



HOW GOOD
is good enough?



L I F E C H A N G E B O O K S

ANDY STANLEY



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PART I

HOW DO YOU GET THERE FROM HERE?

The story is told of a Sunday school teacher whose assignment was to explain to the six-year-olds in his class what someone had to do in order to go to heaven. In an attempt to discover what the kids already believed about the subject, he asked a few questions.

“If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale, and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into heaven?”

“NO!” the children all answered.

“If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would *that* get me into heaven?”

Again the answer was, “NO!”

“Well then,” he said, “if I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children and loved my wife, would that get me into heaven?”

Again they all shouted, “NO!”

“Well then, how *can* I get into heaven?”

A boy in the back row stood up and shouted, “YOU GOTTA BE DEAD!”

DEAD SURE

Therein lies the problem: You gotta be dead to go to heaven. Consequently, you gotta be dead to know much about the place, as well.

The people who seem to be most confident about what heaven is like are those who claim to have died and come back to talk about it—and write bestselling books on the subject. I have read a couple of those books, and I’ve heard a couple of “returners” interviewed on television. Their stories are interesting. But they never give a straight answer to the questions we are all asking: “How do you get there? What can we do on this side of death to assure ourselves a spot in heaven?”

Most agree that death is a prerequisite, but that’s pretty much where agreement ends and speculation begins. In these pages, we are going to look at an ancient

but popular theory regarding who goes to heaven. I say ancient, because the idea has been around since the beginning of civilization. In terms of popularity, it is what most world religions espouse.

So why did I bother to write a book about it? Because in spite of its immense popularity and long standing, it doesn't make a lick of sense.

Seriously. Smart, educated, accomplished men and women from just about every nation on earth are banking their eternities on a theory that doesn't hold up under even the slightest scrutiny.

Why? Well, I'm not sure. My assumption is that everybody is preoccupied with making a living, falling in love, having kids, and whatever else they are doing. Nobody's got time to think about heaven. So they don't.

THE GREAT EQUALIZER

But every now and again we are confronted with our mortality. When that happens, we mentally take hold of *something* that gives us assurance. For most people on this spinning ball of minerals and dirt, assurance is found in an assumption they have never tested. And it brings them the assurance they need to jump right back into the game of life.

So what is this internationally held assumption?

Good people go to heaven.

The logic flows something like this: There is a good God who lives in a good place reserved for good people. This God goes by many names. He is behind all major world religions. Therefore, all major, and possibly minor, religions provide a legitimate path to God and, therefore, heaven. The criterion for making it to this good place is to be good. Each religion has its own definition for *good*. But what they all have in common is that men and women must do certain things, and not do certain things, in order to assure themselves a spot in this good place with a good God.

Make sense?

Actually, it doesn't really make any sense at all. In fact, if you are smart enough to read this book, you are smart enough to find the problems with the *good people go* view without my help. Chances are, you've never really thought it through. But you owe it to yourself to do so.

I figure it will take you about two hours to read this book. Investing two hours of your time to consider where you will spend eternity isn't really much to ask. So find a comfortable chair and prepare yourself for what may be an uncomfortable discovery.

Chapter 1



EVERYTHING'S FINE

If you are like most people, you believe that everybody lives forever somewhere, that once you die, your soul goes somewhere. Most Americans believe in heaven. A smaller percentage believe in hell. In other parts of the world, the prevailing belief is that the soul comes back around for another lap—we just start over as someone (or something) else.

In spite of all their differences and peculiarities, the religions of this world share one common denominator: How you live your life on this side of the grave determines what happens next. Western thought has all the good people going to heaven. In other parts of the world, the good people come back around as even better people, or at least with the opportunity to become better people.

THINK ABOUT IT

Here's something to think about: If God appeared to you and asked, "Why should I let you into heaven?" how would you answer? If you're like most people, your answer might run something along these lines:

"I've always tried to..."

"I never..."

"I do my best..."

