

## **What is the Elijah Message?**

### **THE GOOD SHEPHERD TAKES THE INITIATIVE**

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If God tries to save us and then gives up when He sees how difficult we are, that is bad news. If He has made the path to heaven difficult and the path to perdition easy, that is also bad news.

Deep down, how do you feel about God? One way to find out would be to ask yourself whether this statement is true or false: “It’s easy to be lost and hard to be saved.” If you answer True, it is likely that your basic idea of God is uncomfortably like that of the one-talent man, who dug a hole and buried His wealth in the ground. When the Lord finally confronted him, he retorted, “Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid” Matthew 25:24, 25, RSV.

Many people today fear God and view Him as a petty “hard man,” who lets it be difficult for us to be saved, but easy for us to be lost. And if that’s true, then God sits by unconcerned while the vast majority of earth’s inhabitants are allowed to be eternally lost, unwarned. He lets the path to hell be a superhighway down which you coast effortlessly into eternal ruin. On the other hand, He hides the way to heaven so cleverly, with every conceivable obstacle fiendishly built into it to mislead as many people as possible. And God stands back in the shadows, content to watch the masses slide down

the slippery path to perdition, while only a mere handful have what it takes to thread their way through that maze and successfully make it to heaven. And this is supposed to be “good news”?

No one overtly denies the “Good Shepherd” idea—that Christ actively seeks and saves the lost rather than waiting for us to seek and find Him; but the Elijah message of the gospel has far better Good News than “we” have thought.

No one among us today will overtly deny the parable of the Good Shepherd. It’s a given. But the idea seldom gets through clearly.

For example, consider the basic theme that permeates so many of the messages heard at revivals and the sort: in order to be saved, there are three things we must do: (a) read the Bible, (b) pray, and (c) witness. The theme is played almost endlessly. “Maintain your relationship with the Lord,” which means get up in the morning, read something devotional, and pray. And the cure for spiritual maladies is “work for others.”

True, 100%. Can’t be said too often. But a few weeks after camp meeting, we get busy again, and we’re back in the same old problem.

“Maintaining that relationship” with the Lord is the problem we find. Once we get far enough along that we have a “relationship,” it’s commonly understood that maintaining it is the believer’s job. And that seems to make good sense, for the Good Shepherd has done His duty; it’s only fair now that we do ours. There have to be some works.

And here’s where often we fall down. We forget or we get too busy, and then it seems the Lord is far

away. And of course it's all our fault, isn't it? So, . . . enter guilt.

The natural human state, apart from a distinct miracle, is "enmity with God." Romans 8:7, NEB. Anybody who thinks he never has had this problem is misinformed, for "we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." Ephesians 2:3, RSV. A good way to start getting this buried "wrath" out of our systems is to discover the truth that it is indeed hard to be lost, and easy to be saved. God is a much more likeable character than we have been prone to think, and His good news is a lot better than we have thought.

There ought not to be any question about something if Jesus says it plainly. Yet multitudes who say they believe the Bible balk at one of His clearest utterances: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. . . . For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Matthew 11:28-30. Human nature seems intent on believing that His yoke is hard. Many feel that being a true Christian is a fiendishly difficult undertaking, a heroic achievement that only a few people can ever hope to realize. Naturally such an idea discourages multitudes who may want to follow Jesus.

Let's look also at the apostle Paul's report of a personal conversation with God on his way to Damascus. Paul, then known as Saul, was truly hell-bent, fuming with rage against the followers of Jesus, determined to fight against this faith to the

last ounce of his strength. He had money, official influence, public opinion, and ecclesiastical sanction on his side. Did he find this path "easy"? Outwardly, perhaps. But wait. We might assume that he was on a toboggan ride to hell. But the same Jesus, who tells us that His "yoke is easy," told Saul that the way he was going was actually "hard."

This is how Paul described his experience: "I was travelling to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests; and as I was on my way, Your Majesty [King Agrippa], in the middle of the day I saw a light from the sky, more brilliant than the sun, shining all around me. . . . then I heard a voice saying to me in the Jewish language, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you, this kicking against the goad. . . . I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'" Acts 26:12-15, NEB.

The fact is that God truly loved Saul. The poor man was hell-bent, but the obstacles were placed in the supposed superhighway to hell, not the path to heaven! Sinner Saul was meeting up with all kinds of inner difficulties that made his way "hard." The Holy Spirit loved him so much that He constantly pressed into his soul the conviction of sin. Day and night Saul felt the "goad": "What you're doing is wrong, Saul. Stop! Turn around! Danger ahead!"

