

LOSTNESS

What is Lostness?

In British English, the term “lostness” is defined as: “the state of being lost.” Being lost can be frightening! A trekker in a thick forest may become disoriented and lose their way. A plane may crash in a remote location and the survivors may have no idea about how to reach civilization. Joseph and Mary had been to worship in Jerusalem and began their journey home, but turned back when they realized they had lost Jesus (Luke 2:41-51). Upon finding Jesus, Mary asked: “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress” (Luke 2:48 ESV).

Depending upon the situation, being lost can be either temporary or permanent. Being lost can often end in tragedy! Our attention turns specifically to the state of *spiritual* lostness. We propose to present Bible answers to many important questions. *Who* is spiritually lost? *Why* do people find themselves in such a predicament? *How* can the condition be remedied? *What* is the eventual outcome for those who remain lost?

Who is Lost?

A good way to determine *who* is lost is first to establish what causes a person to become lost. Adam and Eve, the first human couple (cf. Mark 10:6), were created pure. Their benevolent Creator provided physical food to sustain them. However, they were warned: “*the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die*” (Genesis 2:17). Clearly, they were given choice, as well as being told what would happen should they choose to disobey. Unfortunately, Eve “*took of the fruit thereof, and did eat; and she gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat*” (Genesis 3:6). So what happened to them? Well, since God cannot lie (Titus 1:2), they suffered the consequence for disobedience he said would result. They died! This puzzles many, because “*all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years: and he died*” (Genesis 5:5). Adam lived long after he ate the fruit. The confusion dissipates when we realize there are two basic kinds of death – physical and spiritual. Adam’s physical life did not end the day he ate the fruit. Remember, God had specifically warned that eating of the forbidden fruit would bring death “in the day” it was eaten (Genesis 2:17).

Death involves a separation. *Physical death* occurs when the human spirit leaves the physical body (James 2:26). *Spiritual death* results when a responsible person commits sin, thereby being separated from God. Isaiah explained: “*your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, so that he will not hear*” (Isaiah 59:2). Spiritual death is a separation caused when a pure person commits sin, thereby becoming impure, and creating a barrier between themselves and the holy God.

Once Adam and Eve were driven from the garden, no doubt the natural aging process began. If they had access to the tree of life they could “live forever” (Genesis 3:22). Also, since they were created full grown, they were accountable from the beginning of their existence. They had no infancy and subsequent childhood maturation process. Adam and Eve were an exception. The rest of the human family begins life as infants.

Are Children Lost?

What about children? Are they born lost or safe? Debates on this question have raged for centuries. The doctrine of “inherited sin” is so pervasive. Often this teaching is termed “original sin” since it is alleged that the tainting from Adam’s *original sin* was passed on to his descendants. Some theologians refer to this doctrine as: Total Hereditary Depravity. So, are children born depraved from their ancient forefather, or not?

A basic understanding of what sin is and how it affects us makes the answer easier. “*Every one that doeth sin doeth also lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness*” (1 John 3:4). Notice that sin is something *done* by an individual. The “*soul that sinneth, it shall die*” (Ezekiel 18:4). Note also in this verse the linking of sin to the individual perpetrator. “*The soul that sinneth, it shall die: the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him*” (Ezekiel 18:20). Sin is not transferable! From this verse we also learn that neither sin nor righteousness

is transferable. How would you like it if you did well and someone else got the credit? How much less would you like it if someone else committed a crime and you received the blame?

Infants come into this world, having done neither good nor bad deeds. We might say they have a blank deeds slate. Moses wrote of “children,” that “have no knowledge of good or evil” (Deuteronomy 1:39). Consider also the words of Isaiah. *“For before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, ...”* (Isaiah 7:16).

When God spared the city of Nineveh from destruction, he mentioned to Jonah his compassion upon the *“more than six-score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand”* (Jonah 4:11). The implication was clear that those one hundred and twenty thousand were children, who did not personally deserve destruction due to their, as yet, undeveloped ability to discern. The purity of children is also highlighted in God’s indictment of ancient Judah’s atrocity of child sacrifice. *“Because they have forsaken me, . . . and have filled this place with the blood of innocents, and have built the high places of Baal; to burn their sons in the fire for burnt-offerings unto Baal”* (Jeremiah 19:4, 5; see also 7:31). Israel’s same rebelliousness is recorded in Psalm 106: *“Yea, they sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto demons, And shed innocent blood, Even the blood of their sons and of their daughters, Whom they sacrificed unto the idols of Canaan”* (vv. 37, 38). The innocence of children is very well documented biblically.

