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Will Judas Be in Heaven?

"Do you think Judas will be in heaven?"

The man who asked me that question sat manacled to the table in Los Angeles County Jail, sentenced to life without parole for the brutal killing of his mother and father. He carried in his hands an underlined copy of a book I had written about Judas which had been given him by one of the volunteer chaplains.

"Can Judas really be forgiven for what he did? I did something worse than Judas, but somehow I believe that if there is hope for him there may be hope for me."

We talked for an hour. He wondered how Jesus could ever forgive Judas and whether what he himself had done might finally be unforgivable, even by God. He pursued the question to the point where I finally said, "Let me ask you a question. Suppose that when you die God confronts you with your parents whom you murdered and tells them that they now have the power to make a determination as to your eternal destiny. These are the parents whom you murdered. What will they say?"

He paused for a long while and finally said slowly, "My mother will forgive me, for she loved me, I am sure of that." To which I replied, "Then you know that God can forgive you, for he has taken upon himself your guilt through the death and resurrection of Christ."

Difficult as it was for him to internalize the reality of God's forgiveness, the case of Judas became a door through which he could walk.

I began musing about Judas years ago. It began with a sermon I preached in the middle 1960s titled “Judas as an Answer to Prayer.” After praying all night, Jesus then called all of his disciples and out of them chose the twelve including, as Luke records it, “Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor” (Luke 6:16). I pondered the significance of that choice in light of the night spent in prayer. One could well assume that the purpose of the night spent in prayer was to seek divine guidance in the choosing of the twelve. I will leave for another time some reflections on what this might say about prayer in our own lives. For Jesus, it certainly enabled him to accept even the betrayal by Judas at the end as bracketed by his prayer which placed all of life and destiny in the hands of the Father.

The thought of Judas being in heaven is what triggered the request from the prisoner to talk with me. As a convicted murderer, who did not deny the act, he now thought of his life beyond death and what it would mean to face the judgment of God for his act.

I presented this encounter as a case for discussion with my seminary students. There was general agreement that if the prisoner had confessed the sin of murder and trusted Christ for forgiveness he could be assured of eternal life with God in heaven. While some questioned the authenticity of such a conversion under these circumstances, it was agreed that only God knows the heart and that there is always some degree of ambiguity in the human profession of faith, especially when it has not yet been tested as to its endurance and growth. We were reminded of the conversion of Carla Faye Tucker, the woman in Texas who had participated in a terrible crime of murder and only later in prison under sentence of death did she accept Christ as savior and profess a transformation of life. In her case several years passed by before she was executed during which she taught Bible classes in prison and demonstrated a consistent testimony to a new life in Christ. Even the brother of one of the victims affirmed the genuineness of her conversion

and, himself being a Christian, expressed confidence that she was forgiven by God and is now in heaven after her execution.

Setting aside the ambiguity regarding the prisoner with whom I had my conversation, the theological issue in our discussion of this case emerged when I raised the matter of the victims of this man's murder, his own parents. Assuming that his parents had given no evidence or indication of their faith in Christ prior to their death, is it possible that their son, the murderer, would go to heaven based on his conversion to Christ while his parents would end up in hell?

Some students agreed, though reluctantly, that this indeed would be the case assuming that they had no opportunity to repent and receive Christ as savior before their murder. Their response was determined by the conviction that only those who personally accept Christ in this life can be saved. Furthermore, some added, the idea that Judas could be in heaven was itself an unwarranted assumption given the fact that he not only betrayed Jesus but also committed suicide. One's eternal destiny is determined by one's relationship to Christ and this must take place before death. Otherwise, they said, what motive would there be for taking the gospel of Christ to the unsaved?

Other students were offended by this, saying that it would be outrageous for God to save the murderer while sending the victims to hell. When pressed, they had no basis for their feelings other than it "just didn't seem right!"

My own musings on this issue cause me to reflect upon how theologians in the past might respond to my case scenario. Calvin would no doubt respond by reminding us that the eternal destiny of every human person is determined by the decree of God prior to the creation of the world. "All things being at God's disposal," wrote Calvin "and the decision of salvation or death belonging to him, he orders all things by his counsel and decree in such a manner, that some men

are born devoted from the womb to certain death, that his name may be glorified in their destruction" (*Institutes.*, III, 23, 6). In other words, Calvin held that every person is predestined by God to either salvation or reprobation (hell) by the sovereign decree of God. It is not the human act of repentance and faith that determines salvation, but God alone, and that apart from any subjective human response. In effect, the death of Christ on the cross did not alter the number of persons ultimately destined for either heaven or hell by so much as one.

