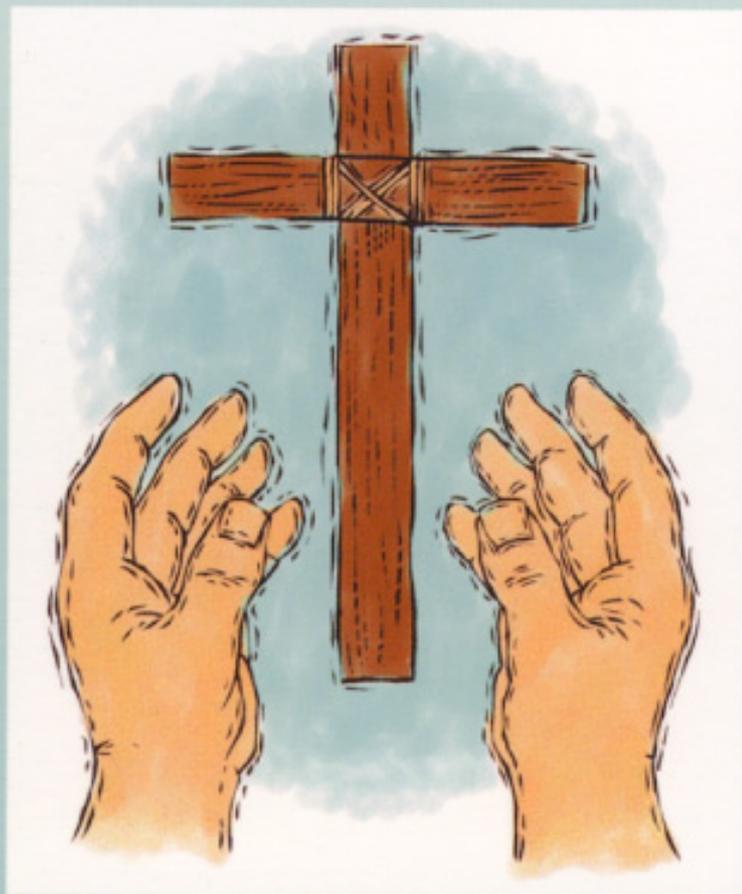


Saving Faith



The Kind of Faith
That Will Get You
To Heaven

By Dick Tripp

The Kind of Faith That Will Get You Into Heaven

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Foreword

How can we know we are accepted by God? Is it possible to be a humble Christian and, at the same time, confident of our relationship with God - that we will be with him in heaven forever? In this very helpful booklet, Dick Tripp challenges us to think through the most significant faith issue of our entire life.

In 20 years of witnessing, I have never found a better question than that with which Dick begins his discussion. It helps clarify what our faith is actually resting on. We don't often realise what we are trusting in until we hear our answer to that question. It helps us begin to explore further whether our confidence is warranted or not. It also allows the witness to tailor the Gospel presentation to the person's spiritual condition. Then we do not attempt to offer someone something they think they don't need.

God wants us to be secure in our relationship with him. As Rev. Nicky Gumbel, the developer of the Alpha Course, has said, "Good parents want their children to be sure of their relationship with them. In the same way, God wants us to be sure of our relationship with him." The certainty of knowing our names are written in heaven, frees us to serve him with our lives. After all, Jesus reminded us that this was the priority issue (Luke 10:20).

May the reading of this booklet bring every reader the joy of knowing that this issue is settled for them, now and forever.

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Introduction

In order to clarify one issue, I would like to begin this booklet by asking you, the reader, to answer a question. It is an important question. Indeed, it could be the most important question you will ever answer.

This is it:

Suppose you were to die today and found yourself standing before God, and he were to look you in the eye and ask you, "Why should I let you into my heaven?" what would you say?

What about pausing for a moment right now and asking yourself, "What *would* you say?"

