

**HOW TO
GET TO HEAVEN**

ACCORDING TO TEACHINGS OF JESUS

WILL BRONSON

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Cover Illustration, public domain: The scene on the cover is of Jacob wrestling with an angel recorded in Genesis 32. The artist is Gustav Dore, a noted French illustrator of the 19th century. The Biblical story tells of Jacob's name being changed to Israel, which means he who strives with God.

DEDICATION

Watching Larry King through the years I have often heard him ask American church leaders a very deep question that goes something like this:

Mr. King: “So what’s going to happen to someone like me who isn’t a Christian, am I going to burn forever in hell?”

Guest: (various elusive responses).

Mr. King: (politely) “Well, let’s get on to another topic.”

I dedicate this short book to Mr. King and all those for whom he asks this important question. He and they deserve a reasonable response to this reasonable question. In a world where religious intolerance often leads to unconscionable consequences, the church has a responsibility to clarify views that have contributed to war and oppression.

Explicit in Mr. King’s question is the church’s historic claim that non-Christians will burn in hell forever, a common perception of Christian doctrine by those both in and out of the church. Though often a majority opinion, it is clearly not a consensus. It seems incongruous in a religion

that speaks so much of love. If one's god plans this kind of violence against his enemies, the chances are good that his followers may try to do the same. History confirms it. A more accurate view of heaven and hell is imperative for the church if it wants any credibility with the world. We can't duck this issue.

I also dedicate this book to all who through the ages have been the victims of religious persecution. Included in this number most recently are the dead and wounded in the Middle East on all sides of those wars. We must also remember the victims of genocide in Sudan. Religion is not always the direct reason for oppression, but it is often a contributing factor used as an excuse to steal another's property or take revenge. True religion should provide a restraint against such actions.

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PREFACE

It is presumptuous of me to believe that I can show you the way to heaven. However, the ideas I am presenting in this book are mine only by adoption. Primarily, I am pointing you to the teachings of Jesus, especially as they relate to this topic. Secondly, I am sharing with you the ideas of competent and careful thinkers whose books are listed in the select bibliography. I occasionally express what may be considered my own opinions, but they are rarely original. With that confession behind me, I encourage you to continue on. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes said that there is nothing new under the sun. But there is value in gathering together some gems of the past and organizing them in a way that I hope may produce an attractive new mosaic.

One of my motives for writing this book is my concern that our country is losing its way for reasons that can be ultimately traced to faulty theology. Ideas have consequences, and theological ideas, because they deal with such deep-seated emotions, have enormous consequences. We must think carefully about our deepest beliefs and world views because they can translate into regrettable

actions if we are wrong about them. For example, in my view it was faulty theology that strayed a long way from the teachings of Jesus and allowed Urban II and St. Bernard to harangue their troops to try to take back the Holy Lands a thousand years ago. The church provided the political base for the Bush administration's desire to reshape the world with the sword. Then it was Europe, who wanted to control the Holy Lands. Maybe Europe's reticence in joining our current adventures in the Middle East harkens back to the bitter experiences of the Crusades. Genuine change comes not from outside but from within. Our struggle is for the hearts of humankind. A sword or gun is a poor tool for that endeavor.

A second motivation of mine is the hope that, whatever mess the world may be in, we may find some measure of personal peace within our own hearts and minds. Without trying to escape our responsibilities on this earth, we must also realize that our time here is short and our real home, hopefully, is heaven. Bad theology may bring bad results in the world. But likewise, good theology can bring peace to our hearts and to our world. Peace starts with us.

Three pieces of bad theology with bad consequences are the ideas that a) our destiny is determined before we were born; b) everyone who is not a member of our particular Christian faith is lost; and c) our loving God will burn the lost forever in hell. *If one truly believes that an "unbeliever," however that may be defined, is going to burn*

forever in conscious torment; that view can justify a large range of actions "on behalf" of the victim. The various Inquisitions of the Roman Church justified the cruelest tortures as the means of saving a person from eternal fiery torment in Hell. Later, Luther and Calvin approved the persecution and killing of Anabaptists for similar reasons.