Calvin would warn us not to assume that the son by his contrition, remorse and faith could alter the divine decree concerning his eternal destiny. If God had indeed predestined him for eternal life then the son could not change that even by his heinous act of murder. If in fact, he did express repentance and faith in Christ this may have been the work of God's Spirit to make efficacious in his life what God had already predestined in his case. So also with regard to the parents, Calvin would remind us. Their apparent lack of saving faith would in itself not disannul their eternal salvation if God had predestined them for salvation. In other words, we really do not know and must bow before the sovereignty of God rather than to speculate. Because we do not know, Calvin would say, we should offer the gospel to all so that God's predestination can produce faith where it has been determined for those elect to salvation. For those not elect to salvation, even their profession of faith, as in the case of the son, would have no eternal significance.

Calvin, of course had his own pastoral concerns when it came to assurance of salvation. If our eternal destiny depends upon the genuineness of our subjective repentance and faith, then we would always be cast back upon the weakness of our faith and the subjective doubts about our repentance as a sufficient condition for forgiveness. Assuming that our faith, weak though it

may be, is produced in our hearts by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit, then we can have confidence that we are the elect due to God's own decree and his sovereign will.

When applied to this particular case, Calvin's solution to the problem raised as much consternation as it brought comfort. For those who accepted Calvin's theory of predestination, it seemed to resolve the issue at the intellectual level. Whatever feelings one had about the possible unfairness of such an arrangement were to be set aside, as Calvin himself suggested, citing the Apostle Paul's statement, "But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is molded say to the one who molds it, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use" (Romans 9:20,21)?

Jacobus Arminius, a generation later than Calvin, could not accept the relentless logic of Divine predestination. Arguing for the freedom of human will, despite the sinful condition of the human heart, Arminius placed the ultimate responsibility for one's eternal destiny upon each person's decision for or against Christ after hearing the Gospel. According to Arminius, the doctrine of divine predestination and election as taught by Calvin is "repugnant to the nature of God" (who is merciful and just), "contrary to the nature of man" (who has freedom of the will), "injurious to the glory of God," and "dishonorable to Jesus Christ our Savior."

If we were to ask Arminius to comment on the scenario above, he would encourage us to believe that the son who murdered his parents could truly be forgiven by God through repentance and faith in Christ. If he truly exercised freedom of will to receive the grace of Christ while still alive, he could well have been pardoned by God and received in to heaven.

As to the parents, however, the ambiguity of their relation with God due to lack of evidence of saving faith in Christ, creates a barrier to further speculation. Doubtless Arminius

would say what many pastors who follow in his tradition are forced to speak words of comfort at the graveside to those who grieve without placing the departed in heaven—We commit the soul of this loved one to his Creator with confidence that the judge of all the earth will do right. In other words, believe what you will or what you need about the eternal destiny of your loved one, just don't ask me to justify it theologically.

This, of course, leaves us with the tormenting question with which we began this inquiry—is it possible that the murderer will be in heaven while his victims go to hell because they did not have the same opportunity that he had to receive and believe the gospel?

The debate between Calvin and Arminius concerning divine sovereignty and human free will has never been resolved by theologians. The scenario I have presented only serves to tease out the inherent problems with each, leaving pastors caught on the horns of a theological dilemma.

The modern theologian, Karl Barth, was not unaware of this and suggested a totally different approach. Barth did not begin (as Calvin did) with abstract concepts concerning divine sovereignty and the decrees of double predestination, nor (as Arminius did) with human concepts of free will and individual choice. Rather, Barth began with God's act of self revelation in Jesus Christ as the only source of our knowledge of God's actions with regard to the human situation and eternal destiny. As the incarnate Son of God, Barth argued that Jesus assumed on behalf of all humans both the fatal separation from God caused by sin and the hopeful promise of reconciliation through his own death and resurrection.

If one must speak of election and predestination, Barth argued, then we can only see this as determined and fulfilled through Jesus Christ as the elect one, both to reprobation and to salvation. The three-fold act of God, understood theologically as the trinity, can now be

understood as follows. God the Father is the Creator of the world and humankind, loving the world and not willing that any should perish (John 3:16). God the Son is the Reconciler of all humanity through his incarnate life, death and resurrection, taking upon himself the consequence of sin so that the world may be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:18-19). God the Holy Spirit is the Redeemer, who awakens those “dead in sin” to new life in Christ.

Consequently, Paul says of himself, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:19-20). All human beings have been crucified with Christ, whether they know it or not. But not every human being can say with Paul, nonetheless, “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” Barth has reminded us that the death and resurrection of Christ did not redeem all humanity, but created in Christ the objective basis of reconciliation between God and humanity. It is the Holy Spirit who redeems persons through the spiritual transformation from death to life: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ that person does not belong to Christ (Ro. 8:9).

Does this mean that all humans, being reconciled to God are therefore redeemed? No, says Barth. What it does mean is that God has taken upon himself the fate of eternal estrangement and so removed death as an obstacle to the possibility of redemption of all. Will all be eventually redeemed asks Barth? Not necessarily, he argues, for this would be to presume upon God’s freedom. We can think out theologically what God has revealed to us through Christ, but we cannot speculate beyond that which is revealed in Christ. God is not under some logical

necessity to redeem all evil, says Barth. There can never be a time when God surrenders his freedom to some “inner necessity” of his being to satisfy our logical demand for an answer.