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This is a question I have asked hundreds of people over many years in the Anglican ministry. There are a number of common responses. Some people reply honestly, "I don't know." Some people expect to get into heaven without having to answer such a question, as they believe everyone will go to heaven anyway. A more common response, however, goes something like this: "I have not been too bad a person. I know I am not perfect but I have done my best to lead a good life. I...I..." The focus of their response is on themselves, what they have done, or not done. In other words, they expect people (and themselves in particular) to get into heaven on the basis of their moral behaviour. (Or, in some instances, to fail to get in because of their lack of moral behaviour!)

This booklet is written from the assumption that Jesus knew exactly what he was talking about when he spoke about heaven, and also when he said that not everyone would be there, as he did very plainly.¹ That being the case, what are the conditions of entry?

A common misconception

The most common misconception about being accepted by God and entering into heaven, and perhaps the most common misconception about Christianity in general, is that God's approval is something which has to be earned or merited. He will only love us and accept us if we happen to be good enough. Charles Haskell, who was a Christian missionary in Pakistan for some years, told of a friend who was amused by a Muslim who confidently asserted that he had committed 129 evil deeds. Fortunately these were offset by 135 good deeds, so he was still in credit with Allah! Unfortunately, it is not only Muslims who have such a view of God's judgement. In 1980, a Gallop Poll in the US showed that 43 per cent of Catholics and 20 per cent of Protestants agreed with the statement that "heaven is a divine reward for those who earn it by their good life."

Maybe this view sounds logical—but only if we don't think about it too deeply. People who hold such a view of God's judgement are faced with a number of problems. Firstly, who sets the standard? Usually the answer is that each person decides for themselves what they think the standard should be, ignoring what God's pass-mark actually is. Secondly, it would mean that no one could ever know that they were going to heaven. Who could say for sure they were good enough? (Though many seem to think so!) And yet the Bible indicates that we can be certain. Thirdly, such a view is asking God to

¹ That Jesus was indeed the divine Son of God and *did* know what he was talking about, are questions I have dealt with in another booklet, *Is Jesus Really God?*

ignore our failures and, therefore, approve of evil. Fourthly, it contradicts what God has revealed to us in the Bible.

God's passmark for getting into heaven

Let's see what the Bible declares. It may come as a surprise to many that God's passmark for getting into heaven is actually 100 per cent—perfection—that is, if you want to get in on your own merit. When speaking about God's moral laws, particularly his command to love others as much as we love ourselves, the New Testament declares, **"whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it"** (James 2:10). When we consider that Jesus said the most important command of all was to **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind"** (Matthew 22:37), then it becomes obvious that we all have a problem. The situation looks bleaker still when we take into account Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount that we break God's commands as much by our thinking as by our actions (Matthew 5:21, 22, 27, 28).

The God that the Bible reveals to us is a "holy" God. This means that he himself is without evil and is implacably opposed to it. As the prophet Habakkuk declared, **"Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong"** (Habakkuk 1:13). He is not only a God of love, but also a God of justice, and to be true to his own nature, he must judge evil. So here lies the problem. Nothing tainted with evil can live in God's presence. I may think I am better than most, but we are all in the same boat, **"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"** (Romans 3:23). That doesn't mean we are all as bad as we *could* be. It simply means that none of us are as good as we *should* be. Obviously there must be some other way of getting into heaven than by trying to be good enough.

God's way of salvation

Fortunately for us, there is another way of being reconciled to God. God himself has taken the initiative to reconcile us to himself. At the midpoint in human history, he came into our world in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived on earth as perfect man and gave us in his own example a picture of all we were meant to be. That by itself is no help. It only shows us up. However, he came for an even greater reason: to die for our sins and take upon himself the guilt of the human race. This is the central theme of the New Testament. **"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us"** (Romans 5:8). **"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree"** (1 Peter 2:24). **"This is love: not that we loved God, but**

that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

We will never understand in this life all that happened while Jesus hung on the cross, nor all that he suffered. The Bible gives many facets of it; however, the emphasis is constantly on this event being the supreme evidence of God’s love, done because of our sins and to rescue us from our hopeless predicament. Jesus not only died, he rose triumphant from the grave and now lives as Lord. The living Christ now offers to us the benefits of his death on our behalf—forgiveness, reconciliation, his transforming presence in our lives, and the assurance of a wonderful future in his eternal kingdom. We do not deserve these things. They are offered to us as free gifts of his love. **“The free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord”** (Romans 6:23—Revised Standard Version). However, we do have to decide whether they are gifts that we want, and will accept. The means by which we receive them is faith. **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast”** (Ephesians 2:8,9).

