It will not Return Void

At a recent home fellowship, an attendee recalled hearing about a person dying, seeing heaven, and then Jesus. Although “heaven” looked amazing and inviting, Jesus gave this person the option to either enter in or return to their family. This individual chose to return and began living with renewed vigor, describing to everyone their other worldly experience. The discussion shifted to the validity of the story with the question being, “Did Jesus really appear to this dying person?” With opinions all over the place, the consensus was, “Why not? Why couldn’t Jesus intervene in a crucial point in a someone’s life and lovingly give them options?” We all agreed that it was possible, and perhaps probable, for the loving God and His son to be there for their saints.

Later during the fellowship, a friend of mine lamented the death of a friend he had since childhood. “He was an unbeliever and constantly rejected my overtures of the gospel. I think he was unsaved.” he regretfully exclaimed, fearing his friend’s fate. God intervened with some insight for him, as He often does when believers fellowship together. I asked him, “Did you actually witness to him?” “Oh, yes” he said, “many times. But he fought it and sometimes told me to stop.” “Let’s recall a parable” I responded.

Matt. 20:1-15

“For the Kingdom of Heaven is like a man, a head of a house, who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

And when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace,

and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ And they went their way.

He went out again about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing.

And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing, and he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’

They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘Go also into the vineyard.’

“And when evening came the lord of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning from the last to the first.’

And when those who were hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius.

And when those who were hired first came, they assumed that they would receive more, and yet each one of them also received a denarius.

And when they received it, they grumbled against the head of the house,

saying, ‘These last have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’

But he answered and said to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?

Take what is yours and go, and I will give to this last group, just as to you.

Am I not allowed to do what I want with my own? Or is your eye evil, because I am good?’

Two points before we discuss the parable’s meaning. A denarius was a coin representing one day’s wage for a laborer. In today’s world let’s say that we’re paying a laborer $15/hour. A twelve-hour day of labor would make the denarius worth about $180. Pretty good money. The second point is when Jesus mentions an “evil eye”, this is not the same look as our wives give us when we leave the toilet seat up or a linebacker gives a running back. At that time, it meant “greedy, covetous, stingy”. So, what’s the point of the parable?

Salvation is a gift. It’s not earned. The 12-hour guys got the same as the 1-hour guys. Why? Because the boss is loving, gracious, and true to his word. He is generous to all. Why? Because they earned it? No, not really. Because that’s who He is.

2 Pet. 3:9

The Lord is not slow in fulfilling his promise, as some consider him to be slow, but he is patient toward you, not wanting anyone to be destroyed but for everyone to come to repentance.

He wants “everyone to come to repentance”, join His family, and not be destroyed. I ask you, “Everyone? Even those who have rejected Him repeatedly and even mocked Him?” Yes! Everyone means everyone. Why? Because He is love. Period. Not “sometime love” or “sometime hate” or “sometime indifference”. He is love first, last and always. In every situation to every person at every time. He always wants the best for each of us, even a seemingly lost cause like Saul of Tarsus.

1 Tim. 1:15

This statement is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,” of whom I am the worst.

Imagine saying by divine inspiration that you are the worst sinner in the world? How messed up would that be? To have looked many believers in their face and caused their death? If you think a hard-hearted nasty atheist is hard to stomach, what about a “Pharisee of Pharisees” who is convinced that your death will fulfill God’s will and secure their place in eternity? What a nightmare! Saul was a historically evil dude - almost like an evil spirit with skin. Yet, Jesus spoke to him on the road to Damascus. Jesus saw that beneath the evil influence and confusion was a misguided man who just wanted to please God. Jesus helped Saul repent and get saved. What a great day! For Saul, God, and the Church!

Let’s remember that repentance implies a free will person making a decision for Jesus and forsaking sin. It implies that the one repenting has heard the gospel and chooses it. So, when and where did Saul hear the gospel?