So what does this mean with regard to the scenario described above? As far as Barth is concerned, we are left with both a promise and a warning. The promise is that God has destroyed the power of death to determine eternal destiny for human beings through the resurrection of Christ. It is not death that determines our eternal destiny but God. And the God who will sit in judgment of all after death is Christ himself. All must appear before the judgment seat of Christ following death, says the Apostle Paul (2 Cor. 5:10). The warning is not to speculate or predetermine what God might achieve with regard to actual redemption of those for whom Christ has reconciled through his own death and resurrection. If some humans are finally judged to be irredeemably evil, that remains for Christ to determine.

In presenting this case to my students I pressed the point of the final judgment where Christ will render the decision with regard to every person. Is the verdict already determined before Christ assumes the seat of judgment? Calvin would, of course say, yes; Christ cannot but dispense the judgment already determined by divine predestination. Arminius, would also assent, on different grounds. Those who do not exercise their free will to receive Christ before death have sealed their fate. It only remains for the verdict to be read.

But is it not possible that the judgment rendered by Christ will be an actual decision or determination grounded in the freedom of God? Is it not possible that the judgment of Christ will be an actual determination rather than simply reading the verdict already determined? If so, then there remains after death a final determination of one’s eternal destiny, surely taking into account one’s life before death, but not totally determined by that.

Evangelical theologian Donald Bloesch suggests that those who have died without having an opportunity to accept Christ will then have that chance: "Salvation is fixed at death for those who are in Christ, but the condemnation of those who have never known about Christ is not decided at death. . . .I affirm not the doctrine of a second chance for salvation after death but the universality of a first chance. Those who were unable to hear the gospel in this life will surely be given such an opportunity in the Word of Spirit."

Bloesch would thus respond to the scenario by suggesting that the parents who were murdered by their son may well have the same opportunity as the son to receive the good news of Jesus Christ. What Bloesch has done is to push the Arminian position of human free will beyond death as a way of resolving the tormenting question posed in our case scenario. The suggestion by Bloesch appears as a fragment of his own "musing" without any theological basis offered.

What Barth has offered, whether or not one agrees, is a solid theological argument for the freedom of God to make a final determination of human destiny not based on a theory of predestination (Calvin) nor upon human free will (Arminius), but upon God's own act through Jesus Christ by which the power of death to determine human destiny has been once and for all overcome through the death and resurrection of God's own Son, Jesus Christ.

Barth leaves us with no clear answer to the question of the eternal destiny of both the son who murdered his parents and the parents who were the victim. Instead, Barth points us to the three-fold work of God as outlined above. The work of God the Father has resulted in the incarnation of the Son as a vicarious representation of all humanity. This is in accord with the Apostle Paul's analogy in which he states that through the first man, Adam, death as a result of sin is the condition of all humanity while life has come to all through the grace of the one man,

Jesus Christ (Romans 5:12-17). The work of the Son through death and resurrection has resulted in the reconciliation of the world to God, whereby God no longer “counts trespasses against them” (2 Cor. 5:18-19). The work of the Holy Spirit creates a new nature in those who are transformed from “death to life” in Jesus Christ. It is this work of the Spirit that may well continue beyond death, not merely human free will.

So, will Judas be in heaven? Not really. That is, not the Judas who is the betrayer, but possibly a “born anew” Judas through the power of the Holy Spirit in the encounter with Christ which occurs after death (2 Cor. 5:10). Will Ray Anderson be in heaven? Not the Ray Anderson who is “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:2) but a “born anew” Ray Anderson through the power of the Holy Spirit, of which I have present assurance of a future reality, the “pledge of our inheritance” (Eph. 1:13-14). Both Judas and I will appear before the final judgment seat of Christ. I “fear no condemnation” (Rom. 8:1), and I would like to think that this fear will also be removed in the case of Judas.

The man who murdered his parents will meet them again at the judgment seat of Christ. Thank God it is the same Jesus Christ who was an advocate for the condemned, estranged and yes, victims of the sins of others, who will make the final decision. Is this not good news? Think about it!

Sources:

The reference to my book on Judas is, The Gospel According to Judas: Is There a Limit to God's Forgiveness? Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991

The references to Jacobus Arminius can be found in Arminius, Writings, 3 volumes, translation by James Nichols. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956, I:221ff.

For Barth's doctrine of election, see Church Dogmatics, II/1 pp. 3-194. On his concept of double predestination as completed solely in Jesus Christ see, pp. 162-167; for Barth's doctrine of

justification and sanctification as completed in Jesus Christ for all persons, *de jure*, but not completed in fact (*de facto*) for all persons, see Church Dogmatics IV/1, pp. 145-148; IV/2, pp. 511ff.

The quotation by Donald Bloesch is from, Donald Bloesch, Theological Notebook: Volume II, 1964-1968. Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1991, pp. 82; 148