I mention this dismal history to underline the importance of the questions we are dealing with in this book. Little has changed in the arena of theology for over a thousand years. Yes, there has been a broadening of options in belief systems to choose from today. But the core beliefs of Christianity, both before and after the Reformation, have remained essentially intact. Though most mainline denominations have abandoned the idea of eternal conscious torment (ECT) of the lost, it is still the official doctrine of the Catholic Church and many conservative Protestant churches. Because this idea is so patently offensive, there has been a conspiracy of silence on the topic of hell among churches of all persuasions with few exceptions.

Many of the ideas presented here I have personally held for nearly fifty years. I have been greatly encouraged by a group of writers generally described as Openness theologians (see bibliography: Pinnock, *Openness of God*, 1994) who challenge some of these doctrines such as predestination and the inherent immortality of the soul.

Considering our eternal destiny is one of the most

important things we can do. Our conclusions on this matter affect how we live and they produce huge repercussions. So let's begin our examination of these issues.

APPENDIX A

Tips For Effective and Efficient Giving

There is a common misunderstanding that any money you donate to organizations trying to help the developing world will be wasted due to political corruption. Let me say that having visited some of these organizations personally in the field, most of them make full and efficient use of your hard earned dollars and desperately need more help. Many fly “under the radar,” so to speak, of governments and by-pass corruption that sometimes affects government to government transfers.

Charities generally prefer gifts given regularly over time so that they can build our support into their budgets. That is one reason to set up your favorite charity on your bank’s bill pay system so that each month a certain amount goes out without you having to remember. Another reason is that it establishes your giving as a priority and helps create a culture of generosity. Once you have selected a charity or two, stay in touch with them, visit their web-sites often. Better, visit their headquarters or their work in the field, it can be a life transforming experience. Plan your next vacation to include an NGO in the developing world. You will never regret it and sadly they are often a stone’s throw from some of the world’s best tourist destinations.

Here are a few of the many charities working on our behalf for those less fortunate. They desperately need more support from us. Please consider partnering with them. Check them out on the internet and/or at **www.charitynavigator.org**. Jot down the ones you are interested in, and please give what you can, for the sake of the extreme poor and for a better world!

Alternative Gifts International, American Jewish World Service, Americares, Beyond Borders, Care, The Carter Center, Casas de la Esperanza, Central Asia Institute, Christian Children's Fund, Christian Foundation for Children and Aging, Christian Relief Services Charities, Church World Service, Compassion International, Direct Relief International, Doctors Without Borders, ECHO, Episcopal Relief and Development, Feed the Children, Food for the Poor, Freedom from Hunger, Friends of World Food Program, Global Fund for Children, Global Medical Knowledge, Habitat for Humanity, Harvest Aviation, Heifer International, Helen Keller International, Hope International, The Hunger Project, I-TECUSA, International Orthodox Christian Charities, Kids Alive International, Kiva.org, Life Outreach International, Lions Clubs International, Living Water International, Lutheran World Service, MAP International, Mercy Corps, Mercy Ships, Opportunity International, Oprah's Angel Network, Orbis International, Oxfam America, Partners in Health, Persecution Project Foundation, The Salvation Army, Save the Children, SOS Children's Villages, Wings of Hope, Women to Women International, World Relief, World Vision.

NOTE: None of the organizations mentioned here have asked to be listed and are probably unaware that I have mentioned them. Some of them may disagree with some of the views I have expressed

in the above pages. My hope is that we can put aside our theological differences and concentrate on the critical work of serving the poor. I honor them for their commitment and hope you will support them.

List your favorite charities here with their contact info:

APPENDIX B

A Letter to a Christian Nation – A Response to Sam Harris by Will Bronson

I want to congratulate Mr. Harris for an excellent book. I found it to be well informed and honest. I hope my response can be the same. I also want to concur with his concerns that religious fundamentalism poses a serious threat to the planet and those on it.

While reading his book, I felt drawn to what he didn't directly address as much as his arguments. In my response, I want to also address this "Christian" nation and respond to Mr. Harris perhaps obliquely.

