

Greatness in Heaven

Despite what many people claim, the Bible does *not* teach that no one in Heaven is greater than anyone else. Instead Jesus taught that some people will be greater than others. This is an important teaching that should have a major impact on the way we live our life.

This is what Jesus Himself had to say about the topic:

Matthew 5:19: "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

Notice that Jesus didn't say it doesn't matter how you live your life, because everyone in Heaven is going to be great. That's *not* the message He gave! Instead He taught that the way we live our life in this world *actually matters*. Christians who live sinful lives, and who teach others to copy their bad example, will be the least in the world to come. However, those who live righteous lives and teach others to do the same will be great in the world to come.

This isn't just talking about wicked pastors who encourage their congregations to do things that God hates (although it certainly does cover that). If a Christian lives a sinful life and their example teaches other people to sin, they will fall into the category of "the least". The apostle Paul warned about how important it was to watch what we do, lest our example leads others into sin:

Romans 14:21: "It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak."

Even though people may have never set foot in a pulpit, they could still teach others to do evil by setting a bad example.

That means this message applies to *everyone* – not just those who hold teaching positions in a church.

God cares about how we live our lives. In order to be great in Heaven you *must* obey Him in this world and live a holy life. It's not enough to teach other people to obey God. You must also obey Him yourself! If you teach other people to do what's right but you don't practice what you teach then you've fallen short. Heaven treats those who obeyed God in this life differently from those who didn't.

The good news is that you're still alive, which means if you're living a wicked life there's still time to repent. You can turn away from your sins, do what's right, and teach others to do the same. You don't have to continue on the way you've been living! There's still time to change.

There's something else that causes people to be great in Heaven. It's very simple: those who are great *believe what God has revealed in His Word*. We can find that taught here:

Matthew 18:1-4: "At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

What Jesus is saying is simple: little children believe what you tell them. Those who humble themselves and believe what God has told us will be great in Heaven. However, those who refuse to believe what God has said are going to have problems.

It's true that those who reject the gospel aren't saved and will never enter Heaven at all. That's one possibility that Jesus raised. However, there are also Christians who accept the gospel but reject other teachings that are found in God's Word. They believe some of what God has said, but not all of it.

The problem is that God requires us to believe *everything*

He's told us. Every single one of His words are important:

Matthew 4:4: "But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."

God isn't impressed by people who believe part of what He said and then turn around and reject the rest. Those who are great in Heaven are those who believe *everything* He's told us. Christians who look at passages in their Bibles and say "I don't believe that" aren't going to be great in Heaven. They haven't humbled themselves as little children. Instead they've elevated themselves above the Word of God and are judging it instead of obeying it, and that's a problem.

If you want to be great in Heaven then you need to believe God, obey Him, and teach others to obey Him as well. However, if you don't believe God or obey Him then you aren't going to be great— and you'll have no one to blame but yourself.

This is what the book of Daniel has to say about this subject:

Daniel 12:2-3: "And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever."

Who will shine brightly for all of eternity? Those who are wise in God's sight, and those who turn many to righteousness. In other words, those who believed God, obeyed Him, and taught others to do the same. That's what God wants.

The Martyrs

There's another type of greatness that Jesus told us about, but it's a much harder road. When the mother of James and John asked Him to sit her two children beside him in Heaven, this is

what He said:

Matthew 20:21-22: "And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom. But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, We are able."

Jesus told her that the people who will sit at His left and right hand in Heaven will be those who suffered as He did. In other words, it seems that the people in Heaven who will hold the highest positions of authority are those who were greatly persecuted for Him, *and were put to death for the sake of the gospel.*

This shouldn't come as a surprise. Jesus taught that those who are persecuted for His sake will be greatly rewarded in Heaven:

Matthew 5:11-12: "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you."

Luke 6:22-23: "Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets."

One thing I want to point out is that although Jesus said that those who are martyred will be greatly rewarded in Heaven, He didn't promise that every single one of them will be given a

position of great authority. What He did promise is that their reward would be great (which it no doubt will be). The point is that there's a strong case to be made that the highest positions of authority in Heaven (under the Lord Jesus Christ) require martyrdom to obtain.

Jesus warned His disciples that God hasn't given everyone the ability to endure the type of suffering that He endured. God has called some people to suffer greatly for the sake of the gospel, but not everyone. Throughout the centuries there have been millions of people martyred for the sake of the gospel, and there have also been millions of faithful saints who led peaceful lives and died of old age.

