



# When We All Get to Heaven

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH Larry Moffet, Pastor JULY 15, 2012

I won't keep you in suspense about what I think, for what it's worth.

I believe God's love saves all people. Period. No matter what.

**Nothing can separate us from the love of God... Romans 8:39**

The writer of our first hymn today, Eliza Hewitt, agreed with Apostle Paul. She wrote: *When we all get to heaven.*

Today's Epistle Scripture is one of the longest sentences in the Greek language. At least three times it says that God is in charge, and God's grace claims all.

It's not a smooth passage. All of our English translations split it into sentences. The Inclusive Language translation cleaned it up a lot. Even after major editing today's Scripture still conveys the breathless quality of the original language. Have you ever heard someone so excited that they kept on talking (without taking a breath) linking sentences with "and then... and then...and then...."?

Reading today's Epistle Scripture makes me want to say to the writer of Ephesians, "Please! Take a breath! For crying out loud: punctuate yourself!"

Please, instead of seeing this passage as a hopelessly complex set of ideas, hear this passage's sheer joy and excitement. Listen to the words (in one breath):

God destined us to be God's Children – *and*  
It is God's good pleasure and God's will—*and... so*  
immeasurably generous is God's favor lavished on us with perfect wisdom  
– *[that it]* brings all things together in Christ, in heaven and on earth -

That **is** exciting stuff. It's solid Scriptural backing for our hymn: *When we all...*

For years I've been watching how often many of our oldest members ease into a zone where in spite of frailties and ill health they are happy and have a true sense of assurance that everything will be all right.

This week one of our 90+ members who can't make it to church as often as she wants stopped me by saying another all-in-one-breath sentence, "You're just the person I want to see. I don't know how to apologize to my family." Apologize? "Yes, I was with my granddaughter and told her how happy I was these days, in spite of everything, and that I just had this peace, and that I just felt happy and I knew I could die with a smile on my face—well, she told my son and he is so upset because now he thinks I think I'm going to die right away and I have to talk with him today and I don't know how I can apologize to him, so what do you think I should say to him?"

I said, "Well, if I heard you correctly you were just letting your granddaughter know how happy you feel, and you wanted her to know you are happy even though your health isn't always the best." "Yes, that's it!"

How would it be if you told your son something like 'I never intended to make you worry-- I just want to let you know is that...*and together she and I said the same words at the same time... "that I just feel happy."*

That moment, for me, was a bit of heaven. Our hymn, today's Scripture, and that little spur-of-the-moment conversation are all ways heaven comes to us in our lives, now and eternally: God is indeed at work,

**bringing all things—in heaven and on earth—together**

God gives us glimpses of a reality that is beyond us, yet very close to us, moments when we step through a thin veil, aware that we do understand each other, and that we do have assurance that God is in charge of us and all creation no matter what struggles we face, and when we do realize that we are lavished with an amazing grace, that makes the saving love of God something which gives us breathless joy.

Eliza Hewitt articulates that breathless joy. Her words are truly one long sentence:

**Sing the wondrous love of Jesus, Sing His mercy and His grace;  
In the mansions bright and blessed He'll prepare for us a place,**

*Refrain:*

**When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be,  
When we all see Jesus, We'll sing and shout the victory...**

**While we walk the pilgrim pathway, clouds will overspread the sky;**

**But when traveling days are over, not a shadow, not a sigh...**

**Let us then be true and faithful, trusting, serving every day;  
Just one glimpse of God in glory will the toils of life repay, [so...]**

**Onward to the prize before us, soon God's beauty we'll behold;  
Soon the pearly gates will open; We shall tread the streets of gold...**

Ms. Hewitt was in pain most of her adult life. Causes of her spinal injury are disputed, but we do know pain forced her to quit teaching, except...

she ran a Sunday School for orphans in Philadelphia. She wrote these words on her bed, trying to convey the hope of our faith to children.

To be honest, I don't think of heaven as streets of gold with pearly gates. This hymn grabs hold of my imagination because it describes what it means to live in right relationship with each other and with all of creation eternally.

