

The book of luke:  
how does one reach  
heaven?



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The book of Luke in the New Testament offers a promise of salvation. John the Baptist proclaims, from the book of Isaiah, that “ all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3. 6). However, earlier in Luke, an angel says, “ Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors” (2. 14). These two quotes are among the many contradictions in Luke regarding how one is to find salvation. If God has favorites, then it would seem that not “ all flesh” will go to heaven. Characters in the Bible wrestle with apparent inequalities of justice and how to guarantee a place in heaven. Although some parables in Luke appear to provide answers to this problem, there are conflicting examples that seem to indicate there is no clear way to reach heaven, and perhaps God intends for humans to not understand how. After reading the angel’s message that “ those whom [God] favors” will live in peace, one could assume that in order to “ be saved,” one must come into God’s favor, or at least be “ with” him. However, that task is difficult, especially since it is unclear what it means to be “ with” God. Jesus says, “ Whoever is not against you is for you” (9. 49). Therefore, it seems that anyone who is not against Jesus and God can reach salvation. What does Jesus mean by the word “ against”, though? This could possibly be interpreted as doing harm to others or being in cooperation with the devil. Not only is this unclear, but later Jesus contradicts his statement and says, “ Whoever is not with me is against me and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (11. 23). This statement seems to imply that it is not enough to simply not be against Jesus, but one must be “ with” him. Even if we accept this latter statement, we still do not know how to be “ with” Jesus. If we assume that those who are “ with” Jesus are blessed, then we can assume that the poor, hungry, hated, excluded, and sick are “ with” Jesus because he

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blesses them. In addition he says, " Woe to those who are rich, for you have received your consolation" (6. 24). Jesus does not bless the rich and healthy, since they have already received rewards in this life. Therefore, it seems that they are not " with" him. It is troubling that Jesus seems to overlook individual characteristics here and simply promises " great rewards" to those who are disadvantaged now, but does not do the same for those who have advantages in this life. He sets guidelines for living a decent life and prohibits judgment of others and teaches people to love their enemies. Jesus claims " your reward will be great" (6. 35) if these guidelines are followed. Which standard is more important? Does it matter whether one is rich or poor or sick or healthy as long as one lives a decent life? The story of Lazarus and the rich man (16. 19-30) could confirm this. The story does not say that the rich man ever helped Lazarus or treated him equally. Therefore, the rich man could have been sent to Hades based on his lack of compassion, rather than simply for his wealth. However, the parable does not indicate that Lazarus was a decent human being either. Are we to assume that just because he was sick and poor he lived by the laws of Jesus? Jesus does insist " You cannot serve God and wealth" (16. 13). Therefore, the rich man could not be " with" God, but there is no indication that Lazarus was. Perhaps there is not enough information to adequately analyze this story, but there seems to be a lack of justice and uncertainty as to how to be " with" the Lord and secure a place in heaven. Injustices are present in many stories of Luke, which further confuse how one is to be evaluated for salvation. Repentance is a major theme in Luke; it provides a way for sinners to redeem themselves and be saved. In the parable of the prodigal son, the son who sins only repents after he has squandered all his money and is left

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with nothing. He later humbles himself by saying, " I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (15. 21). Repentance and humbling oneself seems to be necessary in order for sinners to enter heaven. The injustice is apparent in that it seems anyone can do almost anything that they want as long as they repent. They will be rejoiced over once they repent more so than those who have remained faithful to God. A metaphor of one lost sheep out of 99 being found is used to explain why heaven rejoices more over one repented sinner than over those who were never lost. Therefore, it appears that one way to be " with" God is to sin, and then truly repent and humble oneself. However, the question of how one who has not sinned can enter heaven still remains. Are those who never sin automatically let into heaven or must they fulfill a further requirements? Jesus promises salvation to those who are " with" him. Being " with" Jesus can be interpreted to mean abiding by the set of rules to live by that he establishes. He also seems to promise salvation to anyone who is poor, sick, lame, or excluded. The rich, however, are not promised heaven since they cannot serve both God and wealth. It is unclear how the average man is to gain favor and go to heaven, especially with so many contradictions. Perhaps Jesus and God intended that people not know how to reach salvation. Jesus warned his followers that " Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it" (9. 24). If humans know exactly how to reach salvation after this life, then they may only behave in those ways because they know it will bring them to heaven. Instead, those who learn the lessons of the Bible and " follow Moses" will be qualified for heaven and they will not even know it.