

## THREE LIES PEOPLE TELL ABOUT GOD

People lie to us all the time. Advertisers tell you their product will make you happy, popular, successful, or attractive to the opposite sex. Politicians announce the wonderful things they have no intention of doing if they are elected. Some people tell little white lies to make you feel better. Others lie to deceive you. We even lie to ourselves, especially about the inevitability of growing old and dying.<sup>1</sup> But the most destructive lies people tell are about God, because they have eternal implications. Let's look at three of them.

**Lie #1: God wants to make you wealthy.** Preachers who just want your money will assure you if you give to God, He will make you wealthy—or at least comfortably well off. These prosperity preachers may also tell you that you will receive good health and an easy life in the bargain. They often quote what Jesus says in Matthew 19:29:

“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life.”<sup>2</sup>

But they are wrong. First of all, history refutes their claim. Jesus and His followers did not live lives of wealth and ease. Instead, they lived simple lives and traveled extensively to spread the Gospel. The early Christians in Jerusalem—where the Christian church was born—were so poor that the apostle Paul raised money in Asia Minor and Greece to help them.<sup>3</sup> Nor did the early Christians have an easy life. Jesus was crucified, and many of His apostles were also martyred because of their preaching about Jesus.<sup>4</sup> For three centuries after Christ's death, many Christians lost their property, their freedom, and even their lives for the crime of being a Christian.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this topic, read “Why You Should Consider Christianity,” on this web site.

<sup>2</sup> See also Mark 10:29-30 and Luke 18:29-30. All quotes are from the *New American Standard Bible* translation.

<sup>3</sup> See 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15; and Romans 15:25-26. See also Acts 19:21.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the lives and deaths of Jesus' apostles, see “The Eleven Apostles Not Named Iscariot,” on this web site.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the persecution of Christianity through 323 A.D., see “Roman Persecution of Christianity,” on this web site.

The life of the apostle Paul is an excellent example of the suffering faced by the early Christians.

Paul traveled throughout the eastern Roman Empire—Palestine (i.e., Israel), Syria, Cyprus, Asia Minor (now Turkey), Macedonia (northern Greece), and Achaia (southern Greece). He also probably traveled to Crete and Spain. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes the hardships he had to endure:

Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine *lashes*. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. *I have been* on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from *my* countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; *I have been* in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.<sup>6</sup>

Paul tells us that he learned to be content even when he was in humble surroundings and had little food.<sup>7</sup> And he also had to endure what he called a “thorn in the flesh,”<sup>8</sup> which was probably some type of chronic health problem. Ultimately, Paul was beheaded in Rome because of his Christian faith.<sup>9</sup> If faith in Christ is supposed to bring health, wealth, and an easy life, Paul and the other early followers of Jesus somehow missed out.

This silly idea that God wants Christians to be wealthy is also inconsistent with the attitude of Jesus and the New Testament writers toward money. For example, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews gives this advice: “*Make sure that* your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have. . . .”<sup>10</sup> And Paul warns us that:

the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:24-27

<sup>7</sup> See Philippians 4:11-12.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

<sup>9</sup> For more on the life and death of Paul, see “Paul (Saul) of Tarsus” on this web site.

<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 13:5

<sup>11</sup> 1 Timothy 6:10; in a similar vein, one of the qualifications for an elder is that he be “free from the love of money.” See 1 Timothy 3:3.

Jesus told the rich, young ruler to give away all of his possessions to the poor, so that he would have treasure in heaven.<sup>12</sup> Jesus gave similar advice to His own followers, telling them not to horde earthly possessions,<sup>13</sup> but instead to give them away:

“Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”<sup>14</sup>

Jesus told us to not even be concerned about food and clothing<sup>15</sup>—the very necessities of life—but instead to “‘seek His kingdom, and these things will be added to you.’”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Jesus seems to say that Christianity is opposed to wealth—or perhaps, the desire for wealth:

“No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”<sup>17</sup>

And Jesus said to His disciples, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”<sup>18</sup>

Jesus knew that the wealthy would be strongly tempted to seek their happiness and security through money rather than God. In this way, wealth impedes the development of the relationship God longs to have with us, for He

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22

<sup>13</sup> See Matthew 6:19: “‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.’”

<sup>14</sup> Luke 12:33-34; see also Matthew 6:20-21

<sup>15</sup> Luke 12:22-30 and Matthew 6:25-32

<sup>16</sup> Luke 12:31; similarly, see Matthew 6:33

<sup>17</sup> Luke 16:13; similarly, see Matthew 6:24.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 19:23-24; similarly, see Mark 10:23-25 and Luke 18:24-25; of course, Jesus also assures us that the rich can be saved, for “‘with God all things are possible.’” (Matthew 19:26; Mark 10:27; Luke 18:27)

insists that we make Him the most important thing in our lives.<sup>19</sup> That cannot happen so long as money occupies that top spot. Furthermore, money is only useful in this earthly life, but Christianity focuses on eternal life, too. As Paul said: “If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, making us wealthy often runs counter to God’s interests. So why would He be eager to inflict riches upon us?