My Dear American Christian Friends:

For those of you who have read Sam Harris' Letter to a Christian Nation, I would like you to also consider my letter to you. As you can tell, Mr. Harris is a student of the Bible. He brings forward many troubling verses that are difficult for an honest Christian to deal with. The conservative Christian community has recently spent a great deal of energy defending the "inerrancy" of the Bible and its complete authority in those

areas that it addresses. I have always found those breast beating sessions troubling for this reason: however accurate the Bible may be, it still must pass through our own fallible interpretations before it becomes useful or not. Personally, I believe that God provided a trustworthy representation of his expectations for us, but that it needs to be handled and understood very carefully.

As Christians, we must have some answers for the questions raised in Mr. Harris' book. First, I would say that the some of the verses that he cited were part of an ongoing relationship of God with Israel, that resulted in an "evolution," (a word Mr. Harris might be sympathetic to) that culminated in the teachings of Christ, whose alleged words I feel I can defend, if not all of what went before.

When Jesus said that nothing would be lost from the law until all was fulfilled, I believe He meant that all the purposes of God would one day come to fulfillment. Paul said that Jesus, the embodiment of perfect love, was that fulfillment of the law. The law is a concept of ethical purity and certainty that none of us can attain in this life. But the fulfillment of this law is the ongoing drama we call life which culminates in the miraculous resolution of all injustice. I have attempted to describe some of that in my book *How To Get To Heaven*.

A recurrent criticism of Christian doctrine is that those who do not believe certain things will be punished in hell. I sympathize with sensitivities on this point and its implications. Had I not come to embrace conditional immortality or annihilationism, I could not worship Yahweh or believe that Christ is the Messiah.

Mr. Harris' criticism of the wise men of Rome reconsidering

limbo is a point well taken. I think their efforts would be better used reconsidering eternal conscious torment, an idea far more odious than limbo. Jesus never spoke of eternal torture. He spoke of the fate of the lost as oblivion, eternal in its effect not in its unending pain. The term He used, Gehenna, was the garbage dump of Jerusalem where refuse was thrown to be consumed not punished.

This one doctrine alone, that of ous torment, has been a major hurdle for believers and non-believers of all times. Those who have accepted it have taken on characteristics of co-dependent children waiting for their alcoholic father to alternately love them or beat them. Many have left the faith or become agnostic because of it. Still others have let it color their whole view of Christianity in particular and religion in general.

But what concerns me more than Mr. Harris' criticism of what he would call religious nonsense, are the questions he does not address. I think specifically of the insights of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her book *Life After Death*. She came to her work without preconceptions and left believing that we survive death often in wonderful ways. If, in fact, there is life beyond the grave, an idea that atheists are not inclined to grant, then the whole conversation changes. It is one thing to criticize a Muslim terrorist who kills himself and others with seventy-two virgins in mind. It is another to trash the "blessed hope" that among other things provides comfort to the afflicted and strength to resist violent retaliation.

Perhaps the shakiest ground that Mr. Harris treads is the argument for God's non-existence from science. He does, I believe, state that science cannot cut that argument either

way. I might agree with that initially. Part of my epistemology argues that God intends not to use intellectual coercion, or any other kind, to recruit followers. However, once we come into relationship with God, something like scales fall off our eyes, and we see things we could only guess of before. As Bertrand Russell might have said if confronted by God in the after life: "Why, Sir, did you take such pains to hide Yourself?" The reason is that life is a test and how we choose to believe is part of that test.

Mr. Harris rightly criticizes the exclusiveness of religion that so often leads to bloodshed. If you make an argument that only we have the words of life, and that one must only say the magic words, or believe the special doctrine and one's future is secured, I would urge you to reconsider. And so would Jesus who said, "Not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven." And what is that will? To love God and love our neighbor, not only in words, but in deeds. Mr. Harris is right in rejecting what is often the view put forward by the church, especially some televangelists. Presenting an exclusivist gospel misrepresents Christ's, Paul's, and Peter's teachings. I might throw in James as well. The universal benefits of the atonement are assessable to all. God is no respecter of persons. "Show me your faith apart from works, and I by my works will show you my faith."

