

# Jehovah's Witnesses and the Biblical Doctrine of Salvation – Part 3

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## The Denial of Grace and Maintaining One's Righteousness Under Threat of Annihilation

We have seen that Jehovah's Witnesses hold that unregenerate men and women can exercise faith, live for Jehovah, and even perfect themselves without spiritual rebirth (regeneration). This teaching, of course, denies biblical grace—for if man can do all these, he certainly needs little or no "grace." Clearly, Jehovah's Witnesses speak of "grace"—but not in a biblical sense. The Jehovah God of the Watchtower is said to be a God of "grace" because without Jesus' death for our sins, no one would have the *opportunity* to merit salvation. It should be evident then that the word "grace" for the Watchtower Society simply means the *chance* to earn one's own redemption.

Unfortunately, the problem with a salvation dependent on personal worthiness is that it must be maintained by great effort and can so easily be lost if one fails to meet the proper standards. Thus, if the 144,000 do not continue in service, good works, and obedience to the Watchtower Society (which is believed to equal obedience to Jehovah), they will lose their "justification" and become *worthy* of eternal death. In the following citation, observe how being "justified" (biblically being *declared* righteous apart from works—Titus 3:5-7) is dependent upon continued works and faithfulness. Obviously then, the 144,000 are *not* declared righteous by God; they are only given the opportunity to prove themselves righteous by maintaining a favored status before God. Their "present justification" may be lost at any time!

The followers of Jesus Christ... are first declared righteous by God on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:24, 28)... They are therefore "counted" or "credited" as being completely righteous persons, all their sins being forgiven.... To win [the battle with present sin], however, they must constantly exercise faith in Christ's ransom sacrifice and follow him, thus *maintaining their righteousness* in God's eyes.... If, on the other hand, they take up the *practice* of sin, falling away from the faith, they lose their favored standing before God as righteous persons.... Such ones face destruction [eternal annihilation].<sup>1</sup>

Obviously, this claim to being *credited* as righteous and having *all* ones sins forgiven is either not true or not believed by the Watchtower. If it were considered

true, there would never be any legal or just basis for Jehovah to annihilate people. Thus, just like the claim to believe in God's grace is disproved by their emphasis on works, so their claim to believe in justification and full forgiveness of sins (at least for the 144,000) is disproved by their emphasis on the requirement to maintain salvation. Thus, the 144,000 elect are chosen on the basis of their own worthiness, and then must maintain worthiness until death to be insured a spiritual resurrection, finally giving them immortality. The other Witnesses, as we shall see, must also do good works and remain faithful in this life and then both they and the rest of resurrected mankind must later attain sinless perfection if they also are to finally inherit "eternal life" on earth.

### **Salvation in the Battle of Armageddon and Beyond to the Millennium**

The Witness concept of salvation is also related to the ever-approaching "battle of Armageddon," the last great World War prior to the Millennial age of God's theocratic kingdom. Only Jehovah's Witnesses are survivors of this Great Tribulation. They will be joined on earth by the resurrected *faithful saints*<sup>2</sup> (the 144,000) *and later by the resurrected unbelievers*. These Witnesses will become the righteous example for the rest of resurrected mankind (the unbelievers, whether good or evil) who now have the opportunity to earn salvation during the millennium. Here we have an irony of sorts. Even the evil people in this life fare better than unfaithful Witnesses—even if the Witnesses had been faithful most their lives. Jehovah's Witnesses can be faithful for most their lives and still lose their salvation—which relegates them to the "unfaithful" category. All "unfaithful" Jehovah's Witnesses throughout history were forever annihilated when they died, while the evil unbelievers now get to be resurrected and are offered a second chance for immortality on earth. Obviously, it is preferable to be even an evil person in this life than an "unfaithful" Jehovah's Witness.

But even faithful Jehovah's Witnesses are not off the hook. The Watchtower teaches that Jehovah's Witnesses who survived Armageddon had previously attained righteousness on earth, although not yet perfection. Hence their righteousness only provides them a privileged *position* in the millennial age. They must still earn their eternal life. The rest of earthly mankind must do the same. Thus, while Jesus and the 144,000 rule from heaven, everyone on earth must now attempt to perfect themselves. For the Jehovah's Witnesses who survived Armageddon: "Jesus Christ... can do priestly service for them throughout the thousand years of his reign till at last they reach human perfection, if they are willing."<sup>3</sup> For the remainder of mankind:

The "great crowd" of survivors of the war of [Armageddon]... will then be on their way to gaining absolute righteousness and perfection in the flesh... actual human perfection in the flesh.... They will be able to stand before the God of holiness on the basis of their own righteousness.<sup>4</sup>

But that's not all. Even *after* attaining perfection, *no one* is yet truly justified or a possessor of eternal life. All must yet pass the test spoken of in Revelation 20:7-9, the test that countless numbers are destined to fail:

