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1 Timothy 2:1-7
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LOVE WINS!

Ever hear the bible passage from the Gospel of John, chapter 14, verse 6? It's the one where Jesus unreservedly states: "I am the way, the truth and the life. NO ONE come to the Father EXCEPT through me."

Or the one where the Apostle Peter, speaking of Jesus Christ, proclaims:

"Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Millions have read these and other Bible passages that declare the exclusivity of Christianity—the verses that tell us that Jesus Christ is the *only* path to salvation.

And, just so you know, these scriptures are absolutely true!

But here is the dilemma: What about all of those people who have not fulfilled the basic requirement of these scriptures?

What about those who have lived far removed from ever even hearing the name of Jesus Christ?

What about those who may have heard the name, but did not really understand Jesus or his message? What about all the children who have died?

Is that *it*? Have they missed their only chance—only to go to hell?

Which brings us to today's question for God. "What are YOU (GOD) going to do with those who don't believe in Jesus Christ?"

Hmmmm....

Well, we also read where the Bible declares that "God is love" (*1 John 4:8*) and "desires all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (*1 Timothy 2:4*).

Then there's the Bible's most famous verse declares that "God so loved the world" (*John 3:16*).

Could a loving God sentence people to an eternity of torment for not having a chance to hear Jesus' name?

Are those who do not "profess the Name of the Lord" nothing more than walking firewood?

Will our loving, merciful Creator really condemn to eternal perdition those children who could not find Him?

What of God's children who have been driven away by abuse and condemnation? Will they remain outsiders forever?

What of those who avoid a Being whose representatives proclaim harsh judgments and issue hateful edicts?

Are agnostics and atheists doomed for doubting — when they've never seen any evidence of this "loving, merciful God" in their world?

The truth is, we do not know for certain who will live eternally with God; that decision is God's alone.

But, the bible I read gives us a strong hint about that outcome. Let me share three stories – one from the Old Testament and two from the New that might shed a new light on the subject.

The first is known as the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*.

As the Jesus tells the story, a young man takes his inheritance and leaves home – off to the big city and all that entails.

Soon, though, he has spent it all. Wasted every cent on worthless stuff.

Impoverished, friendless, and starving, the young man is forced to take the worst, dirtiest menial job imaginable - he gets a job taking care of ... pigs.

One day – probably in the middle of cleaning out the pig pens – the son realizes that the lowest servant in his dad’s place has a better life than his.

He decides to head home, admit that his life is a mess, and ask only to be treated like a servant.

No frills, no expectations. All he wants, is to live in his father’s house. And so, he sets off for home.

Jesus tells us that the father sees the young man “while he was still a long ways off.”

Ever wonder how that could be, unless the father had been waiting and watching for his son?

Every waking hour of every day, the father had been scanning the horizon, seeking a sign of his child ... longing for his return.

And as soon as he sees his son, the scripture tells us that “the father ran to him and hugged and kissed him.”

In an age when decorum and order were tremendously important — when appropriate conduct was that a child should come before his father and bow respectfully and formally — the old gentleman sets off at a run and grabs his son in a bear hug and covers his face with kisses.

The father ignores the “rules.”

Overcome with great love and compassion, he embraces his returning child.

He is not put off by the fact that his son is covered with filth and smells like a pig — despite the stringent religious prohibitions against both.

“Dirt” and a “nasty history” are inconsequential. What matters to the father is that the family is together again.

And did you notice, all of this happens before the son has a chance to make his confession. Before he has a chance to admit his mistakes, before he has the opportunity to even ask for forgiveness.

There is no reprimand, no scolding, no demand for repentance. The joyful reunion begins the instant the father catches sight of his child.

And then God ... oops, then the father, throws a big party. It is cause for a major celebration:

“My son who was dead, is now alive. He who was lost, has now been found.”

Did you know that the parable of the prodigal son is the only one of Jesus’ stories that directly addresses the parent/child relationship?

It describes a father who yearns for his absent son so deeply, that he continually watches for his return. A parent who forgets all earthly rules and regulations in order to welcome his child home.

It is about love, mercy, and forgiveness given freely — abundantly, unstintingly, unconditionally.

There is one other major character who appears in the parable: the other son; the one who has been with the father all along, loyal and loving (or loyal, at least).

When he hears the music, and learns that it is a celebration for the prodigal, his brother, he refuses to join in.

He feels cheated, shortchanged, “disrespected” — it seems to him that his faithfulness has been overlooked.

It is a disappointing, but a very human and very understandable reaction. To the hardworking son it seems unfair.

He has done his part, followed the rules, done what he was told — and now his lazy bum of a brother is being welcomed home with all the trimmings.

When the father comes out of the house he begs the son to join in the festivities.

“Don’t you see?” he asks his stubborn child, “You’ve been with me all this time, and all I have is yours. Can’t you understand how wonderful it is that the one who was dead is alive?”

