

What Does Islam Teach About Salvation?

By Dr. John Ankerberg, Dr. John Weldon

The Koran teaches, “The true religion with God is Islam.”¹ For the Muslim this means that salvation is achieved only through submission to the teachings of Islam. Salvation in Islam requires that 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.”² “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.”³

What exactly does the Muslim believe about salvation? Below we present four basic teachings that reveal what the religion of Islam teaches about this important subject.

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

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

The Koran clearly teaches that salvation is achieved on the basis of good works. Consider the following statements:

... every soul shall be paid in full what it has earned....⁴

... God loves those who cleanse themselves.⁵

Gardens of Eden, underneath which rivers flow, there indwelling forever; that is the recompense of the self-purified.⁶

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 Koran teaches:

[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.⁷

With knowledge We will recount to them what they have done, for We are watching over all their actions. On that day [of judgment], their deeds shall be weighed with justice. Those whose scales are heavy [with good works] shall triumph, but those whose scales are light [i.e., containing evil works] shall lose their souls, because they have denied Our revelations [e.g., in the Koran].⁸

The Muslim assumes that his chances for heaven are good if he 1) accepts the Muslim God Allah and his apostle Mohammad, 2) does good works and all that is required of him by Allah, and 3) is predestined to Allah’s favor.

Given such requirements, which Muslim can have any assurance of salvation? Abdujah 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.”⁹ No Muslim can ever know if his good works are sufficient, or 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 that this brings 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. ¹⁰

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. Christ died for our sins so that once a person receives Christ as his or her Savior, all of his sins are forgiven and each one is *guaranteed* a place in heaven (John 5:24; 6:47; 1 Peter 1:3-5; 1 John 5:13).

But in Islam, because there is no substitutionary atonement for forgiveness of sins, forgiveness is predicated upon *both* personal merit *and* Allah's choice of mercy. Unfortunately, no one ever knows if one's personal works are sufficient to forgive one's sins or if Allah will be merciful to him—for Allah is an arbitrary deity, and one has no ultimate guarantee of his favor. The following statements in the Koran 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. ¹¹

God has pardoned what is past; but whoever offends again, God will take vengeance on him; God is All-mighty, Vengeful. ¹²

But this too is contrary to what the Bible teaches—that full salvation comes by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ who died for our sins (Ephesians 2:8,9; 1 John 2:2). The Bible 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" (Romans 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" (Ephesians 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 that he is eternally saved. Jesus taught, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The apostle Peter taught, "The Lord... is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Jesus taught, "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" (Revelation 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 John 5:13).

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

We mentioned earlier that Islam rejects the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Because Islam considers Jesus Christ one of Allah's prophets, and because it is unthinkable that God would permit one of His prophets to be crucified, the Muslim religion denies that Christ died upon the cross. The Koran 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." ¹³

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

Throughout the length and breadth 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. ¹⁴

But Mr. Dedat is wrong. On many 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*" (Luke 9:22). After His resurrection He told his disciples:

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 the 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 24:44,46,47).

In Revelation 1:18 Jesus taught, "I am the Living One; *I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!*"

Dr. John Elder was missionary to Muslims in Iran from 1922 to 1964. 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 [allegedly] 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. ¹⁵

In conclusion, Muslims reject the biblical teaching that Christ died for their sins, and therefore they seek salvation by religious observance. Unfortunately, in doing so they deny

their need for Christ and repudiate what the Bible teaches concerning His death: “He Himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness...” (1 Peter 2:24) and, “God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

(to be continued)

Notes:

1. A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, (New York: MacMillan, 1976), p. 75.
2. Ibid., p. 85.
3. Ibid.; p. 48.
4. Ibid., p. 93.
5. Ibid., p. 220.
6. Ibid., p. 344; cf. pp. 102, 105.
7. Sura 23:104-05 in the George Sale translation (1734) as cited by Phillip H. Lochhaas, *How to Respond to Islam* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1981), p. 24.
8. N. J. Dawood, trans., *Koran*, p. 241.
9. Abdiyah Akabar Abdul-Haqq, *Sharing Your Faith with a Muslim* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1980), p. 164.
10. William Miller, *A Christian's Response to Islam* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), pp. 82-83.
11. Arberry, *Interpreted*, p. 58.
12. Ibid., p. 143.
13. Dawood, *Koran*, p. 372.
14. Josh McDowell and John Gilchrist, *The Islam Debate*, (San Bernadino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1983), p. 172.
15. John Elder, *The Biblical Approach to the Muslim*, (Fort Washington, PA: Worldwide Evangelization Crusade, 1978), pp. 94-96.