Up in heaven in association with the High Priest Jesus Christ, great will be the privilege of his 144,000 immortal joint heirs.... Having been imperfect, sin-laden humans themselves on earth, they too will be able to sympathize with men on earth in their efforts to get rid of the “law of sin and death” in their members and to attain to human perfection, innocence, sinlessness.... All mankind will then be, like the perfect man Adam in the Garden of Eden.... [Nevertheless] before adopting them as his free sons through Jesus Christ, Jehovah God will subject all these perfected human creatures to a thorough test for all time.... The ones to be tested then will be, not the holy angels of heaven but only perfected mankind on earth.... So an indefinite number of perfected, human free moral agents will let themselves be misled.... These willful rebels will be summarily executed.<sup>5</sup>

According to Revelation 20:7-9, the number of the perfected class who will rebel against God are like the “sand on the seashore”—innumerable people. So, one wonders how these “perfect”, “innocent”, and “sinless” people could ever rebel against God in the manner spoken of? The answer biblically is because these people of the millennium are still sinners. But the Watchtower teaches that these individuals have *sinless perfection* and yet still rebel. Clearly, it would seem, this does not offer Witnesses much hope for their eternal future.

Thus, all the heroic efforts a Jehovah’s Witness engages in in this life only secures him a better *political* position in the New World. His many good works offer him precious little in relation to his *spiritual* position before God. Along with everyone else, including the wicked, Witnesses with a lifetime of good works and maintaining righteousness must now work even harder toward literal perfection and somehow attain it. Then, they must pass the final test before they can be counted among those with eternal life.

The “second death”—extinction—remains for those who fail the final test. Again, this eternal judgment is applied even *though* men have attained perfection, but yet somehow rebel against God. However, even from a Witness perspective, it hardly seems just. Although original sin bringing death was canceled by the atonement, *perfect* men can still die (be annihilated) by their own rebellion:

After that, if any lifted up to a perfect human image and likeness of God die, it will not be a death traceable to Adam but be a death due to the perfect sinner’s [!] own willfulness and rebellion.... So at the end of Christ’s millennial reign he turns over the perfected human race to stand trial before God, for only God is the one who can justify creatures to everlasting life. —Romans 8:33.<sup>6</sup>

Here, people spend hundreds and hundreds of years striving and straining to attain sinless perfection during the millennium. Finally, they achieve it—and then find themselves annihilated for one transgression! Besides the fact that by definition perfect, sinless people do not sin, what was the point to all that effort if it could so easily be lost? (If countless people are lost at this point, the transgression itself, whenever it is, cannot be that difficult to fall into.)

Here we find illustrated another Achilles heel of Watchtower salvation—it is so fragile that it can be lost at any point, no matter how heroic the efforts on behalf of salvation up to that point. Of course, if human nature tells us anything, it is that a

salvation dependent on us must, in the end, always fail. No one can ever perfect themselves or be good enough to merit God's acceptance and salvation. Unfortunately, Jehovah's Witnesses have little understanding of either the depth of human sin that reveals our predicament, or the depth of the grace of God that solves it. Again, sin is too deeply ingrained in our hearts and actions, even our good actions, for us to ever achieve sinless perfection, let alone merit God's justification.

To be frank, the Watchtower doctrine of salvation leaves much to be desired. What the Watchtower requires of everyone—self-perfection—is an impossible burden to bear. Perhaps this may explain why different studies indicate mental illness among Witnesses is 4-16 times that of the general population—people break down over the strain.<sup>7</sup> Has anyone in human history ever been able to perfect himself or herself? Has any Jehovah's Witness ever given proof to the world that he or she has attained sinless perfection? And biblically, can anyone ever please God by good works and their own righteousness? Is there even a single person anywhere who can be considered "good" in God's eyes? The Bible is clear that there is no one righteous before God as the following Scriptures demonstrate:

There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins. (Ecc. 7:20)

There is no one righteous, not even one;... there is no one who does good, not even one. (Rom. 3:10-12)

Indeed, before the infinite holiness of God "all our *righteous* acts are like filthy rags." (Isa. 64:6)

So who thinks they can please God and merit salvation by their own good works and personal righteousness? Here is the fundamental problem of Watchtower salvation—it constitutes the worst form of spiritual deception when it holds out to others a salvation they can never attain.

This is a very reason why Christ lovingly died—to make possible as a free gift what we could never earn on our own merits because of the depth of our sinfulness (Rom. 3:10-18). And the glory of God's free grace is that the salvation once received is forever—it can never be lost.<sup>8</sup> Again, the reason salvation by works is forever insecure is because it is dependent on what man cannot do. The reason salvation by grace is forever secure is because it is dependent upon what God can (and *did*) do.