I had a glimpse of that Friday as we hosted the African Children's Choir. Meeting the 7-10 year olds, seeing their infectious smiles is a little bit of heaven for me—a moment allowing me to glimpse (quoting today's Scripture)

**the fullness of time [that] brings all things-in heaven and earth-together**

In moments like this, Jesus' words in our Gospel Scripture are fulfilled:

**I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly**

Another glimpse of heaven happening right now is some Progressives and Conservative Christian scholars are finding a meeting ground in a hopeful universalism. Paul D. Jones writes: <sup>1</sup>

“None of us are the sum total of our awkward, sinful and frequently disappointing lives. Through Christ, God has bound Godself to us, and us to God, in the most radical way imaginable. And this binding is not occasional or temporary. It cuts to the heart of who we are [and to God's love for all people]. Precisely because the scope of the Son's intercession is as broad as the humanity that he assumes...there is good reason to suppose that God's saving work has no limits. It's not theological overreach to hope that salvation will come to all.

“Christ's engagement with sin...Christ's life, death and resurrection...is such that sin has no future. I don't want to suggest here that sin is no longer part of human life. It clearly is, and the world in which we live often shows signs of getting worse, not better. My point is this: in light of Christ's person and work, sin no longer sets the terms for our relationship with God and God's relationship with us. On the cross... Christ draws the full weight of human sinfulness—past, present and future—upon himself, rendering himself the one in whom all sin is overcome. What's needed [from us is this]: a belief in the open-ended task of exegesis, a light theological touch, a dose of good humor and a clear sense of the impossibility [of knowing exactly how God is working God's purposes out]. If we can achieve that... we'll at least be doing something to honor a Love that [to quote Rob Bell] Wins.”

To quote the writer of Ephesians: Christ **brings all things-in heaven and earth-together.**

To quote Jesus, **I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly.**

To quote our 90+ year-old member, **I just want you to know that I am happy.**

<sup>1</sup> “A Hopeful Universalism,” by Paul D. Jones, *Christian Century*, June 27, 2012, p. 22

**EPISTLE Ephesians 1:5-14**

God destined us through Jesus Christ to be God's own children—  
such as God's pleasure and will  
6 that everyone might praise the glory of God's grace  
which was freely bestowed on us by God's Beloved, Jesus Christ, for  
7 It is in Christ and through the blood of Christ that we are redeemed  
and our sins forgiven;  
so immeasurably generous is God's favor  
8 lavished on us with perfect wisdom and understanding; for  
9 God has taken pleasure  
in revealing the mystery of the plan of Grace through Jesus Christ,  
10 to be carried out in the fullness of time;  
namely to bring all things—in heaven and on earth—together in Christ;  
for in Christ we have been given an inheritance,  
for in the decree of God—  
and everything is administered through Divine Will and counsel—  
12 we were destined to praise the glory of God  
by being the first to set our hope in Christ,  
13 and in Christ you too were chosen,  
for when you heard the Good News of salvation and believed it,  
you were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit;  
14 who is the pledge of our inheritance.

**GOSPEL John 10:7-16**

<sup>7</sup>So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.  
<sup>8</sup>All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup>I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved,  
and will come in and go out and find pasture.  
<sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.  
**I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly.**  
<sup>11</sup>"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.  
<sup>12</sup>The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep,  
sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—  
and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.  
<sup>13</sup>The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.  
**<sup>14</sup>I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,** <sup>1</sup>  
<sup>5</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.  
And I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>1</sup>  
**<sup>6</sup>I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.  
I must bring them also,  
and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.**

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*For more information...*

from "**A Hopeful Universalism**," by Paul D. Jones, *Christian Century*, June 27, 2012:  
*Dr. Jones teaches at the University of Virginia, and is much-respected  
by both conservative and progressive Christian scholars.*

...if human beings reject God and harm one another, with the result that God and human beings exist in a condition of estrangement, a mere assertion of divine love doesn't provide sufficient support for an affirmation of hopeful universalism. What's needed, in addition, is an account of God's righteous contestation of sin—a contestation of such magnitude that the condition of estrangement no longer obtains. Absent such an account, Christian theology risks an abbreviated view of God and an account of salvation that yields only warm platitudes. With such an account in hand, however, salvation can be acclaimed an unmerited gift, offered despite our continuing fall into wickedness.