Acts 8:3

But Saul laid waste the church; entering into every house and dragging off men and women, he committed them to prison.

Saul entered every house where Christians gathered and committed them to prison. Why did he go to houses? Because that’s where the Christians met. How did he learn in which houses they met? He hung around the marketplace, got witnessed to, and then went to the home fellowships. Then he “dragged off men and women”. How despicable! But did you notice an early part of the persecution process? He allowed himself to be exposed to the gospel in order to find the home fellowships, remember? Why is that important?

Is. 55:10-11

For as the rain and the snow comes down from heaven and does not return there, but waters the earth and makes it bring forth and bud and gives seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

so will my word be that goes forth out of my mouth; it will not return to me void, but it will accomplish what I please, and it will prosper in the thing I sent it to do.

God’s word does not return void. It prospers in its effect. Watch what happens when Jesus talked to Saul on the road to Damascus.

Acts 9:1-5

Now Saul, still breathing out threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest

and asked him for letters to the synagogues of Damascus, that if he found anyone belonging to the Way, whether men or women, he could bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Now while he was going along, it came to pass that when he drew near to Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven shined around him,

and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.”

When Jesus appears, does Saul say, “I never heard of you before! You’re not real. I need electrolytes!”? No, it doesn’t say that he hadn’t heard of Jesus because he had – every time he was evangelized at the marketplace and during house church meetings. He heard the gospel but refused to believe it. Until … Jesus invaded “his space”. What else happened that perhaps opened the door to Jesus’ participation?

“Saul breathing out threats and murder”. Our breath is evidence of our “soul life”. It is the essence of our physical life until either we die, or we’re changed at the rapture. What did Saul “breathe out”? “Threats and murder”. Now of course this is a figure of speech describing a terrifying reality. Have you ever spoken face to face with a murder spirit? It’s like being in front of a hungry lion sizing you up. It can make your knees weak. This description of Saul is unspeakably evil and sick. The human body and mind were never made to house or do this. Perhaps this evil exacted such a painful toll on Saul that he began to doubt his life choices or seek escape from the vile malevolence he was suffering.

Into this situation Jesus possibly intervened. When he said that he was Jesus, Saul never responded, “Who?” because he already knew who Jesus was. He heard about him constantly in the marketplace and at the home fellowships he stealthily attended. When Jesus announced his presence, Saul realized that Jesus was not the enemy, but instead the answer to his misery. He repented and obeyed, joined God’s family, and escaped destruction. Why? Because Jesus loved him, even the one murdering his brothers and sisters. This quality of love is foreign to the world and must be experienced to be believed.

Let me quote a well-known verse.

Prov. 16:18 KJV

Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.

We’ve all experienced a proud person, convinced of their rightness in spite of their path’s wrongness and the calamity that ensues, such as… "There is no danger that the Titanic will sink. The boat is unsinkable and nothing but inconvenience will be suffered by the passengers." Said Phillip Franklin, White Star Line vice-president, 1912. Oops! After the Titanic sank, shipbuilding “repented” their confident old ways, and rethought ship design and operations carefully. Oceanic ship safety is much, much better today.

Here Comes the Iceberg

“I don’t believe in God and Jesus.” “Christianity is for losers.” “I can’t believe in a God that would let my mother die in pain from cancer.” “I won’t believe in what I can’t see.” These prideful and confident boasts “float” during healthy times but start sinking when the iceberg looms. When you’re lying in a hospital bed accompanied by the slow incessant beep of an EKG… and you have more lines in you than strings on a guitar… and you hear your kids murmur disagreement over who gets what… and the visitors look uncomfortable and at their watches… all the prideful boasting evaporates.

The dying person asks, “What’s next?” “Is there anything more than this current world?” “Was that stuff my friend told me about God true?” I think Jesus then interjects responding, “I thought you’d never ask!”. God’s words spoken to this individual earlier in their life that “will not return void but will prosper in the thing I sent it to do” becomes the seed that can blossom to eternal life. In the eye of the confusing storm when someone is dying, I’m confident the Savior comes knocking on the recently humbled person’s heart.