Faithfulness Matters

It shouldn't surprise us that God cares about our faithfulness. The way that we live our life matters to Him, and He will reward those who faithfully serve Him. The apostle Paul warned us that in the day of judgment some Christians will go away empty handed:

1 Corinthians 3:12-15: "Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire."

What's at risk here is people's rewards, not their salvation. If a person is genuinely saved then they'll still go to Heaven and inherit everlasting life. However, if they led a sinful life and did nothing worthy of a reward then when they reach Heaven they won't be given one. Instead they'll be the least in the kingdom. Rewards will be given to those who earned them (and Jesus had a lot to say about how to earn Heavenly rewards).

Jesus warned us that our faithfulness matters:

Matthew 25:20-21: "And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more. His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord."

Who will reign in Heaven? Those who were faithful to God during this life. Who *won't* reign in Heaven? Those who were unwilling to serve Him:

Matthew 25:26-30: "His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. "

This person clearly isn't saved. He found serving God offensive and chose to insult God instead of obey Him. As a result he was cast out into everlasting torment.

There are other people who also failed to serve God, but not to such an extreme degree. One example we can find in the Old Testament are the priests. God told Ezekiel that the priests of Israel who weren't faithful to Him will still be allowed to serve in the millennial temple, but because of their faithlessness they'll be

given the lowest jobs:

Ezekiel 44:10-14: “And the Levites that are gone away far from me, when Israel went astray, which went astray away from me after their idols; they shall even bear their iniquity. Yet they shall be ministers in my sanctuary, having charge at the gates of the house, and ministering to the house: they shall slay the burnt offering and the sacrifice for the people, and they shall stand before them to minister unto them. Because they ministered unto them before their idols, and caused the house of Israel to fall into iniquity; therefore have I lifted up mine hand against them, saith the Lord God, and they shall bear their iniquity. And they shall not come near unto me, to do the office of a priest unto me, nor to come near to any of my holy things, in the most holy place: but they shall bear their shame, and their abominations which they have committed. But I will make them keepers of the charge of the house, for all the service thereof, and for all that shall be done therein.”

In the millennium, these priests will be allowed to serve in the millennial temple but they won't be allowed to approach God. That honor will be reserved for the sons of Zadok, who were faithful and didn't worship idols:

Ezekiel 44:15-16: “But the priests the Levites, the sons of Zadok, that kept the charge of my sanctuary when the children of Israel went astray from me, they shall come near to me to minister unto me, and they shall stand before me to offer unto me the fat and the blood, saith the Lord God: They shall enter into my sanctuary, and they shall come near to my table, to minister unto me, and they shall keep my charge.”

God put a difference between the priests who were faithful and those who weren't. He also puts a difference between Christians who believe everything He has said and those who don't, and those who obey Him and those who fail to do so. Our faithfulness in this life matters and will greatly impact our position in the life to come.

The Church

There's another piece to this which must be considered as well. Jesus taught that the saints who are part of the church are greater than the saints who are *not* part of the church:

Matthew 11:11: "Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Jesus is saying that all those who are a part of the church are greater than John the Baptist. Although John the Baptist was saved, he wasn't part of the church (because Herod murdered him before the church came into existence). That's why he called himself a friend of the bridegroom instead of part of the bride of Christ:

John 3:29: "He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled."

In order to make sense of this we need to understand a few things. First, no one who was saved in the Old Testament was part of the church, and no one who's saved after the rapture will be part of the church either. The church came into existence on the day of Pentecost, and its membership will be completed at the day of the rapture (which Jesus will return to this world and take the church

to the throne room of God). That means the church is exclusively composed of the saints who lived between the day of Pentecost and the moment of the rapture.

Of all the saints of God, those who are part of the church are greater than everyone else. Within the church there are vast differences (as we've seen throughout this study), but the least saint within the church is greater than the greatest saint outside of it. This means the Christians who are part of the church are greater than all the Old Testament saints, and are also greater than all the tribulation era saints.

Why is that the case? Jesus doesn't explain, but I think the reason is fairly straightforward. The Lord does give us a hint:

John 20:29: "Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed."

One of the most important things to understand about God is that He cares a *lot* about whether we believe Him:

Hebrews 11:6: "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."

The saints of God can be divided into three broad categories based on when they lived. The first are those who were saved before the time of Christ (the Old Testament). The second are those who were saved during the church age. The third are those who will be saved after the rapture.

Of those three groups, the one that requires the greatest faith to be saved is the church. We are the group that hasn't seen anything and yet has believed anyway. That's not true of the other two groups, who God treats very differently.

For example, throughout the Old Testament the nation of Israel had prophets, the tabernacle, and the temple. God spoke to them, sent them angels and visions, and performed astonishing

miracles among them. In those days you could go to the temple complex and enter into the presence of God Himself. Once a year the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies and actually speak to God, *and hear God speak to him in return!* You could use the Urim and Thummim to ask God questions and get answers back.