No way did the Holy Spirit allow Saul to slide unhindered down a greased runway to perdition. In order for him to go on in his mad campaign against Christ, Saul would have had to repress and stultify all these convictions and promptings of the Holy

Spirit. The Lord loved Saul so much that he made it “hard” for him to destroy himself.

When Saul became the apostle Paul, he never forgot the lesson. He had discovered “good news.” And the Lord loves us no less than He loved this wayward man of old. Christ is the “true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.” John 1:9. The Holy Spirit does not restrict this good work to only a handful of favorite people, but “he will reprove the world of sin.” John 16:8. “God. . . desires all men to be saved.” 1 Timothy 2:3, 4, RSV.

As an example of Paul’s irrepressible “good news,” consider one of his passages that is usually misconstrued to say the opposite of what he intended: “The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would.” Galatians 5:17, RSV.

There are two ways to understand this: (1) The evil that the flesh prompts us to do is so strong that even the Holy Spirit is powerless to help us, and we simply “cannot do the (good) things that . . . we would,” or (2) the good that the Holy Spirit prompts the believer to do becomes such a powerful motivation that the flesh loses its tyrannical control over him, and the Holy Spirit prevents the believer in Christ “from doing” the evil things that he “would” otherwise be programmed to do.

Explanation one is bad news. As long as you have “flesh” in which to live, you are doomed to continual defeat. This is what many feel forced to believe.

Their experience constantly seems to reinforce this idea; for they find the “flesh” all-powerful. Illicit love, sensuality, cigarette addiction, alcoholism, drugs, and materialism beat back the Spirit; and temptation makes them cave in repeatedly. Surely the Lord’s heart goes out to them. He knows how many times they have stained their pillows with tears as they review the day’s failures.

On the other hand, explanation two emerges as the best good news one could imagine. The Holy Spirit is actually doing the work; He is “against the flesh.” Whereas we may have thought that obstacles impeded our path to heaven, making it as difficult as possible, the reality is that he sets up obstacles in our way to perdition. He is stronger than the “flesh.” Every moment of every day, He makes His influence apparent “against the flesh,” against these promptings of our sinful natures, and with our consent completely defeats them all. He spends as much time with each person in this constant striving against evil as if that person were the only one on earth.

Which of the two explanations is the correct one? When allowed to speak in context, the Bible unhesitatingly says, The good news one; for it alone is in harmony with Jesus words about His yoke being “easy.” It is because He knows that the mighty Holy Spirit does the lifting of the heavy weight that He assures us, “My burden is light.”

But don’t be fooled into thinking that when you are converted, your sinful nature will never again prompt you to do evil things. We don’t have “holy flesh” so long as we’re in this sinful world. A truly

converted person is still temptable, maybe even more so than before. Jesus Himself was “one who in every respect has been tempted as we are” (Hebrews 4:15, RSV), and is anybody better than He was? The one who follows Christ has the same sinful flesh he always had, but he is no longer a slave to “gratify the desires of the flesh.” Galatians 5:16, RSV. He is now “led by the Spirit” (verse 18, RSV) into a new “freedom” (verse 1, RSV).

We have Someone on our side who is more than a Saviour in name only: “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” Romans 8:3, 4, RSV.

Someone may ask, “How come I never knew this before? I have wasted years while laboring under a misapprehension!” An enemy has masterminded a scheme to obscure the pure, true gospel and has twisted it into bad news.

If you are beginning, ever so slightly, to see God in a different light as One who is on your side as you never imagined He is, be glad for the revelation.

Almost everybody these days has the feeling TV is stronger than the prayer meeting—the lure of the world has more appeal than the service of God. Like a weak distant signal jammed by a powerful radio station nearby, the Holy Spirit seems barely able to come through, compared with the appeal of the world. But Paul says, No: “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: that as sin hath

reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.” Romans 5:20, 21.

Before we understood the gospel, Paul says, “sin hath reigned” like a king, beating back the power of grace like Saul kicking against the “goad.” But when we understand the gospel, grace reigns like a king and beats back the power of sin. This has to be true, because if there is not more power in grace than there is in temptation, John would be wrong when he says, “This is the and the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4), and the gospel could not be good news.

