

“Who Gets Saved?”

1 Timothy 2:1-7

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent

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When I was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, I went through confirmation, just like our 9<sup>th</sup> graders go through confirmation here at Westminster, to become a member of my Presbyterian church back in Michigan.

One of my most vivid memories from that class was the day that we talked about salvation. I remember it because one of my classmates asked our pastor, “Will Hitler go to heaven?”

My pastor responded, “Yes, I think Hitler will eventually be with God in heaven.”

My classmate was surprised.

“But what about all the people he killed?”

To which my pastor replied:

“Yes, that’s true. But I believe God’s love is even more powerful than one person’s ability to murder millions of people. I think after Hitler died, God either has caused or will cause Hitler to come to know all the wrong and evil that he did, and Hitler will be able to repent of that evil, even after death, and in the end Hitler will be saved because Hitler was one of God’s children too.”

Almost 40 years later, the memory of that conversation is VIVID in my mind.

It was my introduction to the theological thought called UNIVERSALISM. The belief that in the end, everyone gets saved, everyone gets “in,” no matter what they have done in this life.

It was a lesson that shaped my own imagination about the potential breadth and depth of God’s love in significant ways...and yet even at that time, I knew there were unanswered questions and unresolved issues in that line of thought.

For example, if our God is not only a God of love, but also a God of justice, what does justice look like if someone like Hitler “gets off the hook” for all the evil that he did?

Hitler in heaven?

It’s not just an interesting thought.

It’s a offensive thought...it’s not a thought I ever shared with my good friends who were Jewish when I was growing up.

So sometime from 9<sup>th</sup> grade on, the question was there, but for the most part, I kept the question quiet:

### **Who gets saved?**

That’s the topic for our sermon this morning. We’re in the midst of a sermon series during the season of Lent, a series called, “Back to the Basics,” in which we’re exploring different fundamental beliefs of our Presbyterian/Reformed theology.

Today is salvation, part 2:

### **Who gets saved?**

Has anyone here ever wondered about that question?

I imagine that the writer 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy asked this question.

Whoever it was who wrote this letter—it may have been Paul, but we’re not sure it was Paul—the writer tells us to make “prayers, supplications, and thanksgivings...for everyone.”

And then the text reads:

“This is right...in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved.”

According to scripture, God desires EVERYONE to be saved.

Not just Christian people.  
Not just good people, nice people.  
Everyone. All.  
No exceptions.

But that’s a pregnant statement, isn’t it?

God desires this...does that mean that even though it’s what God wants, it may not happen? Are there forces strong enough in God’s good creation to keep God’s wishes and desires from ultimately taking place?

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Many a theologian has explored this question through the years. I’m reminded of C.S. Lewis’ book, *The Great Divorce*.  
Delightful book.

The characters take an imaginary bus ride after they die, and they’re given a choice between heaven and hell.

They still have free will, and if they can let go of what they cling to most tightly...their fear,  
    their control,  
    even their child—  
    then they will be with God.

The results are surprising.  
A murderer gets in.

An everyday mom cannot let go of what she needs to let go...

In Lewis' imagination, salvation was not a universal given,  
but a universal GIFT.<sup>1</sup>

Everyone gets offered the gift, not everyone accepts it.

It's an ENTICING answer...there's plenty of Scripture that supports this answer...but there are problems with this approach too.

Can we truly reject God—not just temporarily, but for all eternity—meaning God, in all God's love and power, will be UNABLE to do ANYTHING about it?

- What about Paul's words in Romans, that neither death nor life nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything in all creation will separate us from the love of Christ...not even ourselves?!

Look, every attempt at providing an answer for this question introduces new problems, even for some of the greatest theological minds in history.

For example, there's the PREDESTINATION answer...first offered by Augustine of Hippo, then again by John Calvin. Calvin believed that God has determined ahead of time that some will be with God in heaven and some will be in hell, and there's nothing we can do or say to alter that course of events.

None of that has ever made any sense to me.

What kind of a God would predetermine some of God's children to end up in some kind of eternal punishment?

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1946.

It doesn't just sound arbitrary, it sounds cruel, and nothing like the God we know in Jesus Christ.

Then there's the CONFESS JESUS WITH YOUR LIPS and accept him into your heart, and-you-will-be-saved answer.

But the problem there is obvious as well. It turns salvation into something that we do or accomplish or achieve. It gives us ultimate control, which means God's grace isn't really grace...it's just a reward for giving the right answer on some divine test with eternal results. And besides, what about those who didn't even know there was a test going on?

The fact is, I've never heard a COMPLETELY SOUND, intellectually satisfying, air-tight answer to the question:

“Who gets saved?”

So let me pause here and lift up three points.

First, there's no need for fear or worry in any heart in this room. Presbyterian theology about what happens when we die is very clear:

All y'all will be God.

(Am I saying it right? All y'all? I keep trying...)

And your loved ones will be with God.

And the community of the saints will surround you in the new life that God gives you.

That new life will not be the result of anything you've done.

Not an award.

Not an achievement.

It will be pure gift.

Pure grace.

And it is promised by God...which means—and this is the ONLY way I can understand predestination—EVERY person in this room, and every person you love and know is destined to be with God after we die.

Second point:

There is clearly a sense in which the question, “Who gets saved?” is none of our business...it’s God’s business.

In other words, when it comes to someone like Hitler, or Putin, or you can fill in the blank with anyone who has committed heinous acts of evil in this life...I don’t know that we will EVER know what happens to people like that.

