

# What Does Islam Teach About Salvation?

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Because the Qur'an<sup>1</sup> teaches that, "The true religion with God is Islam"<sup>2</sup> this means for the Muslim that salvation is achieved only through submission to the teachings of Allah. Thus, salvation in Islam requires one must be a member of the Islamic faith. "Whoso desires another religion than Islam, it shall not be accepted of him; in the next world he shall be among the losers."<sup>3</sup> Thus: "But those who disbelieve, and die disbelieving—upon them shall rest the curse of God and the angels, and of men altogether; there indwelling forever; the chastisement shall not be lightened for them; no respite shall be given them."<sup>4</sup>

But, what exactly does the Muslim believe about salvation? Below we present four basic teachings that reveal what Islam teaches about salvation.

## ***A. Islam teaches that forgiveness is conditioned upon good works and Allah's choice of mercy.***

Islam is a religion of salvation by personal righteousness. In other words, the Muslim believes that by striving to please God and by doing good works, he will hopefully gain entrance to heaven through personal merit.

The Qur'an clearly teaches that salvation is achieved on the basis of good works. Considering the following statements:

...every soul shall be paid in full what it has earned,...<sup>5</sup>

...God loves those who cleanse themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Gardens of Eden, underneath which rivers flow, there indwelling forever; that is the recompense of the self-purified.<sup>7</sup>

Islam teaches that on the Day of Judgment one's good and evil deeds will be weighed on a scale. Good works are heavy and evil deeds are light. Thus, the person whose balances are heavy with good deeds will go to heaven, while the person whose scales are light will go to hell. The Qur'an asserts:

[In the Day of Judgment] they whose balances shall be heavy with good works, shall be happy; but they whose balances shall be light, are those who shall lose their souls, and shall remain in hell forever.<sup>8</sup>

With knowledge We will recount to them what they have done, for We are watching over all their actions. On that day, their deeds shall be

weighed with justice. Those whose scales are heavy shall triumph, but those whose scales are light shall lose their souls, because they have denied Our revelations.<sup>9</sup>

The Muslim assumes that his chances for heaven are good if he 1) accepts only the Muslim God Allah and his prophet Muhammad, 2) does good works and all that is required of him by Allah (e.g., the pillars of religion), and 3) if he is predestined to heaven by Allah's favor.

Unfortunately, given such requirements, one wonders if the Muslim can have any assurance of salvation at all. Abdiyah Akbar Abdul-Haqq comments that the Islamic reliance on good works is bound to leave any Muslim who seeks for personal assurance of salvation "utterly confused"<sup>10</sup> because in this life no Muslim can ever know if his good works are finally sufficient—let alone if he is predestined to Allah's favor.

William Miller was a missionary to Muslims in Iran from 1919 to 1962. He discusses the Islamic view of salvation, its dependence upon good works and personal merit and the uncertainty this tends to bring to the heart of every Muslim:

Islam has no Savior. Mohammad is rarely called Savior. He is said to have brought God's laws to men, and they, by keeping those laws, must satisfy God's requirements and win His approval.... Since many Muslims realize that they [fall short of Koranic standards],... they recite extra prayers in addition to those required for each day, they make gifts to charity, and go on pilgrimages not only to Mecca, but also to other sacred shrines, in order to gain merit, and if possible, balance their account with God. But since God does not make known how the accounts of His stand, a Muslim facing death does not know whether he is to go to paradise or to hell. After all, the decision is made by the arbitrary will of God, and no one can predict what that decision will be.... And so the Muslim lives and dies, not sure of his final salvation.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the Muslim concept of forgiveness is unlike that of biblical Christianity. In biblical Christianity, forgiveness is based upon the death of Christ on the cross as a *past* action. This means that once a person receives Christ as his or her Savior, all of his or her sins are forgiven and each one is *guaranteed* a place in heaven: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me *has eternal life and will not be condemned*" (Jn. 5:24); and "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can *never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time*" (1 Pet. 1:3-5).

In Islam, there is no atonement for sin—no propitiatory basis for forgiveness of sins. The Bible, however, teaches of Jesus that "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins." Because of His great love for us, Jesus willingly died in our place (Jn. 10:18)—taking the penalty due our sin—so that God could freely forgive us.

