judaism"  
Paul Saul: "Humble Uncertainty: A Narrower Path to a Greater Hope"  
Mark Kinzer: "Final Destinies: Qualifications for Receiving an Eschatological Inheritance"

Now let me explain why this foundational subject has risen to such a high profile in the Messianic Jewish movement and in the UMJC in particular. It is because the differences of opinion held on the matter have threatened the unity Jewish believers in Yeshua to the extent that some congregations have actually withdrawn from the Union, and there has even been talk of splitting the Union over it, with Jewish leaders accusing each other of heresy. I could have quietly attended the Soteriology conference, not given this message, and spared you hearing about this, but I don't think putting our heads in the sand is what God wants us to do.

There is a reason why the classical evangelical view of salvation raises hackles in Messianic Jewish ministry. It is because most outreach techniques that have come out of evangelicalism have proven not to work in drawing Jews to Yeshua. The evangelical approach of offering the choice of eternal life or a Hell-fire death assumes things that are typically not true of Jews. It assumes that the hearer is motivated by the prospect of having eternal life or by the fear of annihilation; among Jews, this is usually not the case. Gentile children who are brought to Christian churches by their parents are often exposed to years of hearing salvation messages of fire and brimstone preached from the pulpit. In some cases it's a turnoff, yet it instills in the young person a value for salvation that can surface later in life in response to the evangelistic message. Jewish children who attend synagogue and Hebrew School, however, hardly ever encounter the subject of eternal life and, if they do, it is a side issue that is given only fleeting attention. As for secular Jews, their unbelief in God and the Scriptures precludes their giving any credibility to the possibility of eternal life, so they are fully accepting of not having it. The consequence of this is that offering a Jew salvation if he will come to Yeshua generally does not

produce a positive response. Of course, if the Holy Spirit is at work in the Jewish person, you can offer him “Post Toasties” and he will respond.

The disciples were sent out to the entire world and, in Mark 16:15-16, we read that Yeshua said to them:

*"Go into all the world and preach the gospel (meaning the Good News) to every creature. He who believes and is immersed will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."*

That's pretty plain, but to a Jew, the Good News is often viewed as bad news because if you put it exactly in the way of the Mark Scripture, you are telling him that his entire family, including his saintly mother (should she be deceased), are now burning in Hell! What kind of good news is that?

On the other hand, in Matthew 28:19-20, in a different formulation of the “Great Commission,” we read:

*"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, immersing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you;"*

This approach is received more positively by the Jewish people because it does not seek to entice through a carrot of salvation, and does not threaten anyone if the Gospel is rejected. Furthermore, it is an approach familiar to Jewish people because *mikvah* immersion is a familiar Jewish custom, and teaching to observe things that are commanded is a *Torah*-faithful approach to God that is completely familiar, and completely Jewish. Of course one has to get the point across that obeying Yeshua's commandments and relying on His sacrifice, is part of what it means to be *Torah*-faithful in the New Covenant.

Okay, back to the Soteriology Conference. You recall I said that the conference focused on whether or to what extent there is biblical latitude for an individual to have eternal life without his having made a conscious commitment to the historic Yeshua during his lifetime. All the participants at the conference believed that everyone who has eternal life has received it through the sacrifice and resurrection of Yeshua. As for terminology, those who believed that God allows no latitude whatever in what our response to Yeshua must be in order for us to have eternal life were said to ascribe to a “narrow hope.” Those who believed that there is little latitude, but that God, in his mercy allows some exceptions, were said to ascribe to a “narrow wider hope,” and those who believed that God allows considerable latitude to those who have not sufficiently heard the Gospel message, were said to ascribe to a “wider hope.” At the extreme end, were at least two participants who would probably say that if one comes to know God intimately, loves Him as the *Sh'ma* commands, and leads a *Torah*-faithful and repentant life, that person has de facto received the Messiah, and may be saved even if he does not admit that the one in whom he believes is Yeshua. That view is termed a “wide wider hope.”