If there is no transformation of those kind of hearts after death, I don’t personally believe that they are headed to eternal punishment. I believe that they would simply cease to exist, in the same way that in the age to come, evil and sin will cease to exist.

In other words, I think the concept of an eternal hell is based more on Dante than it is on Jesus.

Point number 3:

While the question, “Who gets saved?” is impossible for us to answer, what’s not impossible is describing the God who gives us minds that create such questions.

In other words, what’s at stake in this sermon is not someone else’s eternal salvation. What’s at stake is our imagination about God. What kind of God do we believe in?

A God who plays by our rules?

A God who sees people the way we see them?

Or a God whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts, whose ways are not like our ways, a God whose love is infinitely broader than any measurement the human mind can give it...

I mentioned a movie a few months ago, *Big Fish*, which came out 20 years ago...

The late actor, Albert Finney, plays Edward Bloom, a man who is dying and trying to repair his relationship with his now adult son.

Edward is also a man who loves to tell stories.

Stories that are wild and fantastic, stories that his son still remembers as an adult.

One of those stories is about the time when Edward—the dying father in the movie—was only 10 years old. According to Edward, he went to a swamp with some friends, hoping to catch sight of a terrible looking witch and peer into her eye.

“They say,” Edward tells his companions, “that if you look right into her awful glass eye, you can see how you’re gonna die.”

Two of the friends run away, but two stick around with Edward, and they approach the witch’s house. Suddenly, the front doors open and there she is, with her gnarled hair and the patch over her eye.

They ask to see the eye—  
first one friend looks, then the other—  
and terrified, they flee in fear.

Edward has yet to gaze into the eye.  
Should he stay or should he go?

Young Edward decides to look—  
 he stares, transfixed, and then says with a smile,  
 “Huh, so that’s how I go.”

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Now our text from 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy does NOT provide us with a magic eye.

But we do get a peek at something else.  
 We get a glimpse of God, the God who is with us AFTER we die.

“For there is one God;  
 there is also one mediator between God and humankind,  
 Christ Jesus, himself human,  
 who gave himself a ransom for all...”

Notice the wording:

Not a ransom for all Christians.

Not a ransom for everyone who believes in God.

A ransom for ALL.

“All” levels the playing field.

“All” turns our world upside down.

The great theologian of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Karl Barth—he took that word “all” with utter seriousness, and Barth provides an answer that is probably closest to where I land with the question, “Who gets saved?”



Barth said that while “we don’t know all will be saved...we should desire that all be saved, for that is what God desires, and it is axiomatic that we should want what God wants.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, Barth’s answer is one of HOPE.

Hope in a God whose love is large enough and whose grace is grand enough and whose justice is redemptive enough...to transform and change the heart of every child of God into the heart that God intended it to be...whether it’s on this side of the grave or the next.

And how would God do this?

Barth had no idea, and neither do I.

But maybe there are hints in what Jesus said to us along the way.

You see, I don’t think Jesus spent his ministry describing a God who was getting ready to PUNISH a bunch of people. I think Jesus described a God who PURSUES people.

Think parable of the lost sheep.

Think parable of the prodigal son.

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Getting back to *The Great Divorce* for a moment...C.S. Lewis describes a scene with a Ghost, a Lizard, and an Angel.

The Ghost is a man caught between heaven and hell.

The Lizard is his companion and voice—

the voice inside all of us that focuses on FEAR,  
that gets STUBBORN, that RESISTS ANY CHANGE.

When the Angel meets the Ghost,

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<sup>2</sup> This quote is actually a summary of Barth’s theology on this topic, and comes from William H. Willimon, *Who Will Be Saved?*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008.

the Angel asks if he might kill the Lizard.

The Angel knows that without the voice of the Lizard,  
the Ghost will become whole, complete—  
a new member of God's creation.

The Ghost, however, isn't so sure.  
He hems and haws, and creates excuses:

Now's not a good time.  
Let's do this gradually.  
How about a second opinion?

But it could *hurt*.

Oh yes, says the Angel, it may hurt—  
but only for a moment.

So finally the Ghost submits, the Lizard is killed...and the Ghost is healed. He becomes a new person, and the Lizard becomes a stallion for him to ride.

They are transformed into new creatures, riding off toward the rose-colored brightness of everlasting eternity.<sup>3</sup>

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Now who knows if that's the way it happens.  
But I do think Lewis was onto something.

Because we all need to be transformed in some way.

As Paul put it in our first text for today:

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis, *The Great Divorce*.

“God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.”

This is what it comes down to for me:

Is it possible for some human wills to resist the grace of God, not just in this life, but for all eternity? Or will God’s grace prove to be not simply offered, but irresistible for everyone?

I don’t know how to answer that question.

I do know that it’s our human nature to be curious about the future.

Which is what that magic eye represents, from *Big Fish*.

That eye represents our desire, at any age, to know what the future holds. And while we cannot know **THAT**, **we do know who holds the future. We know who the future belongs to...the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ.**

So pretend for a moment that you **DO** have a magic eye.

If you looked into it, what would you see?

I have no doubt.

I believe that you would see Jesus.

I believe that everyone here today will see Jesus,  
and everyone who’s ever lived with see Jesus,  
and everyone who is yet to come will see Jesus.

Seeing Jesus, the risen Lord...that’s enough for me.

I trust that’s enough for you...

Amen.