

It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment (Heb. 9:27 KJV)

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Universal Opportunity for Salvation in Christ: A Theological Examination of Salvation Beyond Temporal and Geographical Boundaries

Abstract

This paper explores the theological question of salvation for those who, due to the limitations of time and place, have not had direct access to the message of Jesus Christ. The inquiry investigates the biblical foundation for the universal opportunity to be saved if one chooses to receive it, examining how Christ's eternal sacrifice offers redemptive opportunity not only for those who encounter the gospel in their earthly lives but also for those who have passed without knowledge of Him. Through an analysis of New Testament scripture, particularly the Epistle to the Hebrews and Peter's writings, this paper contends that salvation in Christ spans both life and the afterlife, extending the promise of salvation universally, including those who lived in ignorance of the gospel. This is not "Universal Salvation", only those who repent and believe in Jesus will be saved.

Introduction

The doctrine of salvation as found exclusively in Jesus Christ raises pertinent questions about the fate of those who, due to historical and geographical factors, never encountered the gospel during their lifetimes. Does salvation extend beyond this temporal constraint, and if so, how? This paper delves into the implications of Christ's sacrifice, His role as High Priest, and the inclusivity of His atonement. By analyzing key biblical texts, this study seeks to clarify whether the gospel's message is, indeed, "Good News" for all humankind, regardless of the limitations of earthly life.

The Scope of Christ's Sacrifice

The concept of Christ as "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8) presents an eternal aspect to His sacrifice, suggesting a timeless efficacy. Hebrews 9:26 affirms that Christ's singular sacrifice, "offered once at the end of the ages," is sufficient to redeem all who have lived since the world's foundation. The Epistle to the Hebrews further articulates that, just as it is appointed for humanity to die once, followed by judgment (Hebrews 9:27), so Christ's death offers universal coverage for sin, applicable to all regardless of temporal constraints.

Post-Mortem Opportunity for Salvation

The Epistle to Peter states that the gospel "was preached also to the dead," ensuring that all, including those who never heard the gospel in life, would receive an opportunity for redemption (1 Peter 4:6). This post-mortem proclamation allows for Christ's sacrifice to extend universally, where judgment follows death, evaluating whether Christ's atonement applies to individuals' sins. Repentance and an "answer of a good conscience" (1 Peter 3:21) appear to play a significant role in this judgment, as seen in both Peter's and Christ's teachings, where those "in the graves" who hear Christ's voice will rise "unto the resurrection of life" (John 5:24-29).

Christ's Role as High Priest and the Eternal Redemption

The function of Christ as High Priest, described extensively in Hebrews, contrasts with the earthly priesthood of the Old Covenant. While the former covenant required repeated sacrifices for atonement, Christ's sacrifice was "once for all" (Hebrews 9:12) and achieved eternal redemption. This final sacrifice ensures salvation is not temporally or geographically bound, transcending the constraints of the Old Covenant and extending universally, including those who, though unaware of the gospel in life, receive it posthumously.

Immediate Judgment and Salvation

A common theological interpretation holds that individuals face a "particular judgment" immediately upon death, determining their spiritual

fate. R.C.H. Lenski and other theologians highlight that this judgment does not solely pertain to a future eschatological event but occurs individually at death, a viewpoint that suggests no delay in divine verdict (Lenski, 1938). Those who die “in Christ” pass directly into the presence of God, “not coming under the judgment” of condemnation (John 5:24), while the unsaved await judgment following death, allowing Christ’s redemptive act to reach even beyond the grave.

A Chronological Reading of Judgment in Hebrews

The sequential reading in Hebrews, from Christ’s role in the heavenly sanctuary to the “appointment” of death followed by judgment (Hebrews 9:24-28), supports an interpretation of judgment that is immediate upon death rather than at a distant end-time event. This interpretation affirms that the judgment in question here is not eschatological finality but a redemptive judgment assessing eligibility for Christ’s salvation.

Universal Redemption Beyond Earthly Life

The New Covenant, according to Hebrews 8:12 and 9:14-15, is characterized by its universality, transcending the temporal limitations of the Old Covenant. While the sacrifices under the Old Covenant provided limited, repetitive atonement for sin, Christ’s atonement, through the “eternal Spirit,” applies universally, offering redemptive opportunity to all, even those unaware of His message in life. The New Covenant thus inaugurates a broader scope for salvation, aligning with the concept of post-mortem evangelism found in 1 Peter 4:5-6.

Conclusion

The theology of Christ’s atonement, as presented in the New Testament, suggests a redemptive opportunity that is not bound by the temporal and geographical limitations of earthly life. Through a nuanced interpretation of Hebrews and Peter’s writings, this study posits that the gospel of Christ indeed extends posthumously, providing a “universal opportunity for salvation” through the eternal efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice. This reading offers a hopeful vision of the gospel’s reach, affirming that the salvific work of Christ transcends time and space, making the gospel truly “Good News” for all humankind.