Remember, the battle is never an even one: grace abounds “much more.” It is literally true that “if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” 2 Corinthians 5:17. You have a new Father, so that the power working within you for good is as much stronger than our tendencies to evil as our heavenly Father is greater than our earthly parents.

The wonderful Bible truth is that God takes the initiative in saving us. He is not, as many conceive of Him, standing back, His divine arms folded in disinterested concern while we wallow in our misery. He is not saying, “Well, I did My part long ago; it’s up to you now. You must take the initiative. If you want to be saved, come and work hard at it. If it seems hard to you, you just don’t have what it takes to get to heaven.”

No. A thousand times No! But many feel that way about God. And some shy and timid ones think: God does have plenty of good people ready to take

my place—He doesn't need me, and I'm not really sure He even wants me.

In contrast, Paul wants us to see the divine initiative at work for us: "Despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?" Romans 2:4.

Today's English Version says He "is trying to lead you to repent." The goodness of God is actually taking you by the hand and leading you toward repentance as surely as a fireman tries to lead a victim out of the smoke and haze of a burning building. If you don't stubbornly resist, you will be led all the way to heaven.

Sometimes we pray agonizingly for some wayward loved one, assuming we have to beg the Lord to wake up and please do something. The idea is that He is unwilling until we touch His pity somehow. But the goodness of God is already working, leading your loved one to repentance. The trouble is that we often thwart what He is trying to do because we haven't understood the goodness, mercy, and forbearance of the Lord in their true dimensions. We pile stumbling-blocks in our loved one's way to heaven. We don't realize how the selfishness and inconsistencies seen in us block others' access to God or shadow their concepts of His character that should be revealed in us.

True, not everybody repents. Why? Some "despise" this goodness of God. Stubborn, they break away from that leading. As far back as 1892, a thoughtful writer grasped this tremendous insight and expressed it well in a little book that has been

printed in 101 languages: "The sinner may resist this love, may refuse to be drawn to Christ; but if he does not resist he will be drawn to Jesus; a knowledge of the plan of salvation will lead him to the foot of the cross in repentance for his sins."—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 27.

This is a revolutionary idea to many people who have supposed that they must take the initiative and do something if they want to be saved. To them this idea seems putting the cart before the horse—if we stop resisting, we will be saved! But however revolutionary it sounds, this is the "good news" of the gospel, for it presupposes the active, persistent love of God. It leaps at you in beautiful thoughts like this one from Paul:

"This is what I mean: so long as the heir is a minor, he is no better off than a slave, even though the whole estate is his; he is under guardians and trustees until the date fixed by his father. And so it was with us. During our minority we were slaves to the elementary ideas belonging to this world [margin], but when the term was completed, God sent his own Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to purchase freedom from the subjects of the law, in order that we might attain the status of sons." Galatians 4:1-5, NEB.

The mind boggling idea discloses the reality of God's true character of love. He counts all humans as potential heirs of His "estate," but "before this faith came" to us individually in our experience of comprehension, we are like the millionaire estate owner's barefoot child who is bossed about by common slaves. We come of age when we grasp

the truth by faith. Until then, we remain “prisoners,” and the law is a “tutor” (Greek, a slave who conducted children to school) who maneuvers us to the Saviour. And what we don’t learn easily by faith, by His grace, we learn a harder way by discipline. All this infinite, loving care is lavished upon us individually in order to lead us to Christ, that we might “be justified by faith”!

It’s so easy for us naive humans to conceive of the Lord as drawing a circle that shuts out bad people. But this is not true. He draws a big circle to include them—at least until they shut Him out by never-ending resistance. The Lord looks upon lost people not as wolves to be shot down as soon as possible, but as sheep who have wandered away—as potential heirs to His estate. His grace persists in seeking some way to intrude. What a pity that so many people don’t yet understand this concept and consequently treat “unsaved” people as if they were wolves! The church has hardly begun to love as God loves!

Being “justified by faith” is something that nearly staggers one’s mind just to realize how wonderful it is. It makes you want to get up on the housetop and shout the good news to everybody. Christ’s death on the cross is for every sinner a sacrifice for his or her salvation. God has no chip on His shoulder against anyone. And this “gift” is “out of proportion” to sin, which is “vastly exceeded by the grace of God.” Romans 5:15, NEB. Thus there is no reason why “all men” should not be saved except that they refuse Christ’s grace and spurn the “gift of salvation.”