The extreme harshness of the law in the Bible is often the target of criticism. By way of defense, I can only say that these laws are intended to point to the holiness of God and to underscore the idea that the penalty of sin is death. This was the deal from the first days in the Garden of Eden. Any sin is really a sin of rebellion

against a holy God, Eloyim. In that parents stood in for God to their children, rebellion against parents was equally serious. Adultery and idolatry were also sins of rebellion.

I draw three lessons from this. The first is that God wants to get our attention on the right things, the first being the seriousness of our situation. The second is that we are being warned against life-threatening behaviors. Sin is a killer. But, third, all this sets the scene for the most beautiful and wondrous thing in all creation, and that is: forgiveness.

We see this principle put forward when Jesus writes on the ground while the crowd calms itself after throwing a woman at His feet who was caught in the act of adultery. They are challenging this “so called” prophet to resolve this discrepancy between his preaching about love and forgiveness and the requirements of the God He calls His Father.

His response is: “Let him who is without sin, cast the first stone.” In other words, He is saying I know you are all guilty as sin, and you all know you are all guilty as sin, but I and My Father have a remedy for that. You will see it when you see me hanging on the cross in a few months.

What justifies the brutal tradition of animal sacrifice given to the people of Israel by their God is its message of the serious nature of the consequences of sin culminating in the sacrifice of the Ultimate Paschal Lamb, the Son of God Himself. Yahweh was not asking of Abraham anything that He was not willing to do Himself. The drama of the near sacrifice of Isaac was again to underscore the drama of Atonement, finished once and for all when man killed God on the Cross for the atonement for all the sins of the world. This Script, fully elaborated in Holy Script

is the most amazing plot-line the world has ever known. In the end, it says all may end well. Suffering and death are not the end. Forgiveness and love are. And beyond that: happiness and joy, pure bliss. Life from one perspective may be seen as Thomas Hobbes expressed it: “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” But it will one day metamorphize into the beautiful butterfly of eternity. You only have to embrace such a world view to resolve all the apparent inequalities and injustices of life which try to make us hard and bitter.

What of all those who were apparently senselessly killed by a draconian legal system given by God, or by natural disaster for which God has the power to quell but does not, or disease which kills mercilessly and is allowed to do so by a God who could intervene and does not? Only one answer suffices. On the other side, all these victims are greeted as Jesus stated in the beatitudes, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Though I am concerned for all the sufferings of the destitute, I know a wondrous fate awaits them on the other side. It is the rich needing to pass through the eyes of needles, that Mr. Harris alluded to, who are the ones ultimately at risk. How they respond or not to the needs of their needy neighbors could affect their eternal destinies. This is where the real challenge lies. To illuminate this challenge is my mission.

Can I prove that this scenario is true? Only by the same means Mr. Harris calls on, reason. If this scenario is not true then life makes no sense at all, and if there is a God, I would agree He would have to be a monster. But because I have committed to this story, I know Him as my loving, forgiving, Father, who will make things right for all people of good will. As Mr. Harris says,

either he is right or I am. The middle ground of the moderates doesn't work here. If I am wrong, I perish in my grave. If he is right, so does he. But if I am right, I rise in the resurrection and embrace the blessed hope that has become my reality.

And Mr. Harris, if I am right, your raging against falseness and dishonesty, your desire for peace on earth are all seen by a heavenly Father you didn't know you had and this God is redemptive. God will receive you into an eternal reward purchased by the blood of Christ, not unlike the blood of all the helpless victims you have so grieved over. The difference between these victims and Jesus is that Jesus didn't have to die, but He chose to make the ultimate sacrifice, not for His sins, but for ours.

Mr. Harris, Sam, hope that I am right. And fellow Americans, let's think of ourselves as the rich people trying to struggle through the eye of a needle, for surely we are. The significant fact of our day is that half the world struggles to subsist on \$2 a day. Over 20,000 each day don't make it and die painful deaths that could have been prevented, if not for our neglect.

God, forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Forgiveness is the only path to peace on this planet, peace in our hearts, and peace with God.

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