Now it should not surprise us – in fact we should already realize – that if there is something out there to believe, someone in the world believes it. So the question for all of us should be “what does Scripture say on the subject of salvation” because, in ministering Yeshua to Jewish people, answers will be demanded of us, and if we are unwise in how we answer, we will discredit both ourselves and Him whom we serve. In my opinion, of all the views, the narrow hope and the narrow wider hope are the two that are most biblically defensible and, of the two, the narrow wider hope is the one I prefer and that our *Shaliach* Dan Juster prefers. Of the classical theologians, Francis Schaffer would argue for a narrow hope on the basis of his belief that all of humanity deserves spiritual death and eternal separation from God, so any criteria that God establishes for salvation is both fair and gracious, even if some people have little or no opportunity to avail themselves of it. John Wesley, on the other hand, would argue for a narrow wider hope on the basis that Scripture is silent on some situations for which God, in his justice and mercy, must have a plan. These include children who die before reaching an age of understanding, adults who are mentally impaired, and persons who live in isolated parts of the world where the Gospel has never been taught. Wesley’s view is more intricate than that, but it is enough for our purpose.

While both the narrow hope view and the narrow wider hope view are completely defensible in Scripture, as a way of explaining why the narrow wider hope view is more practical in Jewish ministry, I would like to read a short section from Dan Juster’s paper that he presented at the meeting. Here is what he says:

“The narrow hope view provides us with difficulties. It too easily thinks that we can judge who is and who is not “saved” on an individual basis. It involves a judgment of the unseen heart. It does not give adequate to those Scriptures that more than hint at a wider mercy from God for those that seek the Truth. I see no gain in holding this position over against the narrow wider hope view. For one thing, it makes us so narrow that others will unnecessarily dismiss us as bigots. When Billy Graham was on Larry King’s show and was asked concerning the destiny of those who have not accepted Yeshua, he made two statements. One was that Yeshua was the way and that he was called to proclaim salvation through believing in him which is the way of assurance of salvation. He made it clear that there was a great danger of being lost. However, he also said that the destiny of those who have not had opportunity to receive Him 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. At least, Billy Graham did not look like a narrow minded bigot.”

“About a year previous, one of the leaders of a major Jewish outreach organization was also on Larry King’s show with a noted Rabbi. The Rabbi accused the leader of having an abhorrent and narrow view that all those who have not explicitly embraced Yeshua were going to Hell. He stated that the leader believed that the victims of the Holocaust went from the ovens of Aushwitz to the eternal barbeque in Hell. This was an emotional appeal that was not totally valid. However, it had its effect. The missions leader had nothing to say and responded as if this was his view. Jesus was presented as the only way, and this meant explicit confession in this life in every case. Instead, he could have asserted that Yeshua was

the way to salvation for Jew and Gentile, and the way to assurance for one's eternal destiny. At the same time he could have said that God would mercifully judge all who sought the truth and to live according to righteousness in dependence on His grace. This is the basic teaching of the Judaism of the Siddur."

I had reached the same conclusions about salvation some time ago, but had not been able to express it with Dan's eloquence. For a long time now I have refused to refer to any individual as saved or unsaved. The concept and the destiny is biblical, but I cannot read hearts, and the authority to judge is not mine. 1 Corinthians 3:7 says that love believes all things. So, when a person verbalizes either his faith or lack of faith in Yeshua, I believe him unless his actions say otherwise. If he professes faith, I relate to him as a brother in the faith, and if he professes no faith, I relate to him as someone who needs to hear the Gospel. But these are working assumptions – not judgments.

There are four categories of Scripture that lead me to my understanding of what is needed in order to have eternal life. The first category is illustrated by 1 John 5:11-12:

*"And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."*

This tells me that eternal life is in Yeshua. If we have Yeshua we have eternal life and, if we do not have Him, we do not have eternal life. The Scripture does not, however, explain what having Yeshua means or how we acquire Him.