However, this does not mean that Matthew 19:29 is a lie, for “ ‘God is not a man, that He should lie. . . .’ ”<sup>21</sup> Anyone who leaves home or family for God *will* receive many times as much, because she will become part of the much larger family of God and will be welcomed into the homes of God’s many true followers. And that is a reward greater than any promised by the prosperity preachers.

**Lie #2: God punishes us in this life.** Another lie that too many Christians (and non-Christians, also) accept—either explicitly or implicitly—is that God punishes us in this life for the evils we do and/or the mistakes we make. When something terrible happens in their lives, they immediately wonder what they did to cause God to inflict such a calamity on them. Jesus’ contemporaries thought this way, but Jesus refused to buy into this idea. When His disciples asked whether a man had been born blind because of his parents’ sin or because of his own sin, Jesus responded: “ ‘*It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.*’ ”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Jesus refuted the idea that the victims of two misfortunes of His day had been punished by God for their sins:

Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. And Jesus said to them, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were *greater* sinners than all *other* Galileans because they suffered this *fate*? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were *worse* culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The most important of God’s commandments is to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. See Mark 12:28-30, Matthew 22:36-38, and Luke 10:25-27.

<sup>20</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:19; see also Ecclesiastes 2:1-11, which points out that wealth and possessions cannot bring happiness or fulfillment.

<sup>21</sup> Numbers 23:19; similarly, Paul tells us in Titus 1:2 that God “cannot lie.”

<sup>22</sup> John 9:3

<sup>23</sup> Luke 13:1-5

While the Old Testament often speaks of God punishing individuals and nations in this life because of their bad behavior,<sup>24</sup> the New Testament is curiously silent on that subject. Instead, the New Testament focuses on God's judgment *in the next life*—life after death.<sup>25</sup> Of course, people who break man's laws are punished in this life, but such punishment comes from God only in the very indirect sense that the authorities who enforce those laws owe their positions to God.<sup>26</sup> As a general rule, the New Testament writers do not suggest that God inflicts earthly punishment for bad behavior, and the exceptions to this are very limited and specific.

One such exception is Paul's reference to Christians who suffer because they have failed to respect the importance of the Lord's Supper:<sup>27</sup>

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See the article, "Is Yahweh an Ogre?" on this web site.

<sup>25</sup> For example, see Matthew 25:31-46, where Jesus speaks of God's eternal judgment.

2 Thessalonians 1:6-10 speaks of God punishing those who are persecuting the Thessalonian Christians, but the punishment is "eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord" (2 Thessalonians 1:9), which clearly refers to the afterlife. In addition, the time of this punishment is not the present, but "when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels," (2 Thessalonians 1:7), a reference to His Second Coming. Romans 2:2-10 speaks of God's judgment upon the unrighteous, but in the context of eternal life. (See Romans 2:7.) Many other examples could be cited from the New Testament.

<sup>26</sup> See Romans 13:1-3. And see 1 Peter 2:13-15.

<sup>27</sup> The Lord's Supper, also known as the Communion, commemorates Jesus' last night before his crucifixion, when he used bread and wine to symbolize his body and blood, and asked His disciples to eat and drink "in remembrance of Me." See Luke 22:19-20 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; see also Matthew 26:26-28 and Mark 14:22-24.

<sup>28</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:27-32

Two other exceptions are found in Revelation, where John threatens the false prophetess Jezebel (and her followers) with sickness,<sup>29</sup> and then warns the Christians of Laodicea that the Lord will “reprove and discipline” them to shake them out of their arrogance and complacency.<sup>30</sup> But note how limited each of these exceptions is. Revelation threatens punishment only toward a specific group, and then adds a vague warning about the Lord’s “discipline,” while Paul’s warning addresses only those who profane the Communion meal. As such, these exceptions have only limited application to Christians generally, and none to non-Christians.

Now to be sure, the New Testament does speak of Jesus and His followers suffering, and especially suffering persecution.<sup>31</sup> But this suffering cannot be equated with punishment from God. Indeed, most of this suffering is unwarranted and unjust, and yet also a cause for rejoicing:

“Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”<sup>32</sup>

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope. . . .<sup>33</sup>

Suffering can result from a variety of causes,<sup>34</sup> including our own actions, but punishment from God is rarely, if ever, the reason for our suffering.

**Lie #3: God will let you into Heaven if your good works outweigh your bad deeds.** I remember my mother telling me that she was raised to believe that God kept a record of everything she did—good and bad—and that her eternal destiny

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<sup>29</sup> Revelation 2:20-23

<sup>30</sup> Revelation 3:19: “ ‘Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.’ ”

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Matthew 5:11, 5:44, 10:23, 13:21, 16:21, 17:12, 23:34, 24:9; Mark 4:17, 8:31, 9:12; Luke 9:22, 11:49, 17:25, 21:12, 22:15, 24:26, 24:46; John 15:20, 16:33; Acts 3:18, 5:40-41, 8:1, 9:15-16, 11:19, 13:50, 17:3, 26:23; Romans 5:3, 8:17, 8:35, 12:12, 12:14; 2 Corinthians 1:4-9; Galatians 1:1; Philippians 1:29; 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 3:3-4; 2 Timothy 1:12, 2:3, 2:9; Hebrews 10:32-39; 1 Peter 2:19-21, 3:14, 3:17, 4:12-16, 4:19, 5:9-10; Revelation 1:9, 2:9-10.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew 5:11-12