This being the case, we all have to face a decision. We can continue to attempt to make it on our own merit, or else we can humble ourselves, admit we are sinners, and gratefully accept what Jesus is offering us.

A choice to be made

The story is told of a man who dreamed that he built a ladder from earth to heaven, and when he did a good deed, up went his ladder a few feet. When he did a very good deed his ladder went higher, and when he gave away large sums of money to the poor, up it went further still. By and by it went out of sight, and as years rolled on, he thought it would go clear up into heaven. He expected to step off his ladder into heaven when he died. Suddenly, however, he heard a voice roll out from paradise. He heard words that had been spoken by Jesus himself when on earth. **“I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in some other way, is a thief and a robber”** (John 10:1). Down he came, ladder and all, and he awoke. He realised that if he wanted to receive salvation he must receive it in another way than by good deeds. He took the other way, which is by faith in Jesus Christ.

The Bible is very clear that these two ways to heaven are mutually exclusive. We cannot have a bit of one and a bit of the other. **“We...have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified...for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ**

died for nothing!" (Galatians 2:16,21). **"If by grace [the undeserved goodness of God], then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace"** (Romans 11:6).

Paul is very clear about the things he trusted in for acceptance with God before becoming a Christian. After listing his religious background and attempts to keep God's moral law he declares, **"But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ...I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith"** (Philippians 3:7-9). We must each choose which path we will take. That we will face God's judgement is sure. Whether we get what we deserve, or whether we receive mercy, can be *our* choice. **"There is...no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"** (Romans 8:1).

Jesus illustrated this choice very clearly in his story about the Pharisee and the Publican who went into the temple to pray (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee told God what a good fellow he was. The Publican, though unaware that Jesus would die for his sins, prayed, "God have mercy on me, a sinner." It was the Publican who **"went home justified [acquitted of his sins] before God,"** rather than the Pharisee.

The nature of saving faith

Faith is mentioned something like 300 times in the New Testament in connection with our salvation. At this point, it may be helpful to clarify the meaning of "salvation". It is a comprehensive word in the New Testament that has to do with the total process whereby God reconciles us to himself, begins a process of inward transformation and growth, and eventually presents us without fault in the presence of God. One could say that it is salvation from the penalty of our sins, which happens when we put our faith in Jesus; salvation from the power of sin, as we allow Jesus to progressively have his way in our lives; and salvation from the presence of sin, when he presents us faultless in the presence of his Father in heaven. This is all his doing, though it demands our co-operation. Faith is the means by which this becomes possible. What, therefore, is faith? In order to clarify what faith is, it is necessary to correct two misconceptions that many people have.

Saving faith is not just a head belief

The essence of faith is trust. It is possible to believe all about someone without trusting them. I can believe that Jesus is fully divine, the Second Person in the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I can believe that he came to earth to die for me. I can also believe that, if I trust him to do it, then

he can save me. However, it will do me no good unless I *do* trust him. And that is more than mere head belief. Just being able to spell out the Christian beliefs, and really believe them, will not get me to heaven. James warns us that even demons have this sort of belief. **“You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder”** (James 2:19). The devil himself believes in God. However, it does him no good. There is no trust involved.

Not just trusting God for life’s needs

It is possible to trust God to do all sorts of things—to heal a sick child, to guide us in decisions, to provide us with sufficient income, to keep us safe on a journey, to give us strength to cope with trials. The Bible has much to say about this sort of faith. However, we are not talking here about how to live in a daily relationship with God. We are talking about how to be reconciled to him in the first place—how we receive forgiveness, how we become one of his children, how we receive his gift of eternal life, how we can be sure of heaven. For this we need to trust God, not for things to do with daily living, but for forgiveness, for salvation. We could call it “saving faith”.

