

Can You Be Sure Where You Will Spend Eternity? – Part 1

Why Is it Important to Be Sure Where You Will Spend Eternity?

by Dr. John Ankerberg, Dr. Erwin Lutzer
(Transcript of an interview; edited for print.)

Dr. John Ankerberg: We are talking about one of the most important topics that anybody can talk about: *How you can be **sure** that you will spend eternity with God.* Can you think of anything more important than that? My guest is Dr. Erwin Lutzer, pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago, IL. We've known each other for a long time. I've read his book on this topic and I think it is one of the best books I have ever read. Our goal is to share this important information with you.

Erwin, why is the topic of knowing for sure where you will spend eternity so important?

Dr. Erwin Lutzer: Well, John, think of it this way. One minute after you die, you will either have seen the beauties and the glories of Christ and of Heaven, or else you will have seen something that is so awful that you could scarcely imagine it today. I mean, when you stop to think of it, the most important question we could **ever** ask is where we're going to spend eternity. You know, I'm reminded of the words of Blaise Pascal who said that there really are only two sane men in the world. The first is someone who loves God with all of his heart, mind and soul because he has found Him; and the other is someone who seeks him with his whole mind, heart and soul because he has as yet not found Him.

Ankerberg: That's a scary thought. In your book you said, "Five minutes after you die, whatever you experience, you'll know that your future will be irrevocably fixed and eternally unchanged." There's no second chance, no second choice. You can't reverse your course at that point. So **now** is when we've got to decide.

Lutzer: And you know, John, I go to a bookstore perhaps to buy some books on Europe if I'm going to do traveling. I mean, I'm studying where I'm going to go. Right? We all do that. And yet there are people who give no thought to the fact that there is eternity coming and they're going to spend eternity somewhere else other than Planet Earth and it's really important that we know where it is that we are going. The good news is that we **can** know the way and have confidence.

Ankerberg: At the same time, you have got to share with people the scary story that illustrates how people can misplace their faith. That is something that is just horrible to think about, but let's get right to the implications of misplaced faith; that is, people that even believe in God, think they're going to get to Heaven, and they're

not – they're going to be turned away from Heaven's door. Take it step by step. Tell us about the Tylenol incident.

Lutzer: What I tell people, John, is that faith can destroy you. There are people who are reading this today who have tremendous faith, but who will not be saved; and that faith is destroying them. You know, back in 1982 there was an evil man (or perhaps a woman, I don't think they know who it was), who took some Tylenol capsules and put Cyanide into them. Seven people died as a result of it. They were just taking Tylenol because they had a headache or whatever, and they ended up being dead.

Now, there are two very important lessons that we learn from that experience. The first is that all the faith in the world cannot take something that is harmful and turn it into something that is helpful. I mean, there were people who believed that they were taking Tylenol, and they had confidence that they were doing it, but all of their faith never changed that capsule into Tylenol since it contained Cyanide. That's an important lesson, which means, of course, that the object of our faith is incredibly important.

But the second lesson is even more scary. Sometimes a false faith can resemble a true one. I'm told, evidently, that the Cyanide looked a lot like the Tylenol. In the very same way, there are people who have faith: they have faith in God, and they have confidence in God, and they fully expect to get into Heaven. But someday the door of Heaven is going to be slammed into their faces.

You know, Jesus told a story in Matthew 7 that is so important that I think we should read it. It is enough to just take the wind out of your sails.

Ankerberg: I agree. There are some people who would say, "Wait a minute, Erwin. I want to challenge you on that one. You are trying to tell me that I can have faith in God and still not get in?" And what you are saying is, that's what the Bible says.

Lutzer: And you know, John, it's even more scary than that. You can actually have faith in Christ and not get in.

Ankerberg: All right. Read the verse and explain that to us.

Lutzer: Listen to this. Jesus says this, beginning in Matthew 7:21: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in Heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers.'"

Here are people who did the kind of miracles that actually helped people. I mean, there's every evidence that apparently they did cast out demons, they did miracles; maybe some of their prophecies came to pass, and they were fully expecting to get into Heaven. These are not the kind of people who come into church late, sit in the back row and leave before the Benediction. These are the kind of people who are up-front spiritually. And if we think to ourselves, "Well, yes, but you know, they were fakes. They were just, you know, some people who were off the edge," I don't think

that's the point. I think that what Jesus wants to say is that if people who had such confidence and who had ministries in this life will have the door of Heaven slammed into their faces, think of the number of ordinary folks like us who aren't going to make it. And if we don't make it, it will be for the same reason that they didn't.

Ankerberg: What is that?

Lutzer: Misplaced faith.

Ankerberg: Those people that showed up in church every Sunday – maybe even an usher, a Sunday School teacher, a choir member – they did those things, and they were expecting to get into Heaven. Now, what's the reason that these seemingly good Christian people aren't going to get in? Why are they going to have the surprise of eternity where Jesus shuts the door on Heaven and says, "Depart from me"? What did they do wrong?

