

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #1: WILL CHRISTIANS JUST BARELY MAKE IT TO HEAVEN?

By John Temples

1 Peter 4:17,18 is a passage that has troubled many Christians. It says, "For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be then end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? Now if the righteous one is scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?" (All Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.)

The English word *scarcely* means:

- Scantly
- Only just
- Barely
- By a narrow margin
- Hardly
- With extreme difficulty

Is this describing our salvation and entrance into heaven? Will we just get there by the skin of our teeth? Do we have to beg God to let us in?

How do other passages describe our entrance into heaven? Some examples:

- Matthew 5:12--"For great is your reward in heaven."
- Philippians 3:20--"For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." (No sense of dread or hesitancy there.)
- John 14:2--"In My Father's house are many mansions." (There's no housing shortage in heaven!)
- Revelation 7:9--"After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude, which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands."
- Hebrews 10:19,22--"Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near with a true heart in full

assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

- 2 Peter 1:10,11--”Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble, for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

And note that the same apostle wrote 1 Peter 4:18 and 2 Peter 1:11. (The one says we are scarcely saved; the other says we have an abundant entrance awaiting us into the everlasting kingdom.)

So here is our problem: On the one hand, we have multiple passages describing our entrance into heaven as:

- Abundantly and richly provided for
- Something we eagerly and confidently wait for
- Characterized by boldness in drawing near to God
- With full assurance of faith

On the other hand, we have Peter saying in our text, “if the righteous one is scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?”

The contrast could not be more stark and dramatic!

How do we resolve the jarring disconnect in tone and sentiment in these passages?

COULD 1 PETER 4:18 BE TALKING ABOUT BEING SAVED IN SOME OTHER SENSE?

Is Peter speaking of our salvation at the end of time, or of some other kind of salvation? When you read the context of 1 Peter 4, right away you notice a theme: *suffering*. Peter uses the word *suffer* or some form thereof six times in this chapter.

And not just suffering in general, but suffering which was *imminent*--about to directly affect those to whom he was writing. Note:

- Verse 1--"Since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same mind." (Get ready to suffer)
- Verse 7--"The end of all things is at hand." (Nearby, close, about to happen)
- Verse 12--"Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you."

Another expression of immediacy is found in verse 17: "The time has come for judgment to begin...." Peter wrote this about AD 65. Whatever this judgment is, it was at the door, soon to descend upon our first century brethren. Therefore, it cannot be the final, eternal judgment, for that time has not come even in our day.

Was there some cataclysmic event around or shortly after AD 65--

- Which affected the church on a large scale (especially Jewish Christians)?
- Which could be described as a fiery trial, a judgment of God, and "the end of all things"?

Indeed there was: the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies in AD 70, with widespread death and destruction among the Jews.

Over a million Jews perished in the siege of Jerusalem; countless others were carried away into slavery. The Roman armies destroyed the temple and laid waste the city. All Jewish institutions and temple rituals ceased. And this campaign was not confined to Jerusalem; its fury was directed at Jews in many lands. It could indeed be described as "the end of all things"--all things Jewish.

WHAT DID PETER MEAN BY "THE TIME HAS COME FOR JUDGMENT TO BEGIN AT THE HOUSE OF GOD"?

The house of God is the church (1 Timothy 2:15). He must mean that when the Romans came for the Jews, the Christians were going to suffer as well. Why?

- For one thing, many Christians were Jews.

- And there were many Christians living among the Jews in Jerusalem and in many other nations and cities, so the wheat would get uprooted along with the tares.
- For another thing, the Romans did not differentiate between Judaism and Christianity--they regarded the church as just another Jewish sect.

Because of God's providential protection, the church would survive, but with great difficulty. The righteous would be "scarcely saved."

Therefore, 1 Peter 4:18 is not talking about our barely making it into heaven at the end of time, but about first-century Christians scarcely escaping the horrors of the Roman holocaust. The salvation Peter spoke of was not salvation from sin, but deliverance from physical trial. And "the end" in verse 7 is not the end of the world, but the end of the institution of Judaism.

Here are Adam Clarke's comments on the righteous "being scarcely saved": "If it shall be with extreme difficulty that the Christians shall escape from Jerusalem, when the Roman armies shall come against it with the full commission to destroy it, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? Where shall the proud Pharisic boaster in his own outside holiness, and the profligate transgressor of the laws of God, show themselves, as having escaped the divine vengeance? The Christians, though with difficulty, did escape, every man; but not one of the Jews escaped, whether found in Jerusalem or elsewhere."

(from Adam Clarke's Commentary, Electronic Database. Copyright © 1996, 2003, 2005, 2006 by Biblesoft, Inc. All rights reserved.)

Brother Burton Coffman agrees: "Does Peter, for one moment, mean to say that Christians shall hardly be saved at all? Certainly not! Did not he himself say, 'An abundant entrance into the eternal kingdom shall be richly supplied to us' (2 Peter 2:11 KJV)? Well, what is in view here? The time is come for judgment to begin ... This does not mean the eternal judgment is about to begin, but it refers to the judgment against Jerusalem impending in the total destruction of it, and prophetically foretold by both Christ and the apostles."

(from Coffman's Bible Commentary, Copyright © 1971-1993 by ACU Press, Abilene Christian University. All rights reserved.)

It is vitally important for Bible students to take the events of AD 70 into account when reading the Scriptures! --John Temples