Rev. 3:20

Look! I am standing at the door and knocking. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will eat with him, and he with me.

If Jesus pursued Saul, the killer of his brothers and sisters, certainly he will pursue someone who has been stiff-arming him who is realizing he’s about to not even have arms! I think we are unable to experience the silent salvation that happens right under our noses while someone is passing away right in front of us.

Now someone might say, “How can someone live like the devil for a lifetime and get saved 5 minutes before they die?!” I answer, “How can someone work for an hour and get paid as much as those who worked all day?” It happens because of the unfathomable love of God who is “not wanting anyone to be destroyed but for everyone to come to repentance.” We may love our dying friends, but Jesus loves them more – a lot more – and can do things we can’t. He keeps knocking at the door until they open up, and sometimes it’s when they’re out of worldly options and have “come to the end of themselves”, figuratively speaking. Then Jesus shows them the only true option, himself. I’m sure many accept Christ just like Saul of Tarsus did – in pain, in crisis, and in confusion.

Rom. 10:12b,13

for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him;

for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

In the parable, some answered the call at 6am, 9am, noon, 3pm or 5:59pm. They all get “paid” salvation. So, someone says, “Then I will live like the devil all my life and get salvation at the end of it, if this is the way it is!” There are two problems with that thinking. First, when you live like the devil, you get… the devil! “Breathing threats and murder” is not a life to aspire to. There are awful consequences to ungodly living in this life. There are all kinds of inherent problems we must deal with in this fallen world. Adding additional consequences from ungodly living is like finding yourself walking on a tightrope and deciding to also hit yourself in the head with a hammer! Secondly, the one who answers the call at 6am can add rewards to their eternal life for their obedience. The one who opens the door for Jesus knocking at the end of their life gets eternal life but has no real time to gather rewards. But… they get in! The others that don’t respond will fade into oblivion and be forgotten like used tissue. Those of us who answered early and are faithful, get “paid” what the late responders do (eternal life), but also accumulate rewards for our good words.

2 Cor. 5: 10

For we [Christians] must all appear and be exposed before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be repaid for the things done in the body, according to what he has made a practice of doing, whether good or evil.

The tally for rewards for good works starts when you become a Christian. Before that it’s impossible to do good works – works done with God. The person who barely slips under the wire gets in on the heavenly “flight” when Christ returns, buts gets “a carry-on restriction” on the flight. Those of us who are “good workers” get unlimited “carry-on’s” and “checked bags” for the flight. And those carry-ons and suitcases are filled with goodies for eternity!

So why do we witness to others about God’s goodness and Christ’s accomplishments? Because if Paul had never heard the gospel, who knows if he would have accepted Jesus on the road to Damascus? Remember, the process of spreading the gospel works like this:

1 Cor. 3:6

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.

Some saints witnessed to Saul in the marketplace and “planted” the gospel in him. Some later “watered” the gospel he heard, reiterating and expanding on it at home fellowships. When he met Jesus on the Damascus Road, God gave the increase. Saul’s conversion was a “group effort” although it perhaps looked like failure for years. The same was true for my friend’s friend who seemingly died unconverted. We don’t know when or how God’s word will bear fruit, but we can say with confidence that the Lord is patient with each of us and will knock on our door until we are ready to open it.

This is why we speak to folks about Christ and plant and water, despite the response. Our seeds sown might be the difference in eternal life and death for the hearer. We will see the tally one day when the secret things are made known when the family gathers together. I think we’ll see lots of unexpected folks who got meek when they got weak and then Jesus allowed them to sneak into the family! Of course, by his grace and love, he let us all sneak into the family! Let’s speak the word of God knowing that the seeds we plant “will never return void and will prosper (maybe not then, but one day) in the thing I sent it to do.”