



# “A Terrible Choice”

a sermon by

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John 14:1-7

We were three days into a six-day youth conference at Montreat. It was around 11:30 pm, after a long day of teaching and recreation, and we were just settling back home and starting to debrief the day, when suddenly a member of our group passionately exclaimed, “today in small group we talked about heaven and hell and I simply do not believe that God sends people to hell.”

You could hear the air get sucked out of the room as everyone inhaled together, much like how water is sucked off of the shore just before a Tsunami; and then like a crashing wave, it came rolling back again, as multiple voices joined in a chorus of assent.

Scripture says that we should always be prepared to “give an answer to everyone who asks the reason for the hope that we have,<sup>1</sup>” but I have to tell you, even though I have personally wrestled with whether or not God sends people to hell many times over the course of my life, at that moment I was at a loss. I was utterly befuddled.

I went to bed later that night disturbed. My spirit was troubled and I couldn’t pinpoint why. I couldn’t sleep and so dawn found me bleary eyed, sitting out on the deck with a cup of coffee beside me; my Bible in one hand, and my journal in the other – pouring my heart out before God.

And then in the still-silence that comes as the morning sun slowly rises and as the shimmering dew begins to water the thirsty ground, God began to speak.

What disturbed me about the discussion the night before was not the question, “Does God send good people to hell?” but instead the amount of negatively charged emotion that framed the question itself.

What had disturbed me was how quickly God had suddenly become a meanie, the heavy, the one who was acting unfairly and unjustly. God had suddenly become the scapegoat, with no regard or thought to human responsibility. And the amount of negative emotion that was vehemently directed toward God was unsettling.

“How could God really do such a horrible thing?” was the sentiment, it was as if God was suddenly Leroy Brown, meaner than a junkyard dog, the epitome of a cosmic bully.

But I don’t believe that God is a cosmic bully and so I was challenged to open my Bible and to begin tracing what I ultimately hold to be true. And I want to present to you today what I believe to be three foundations.

The first foundation has to do with the nature of heaven and hell. The second foundation is in reference to God’s desires and the third foundation has to do with the fundamental law of relationship and the dignity of choice. And taken together, I believe they provide a window that can shed some light on this important and often volatile topic.

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<sup>1</sup> I Peter 3

The first foundation: has to do with heaven and hell. What is heaven and what is hell? Are they literally physical dimensions? Is heaven really a seemingly magical place with mansions lining streets of gold, like an eternal Disney Land, with Angels instead of Princesses? And is hell really a burning lake of fire, a place of torment somehow greater than that of sitting gridlocked on Route One between New York and Philly?

Truth is, we don't really know. Most of the physical descriptors we have in the Bible concerning Heaven and Hell are apocalyptic, which is a fancy way of saying that when Heaven and Hell are described in the Bible it is most often in figurative language that pushes beyond the dictionary definition of words.

What the Bible does make abundantly clear however, is that to be in heaven, is to be uniquely in the presence of God in a way and in manner that we currently cannot fathom. It is to be forever in the presence of our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. It is to be in an intimate relationship with Jesus that has no barriers to stand in the way. It is to be loved without boundaries, to be known for who we are, and to be accepted and cherished as such.

Conversely, the Bible makes it clear that to be in hell is to be separated from the presence of God in a way that defies even our wildest imagination. To be in hell is to be cut off, alienated, estranged from God. It is to be removed from his grace – grace that we have become so accustomed to sustaining us that we hardly even recognize it from day to day.

So that is the first foundation – heaven is to be uniquely in the presence of God in a way that we cannot currently fathom and hell is to be uniquely separated from the presence of God in a way that defies even our wildest imagination.

The second foundation: has to do with the heart of God. Isaiah 43 says, “This is what the Lord says – he who created you O Jacob, he who formed you O Israel; ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned, the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior...Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north ‘give them up!’ and to the South, ‘Do not hold them back!’ Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth.”

2 Peter 3:9 says, “God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish.” John 3:16 and 17 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

This entire book is about God's passionate pursuit of his people, it is about how time and time again God has removed the boundaries and the barriers that have come

between him and his creation. It is about the great lengths that God has gone, about all that God has done in order to remove the obstacles that would prevent us from being in relationship with him. God yearns for us. God longs for us. That is the second foundation – God’s great desire is to be in intimate relationship with us.

The Third Foundation: The third foundation has to do with the laws of relationship and the dignity of choice. Quality relationships cannot be forced, coerced, or one sided. Relationships by their very nature require two. I can choose to seek out a relationship with Jennifer Anniston until the cows come home, but unless Jennifer chooses to reciprocate, to my dismay, we will never have a relationship. The confines of relationship dictate that we have to both be able to choose whether or not to participate.