SAVING FAITH IS TRUSTING JESUS CHRIST, AND HIM ALONE, FOR OUR ETERNAL SALVATION.

Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher, gave the following illustration:

Suppose there is a fire on the third floor of a house, and a child is trapped in a room there. A huge, strong man stands on the ground beneath the window where the child’s face appears, and he calls, “Jump! Drop into my arms!” It is a part of faith to know that the man is there; still another part of faith is to believe him to be a strong man; but the essence of faith lies in trusting him fully and dropping into his arms.

Thus it is with the sinner and Christ. A part of faith is to know that he died for our sins; another part of faith is to believe he is able to save all who put their trust in him; but the essence of faith lies in trusting him fully by resting one’s whole case in his hands, now and for ever.

Again, it is not the *amount* of faith that reconciles us to God, it is *what we are putting our trust in*. Imagine two bridges across a river in flood. The first is an old bridge that is made of solid timbers, but which has been replaced. The second is a new concrete bridge which, unknown to anyone, has a serious flaw. A car arrives at the river and the driver, with lots of faith, drives across the new bridge. Half way across the bridge collapses. Another car comes along. This driver sees only the one old bridge, and, in fear and trembling, drives across. He gets across safely. The first driver had lots of faith, *but he*

put it in the wrong bridge. The second driver had very little faith, *but enough to trust the right bridge.* The person who commits his or her life to Jesus Christ is secure for eternity, not because of the amount of their faith, but because of the greatness of the one who has pledged to save those who come to him.

If salvation is by faith, do good works matter?

Obviously, the New Testament has a great deal to say about the sort of people we should be and the good works we should do. However, it is also very clear that these should be the consequence of our relationship with God, and are not the means by which we enter into that relationship. After declaring that we are saved **“by faith”** and **“not by works”**, Paul goes on in the next verse to say, **“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works...”** (Ephesians 2:8-10). He wants us to submit to him so he can then work on us and produce **“Something Beautiful for God”** (as Malcom Muggeridge entitled his book on Mother Theresa).

One of the metaphors used in the New Testament to describe both character and behaviour is that of **“fruit”**. Jesus said, **“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing”** (John 15:5). In other words, the good works that are acceptable to God are those which grow out of a right relationship with him. Martin Luther, whose teaching sparked off the Reformation in the 16th century, put it like this:

No one can be good and do good unless God’s grace first makes him good; and no one becomes good by works, but good works are done by him who is good. Just as the fruits do not make the tree, but the tree bears the fruit...Therefore all works, no matter how good they are and how pretty they look, are in vain if they do not flow from grace.

To sum up, we could say that if our faith does not have some effect on our lives in terms of both love for God and love for others, then something is deficient in our faith. James put it more bluntly, **“faith without works is dead”** (i.e. not real faith at all—James 2:26).

Aspects of saving faith

Saving faith is exclusive

It is trusting in Christ *alone* for my eternal salvation—not Christ and my good character, or Christ and my good works, or Christ and my religious observances, or Christ and some other religious leader. John Paton was a missionary last century to cannibals in the New Hebrides. When translating one of the gospels into a local language, he had a problem finding a word or phrase in their language that was equivalent to the New Testament’s concept

of trusting in Christ. The islanders trusted nobody and there was no word for “trust” in their language. His native assistant entered the room and Paton had an idea. “What am I doing?” Paton asked. The man replied that he was sitting at his desk. Paton then raised both feet off the floor and sat back on his chair. “What am I doing now?” he asked. In reply, the native used a verb which means “to lean your whole weight upon”. This is the expression that Paton used through the gospel to translate “to believe in” Jesus.