Regrettably then, because even the 144,000 have only "the hope" of being a member of this elite class, the entire Watchtower concept of justification is largely irrelevant, if not worthless. How is someone to know he is justified, if in this life he can, at best, only "hope" it might come true? Unfortunately, no Jehovah's Witnesses anywhere can have any assurance of their salvation. Former Jehovah's Witnesses themselves have pointed out the uncertain and tenuous nature of their status before God:

I never had any assurance of my salvation; it was something to be obtained by right conduct and good works as a theocratic slave. In spite of all my efforts I did not have a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. If a Witness does not

maintain a faithful course of integrity, he loses his chance of gaining everlasting life.... This teaching applied even to the “heavenly class” of 144,000.<sup>9</sup>

And,

The Witnesses’ plan of salvation is based primarily on one’s personal good works. Each Witness is working his way to everlasting life and cannot know that he is saved.<sup>10</sup>

What a contrast with the Gospel— “He who *has* the Son *has* life; he who does *not* have the Son of God does *not* have life. 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. 5:12-13). As Jesus Himself emphasized, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me *has eternal life* and will *not be condemned*; he *has crossed over from death to life*” (Jn. 5:24).

To recapitulate and summarize, we may observe four categories of people. Note again that everyone must earn his or her own salvation:

### **1) The 144,000 (the elect historically)**

The “resurrection of life” includes the “first resurrection,” which is the resurrection to instantaneous perfection of life, spirit life, in which Jesus himself participated and in which only the 144,000 joint heirs participate with him.<sup>11</sup>

The way to heavenly life involves more than just faith in Christ’s ransom sacrifice and works of faith in obedience to God’s instructions.<sup>12</sup>

### **2) The “other sheep” (other faithful Jehovah’s Witnesses historically)**

Others who “did good things” in God’s sight and who will share in the “resurrection of life” will be those of the “great crowd” of sheeplike persons who may die before Armageddon; also the faithful witnesses of Jehovah who died before Pentecost A.D. 33.... Their resurrection will be early after Armageddon, because many of these will be made theocratic princes in all parts of the earth.<sup>13</sup>

### **3) The unjust who attain perfection**

This includes only resurrected unbelievers (non-Jehovah’s Witnesses). (Again, when the Millennium begins there are only two categories of people: the 144,000 who rule from heaven and the faithful Witnesses, who survived Armageddon. The resurrected unbelievers will join them later in the Millennium.) In the following, note again that the teaching here involves the opportunity for salvation after death. Speaking of the “resurrected” unrighteous we are told that Jesus Christ will provide:

A period of judgment in the new world in hope of their reforming and practicing good things and deserving to be lifted up to human perfection.... As Jehovah’s High Priest, the Shepherd King will be able to apply the merit of his atoning sacrifice... in behalf of their sins. In that way their sins may be forgiven and canceled and they may be cured of their imperfections and brought to the image and likeness of God by the end of Christ’s thousand-year reign.<sup>14</sup>

### **4) The rebellious who fail**

This includes certain categories of people who are forever annihilated at death (they are never resurrected in the first place); the resurrected unjust who fail to attain

perfection in the millennium (Jehovah's Witnesses and non-Jehovah's Witnesses), as well as all those deceived in the final test, whether faithful ("other sheep") Jehovah's Witnesses, or non-Jehovah's Witnesses.

If any resurrected ones then under judgment prove unreformable or turn rebellious after a sufficient period of trial, they may be executed, destroyed in the second death, without further delay.<sup>15</sup>

Not only these people but also everyone who is alive anywhere on earth will have to face this last test, even the princes of the "new earth" and the sheeplike people who lived through Armageddon. Everyone on earth will be judged according to how he meets this test.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, in *Life Everlasting* we read, "Jehovah God will justify, declare righteous, on the basis of their own merit all perfected humans who have withstood that final, decisive test of mankind."<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Aid to Bible Understanding* (1971), p. 437, emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> Only the 144,000 hold the title of "saints."

<sup>3</sup> *Life Everlasting in Freedom of the Sons of God* (1969), pp. 397-399.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 391-393, cf., pp. 396, 397.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 397-399.

<sup>6</sup> *You May Survive Armageddon into God's New World* (1955), pp. 357-360.

<sup>7</sup> See Jerry Bergman, "Paradise Postponed...And Postponed: Why Jehovah's Witnesses Have a High Mental Illness Level" *Christian Research Journal*, Summer 1996.

<sup>8</sup> We documented this biblically in our *Knowing the Truth About Eternal Security* (Harvest House, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Edmond Gruss, *We Left Jehovah's Witnesses—A Non-Prophet Organization* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1974), p. 132.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *You May Survive Armageddon into God's New World* (1955), pp. 354-355.

<sup>12</sup> *Aid to Bible Understanding*, p. 735.

<sup>13</sup> *You May Survive Armageddon into God's New World*, p. 355.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 356.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 356-357.

<sup>16</sup> *From Paradise Lost to Paradise Regained* (1958), p. 238.

<sup>17</sup> *Life Everlasting*, p. 400.