When it comes to having a relationship with God, the same law applies. God has already chosen us; God has already predestined us to be in relationship with him, he has already removed all the obstacles that would prevent us from coming into his presence – all except the obstacle of our choice.

God has dignified us by providing us with the ability to choose whether or not to follow him. He has given us the dignity of being able to choose whether or not we want to believe in and be in relationship with him. The choice for relationship is no longer up to God, God has already made it, **God chooses us** – but we have to choose him back – otherwise we do not have a relationship. That is the third foundation – God has chosen us but the fundamental law of relationship requires that we also choose him.

And here is the hard truth of the matter, God’s greatest desire is to be in relationship with us, but the laws of relationship require that we be given the opportunity to choose not to participate, which means that inevitably there will come a day when God will have to honor our choice and remove himself from our presence. There will have to come a day when God must grant our desire to not be in relationship with him, and at that time, he will have to completely remove himself from us. Thus based upon our first foundation, placing us in hell.

Which means that heaven and hell, and where we “go” is not really a question of whether or not we are good or bad people, but instead whether or not we desire to be in relationship with God. If we desire to be in relationship with God, than I believe God will do whatever it takes to make that possible, his grace will be sufficient – but if we do not desire to be in proximity to God – than whether or not we are good no longer matters – according to the way God has designed the world, and because of the nature of relationships – than there will come a day when God will have to honor our choice.

And because in this world we are sustained by God, and blessed daily by the grace of God, in countless ways that we fail to understand and to acknowledge – when that sad day comes when God is finally forced into a terrible choice to withdraw himself – I believe there will be great despair. There will be despair on our part because the grace that we have taken for granted has been removed and with that Scripture says will

come weeping and gnashing of teeth. And there will be great sadness on God's behalf because his heart will be broken.

In our text for today, Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me." We often look at this as an exclusionary statement – but it is intended to be just the opposite. Jesus is trying to comfort his people as he heads to his death – a death that will remove the final barrier that prevents his people from having a deep relationship with God. A death that is intended to reveal his great love and to ultimately woo his people back to him.

Jesus is the Way, in that through him, the walls of separation have been torn down... Jesus is the Truth in that he reveals to us, in the fullest way imaginable, God's tremendous love for us... Jesus is the Life, in that because of him and through him we are given life in relationship with God. Jesus is not trying to be exclusive; he is trying to provide a roadmap.

Let me explain it this way, suppose you are in a strange town and pull over to a gas station in order to ask for directions. Suppose the person behind the counter says: 'take the first street to the right and then the second left. Cross the square, go past the Methodist church, and after the church take the third right, then go down approximately three blocks past the old hardware store and make another right. The road you are looking for should be your next left just after the train station.'<sup>2</sup>

Chances are you would be lost before you got half way. But suppose the person behind the counter says, 'why don't I take you there.' In that case, the person becomes the way. They become the roadmap.

That is what Jesus does for us. He not only give us advice and directions. He takes us by the hand and leads us. He does not tell us about the way; he himself becomes the roadmap. In him alone we see what God is like; and he alone can lead us into God's presence without fear and without shame.

So does God send good people to hell? I don't think so. But I do believe that people go to hell, and good people go to hell, because often they choose to go there without fully realizing what they are choosing.

And what makes this topic so difficult is that we have all rolled out of the rack and put our knees to the floor, anguishing over those that we love. All of us have family and friends that actively choose not to be in relationship with God, and that scares us, that grieves us.

But even so, let us be careful not to blame the wrong party. Because God, in the person of Jesus Christ, has literally gone to hell and back in order to make relationship possible. And in the end, it is God who out of excruciating love, must bind himself in order to honor the dignity that is displayed in our ability to choose.

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<sup>2</sup> Idea borrowed from Barclay's **Commentary on John**

During our time on this earth I believe God is passionately pursuing us, trying to woo us, hoping we will choose to be in relationship with him – but a relationship requires two and there will inevitably have to come a day, ironically because of his tremendous love, that God will need to honor our choice and either draw closer to us than we can currently fathom or withdraw in a way that defies our wildest imagination. One will seem like heaven, the other hell.

Make no mistake, heaven and hell do exist, and hell is the antithesis of God's design – its very existence breaks his heart and it exists only because God has deemed to give us the dignity of choice. But it does exist. And the choice is ours. But may it be a terrible choice, that we and our loved ones, never choose.