Someone has put it in the form of an acrostic of the word FAITH:

Forsaking
All
I
Take
Him

Saving faith is personal

John Wesley put it like this:

*Justifying faith implies, not only a divine evidence or conviction, that ‘God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself,’ but a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for **my** sins, that he loved **me**, and gave himself for **me**.*

Saving faith is receiving, not giving

To use John Calvin’s famous analogy, faith is like an empty, open hand, stretched out towards God, with nothing to offer and everything to receive. Or to quote one of today’s leading theologians, Alister McGrath:

Faith is the final step in the process begun by the cross of Christ — we recognise its meaning, we realise its relevance and finally we receive its benefits.

Saving faith is not anti-intellectual

There is nothing anti-intellectual about saving faith. It means that, having been convinced that Jesus is indeed the divine Lord,² and that I need to be reconciled to him, I am then prepared to take the next step of committing my life to him. Evangelist Leighton Ford has said, “Belief is not faith without evidence, but commitment without reservation.”

Saving faith involves commitment

Being a Christian involves a personal relationship with the living Christ. He cannot do the things he wishes to do in our lives without that relationship. As he is Lord of heaven and earth, this involves a willingness to

² I have focused on this question in the booklet *Is Jesus Really God*.

accept him as Lord of our own lives. Jesus said, **“Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”** (Luke 6:46). Charles Spurgeon said, “Faith and obedience are bound up in the same bundle. He that obeys God, trusts God; and he that trusts God, obeys God.” Negatively, this means that I must be willing, with God’s help, to turn away from everything that would be inconsistent with living in a relationship with God. The Bible word for this is “repentance”.³

Conclusion

The story is told of a Christian business man who was attending a convention in a city. While he was staying at the convention hotel, he tried to explain the gospel to the elevator boy. The lad said, “I can understand what it means to believe *in* Jesus, to believe something about Jesus—I’m a church member myself—but what is this ‘believing on’ business.” The convention continued for a day or so and finally the business man had to leave. He rang for the elevator and it came to the first floor, stopped and the door opened. The business man just stood outside with his bags. “Did you ring?” asked the elevator boy. The man answered, “Yes.” “What floor do you want to go to?” the boy asked. The man replied, “I want to go to the ground floor.” The boy said, “Well then, what’s the matter?” “Nothing’s the matter,” the man replied. “I believe that the elevator has the power to take me to the ground floor.” And still he stood there. In exasperation the boy cried, “What’s the matter with you? It won’t do you any good to believe in the elevator unless you get *on* it.” The man replied, “That is exactly what the Bible means when it says, **‘Believe *on* the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved’**” (Acts 16:31—Authorised Version).

It is this final step of commitment to Jesus as Saviour and Lord—trusting him to forgive my sins, trusting him to come into my life, trusting him with my eternal future—that brings me into the personal relationship and experience of his love that the New Testament talks about. Are you prepared to get on board? If you have never made this commitment, but are wondering how to go about it, I suggest you get alone somewhere and tell him about it. You may find the following prayer a helpful guide:

Lord Jesus, I believe that you are the divine Lord, and that you came into this world to die for me. I don’t understand such love, but I am willing to accept it.

I am sorry for my sins that sent you to the cross and I trust you for forgiveness.

³ I have explored the meaning of repentance further in the booklet *Repentance: What It Is and Why You Can’t Get To Heaven Without It*.

I turn from those things that would be inconsistent with living in a relationship with you.

I invite you to come into my life as my Saviour and Lord.

I commit my life and my eternal future into your hands and I gratefully receive your gift of eternal life.

Help me to be worthy of it. In faith I trust you to do all that you promised.

It is part of faith to believe that what he has promised, he will do. He said, **“whoever comes to me I will never drive away”** (John 6:37).

If you should make such a commitment then get a good modern translation of the New Testament. Faith grows as it feeds on the promises of God and that is where you will find them. Also, find some fellow believers who can assist you on the journey. Faith grows in a believing community. May God bless you as you experience this new relationship with the living God himself.

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I am indebted to Dr. James Kennedy, Presbyterian Minister, author and founder of Evangelism Explosion Ministries, for the basic outline of this booklet.