Notice that the church doesn't have access to *any* of these things. There's no temple in Jerusalem anymore. We don't have the Urim and Thummim. God has even stopped speaking to us through angels and prophets and visions:

Hebrews 1:1-2: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds;"

Once He gave us the completed Bible, the old ways came to an end (which is beyond the scope of this study). That means we must believe in God in spite of the fact that we don't have any of the miraculous things that He provided the Old Testament saints.

Those who are saved after the rapture likewise have a very different situation than we do. At the moment of the rapture the Lord Jesus Christ will return to this world. The trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised, and all the Christians in the world will disappear. That will be *very powerful evidence* that the gospel is true! Notice, however, that this powerful evidence won't be available until after it's too late to become a part of the church. If you wait until you see Jesus raise all of the righteous dead then you've waited too long. You can still be saved at that point, but you won't be part of the church.

Likewise, during the tribulation era God is going to do all sorts of astonishing, miraculous things (which you can read about in the book of Revelation). Elijah the prophet will return. There will be two witnesses in Jerusalem (most likely Moses and Elijah) who will do miraculous things. An angel will fly over all the world and preach the gospel.

Imagine how much easier it will be to believe when *Elijah*

returns to this world! Imagine being able to go to Jerusalem and actually *meet Moses*. Imagine hearing an angel from Heaven fly through the sky and preach the gospel. The church isn't going to witness any of those things, but the tribulation saints will.

That means the church is composed of the saints who didn't see and yet believed. Jesus promised that they would be blessed. He rewards those who have faith in Him and who believe *without* seeing. That means the best possible time to be saved is *now*, before the rapture. Salvation will still be possible afterward, but at that point the opportunity to join the church is gone.

The Unborn

There's one other group of people that must be mentioned because they're frequently forgotten. That group is composed of those who die before they're born. How do they fit into these categories?

Now, there are several different reasons why someone might die before birth. In a great many cases it's due to abortion (which is God views as an act of murder). There are other times when it's caused by a miscarriage. There are also occasions when a woman becomes pregnant and loses the pregnancy without ever knowing about it. (It's entirely possible that when people reach Heaven they'll discover they had more children than they realized.) The point is that a *lot* of people fall into this category.

In spite of what many people teach, God never promised that those who die before birth automatically go to Heaven. The Bible doesn't teach an age of accountability. Instead it teaches that we're sinful from the moment we're conceived:

Psalm 51:5: "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me."

The Bible also teaches that it's possible to be saved before we're born. This can be seen from the example of John the Baptist, who was filled with the Holy Spirit while he was still in his mother's womb:

Luke 1:15: "For he shall be great in the sight of

the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb."

The reason it's possible to be saved before birth is because God is the one who decides who is saved and who isn't. The Lord made that decision before He created the world:

Ephesians 1:4: "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:"

All those who God has chosen will be saved. If God chooses to save those who die before they're born then they'll surely be saved and will go on to Heaven. If He doesn't save then then they won't. It's entirely His decision:

Romans 9:15-16: "For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy."

Those who die before birth and go straight to Heaven never have to experience any of the suffering or problems of this life. However, they also never have the opportunity to do anything that would earn a reward. Since they died before birth they were never able to give to the poor, or share the gospel, or give a cup of cold water to someone. They also never had the opportunity to suffer for the sake of Christ (because they skipped all suffering entirely).

On the one hand, it's impossible for them to become the least because they didn't live long enough to teach others to sin. However, they also can't be the greatest because they never taught others to obey God and they were never persecuted. That means they don't meet the criteria for either group. It's impossible for them to fail, but it's also impossible for them to be great.

The reason I bring this up is because some people think it's a wonderful thing to die before birth. *It is not*. Those who murder their children sometimes claim that they're saving them, but that's not true at all. You can't guarantee that your children will be saved by slaughtering them while they're young! Salvation doesn't work that way. You can't force God to save your children by murdering them. (God *hates* murder.)

It's true that God may choose to save the unborn and bring them to Heaven. (He also may not.) However, those who die before birth lose the chance to serve God in this world (with all the rewards and blessings that come from that). That's a very valuable opportunity which they can never regain. As Solomon pointed out, once you're dead you no longer have the opportunity to do anything in this world, either good or bad:

Ecclesiastes 9:6: "Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun."

The best option is to be born and live. It's to believe God, serve Him, and teach others to do the same. The *very* best option is to do all these things after the day of Pentecost and before the rapture. That's where the greatest blessing can be found.