In this same letter Paul goes a step further and says that “God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.” Romans 12:3. So, (a) God has brought justification for “all men” by the sacrifice of His Son, and (c) He has given “every man the measure of faith” to appropriate that justification. Would that everyone said Yes and exercised the faith already given him.

What more could God do?

It all adds up to the conclusion that, if anyone is lost at last, it will be because of his or her own persistent rejection of what God has already done to save him. And if anyone is saved, it will be because he stopped resisting God’s initiative in saving him!

C. S. Lewis expresses this idea in his book *The Great Divorce*. He puts it as a parable, imagining the Holy City to be a mere bus ride away from hell, and all in hell who wish to move there are welcome. But when they come to visit, they can’t stand the place. Even the blades of grass cut their feet like knives! They want to board the bus back to hell as soon as possible. The lost shut themselves out of heaven. It’s not by any arbitrary decree of God, but by their own chosen inability to be happy there, that they end up outside the city.

In the final analysis, therefore, whether one is saved or lost depends on his choice, the response he chooses to give to that which God has already done. In the light of the love of God revealed at the cross, even the choice to be saved becomes “easy.” Granted, if we eclipse the cross of Christ, we must admit that it becomes terribly hard to follow

Christ. The springs of motivation dry up, and temptation to evil becomes overpowering in its appeal. The Saviour becomes “a root out of a dry ground,” and His gospel contains “no beauty that we should desire him.” Isaiah 53:2. But if we see the unadulterated grace of Christ, that choice to bear the cross with Him becomes easy. The love of Christ constrains the one who appreciates what He has done and chooses to respond.

What part do we have to do? Someone may ask, Didn't Jesus say, “Strive to enter in at the strait gate”? Luke 13:24. Aren't we to be “striving against sin”? Hebrews 12:4. Yes, there are indeed endless conflicts with temptation. We are soldiers in a battle. But the point is that we never have to fight alone. We are joined in a yoke with Christ—He does the pulling and our job is to cooperate with Him, to stop resisting. “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 2:5. The part we have to do is tremendously important, for God will not force a person to be saved against his or her will.

Our part in the salvation process is neatly set forth as follows: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 2:5. “Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body.” “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom.” Colossians 3:15, 16. It's as though God takes you by the hand and tugs, saying, “Let's go . . . to heaven!” Don't resist Him, don't squirm away.

It's a joy for a pupil to have a good teacher who makes the learning process easy. Our Saviour is also our Teacher: “The grace of God that brings

salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” Titus 2:11-14, NIV.

That word no may seem to be the hardest word you have ever pronounced, but even here God does not abandon you to stumble along on your own until you say it right. “The grace of God” will teach you how to say it! Can you imagine better news than that? Note that the secret you have to learn is to remember how Christ “gave himself for us to redeem us.” We are never farther away than a hair's breadth from that cross!

And note also that it is He who does the “purifying” of a people “for Himself . . . eager to do what is good.” Titus 2:14, NIV. “It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” Philippians 2:13. Let Him do it!

Our own individual effort is, of course, useless apart from the grace of Christ, but if we don't lose sight of Him being with us, our part is always easy.

Was His part easy for Him in Gethsemane or on His cross? No, His stern battle with self in the garden and on the cross was so severe that He sweat drops of blood; even His very heart was ruptured in His final agony. Does that mean that he was telling us a lie when He said, “My burden is light”?

No. The burden He speaks of in Matthew 11:30 is simply the burden that we carry; His was infinitely heavy. The faith that works by love (see Galatians 5:6) makes our burden light for us to carry, for we appreciate the heaviness it was to Him.

The only difficult thing in following Him, therefore, is the choice to surrender self to be “crucified with Christ.” Galatians 2:20. However, we are never called to be crucified alone—only with Him. It is infinitely easier for us to be crucified with Christ than it was for Him to be crucified alone for us.

Even if this still seems hard, don’t ever forget that it remains much harder to go on fighting against love like that and beating off the persistent leading of the Holy Spirit in order to be lost.

The lost lamb is wedged in the thorn bush on a dangerous cliff that wild stormy night. Will it rejoice when it is rescued by the self-sacrificing Good Shepherd? or will it squirm and resist and fight its Rescuer? The parable didn’t say. It’s for us to complete the story, for the lost little lamb has resisted its Shepherd now for many, many years.