

That All Shall Be Saved

H. Stephen Shoemaker

John 10:14-16,27-28; 2 Corinthians 15:20-28; I Timothy 2:3-6

I have been wanting to preach this sermon for a long time but did not feel free of mind and heart to do so. Today I want to talk about Universal Salvation, Heaven and Hell. The title “That All Shall Be Saved.”

That is the title of a new book by David Bentley Hart,¹ a book which has given me new impetus to think more deeply about the subject and preach this sermon. For years I have been a hopeful and semi-secret universalist. I wanted to believe in Universal Salvation, hoped in it, but could not quite get there, nor articulate it clearly. I

have suggested it here and there in sermons, as I did here in April, but I have never dedicated a whole sermon to it.

Early in my years at Myer's Park Baptist I suggested in a sermon that God's Salvation was broader than the Church or Christianity. The sermon found its way to the internet. Soon after, I discovered that if you googled H. Stephen Shoemaker the first thing that came up was an article with the headline: Shoemaker Destroys Souls. It quoted a passage from that sermon. It was not what I wanted to see first when my name was googled. And it stayed there on top for a good while. I felt a little better when I googled the religious organization who wrote it and discovered that Billy Graham was also considered too liberal.

I begin with two questions which Hart raises in his book. One, can a truly free and rational person defiantly reject the love of God? Two, can a God who creates a world in which there is eternal torment for some of God's children be the infinitely good and loving God Christianity says God is?

As to the first question, Hart made me ask the question, Are any of us as free or rational as we think we are? We are shaped by an uncountable number of influences and experiences. We are finite human creatures who make the best decisions we know to make, but we all live with limited freedom and rationality. We are made by love for love but there can be impediments to accepting that love or living that love.

For reasons such as these, some reject the God of love revealed in Christ not because they are evil but because they are not able to

say yes to God. Some reject God because the message about who God is has been so distorted that they are rejecting the kind of God that has been presented to them, not the true God of love revealed in Christ.

So we move to the second question. How can a God of infinite goodness, love and mercy consign to eternal torment those who were not able to say yes to God, or who never knew such a God? How is it right that an “unrepentant sinner” who has made terrible mistakes and cannot face them be consigned to *everlasting* torment?

What is the character of the God you believe in? Could you love such a God who designed hell as eternal punishment for some?

And what about the doctrine of hell that many have been brought up to believe in? Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the greatest preachers of the 20th century and writer of the hymn, “God of Grace and God of Glory”, tells in his auto-biography of his boyhood fear of hell:

I was a sensitive boy, deeply religious...and the effect upon me of hell-fire-and-brimstone preaching was deplorable. I vividly remember weeping at night for fear of going to hell, with my mystified and baffled mother trying to comfort me.²

Have you ever felt this fear, or some residue of it? Have you worried about some of your loved ones ending up in Hell? Have you put away such thoughts and wondered if you were outside the Christian fold? Have you ever said, “O.K., I’d rather be in hell than with the God who created it!”

III

I have been taught through the years that “universalism”, the belief that all will be saved, was a heresy, and for most of Christian history, particularly Western Christianity, it has been. But Hart’s book introduced me to theologians in the earliest centuries in Eastern Christianity—and by Eastern Christianity I mean the churches that make up what is today Eastern Orthodox Christianity—who believed in Universal Salvation and to the fact that there were many believers, mostly in Eastern Christianity, who believed so.

Moreover, there have been theologians and Christians throughout the centuries, all over the world, who have believed in universal salvation. They have mostly lived just inside the outside of

the circle of Christianity—and some have been cast out of the circle all together.

Did such people create such beliefs out of thin air? What about the Bible?, we might ask. These Christians were closely attuned to the New Testament scriptures and to the spirit of Christ.

IV

So let's look at the New Testament scriptures. Here are some.

1) I Corinthians 15:22. "For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive."

2) I Timothy 2:3-6. "...our savior God, who intends all humans to be saved and to come to a full knowledge of the truth."

3) Titus 2:11 "For the grace of God has appeared, giving salvation to all human beings...."

4) 2 Corinthians 5:19 “Thus God was in Christ reconciling the cosmos to God’s own self, not accounting their trespasses to them, and placing in us the word of reconciliation.”

5) Colossians 1:19-20. “For in him [that is, Christ] all the Fulness was pleased to take up a dwelling and through him to reconcile all things to him...whether things on the earth or the things in the heavens.”

6) I John 2:2. “And he is the atonement for our sins, and not only for ours, but for the whole world.”