Indeed, “God presented him [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement” and “God did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:25-26). In Islam, however, Allah simply forgives whom he chooses to forgive. Again, this forgiveness is predicated upon *both* personal merit and Allah’s choice of mercy. Again, no one ever knows if one’s personal works are sufficient to forgive one’s sins or if Allah will finally be merciful to him. Muslims certainly hope they will be saved. But the following statements in the Qur’an, as well as others, indicate the conditional nature of Islamic forgiveness:

...And whosoever of you turns from his religion, and dies disbelieving—their works have failed in this world and the next; those are the inhabitants of the Fire; therein they shall dwell forever.<sup>12</sup>

God has pardoned what is past; but whoever offends again, God will take vengeance on him; God is All-mighty, Vengeful.<sup>13</sup>

But this is contrary to what the Bible teaches—that full salvation comes solely by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ, who died for *all* the believer’s sins: “He forgave us *all* our sins” (Col. 2:13). The Bible also emphasizes that salvation does not come by good works or anything else we can do to please God on our own efforts: “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (Rom. 3:28). “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” (Eph. 2:8-9).

In contrast to the teachings of Islam, the Bible teaches that anyone who wishes may come to God, *freely* receive salvation, and *know* they are eternally saved. Jesus taught, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall *not* perish but *have* eternal life” (Jn. 3:16). The Apostle Peter taught, “The Lord... is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but *everyone* to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). Again, Jesus taught, “He who believes *has* eternal life” (Jn. 6:47) and “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink *without cost* from the spring of the water of life” (Rev. 21:6). The Apostle John emphasized, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may *know that you have eternal life*” (1 Jn. 5:13).

***B. Islam teaches that Jesus Christ was neither crucified nor resurrected; therefore salvation cannot possibly be had through faith in Jesus Christ.***

Islam rejects the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross. One reason for this is its view that man is basically good; thus, if men are not unredeemed sinners, they do not need a savior from sin, just good works, abstention from wickedness, and Allah’s favor. Also, Islam considers Jesus Christ one of Allah’s prophets, and it is unthinkable that God would permit one of His prophets to be crucified. Thus, the Muslim religion denies that Christ died upon the cross. The Qur’an teaches: “They denied the truth and uttered a monstrous falsehood.... They declared: ‘We have put to death the Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary; the apostle of Allah.’ They

did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did.”<sup>14</sup>

Because Muslims do not believe that Christ died on the cross, they are also forced to deny His resurrection. Ahmad Dedat is one of the leading public defenders of Islam. He claims the following:

Throughout the length and breath of the 27 books of the New Testament, there is not a single statement made by Jesus Christ that “I was dead, and I have come back from the dead.” The Christian has [wrongly] been belaboring the word resurrection. Again and again, by repetition, it is conveyed that it [the resurrection] is proving a fact.... [But] Jesus Christ never uttered the word that “I have come back from the dead,” in the 27 books of the New Testament, not once.<sup>15</sup>

But Mr. Dedat is wrong. On numerous occasions in the New Testament Jesus predicted both his death *and* his resurrection. For example, he told his disciples, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed *and on the third day be raised to life*” (Lk. 9:22). After His resurrection, He told His disciples that this was to fulfill the prophecies written about Him:

This was what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets *and* Psalms.... He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and *rise from the dead on the third day*, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations,....” (Luke 24:44-47)

Further, in Revelation 1:18, Jesus taught, “I am the Living One; *I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!*”

Muslims also say Jesus Christ will not return at the Second Coming. But in Matthew 16:27 and 25:31 and elsewhere Jesus also predicted His literal, physical return to earth to set up His millennial/eternal kingdom.

Dr. John Elder was a missionary to Muslims in Iran from 1922 to 1964. Among his scholarly works are eleven books in Persian and two in English. He discusses the Muslim rejection of the atonement and the reasons upon which it is based:

Like the doctrine of the death of Jesus, the ordinary Muslim completely rejects the doctrine of Jesus’ atonement for sin. He rejects it first on historical grounds. If Jesus survived the cross [i.e., never truly died], as the Muslim believes, then He could not have given His life to atone for man’s sins.

In the second place, the Muslim idea of God and His decrees recognizes no need for atonement. According to the doctrine of decrees, God determined the fate of all men from the beginning, and we are helpless to change it. This belief is taught in many places in the Qur’an....

A third reason why Muslims deny the possibility of an atonement is their belief that God does not love man, and indeed, is unaffected by man’s actions... any idea that God so loved the world that He gave His

only son is completely foreign to the Muslim mind... Thus, a pious Muslim is constantly performing acts which he explains by saying, "*savab darad*" (It is meritorious). Thus, he saves for most of his lifetime to make the Meccan pilgrimage; he gives money to help erect a mosque; he faithfully reads the Qur'an even though it be in a language he does not understand; and he prays the prescribed Arabic prayers.<sup>16</sup>

In conclusion, Muslims reject the biblical teaching that Christ died for their sins and, therefore, seek salvation by religious observance. Unfortunately, in doing so they deny their need for Christ and repudiate what Jesus and the Bible teach concerning His death: "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" and that "He Himself bore our sins in his body on the Cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness..." (Mt. 20:28; 1 Pt. 2:24).