The second category of Scripture states that there is a day of judgment when God will judge all men. It is illustrated by Hebrews 6:1-2 and 9:27, 1 Peter 4:5, 2 Peter 2:9, and Revelation 20:11-15. These Scriptures tell me that God is our judge; therefore, I must do nothing to preempt His judgment. In assessing a person's need, I note what he appears to have and what he appears to lack. If he needs to know about Yeshua and will listen to me, I will tell him whatever he needs to know. If he appears to have adequate and correct information about Yeshua but does not profess faith, I will minister faith to him. If he appears to know Yeshua and expresses faith but needs to be disciplined in other ways, I will help him as the Lord gives me the wisdom and resources to do so. So whether he is saved or unsaved never becomes an issue in my ministry. I consider that my job is to assess wherever a person is at, and seek to bring him one step closer to where he ought to be.

The third category of Scripture reveals that by God's grace and mercy (1) water immersion, (2) calling on the Name, (3) confessing Yeshua's lordship with one's mouth, (4) believing in Him in one's heart, (5) following Him, and (6) having faith in Him, together enable a person to enjoy God's salvation and have eternal life. The Scriptures that illustrate these are many, but here are a few: Matthew 19:16, Mark 16:16, Luke 7:50, John 3:16, Acts 2:21 and 16:30-31, Romans 10:1, 9, and 13, Ephesians 2:5 and 8, and Titus 3:5. These Scriptures (and others that are similar) tell me that faith in Yeshua, accompanied by corroborating deeds, result in salvation and eternal life. From the diversity of the corroborating deeds found in the Scriptures (e.g. confessing Him with our mouth, becoming immersed, etc.), I conclude that it is the faith and not

any particular deed that gives us our salvation. That notwithstanding, the Book of James also teaches that “Faith without works is dead,” which means if our faith doesn’t motivate us to action, it isn’t faith at all. While these Scriptures indicate that faith in Yeshua results in eternal life, they don’t address what happens in cases where faith is absent, or where there is faith in God, but no recognition of Yeshua.

I will cite four Scriptures to illustrate category 4:

Luke 13:23-24: *“Then one said to Him, ‘Lord, are there few who are saved?’ And He said to them, ‘Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able.’”*

John 10:9: *“I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.”*

John 14:6: *“Yeshua said to him, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.’”*

Acts 4:12: *“Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”*

These Scriptures tell me what a person must do in order to be certain of having eternal life. The Luke Scripture exhorts us to strive to enter the narrow gate which I understand to be declaring faith in Yeshua. One can read this Scripture to infer that there may be a wider gate also, but no information is given about it, and we receive no encouragement to seek it. The John Scriptures states that Yeshua is the door to salvation and the only way to the Father; they promise that anyone who enters the door (i.e. declares faith in Yeshua) will be saved. The Acts Scripture states that there is only one name – Yeshua’s name – through which salvation is a certainty. This is a commitment by God that if we call upon Yeshua for salvation (i.e. declare faith in Yeshua), we will have it.

My conclusion from these four categories of Scriptures is that there is only one certain way to have eternal life, and that is through faith in Yeshua as evidenced by our willingness to call Him by name, confess Him publicly, submit to water immersion, and follow Him in *Torah* obedience through the leading and power of the Holy Spirit. I also conclude that anyone who has eternal life has received it through Yeshua, but I cannot conclude from the Scriptures that anything short of a conscious and deliberate acceptance of the historic Yeshua precludes God from granting a person eternal life in an exceptional situation; on the other hand, I see no authorization for me to speculate about such an exception or hold out the possibility to comfort a seeker, so I don’t. My approach to salvation ministry is to ask a person if he wants to be sure of having eternal life – life after death forever with God. If his answer is “yes,” I tell him he must confess that Yeshua

of Nazareth is Messiah and Lord, and he must want Yeshua's sacrifice to atone for his sins. If he struggles against accepting Yeshua and asks if there isn't some other way, my response is that confessing Yeshua in faith is the only authorized way and the only sure way. If he persists in seeking another way, I tell him that I am not authorized to help him in it, and I ask him if he is willing to gamble his eternal life on some other route. The rest, I tell him, is between him and God, but if he wants a simple way to look at it, I tell him to read the Scriptures to discover what God wants, and then don't say "no" to any of it; don't try to negotiate.