

## **“HOW DO WE GET OUR NAME ON THAT GUEST LIST?”**

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A great surprise, as we mature into this world of brokenness and sin, is that as something good happens to us, it is surprising how few will get happy with us. Let's say you get a surprise promotion. We look to others to catch the good feeling and reflect it back. But over time we learn to be careful with whom we share good news and how we share it. Why is that? People are people and will talk. “She didn't really earn her promotion, she knew someone.” A saying gets at this tendency. Wherever a bright light shines, expect it will cast deep, dark shadows.

I begin here because something like this happens to the good news contained in many of our core Christian concepts. They have become suspect to modernity. When we say them, people don't hear good news anymore. They don't see light, just shadows. How does that work? Something like this. Use a word like heaven. “So who are you condemning to hell?” Use a word like salvation. “So who are you calling lost?” Use words like eternal life. “So what people are you damning?”

Last Sunday, preaching on Revelation, all three words came into play—heaven, salvation and eternal life. I said we mainline Protestants need to rediscover Revelation and to discuss heaven. Because if we don't trust God to get his way, if we can't trust that good will win out, how can we live purposefully here and now?

This week, with a new lesson from Revelation and Jesus promising eternal life to those unable to hear it—people of faith ready to stone him!—we push on. Let's raise one of the most hotly debated aspects of salvation or eternal life, as in who receives it? Who's in and who is out? How do we get our name on that guest list?

But first notice, imagining that place where God will finally get his way, we are no longer in a sad world of brokenness and sin. We're in another place. As 1 Jn (1.5) claims, “This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.” Trusting that can help us depend on God's Word as faithful and suspend our dogmatic, modernistic cynicism.

We've heard some argue it makes no sense to be Christian if some can be saved without being Christian. It makes no sense to be Christian, if those who've never heard of Jesus, or people raised in other faiths, also have a shot at eternal bliss.

The whole reason for being Christian, such as these insist, is to avoid damnation. Being Christian is about being on the right side of that great divide. We're saved. Those who are not Christian aren't. As this logic goes, what is the joy of salvation if everyone else escapes the misery of damnation, regardless of his or her belief? To me it feels like the coldness of the older brother to his brother's homecoming. He casts dark shadows all over the bright light of his little brother's getting found.

Is our motive to avoid sin and do right because otherwise God smacks us down? No. We live not to do wrong and to do right because God has revealed to us that is the best and happiest and highest path for us. We shun sinning in order to love ourselves as God loves us, so that we can become the persons God meant us to be. Not because a barbaric threat of punishment looms eternally over our future. It's simple, we can't live contrary to how God made us, and still fulfill our destiny.

Judgment and punishment are so different from what we thought they were. It is not about stoking God's anger for crucifying Jesus and then blowing God off. It is not an event happening in the future before some distant throne. Heaven and hell begin here and now whenever we are in accord or rejecting of God's will for us. Judgment doesn't wait for some great by and by when we get a thumbs up or a thumbs down. Judgment is every day seeing Jesus on his cross and realizing to ourselves, "All of this God did for me--for all of us--and none of us gave a damn."

As for heaven and eternal life, try this on for size. Can we imagine wanting to live with God forever, if we haven't cared at all about God and his ways in this world? Notice me speaking of our choices in our lifetime as much as God's choices. God is love, right? For love to be love, it can't be coercive. God won't force gifts on us. If we spend our life avoiding God at every turn, deriding God's ways for us, preferring what we capriciously prefer over what our Creator knows is best for us, then, in a sense, we're already in hell. Friends, hell isn't a man in a red suit with horns, pitchfork, and flames. Hell is deciding to live apart from God, without God.

We can miss hell here below, but it's right there. As Yale Psychiatry trained me to work with addicts, my practice interview was with a prostitute 6 months pregnant. She was deeply addicted and only getting worse. Sores oozed from over body and she threw up three times in my waste basket. She was perspiring profusely. But what made it so poignant was in truth she had a sweet spirit. She apologized for me seeing that. Have you ever met anybody so lost as that? It taught me that hell is less about fire or brimstone and more about deep loneliness and isolation.

But hear another image, a more helpful one, of humankind's journey to heaven. It's from Rodney Clapp, editor of my first book. Imagine children raised in a cave, never allowed outside. Unless told, they know nothing of the sun. Yet that doesn't mean the sun doesn't exist. Even if they've never seen it, that sun remains a key reality in their existence. The cave-reared children only know the light and heat of wood burning fires. Yet the sun has everything to do with the temperature and other in-cave conditions. The light and heat of the sun allows for the oxygen they breathe, always sustaining the cave children, despite their cavernous ignorance.

Likewise Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection has altered the direction of the world, knocking it out of an orbit of perdition and into an orbit of life. Whether we know it or not, whether we affirm it or not, it affects us all. What's more, as Christians we claim the God revealed in Jesus Christ is gracious and allows our reciprocal love,

respecting our freedom. What happens after death to those who never see the sun--or the Son--or to those who hear of him in a distorted fashion stays unclear.

Such talk makes some Christians twitch. Somewhere along the line they locked in the hydraulics of salvation where those accepting Christ as Lord go on to eternal life with God and those failing to explicitly affirm him go to a hell of torment. And, in their eyes, any relaxation of that deal means that our faith loses its vigor.

I offer a final image, again from Rodney Clapp, to kindle our reflection here. Let's suppose that I come from a race of people who dwell upon an island. Suppose further that I and my people only know the island and nothing beyond it. We have feared leaving it because the body of water surrounding it is immense. Besides, we thought the world, the whole of our existence, was only our island and that great body of water. Living in fragmented fear, we never learned how to swim or build canoes. Yes, we've heard vague rumors of canoes being sighted. Our own have seen creatures in long flat wooden vessels gliding over the water's surface. Many dismiss those stories as delusional. Some wonder if the canoers are gods.

But more is at stake here because not only have we not learned to make canoes. Our island is slowly disappearing in those vast waters. The waves lap farther and farther in. Some have responded to the water's rising with fervent supplication to the "gods" who might fix it. Others simply attempt to live for today and today only.

What is unknown to us is that just beyond our eyesight there is not only an entire continent. There are dwellers on other islands we don't know about who have discovered that continent. They have learned how to swim and to make canoes. They can tell us, because of their advanced explorations, of a whole other world. In our fear and worry, it is going to be a while before we can reach that continent. But following and learning from our Rescuer, some of us, bold and willing to learn of canoe-making, occasionally catch glimpses of its stupendous joy and promise.

Venturing to other islands, before we're able to reach the continent--our new and mended world--we meet others along the way who can teach us a thing or two. As we do, our life in community takes on new and unexpected shades of beauty. We hope for the best for all we meet, even if they haven't joined up with our tribe. Above all, we rejoice that we have been saved, body and soul. The birds seem to fly in a bigger sky than before. The undulating hills seem an offering of praise.

Jesus Christ and his salvation follow from such an analogy. Our world *is* sinking. Our Rescuer empowers the promise of delivery to a better place. That transforms and enriches life here and now, serving us well on the island of our limitations. God's love is more resourceful, I believe, than two-dimensional binaries of judging and saving allow. For now, as any bright light shines, we quickly jump to the shadows it casts. But in the life to come, in our God, there is no darkness at all. Amen.