7) I Timothy 4:10. “...we have hoped in a living God who is the savior of all human beings....”

8) I Corinthians 15:20-28. This chapter is Paul’s great sermon on the Resurrection. The Resurrection signals, he wrote, that God will overcome everything and everyone opposed to God, including death

itself, so that, to use Paul's beautiful phrase, "God will be all in all."

(v.28)

All through these passages one word rings throughout: "all", *panta*. All, all, all, *panta, panta,panta,panta!* Here was the joyful cry:
All shall be saved!

It is the church throughout the centuries who have decided that "all" does not mean "all"! But rather a certain particular "all"! My group. Some have even put a number to it.

So, ok, you might ask, those are the New Testament letters, what about the gospels, what about Jesus? So let's take a look.

1) John 12:32. "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw everyone to me."

2) John 3:17. "For God sent the Son into the cosmos not that he might condemn the cosmos, but that the cosmos might be saved through him."

3) John 10:14-16. "I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me....And I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also." There are, I believe, many more "flocks" than we can ever imagine. I hope this feels like good news to you.

4) John 10:27-28. "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; and no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, my *Abba*, who has given them to me is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand."

But what, we may ask, of Jesus' words about a "final judgment"? He used metaphors of destruction, like the chaff burned

away, like weeds thrown into the oven. And metaphors of exclusion, like the sealed door of the wedding feast. Or images of imprisonment, of being thrown into a jail. Or of isolation, as in cast into “outer darkness.”

But these are *metaphors*, that is, figures of speech which say, “It is like this, like this, like this.” They should not be taken literally. *Gehenna*, which is often translated “hell” referred to the valley of Hinnon outside the walls of Jerusalem where garbage was burned and was always burning. That’s a pretty vivid image!

I’ve heard mothers say to their disobedient children, “I’m going to skin you alive!” There was punishment of some kind ahead, but no *skinning*!

Here is my interpretation of these words and images. They did not refer to a place of eternal torment, but to a period in time, in

historical time or beyond time when our sins will be burned away, where we will be purified and cleansed so that, then, we will be joined to God, see God truly and God will be “all in all”.

The early Eastern theologians saw judgment as the penultimate thing not the final thing, a process of purification and healing after which we would be swept up into the transfiguring glory of the love of God, where everything is transformed, reconciled, made new. “All?!” we might ask, with certain people in mind. Yes *all*, but not as they were but as they shall be.

Here’s an analogy. Think of judgment as a great holy sieve, not one that sifts out some and throws the rest out, letting the “good” people through and tossing the “bad” people away, but as one that cleanses us all, separating from us everything that has marred our lives and kept us from being the persons God created and intended

us to be, so that we now stand before God joyous and free. God's love is not a torment revealing to us how far short we have fallen from that love, but is now the light of the sun in which we will live forever.

VI

Which leads me around the bend to ask, "What then is the meaning of salvation?", and what have God and Christ done, been doing and will forever do to give us such salvation? First, I would say that this salvation is broader than personal salvation, though it includes it. It is the salvation of the cosmos, of all reality where everything will be healed, restored and completed.

It is a salvation that saves us, not from an eternal inferno but from all the hells we have made for ourselves and from all the hells others have made for us.

The salvation story of God and of God in Christ is God's mission throughout time, from the foundations of the earth, to liberate us from bondage, heal us of all that harms us, and restore a broken creation. God descends into the abyss of all our hells to find us and lead us home.

And as for heaven? It is the realm of the Final Healing and Final Rejoicing. The Great Homecoming when we all will be gathered up in the love of God, where, to use the words of the woman mystic, Julian of Norwich, "All shall be well and all shall be well, all manner of thing shall be well".

It is a heaven we can experience *here too*, in part, where now and then the love of God pervades us, broken things are mended, reconciliation happens and people are set free. And we with a lump in our throats too big to swallow see the glory of God at work.

This is a God of moral beauty. This is a God I can believe in. This is a God I *want* to believe in. And this is the God whose face Jesus revealed to us as the face of Love itself.

At the end of the novel and spiritual classic, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, the priest looks at his life and with his last words, the last words of the book, says, “All is Grace.” *Tout est grace*.³ Grace is *all*. If it is not all, if it is not *for* all, it is not grace.

1. John Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019) Hart is a philosopher and Biblical scholar who has translated the entire New Testament

2. Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days* (N.Y.: Harper&Brothers, 1956)pp.35-6

3. Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest* (N.Y.: Carroll & Grat Publishers, Inc.,1937),p.298.