### ***C. The concept of the loving God of the Bible is difficult for the Muslim to accept.***

As we have indicated, the God of Islam, Allah, is not ultimately a God of love. In Islam, Allah's love is not based on unconditional commitment and self sacrifice as is biblical love (1 Cor. 13:1-13). "But God *demonstrates* His own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). In Islam, Allah's love is based on conditional performance and/or divine decree. In Islamic theology, much like Buddhist philosophy, the concept of love seems to be primarily that of "mercy." It is more impersonal than personal.

Dr. J. Christy Wilson observes that the concept of God's love is foreign to Islamic thinking because of the extreme emphasis placed upon Allah's sovereign power and transcendence: "It should be said, however, that most Muslims will misunderstand and question the statement of the New Testament that 'God is love.' His power and sovereign transcendence over all creation are so emphasized in Islam that to call Him a God of love or to address Him as 'Father' would be far from Muslim thought."<sup>17</sup>

John Elder, cited above, comments, "In addition to the idea that God does not need men and therefore cannot love, the Muslim commonly cites two main problems in believing that God is love: the existence of sin and pain, and man's insignificance in the vastness of the universe."<sup>18</sup>

But again, the Bible teaches the Islamic view of God is wrong when it declares that "God *is* love" (1 John 4:16).

### ***D. Muslim salvation is fatalistic.***

The Muslim concept of forgiveness is conditioned upon good works. On the one hand, we find in the Qur'an the promise of heaven for those who do good. But on the other hand, the promise is conditional—one must possess the true religion of Islam, obey its precepts, and also find favor with Allah. But at this point Islam's predestination (in contrast to that of the Bible) appears to become fatalistic.

The largest apparent indeterminacy in the Muslim concept of salvation is Allah's predestination. The Qur'an teaches, "All things have we created after a fixed decree...."<sup>19</sup> Further, "God leads astray whomsoever He will; and He guides whomsoever He will...."<sup>20</sup> Abdiyah Akbar Abdul-Haqq observes, "There are several [Muslim] traditions also about the predestination of all things, including all good and bad actions and guided and misguided people.... Even if a person desires to choose God's guidance, he cannot do so without the prior choice of God in favor of his free choice. This is sheer determinism."<sup>21</sup>

Dr. Wilson comments, "The fifth article of faith is predestination,... the fact that everything that happens, either good or bad, is foreordained by the unchangeable decrees of Allah. It will be seen at once that this makes Allah the author of evil, a doctrine that most Muslim theologians hold."<sup>22</sup> The Qur'an teaches, for example, "And if a good thing visits them, they say, 'This is from God'; but if an evil thing visits them, they say, 'This is from thee.' Say: 'Everything is from God.'"<sup>23</sup>

And,

The man whom Allah guides is rightly guided, but he who is led astray by Allah shall surely be lost. As for those that deny Our revelations, *We have predestined for hell many jinn and many men...* We will lead them step by step to ruin... None can guide the people whom Allah leads astray. He leaves them blundering about in their wickedness.... Say: "I have not the power to acquire benefits or to avert evil from myself, except by the will of Allah."<sup>24</sup>

At first glance, there does appear to be one way a Muslim can guarantee his salvation. This is found in connection with the Muslim concept of jihad or holy war: achieving security of salvation requires death in battle: "If you are slain or die in God's way,... it is unto God you shall be mustered...."<sup>25</sup>

When you meet the unbelievers in the battlefields strike off their heads and, when you have laid them low, bind your captives firmly.... Thus shall you do.... As for those who are slain in the cause of Allah,... he will admit them to the Paradise he has made known to them.<sup>26</sup>

Allah has given those that fight with their goods and their persons a higher rank than those who stay at home... The unbelievers are your sworn enemies... Seek out your enemies relentlessly... You shall not plead for traitors... Allah does not love the treacherous or the sinful.<sup>27</sup>

In the above material, it first seems that the Muslim is promised heaven for death in battle. But we discover that even this security of salvation is apparently conditioned on something else—in this case, bravery:

O believers, when you encounter the unbelievers marching to battle, turn not your backs to them. Whoso turns his back that day to them, unless withdrawing to fight again or removing to join another host, he is laden with the burden of God's anger, and his refuge is Gehenna—an evil homecoming!<sup>28</sup>

Thus, even in the guarantee of heaven through death in a holy war, the Muslim promise of salvation appears to remain provisional. And none can deny that unnumbered Muslims, trusting in Islam to save them and take them to heaven, have instead been sent to their deaths in the jihads of history and today. They have been sent to eternity without Christ.