So let's nuance our starting point—an account of God's love and sovereignty—with the category of election. Let's then add another step of reasoning.

Following the later Barth, I favor an account of God's love for humankind that identifies Jesus Christ as the "electing God" and "elected human." These terms, I hasten to add, aren't a tip of the hat to ardent Calvinists. Talk of election helps to connect the doctrines of God, Christ and salvation. It's a way of saying, specifically, that God's loving advance toward us, realized in Christ, has ramifications for human being as such. The incarnation makes a difference to who we are. It renders us people who bear the image of "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of creation" (Col. 1:15); it marks us as those whom God "chose . . . in Christ before the foundation of the world [and] destined for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1:4–5).

Christ, on this reckoning, isn't merely a focus for Christian thought and action (although he is certainly that). Christ is the basis for a soteriology that delights in the fact that none of us are the sum total of our awkward, sinful and frequently disappointing lives. Through Christ, God has bound Godself to us, and us to God, in the most radical way imaginable. And this binding is not occasional or temporary. It cuts to the heart of who we are, while speaking volumes about the person that God is and the actions that God undertakes. Precisely because the scope of the Son's intercession is as broad as the humanity that he assumes, precisely because Jesus is "exalted at the right hand of the Father" (Acts 2:33, cf. Acts 7:55–6 and Mark 16:19), there is good reason to suppose that God's saving work has no limits. It's not

theological overreach to hope that salvation will come to all. Such hope follows directly from an awareness of God's love and power, articulated by Christ and distributed, mysteriously, by Christ's Spirit.

The next step is to say plainly that Christ's engagement with sin—an engagement that encompasses Christ's life, death and resurrection—is such that sin has no future. I don't want to suggest here that sin is no longer part of human life. It clearly is, and the world in which we live often shows signs of getting worse, not better. My point is this: in light of Christ's person and work, sin no longer sets the terms for our relationship with God and God's relationship with us. On the cross, specifically, Christ draws the full weight of human sinfulness—past, present and future—upon himself, rendering himself the one in whom all sin is overcome.

There really is a “consuming fire,” then, as Edward Fudge supposes. But this fire doesn't await sinners in the future. This fire—the fire of God's holy love—concentrates itself in Jesus' own suffering and death. And because Christ takes to heart the entire shocking history of our sin, sin is wholly burned up, wholly *finished*, when Christ breathes his last. Is this not the meaning of Jesus' cry of dereliction? Doesn't this cry show that God has accepted Christ's thoroughgoing identification with sinners and that God's contestation of sin has run its course? And with the fire of God's holy love burned out, doesn't the resurrection show God relating to God's children in a new way?

Hopeful universalism, on this reckoning, does not require the Christian to downplay the past, present and future fact of wrongdoing. It requires only that the Christian acknowledge the nearly unimaginable price that Christ paid for our salvation: *being* the sin that God condemns and rejects, so that those who live “in him” (that is, all of us) might receive the blessings of God's favor.

A host of auxiliary issues (the Holy Spirit, the church, eschatology) must still be addressed, of course. However, I've gestured here toward the legitimacy of hopeful universalism. Christians need not resort to warmhearted banalities when affirming “all shall be well”; it's possible to supply a decent response to those who suppose that salvation has fixed limits.

A “decent response”? Precisely that—a response both reasonable and graciously offered. If Rob Bell's *Love Wins* tells us anything, it's that the Augustinian-Calvinist consensus on limited salvation is breaking down and that populist neo-Arminianism is losing its luster. Hopeful universalists therefore have an opportunity to frame new discussions about the scope of salvation. And we should do so, too, without lapsing into talk of orthodoxy, heterodoxy and heresy—categories so degraded by rancorous argument and power plays as to be next to worthless. What's needed for profitable discussion is something different: a belief in the open-ended task of exegesis, a light theological touch, a dose of good humor and a clear sense of the impossibility of closure. If hopeful universalists can achieve that—well, regardless of the extent of salvation, we'll at least be doing something to honor a love that, we hope, wins