<sup>33</sup> Romans 5:3-4

<sup>34</sup> For more on this topic, read “Why Do Bad Things Happen?” on this web site.

would be determined by whether she had more marks on the “Good” side of the ledger than on the “Bad” side. What a tragedy that many people seem to accept this view of God. People who believe this lie will waste their whole lives in a vain effort to balance out their failings with good deeds. Or they will simply give up in despair, realizing at some point that we can never do enough to earn God’s love or approval. The good news of Christianity is that we don’t have to. God is not a divine scale, weighing our good works against our bad behavior. He is instead a loving Father, who stands ready and eager to forgive us for all of our wrongdoing, and to welcome us back with open arms.<sup>35</sup> There is only one catch: we must return to Him of our own free will, for He will not, and cannot, compel us. God wants our love, but love must be freely given.<sup>36</sup>

Many New Testament verses teach this truth, but let’s begin with one of the most famous—John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” The word translated “believes” is the Greek word, *pisteuô*, the meaning of which is really closer to our English words “trust” or “surrender.” It connotes giving our lives to God wholeheartedly. A related concept is that of repentance, which translates the Greek word, *metanoëô*, meaning to turn back or change direction. When we repent, we turn back to God and change the direction of our lives. The New Testament often speaks of the need for repentance,<sup>37</sup> just as it speaks of the need to trust God and surrender our lives to Him. These concepts are all interrelated—we cannot truly do one without the others.

When we turn back and surrender to God, we are immediately forgiven for the wrongs we have done and given the free gift of eternal life. This forgiveness and salvation are not anything we deserve. We don’t receive eternal life because we go to church every Sunday or because we do a lot of good deeds. We receive salvation because God loves us and wants to give it to us. This is grace—that is, unmerited favor. Because of His love for us, God gives us what we need, not what we deserve.

We see this truth expressed throughout the New Testament. As Paul says in his letter to the Romans: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>38</sup> Or again, from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians:

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<sup>35</sup> For more on this topic, see “Our Father” on this web site.

<sup>36</sup> For more on this topic, read “For God So Loved . . . Well, Wait a Minute” on this web site.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Matthew 3:2, 4:17; Mark 1:15, 6:12; Luke 13:3, 13:5; Acts 2:38, 3:19, 8:22, 17:30, 26:20.

<sup>38</sup> Romans 6:23

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>39</sup>

God's eagerness to save us, without regard to our own merit, is the point of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. <sup>40</sup> The younger son went away and wasted his money on profligate living, but finally decided to return home. Now his father (who is of course God) did not come after the boy when he left, but as soon as he got close to home the father was not merely willing to forgive, but eager to do so—running to meet his son as he approached. The son did not have to do any good deeds to earn his father's forgiveness; the boy merely returned to his father, and received a wonderful reception. The same is true for us. When we repent and turn back to God, we are immediately accepted by Him, and Heaven rejoices: “ ‘I tell you that in the same way, there will be *more* joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.’ ” <sup>41</sup>

This idea of God's grace is unique to Christianity. In other religions, God (or the gods) is a powerful and terrifying Judge and Avenger, who must be placated. Those religions have rules for what you must do, or how you must act, in order to avoid God's wrath and win His favor. Of course, Christianity has “rules” as well, such as to act with love and kindness toward everyone (even enemies). But unlike adherents of other religions, Christians do this as a *response* to God's love, not in an effort to earn it.

One final point—if God is so loving and wants to forgive us, why is repentance even necessary? Why doesn't God simply let everyone into Heaven? Well, it's kind of like that old Woody Allen joke: “I wouldn't want to join any club that would accept me as a member.” Heaven would cease to be Heaven if God accepted people who are selfish, mean, or hateful *and wish to remain so*. How could a bigot share Heaven with the object of his bigotry? How could a woman share Heaven with the ex-husband she continues to despise? There is only one way: God's way of love and forgiveness. <sup>42</sup> I fear we must enter Heaven God's way, or not at all.

**Conclusion.** We must stop lying to ourselves about who God is and what He wants from us. He is not a vending machine, dispensing wealth when we put in a few coins. Nor is He a school teacher who slaps our hands each time we step out of line.

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<sup>39</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9; the Greek word which is translated as “faith” is again, *pisteuô*, meaning to trust or surrender.

<sup>40</sup> See Luke 15:11-24.

<sup>41</sup> Luke 15:7; see also Luke 15:10

<sup>42</sup> For more on the subject of Heaven, see the article, “Sharing Heaven,” on this web site.

And most important of all, He is not a scorekeeper who decides our eternal fate based on a ledger of our good and bad deeds. God loves us and wants us to love Him back. He wants to have a relationship with us. And He has already made the first move by sending Jesus to show us how much God loves us.<sup>43</sup> How will you respond?

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<sup>43</sup> As Paul said in Romans 5:8: “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”