Guilt vs. Consequences

An important caution is inserted here. Bible students must distinguish between *consequences* of sin that affect others versus the notion that someone’s *sin* may be passed to another person. One very misused verse is Romans 5:12: *“Therefore, as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin; and so death passed unto all men, for that all sinned.”* Ask someone to read this verse, then tell you what was passed on. Let them fill in the blank with only one word. “_____ passed unto all men.” Often I have given this simple quiz. More often than not, the answer, “Sin” is given. I have them read it again, and again if necessary, until they get the correct answer – from the verse itself! Allow me to extract the exact words from the text of the American Standard Version given above – *“...so death passed unto all men...”* The verse is talking about the “one man” Adam, and he indeed introduced sin into this world. But it does not say that sin was passed on! *Death* was passed on. Therefore, we all must face physical death. *“And inasmuch as it is appointed unto men once to die, and after this cometh judgment”* (Hebrews 9:27). There is a dramatic difference between a consequence of Adam’s sin being passed on and Adam’s sin being passed down. The former is true the latter is not.

Another commonly abused verse is found in the poetic writings of David. *“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; And in sin did my mother conceive me”* (Psalm 51:5). One example will suffice to show a classic mishandling. Commenting on this passage, Albert Barnes wrote:

...his [David’s] sin could be traced back to his “very birth;” that it was so deep and aggravated, that it could be accounted for – or that he could express his sense of it – in no other way, than by saying that he was “born a sinner.”

By examining a similar Psalm, we can observe the exaggerated language used for emphasis. *“The wicked are estranged from the womb: They go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies”* (Psalm 58:3). Both verses address early human life – indicated by the terms: “brought forth,” “conceive,” “womb,” and “born.” By hyperbole, infants are said to be “born, speaking lies.” Literally, newborns cannot speak, much less speak lies! In reality, lies are spoken later in the life of a person. It does not say babies are *born astray*. Notice carefully the phrase: “go astray.” As Isaiah affirmed: *“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way...”* (Isaiah 53:6). We are not born astray. None are born actually speaking lies. We are however, born “in” *the midst of sin* – a sinful world, and before very long, we too go astray.

Safety of Children

Having established that sin is not transferable, and that sin results from personal wrongdoing, it follows, that infants come into this world *safe*. We don’t use the word *saved*, since that would imply they were rescued. They have no need of spiritual rescue or cleansing.

The death of a child is heartbreaking! Yet, the scriptures offer happiness for children entering the afterlife. Having had no separation from God in life, there is no barrier after death. While David's child was ill, he fasted and prayed. But after the child died, David made this remarkable statement: *"But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me"* (2 Samuel 12:23). David was not speaking of their bodies being together in the grave, but rather he and the child having a reunion in the next life!

It is outside the scope of this article to discuss *at what point* a young person comes to a point of responsibility. An exact age cannot be given, since not all children mature at the same rate. Furthermore, humans are simply not able to accurately judge accountability as can God. However, this caution is offered to parents and other persons interested in the spiritual wellbeing of a young person: **there is a critical difference between the ability to recite facts and the maturity to comprehend concepts**. A child may be able to verbally rehearse facts such as "hear, believe, repent, confess, and be immersed," and not actually be able to comprehend the necessary truths and commitment of beginning a life of devotion to Jesus as Master. If a child is too young to comprehend how natural conception and childbirth occurs, surely they cannot adequately grasp the virgin birth or the new birth!

Once an individual reaches a point of *responsibility* they are accountable before God. We might divide the word for emphasis: Response-able! Once able to respond, when the first sin is committed, a person dies spiritually. This state is called being "dead through your trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). One need not commit multiple sins to become a sinner. Breaking one law makes a person a law-breaker (cf. James 2:10).

Remedy for Lostness

Thankfully, lostness need not be permanent. As noted already, lostness is attributable to personal sin. God is *"not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance"* (2 Peter 3:9). And *"the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost"* (Luke 19:10). The gospel is the remedy for an existing sinful condition. The gospel *"is the power of God unto salvation"* (Romans 1:16). The Divine redemptive plan makes provision for sinful men to transition from being lost into a realm of salvation.

Repentance is one of the most challenging requirements in the process (cf. Acts 17:30; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Confession is also required (Romans 10:9, 10). The spiritual realm of salvation is found *"in Christ."* *"There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus"* (Romans 8:1). Getting *"into Christ"* is culminated when a penitent person who believes, confesses Jesus as Master, and is *"baptized into Christ"* (Galatians 3:27). Jesus has only *"one body,"* and he is *"himself the saviour of the body"* (Ephesians 4:4; 5:23). That one spiritual *"body"* is also called *"the church"* (Colossians 1:18). So, salvation is enjoyed by those *"in Christ,"* which is equivalent to being in his church. Therefore, the popular idea of being saved without being a member of the church is biblically impossible.

Eternal Lostness

Tragically, most people transition from their childhood safety to a state of lostness, and never experience a restored fellowship with God! Most choose to follow the popular path.

"Enter ye in by the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many are they that enter in thereby. For narrow is the gate, and straightened the way, that leadeth unto life, and few are they that find it" (Matthew 7:13, 14).

Many people seem to believe that God is *"so loving"* that most will be saved. According to Jesus most people will ultimately be lost!

At "the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of his power in flaming fire, rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus: who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9).

For the majority – they will forever remain separated from God. Eternal banishment from God is a real danger (Matthew 25:46). Even the thought of it is so disturbing, that many attempts have been made to explain it away.