### ***E. Do Christians Have Salvation According to Islam?***

Some have claimed that, according to Islam, Christians can remain Christians and still inherit salvation. They also claim that the God of Islam and the God of the Bible are the same God. But to the contrary, the Qur'an teaches that only if Christians convert to Islam and remain good Muslims will they have the opportunity for salvation. If Christians reject the Qur'an, they are classified as unbelievers and their destiny is an eternal hell:

God guides not the people of the unbelievers.... They are unbelievers who say, "God is the Messiah, Mary's Son."...The Messiah [Jesus] said, "Children of Israel, serve God, [Allah] my Lord and your Lord. Verily, whoso associates with God anything, God shall prohibit him entrance to Paradise, and his refuge shall be the Fire; and wrong doers shall have no helpers." They are unbelievers who say, "God is the Third of Three." No god is there but One God. If they refrain not from what they say, there shall afflict those of them that disbelieve a painful chastisement....<sup>29</sup>

In the above citation, we see that (1) Christians who believe that Jesus is the Messiah are classified as unbelievers; (2) that those who believe in the Trinity (that "God is the Third of Three") are unbelievers, and (3) that Christians who believe that Christ is God (those who associate God with Jesus) will be consigned to hell. Thus, if Christians do not turn from their errors and accept Islam they are subject to the strictest judgment:

...[in war] kill those who join other gods with God [the phrase in other translations reads "kill those who are idolaters, pagans"] wherever ye shall find them; and seize them, besiege them, and lay wait for them with every kind of ambush: but if they shall convert, and observe prayer, and pay the obligatory alms, then let them go their way, for God is Gracious, Merciful.<sup>30</sup>

Do they not know that whosoever opposes God and His Messenger—for him awaits the fire of Gehenna, therein to dwell forever?<sup>31</sup>

Verily, God will not forgive the union of other gods with Himself!... And He who uniteth gods with God hath devised a great wickedness.... the flame of Hell is their sufficing *punishment!* Those who disbelieve our signs we will in the end cast into the fire: so oft as their skins shall be well burnt, we will change them for fresh skins, that they may taste the torment.<sup>32</sup>

Ali's translation at Sura 9:17 reads, of those who "join gods with God.... In Fire shall they dwell."

In conclusion, by accepting the biblical nature of God as trinitarian, Christians

show themselves to be unbelievers destined for eternal judgment. Thus, Islam does not accept that Christians can have salvation if they remain Christian.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Various spelled Koran, Quran, et al.
- <sup>2</sup> A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (NY: MacMillan, 1976), p. 75.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344; cf., pp. 102, 105.
- <sup>8</sup> Sura 23:104-105 in the George Sale translation (1734) as cited by Phillip H. Lochhaas, *How To Respond to Islam* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1981), p. 24.
- <sup>9</sup> N. J. Dawood, *The Quran* (Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1972), p. 241.
- <sup>10</sup> Abdiyah Akbar Abdul-Haqq, *Sharing Your Faith With A Muslim* Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1980), p.164.
- <sup>11</sup> William Miller, *A Christian's Response to Islam* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977), pp. 82-83.
- <sup>12</sup> Arberry, p. 58.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.
- <sup>14</sup> Dawood, p. 372.
- <sup>15</sup> Josh McDowell and John Gilchrist, *The Islam Debate* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1983), p. 172.
- <sup>16</sup> John Elder, *The Biblical Approach to the Muslim* (Fort Washington, PA: Worldwide Evangelization Crusade, 1978), pp. 94-96.
- <sup>17</sup> J. Christy Wilson, *Introducing Islam* (NY: Friendship Press, 1965, rev.), p. 20.
- <sup>18</sup> Elder, p. 59.
- <sup>19</sup> J. M. Rodwell, *The Koran* (NY: Dutton, 1977), p. 78.
- <sup>20</sup> Arberry, p. 274.
- <sup>21</sup> Abdul-Haqq, p. 159.
- <sup>22</sup> Wilson, p. 24.
- <sup>23</sup> Arberry, p. 111.
- <sup>24</sup> Dawood, p. 256, emphasis added.
- <sup>25</sup> Arberry, p. 93; cf. p. 98.
- <sup>26</sup> Dawood, pp. 212-122.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 367-368.
- <sup>28</sup> Arberry, pp. 198-199.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140
- <sup>30</sup> Rodwell, p. 471.
- <sup>31</sup> Arberry, p. 214.
- <sup>32</sup> Rodwell, p. 417.