Whether I am talking to Muslims, Hindus, or Christians, the majority of the answers I receive to that question go back to an individual's attempt to live a good life. Why? Because most people believe that good people go to heaven.

The moral? Behave yourself now and you don't really need to worry too much about what happens next. The end. Now let's get back to work, golf, Little League, PTA—the pressing issues of this life.

PACKED AND READY

But then every once in a while something happens that forces you to seriously consider the question of what's next—a funeral, a health scare, a birthday, a glance in the mirror. You don't like to think about it. You rarely ever talk about it. But it is always there. And the older you get, the more often you find yourself pushing it from your mind.

The fact is, the mortality rate for humans is 100 percent. And that bothers you. In spite of the fact that you believe there *is* something better on the other side of life, you are not at peace. And for good reason.

You see, as good as you are—and you are pretty good—you aren't *really* sure if you have been good enough. You hope so. And you are certainly better than...well...than certain people you know.

But how good is good enough?

Where's the line? Who is the standard? Where do you currently stand? Do you have enough time left to stash away enough good deeds to counterbalance your bad ones?

And while we're asking questions, I'll go ahead and throw one in that perhaps you've wondered about but were afraid to ask: Just *who* is in charge of this operation? God? If so, he ought to have been a bit clearer about how this whole thing works. If our eternal residence hangs in the balance based on how we live, we could certainly do with some direction. A standard. A mile marker or two. Perhaps a midterm.

"But wait," you say, "isn't it the job of religion to answer those questions for me?" Sure. Most of the various world religions and their books do exist to answer those questions. Teachers, preachers, ulema, rabbis, priests,

lamas—they are all in the business of getting us safely to the other side. Specifically, they are responsible for helping you and me understand how to live in such a way as to ensure a happy ending.

So why are you still unsure? You've been to church. Perhaps you attended a few religion classes as a child. And yet, if you are like the majority of people I talk to, you still are not confident where you stand with God.

I ran across an interesting quote by Gandhi that underscored the universal uncertainty associated with religious belief. When questioned why he proselytized in the arena of politics but not religion, he responded, "In the realm of the political and social and economic, we can be sufficiently certain to convert; but in the realm of religion there is not sufficient certainty to convert anybody, and, therefore, there can be no conversions in religions."¹ Now that's helpful, isn't it? Even Gandhi didn't find certainty in religion.

TO GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE WE GO

Several years ago my wife, Sandra, walked into our kitchen, sat down on the bar stool, and announced that she wanted to make a special trip to her hometown for the expressed purpose of talking to her aging grandmother, Helen, about eternity. I was surprised. Helen

was almost ninety at the time. She grew up going to the local Methodist church. Until her health became an issue, she rarely missed a Sunday. She was way better than the average person. Certainly *good* by anybody's standard.

"What brought this on?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," Sandra said. "I just don't know how much longer she will be with us, and I've never talked to her about God or heaven or any of that." For most people who knew Helen, her ultimate destination would be the least of their concerns. If good people go to heaven, she was a shoo-in. Nevertheless, Sandra hopped in the car and drove two and a half hours to chat with her grandmother.

Helen knew she was coming. Sandra showed up under the guise of wanting to make cookies. But after about thirty minutes of chitchat, she popped the question. She said, "Grandmama, we've never talked about heaven before. Are you sure that when you die you will go to heaven?"

Helen got big tears in her eyes and responded the way the average *good* person responds to that question. She said, "I hope so, honey."

"I hope so"? Ninety years of good living, standing by her dying husband till the end, serving her community,

loving her grandchildren, paying her taxes, driving the speed limit, and she *hopes* she's going to heaven? If Helen can't go to sleep at night with the peace of knowing that things between her and her creator are good, I'm not sure who can. If Helen ain't sure, can't nobody be sure.

So why is it that even the *really good* people at best "hope so"? I'll tell you why. Because nobody can tell you how good you have to be to go to heaven.

Nobody.

Don't believe me? Get out the phone book and start calling the religious leaders in your community. You will get an earful of information, but when the words finally quit flowing, you'll be back to "I hope so."