Lutzer: What we're talking about is the Gospel and faith in Jesus Christ – the kind of faith that saves. These people apparently had faith in the ability of God to do miracles –because they were doing miracles themselves. They had all kinds of revelations, prophecies, that they maybe had received from God. What they didn't understand is the purpose of Jesus Christ's coming. From our perspective today we can look back upon this with more knowledge than they could have had at that moment. We see the death of Jesus Christ in light of the need for a sacrifice; the fact that God cannot be approached without a sacrifice, without blood.

You know, today, we have all these people who say, "Well, you know, I'm accessing God **this** way, and you're plugging into God **that** way" and all the rest. Well, the simple fact is, John, there is only one way to God.

Ankerberg: Erwin, I think there might be some folks reading this that say, "Wait a minute; I don't like that, because I've determined **sincerely** that I'm going to approach God in a different way." Now Jesus said they're not going to get in, but tell them why it's not good enough to be sincere and to set your own way. We're saying it's because there's a real God out there who has got His own plan.

Lutzer: That's right.

Ankerberg: Tell us about that.

Lutzer: Well, to give it in a capsule, the simple fact is, Jesus is the only qualified Savior. There is nobody else out there. I attended the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1993. In the Palmer House nearly 100 booths had been set up representing different religions of the world. I went to many of these booths and asked, "Do you have a sinless Savior? Because I'm a sinner who needs to be saved, but I can't be saved by somebody who's a part of my own predicament." And you know, John, I could not find one single "savior." What you could find was gurus and prophets who tell you "this way," "that fold" ..., but I didn't find anybody qualified to save me.

The reason that Jesus is the only Savior is because He's the only One who has the righteousness which God accepts and which needs to be credited to my account. Apart from that I'm lost, regardless of how good I am, or how sincere I am, or how many prophets I believed, or how many miracles I've been able to perform.

Ankerberg: I was telling you that I read Leviticus and then Hebrews back-to-back. Now, if you read Leviticus alone, you come to the conclusion that, as a sinner, “I’d already be dead.” Because the God of the Old Testament warned that, basically, if you did certain sins, you were dead, you were killed.

Lutzer: Right.

Ankerberg: And then, in the New Testament book of Hebrews, we find out that the reason we are not instantly killed is that Jesus Christ took our sin and He died for us.

Lutzer: And, John, for those who reject Christ, their judgment in New Testament times is greater than the judgment of Old Testament times. Sometimes people say, “Well, you know, the God of the Old Testament was so harsh and cruel; but Jesus introduced us to this loving God who’d never send anyone to Hell.” You know what it says in the book of Hebrews? “If they did not escape, how shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?” Here we have in the text people who neglected their salvation, even though they were the religious types who were plugged into God.

Now, I think we should just stay on this text for one more minute and say, “What would that be like?” Can you imagine? In my book I give the illustration of a man who’s in a swamp because a plane has crashed, and he’s the only survivor. A rescue plane goes overhead, but doesn’t see him, and he sinks in the mud and knows he’s going to die.

That doesn’t even come close to what these people experienced. You’re **expecting** to get into Heaven and the door of Heaven is slammed in your face. Why? Because you lacked faith? No. These people had great faith, but they had the wrong object. Their faith was in their revelations; their faith was in their ability, maybe even in their miracles. What their faith was **not** in was **exclusively** Jesus Christ, the only One who is qualified to save people.

Ankerberg: These people have misplaced their faith. They might be sincere; they might think the faith that they have in God is going to get them into Heaven. But you’re telling them this is dangerous stuff: that they might be deceived; they might be just dead wrong. You’re really trying to be kind to them by saying, “Before you get to Heaven and Jesus says, ‘I’m sorry. I never knew you,’ here’s what His message is.” Tell me how Jesus talked about misplaced faith.

Lutzer: Jesus said that there’s a broad way that leads to destruction, and there’s a narrow way that leads to life. Why is the way that leads to life so narrow? It’s because it’s the way of faith in Christ alone. But the broad way has many people. You know, most people don’t realize that, as far as we can tell from the Bible, there are going to be more people in Hell than in Heaven. And the reason for that is because this broad way has so many different lanes of traffic. I mean, you can be anything you like on the broad way. You can be what I sometimes call “a ladder climber,” somebody who says, “Well, I can get to God by my own good works.”

I was on a plane one time and a man said that to me. I said, “Are you sure that you could be saved by your good works?”

And he says, “Well, actually, no.” He said, “I have some fear.”

I said, “What’s your fear?”

He said, “It’s standing behind Mother Teresa on the day of judgment and over-hearing the Lord say to her, ‘Lady, you could done a whole lot more!’ And I’m next in line!”