The unbiblical notion of Purgatory is a fabrication designed to offer hope for loved ones who died unprepared. Prayer for the dead is another misguided attempt to alter the destiny of one departed. And the passage about one being “baptized for the dead” does not teach that a living person can change the spiritual condition of one who has already died (1 Corinthians 15:29).

Unfortunately, even some children of God seem to be searching for a sin remedy other than gospel obedience. The thought of our loved ones and friends being lost is rightly disturbing. And the thought of denominational folks being lost, who often seem to be more dedicated than some of the Lord’s own, is indeed troubling. *However, if our thinking is not grounded firmly on Scripture, our feelings may carry us away from truth.*

When this happens, you might hear a Christian musing that the Lord might somehow accept those who have not learned and obeyed the truth. Wandering minds may hypothesize that since many are ignorant, they may not be accountable. Will ignorance be a ticket to eternal bliss? Paul declared: *“Though God overlooked those times of ignorance, He now commands all men everywhere to repent”* (Acts 17:30 Williams). And Peter acknowledged to a group of Jews: *“I know that in ignorance ye did it”* – that is, they *“killed the Prince of life”* (Acts 3:17, 15). But though they did so in ignorance, yet he demanded: *“Repent ye therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out”* (Acts 3:19). Even in ignorance, people are accountable! Truth is obtainable! Jesus said: *“seek, and ye shall find”* (Matthew 7:7). Truth is knowable! Ye *“shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”* (John 8:32).

Judgment Day Surprise

The words of our Lord can bring drifting minds back to clear thinking.

“Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy by thy name, and by thy name cast out demons, and by thy name do many mighty works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Matthew 7:21-23).

It behooves us to study these words carefully to determine who fits this description. This judgment day surprise is coming to those who were busy in life doing religious things and using the Lord’s name. Who are these folks? First, they are religious people. Next, they seem to be giving the Lord credit for what they are doing. Furthermore, they appear to be anticipating approval from the Lord. Since the description is broad, it has quite a wide application. However, certainly many in present day Christendom meet the criteria. Thousands of denominational people are devoted in prayer, Bible reading, and many other religious activities. Often they are busied with philanthropic ventures, and say they are doing it all “in the name of Jesus.”

But crucial questions should be asked. Are denominational devotees actually doing the will of the Father in heaven? Have they been spiritually purified? Peter plainly tells us that purification of one’s soul is accomplished by “obedience to the truth” (1 Peter 1:22). Can they be “in Christ” where there is “no condemnation” if they have never been “baptized into Christ” (Roman 8:1; Galatians 3:27)?

Loyal denominationalists are more analogous to Saul before his conversion. He was zealously doing what he felt was right before God. In good conscience he thought *he “ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus”* (Acts 26:9). While thinking he was pleasing God, Jesus confronted him by asking: *“Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?”* (Acts 9:4). Similarly, myriads are in good conscience as they proclaim infant depravity, “faith only” salvation (cf. James 2:24), and a host of other unbiblical doctrines.

Neither you nor I are in the judgment seat. That is the Lord’s place (2 Timothy 4:1)! Yet Jesus has warned us what his verdict will be for those who are zealously religious, while not actually doing the will of the Father. The Judge has already told us what his decision will be. *“He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned”* (Mark 16:16). God *“would have all men to be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth”* (1 Timothy 2:4). Salvation is not obtainable without coming to the knowledge of the truth.

Conviction-Led Compassion

We should harness our commendable emotion of compassion. We should be bothered at the thought of one person being lost. However, that impetus should not be directed toward looking for a non-existent loophole, or a back door to heaven for “good people.” Maybe you have heard a person say: “I cannot believe that God would send anyone to an eternal place of suffering!” An analysis of their statement reveals the problem – “I cannot believe...!” Their lack of belief does not change the fact that Jesus declared: *“And these shall go away into eternal punishment: but the righteous into eternal life”* (Matthew 25:46)! Let this reality spur us on to speak the gospel of the Lord. The gospel is the message of hope!

While a person is living, their lost condition need not be permanent. And a realization of the horror of eternal separation from God should ignite a fire inside us that propels us to share the message of the Lord Jesus Christ. Beware that evangelistic fervor can be extinguished when a Christian fails to accept the fact that those lost in sin will remain lost without the gospel.

Consider this thought-provoking scenario. Occasionally, someone is enjoying a swim but begins to be in distress. They begin to holler out – “Help, Help!” Bystanders, often without hesitation, instinctively throw themselves into the water and try to assist the drowning person. Why? Because they realize the urgency of the situation and that the person could die if help is not given quickly.

Are we truly convinced that people all around us are lost in sin, and in danger of being lost eternally? If so, we should be responding by sharing the message of hope. Jesus was willing to leave heaven and go to the cross to make salvation possible (cf. Philippians 2:5-8). There surely is a connection between our belief in the lostness of others and our sharing of the gospel.

George Jensen
2021

Work Cited: Albert Barnes. *Psalms: Volume 1*, Barnes' Notes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 85.