Sadly, the elder son shows no compassion for his dad (or his brother, for that matter). He doesn’t seem to realize that his father has suffered from the loss of a child whom he loved.

He doesn’t care that his brother was poor and hungry. He doesn’t see any reason to celebrate that the whole family is together again.

What he wants, is to stay away from that other, bad child.

And that is the saddest part of this story. In choosing to keep himself apart from his brother, the elder son excludes himself from the festivities.

In his stubborn insistence that he is right and the other is wrong, the son finds himself shut out of the joyful celebration.

We cannot know for sure who is “in” and who is “out” when it comes to our salvation; as I said before - that decision is God’s.

But perhaps our gracious Lord placed a clue — and a warning — within the parable of the prodigal son.

It may be that those who demand that others “go to hell,” may find themselves standing outside of heaven — not because God would prevent their entry, but because they will refuse to go in.

The reality is that we do not know all that much about heaven. But we do know rather a lot about God.

And I hope we can agree that God is love. Not just because we find it bluntly asserted in Scripture, but because that is how we experience God in our lives.

And almost all speculation about the afterlife is surely shaped by what we think about God.

Can you imagine God checking the catechism or even Scripture to see who can and cannot be allowed into heaven?

Or God throwing up his hands saying, "I like babies! But my hands are tied, it says right here "no unbaptized in heaven."

Which brings me to the second story, this time from the Old Testament. It is the story of Jonah.

God's word is spoken. The people of Nineveh shall be destroyed for their rebellion and wickedness.

But when Jonah goes to Nineveh, every single person, from the beggar to the king, bows down in authentic repentance to God (every knee bows and every tongue confesses God's way is right).

And then God doesn't do what he originally said he would, i.e. condemn them with destruction.

Rather, his mercy triumphs over judgment, and he saves every single person from condemnation and pours out his grace upon them.

Instead of rejoicing at the salvation of all, Jonah is furious.

Though God did say he would destroy them for their wickedness, Jonah was shocked to then witness God instead extending his mercy to all of them.

At the very last moment, God turned all their hearts to authentic repentance, so that their hearts were opened to the error of their ways, and they all freely believed.

In doing so, instead of being judged and destroyed, they were saved from punishment completely. All this by God's grace.

So, here's my question: Do you think God will do the same thing at the end of time?

By that I mean, however God moved the hearts of all the people in Nineveh to authentic repentance, is it possible he plans to do the same to all of humankind, at some point in time?

And if he does, wouldn't that fulfill the scripture, "Every knee will bow down and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God"?

If that is how it plays out, how would you feel about it?

Would you rejoice that God has done something more merciful and gracious than any of us could have imagined possible?

Or, will you walk outside the gates of heaven, sit under a tree like Jonah, and gnash your teeth that God has not destroyed those whom he said he would?

Would you accept that although God's original *written word* found in Scripture spoke of judgement and separation, God's final *living word* may end up declaring mercy and inclusion of all into salvation?

Would such an event overwhelm you with joy or would it be too painful to witness?

Would you rejoice over the abundance of God's grace or, like Jonah, be disgusted by it? And pout on the outside!

Our last story involves the Apostle Paul.

The Apostle Paul, while he was still the unbeliever who went by the name Saul, represented the very worst of sinners.

He was the kind of man who not only refused to believe in Jesus, but also violently opposed anything connected to the name of Jesus.

Yet God managed to do something — we commonly call it the “Damascus Road Experience” that overrode all his hatred and determination to not believe, causing something like scales to fall off his eyes, and allowing him to see clearly and believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Is it possible that God has a “Damascus Road experience” ready to give to all humankind, like he also gave to the Ninevites and to Paul?

What if unbelief falls from the eyes of all humankind, causing them to see clearly for the first time in their lives, and then all humankind comes to faith through a divine act of grace?

I think that God has shown us in Scripture that his mercy can save an entire nation, every single person, even though he had previously announced judgment.

I think Scripture surely testifies that God can overcome even the hardest heart, as exemplified in Paul (who called himself, the worst of sinners), saving us from our unbelief and drawing us into a living and active faith in Christ.

Let me ask you this: What would bring God more glory than to save and draw all of humankind intimately to himself, not by our efforts, but through the triumph of our Messiah's sacrifice and by the working of God's grace on our behalf?

Maybe then, it is true, that the God revealed in Jesus, the love of God, will not stop until all God's creation is redeemed and recreated.

Of course, that love involves freedom. I guess, in the end, we are free to deny God and to refuse to live the ways of God's kingdom.

God's essence, though, is love and that essence can never change.

It is my two cents that the gates of heaven will never shut, for God, by nature, is always desiring the reconciliation and restoration of all things.

God can never stop being God, which means that in the end, love has to win. And that means so do we. Thanks be to God!

Amen