There is something within us that makes us realize that no matter how much we do, everything we do is tainted. We think we have the best of motives, but we don’t, and we’re sinners. The simple fact is that God is holy. John, if you ask me what the fundamental problem with all these different ways to Heaven is, it is that we have underestimated the holiness of God.

Someone says, “We have cows for milk. We have sheep for wool. And we have God to come along and to confirm our every craving.” We’ve made God into our image. So He is a God who can be appeased if we live a good life.

Well, 1), nobody lives a good life because we’re all sinners. But 2), and here’s the good news – the good news of the gospel is that Jesus Christ came to die for the worst of sinners. And so that’s why the ladder climbers are pursuing a wrong way of salvation. They are on the broad road, as Jesus talks about, that leads to destruction.

Ankerberg: You quote a survey from Barna Research in your book. The survey reveals that almost all Americans believe they are good enough to get to Heaven. But you talk about the religious types that are in for a bad surprise up ahead.

Lutzer: Well, you can be good and even be secular, you know, and not believe in God. I mean, atheists can be good because they’re created in God’s image. They can do good things.

But then, on the other hand, you have the religious types. These are the “goody-two-shoes” who really have never done anything really bad. They’re the church goers, and they’re the people who give their money and so on.

And many of them are going to be lost, too. As a matter of fact, they’re going to be lost, not because they aren’t good people, but because they aren’t **good enough**; because God accepts only perfection. That’s why we need His Son.

So that’s why you have the religious types in the passage of Scripture that we read earlier, these people who cast out demons and prophesied in the name of Christ. I mean, these are the religious types, and they’re finding out that they’re not entering into Heaven and are hearing from Jesus, “Depart from me.”

Ankerberg: You also point out in your book that when some people evaluate themselves against other folks, they self-righteously say, “I’m better than those folks.” How do you talk to those people and explain that, while they might be better than others, in terms of their sinfulness before God, there is such a chasm?

Lutzer: Let’s take this illustration using the Sears Tower in Chicago. Now, the Sears Tower is a lot taller than the First National Bank. I’m sure that we could figure out exactly how many feet and how many yards. But what if you change the question and ask, “Which building is closest to the nearest star?” Well, considering that the

nearest star is a couple of thousand light years away, the difference between the buildings is really not that great. In the same way, if we stop judging ourselves **by** ourselves and start, rather, judging ourselves by God, the differences between us are really negligible. They aren't that great.

So you see, the problem with human beings, as Martin Luther said so well, people perceive themselves to be alive and to be good and all these things, and then, what they don't realize is, they are also blind and do not realize that they are miserable sinners, judged in the presence of a holy God.

There was a little boy who said to his mother, "Mother, I'm eight feet tall." And he was, according to the ruler that **he had made**. He was judging himself by a false standard. If you come to the Bible, you find out that "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). And the folks who are least likely to accept God's grace are the good folks who go to church.

But there is another category of people, John, particularly in our age of spirituality, and these are the spiritual types, the mystical types. We've got people "plugging into God" and trying to think that somehow they know God. The simple fact is, the Bible says that the wicked stumble over things and they don't know what they're stumbling over (Prov. 4:19); but it also says there are people who perceive themselves as being too good to do any wrong (1 John 1:8). The latter group are sometimes the greatest sinners and the hardest to reach. Why? Because they pull out of their life all of these good things that they have done and they do not understand that they also need to be saved, even more desperately, than the drunk who is on skid row.

Ankerberg: How close can people get to the Lord Jesus, true faith, to getting into Heaven, and still miss it?

Lutzer: You know, at the Parliament of World Religions I met a woman who told me that the *Urantia* book gave Jesus back to her. She was raised in a home where she heard about Jesus and loved Jesus. But she went to a church where, as a child she was not allowed to stay in the auditorium. She was supposed to go downstairs with the other children. And when she was scolded for staying upstairs, she left the church and never went back. But now she said, "This book has given my Jesus back to me." She read me a story about how Jesus at the age of 12 helped a little boy. Now, this woman is crying. And I said to her, "You really love Jesus, don't you?"

"Oh," she said, "I love Him."

I said, "Tell me why you love Him."

She said, "I love Him as a friend. I love Him because He's the Lord. I love Him because He's a teacher."

And I looked at her and I said, "Do you also love Him because He was a sinless Savior who shed His blood on the cross to reconcile us to a holy God?"

And she broke eye contact with me, and she said, "You know, I have never thought of that before." Now, here's a woman who loved Jesus, and there are people reading this who "love" Jesus, but they are still not believers; because they have not trusted Christ for the reason that He came. And their good works actually are a

stumbling block because they mask their real need. You see, as long as they're good people, they forget that they need a Savior. How tragic to know Newton, but not as a scientist, or to know Shakespeare, and not as a man of literature. How tragic to know about Jesus, and even love Him, but not **know** Him as a Savior.

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