

“How can a loving God send good people to hell?” – or “We have Two Choices”

The short answer is that God doesn't – we do. Through the choices we make. God loves us so much that He gave us free will, so if we choose to turn away from Him in this life, when we die He will honour our choice. But if we make that choice, consciously or unconsciously, to turn our backs on Him, it breaks His heart because He loves us so much.

David wrote: *“The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.”* (Psalm 145: 8 – 9).

Peter in his second letter wrote: *“...He [the Lord] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”* (2 Peter: 9b, my underlining).

And whose definition of “good” applies anyway – ours or God's? This is the subject of an article in itself, but suffice to say that God's definition of “good” is so far above ours that no matter how ‘good’ you or I try to be, we will never, ever be good enough to enter into His presence on our own merits. Only in Jesus do we become ‘good’ enough to be able to stand before Almighty God.

Which brings me to the ‘long’ answer...

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (Genesis 1: 1 – 2)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

In him was life, and that life was the light of men. (John 1: 1 – 4)

Thus God created the heavens and the earth, culminating in the creation of Man in His own image, Adam and Eve. Not in His physical image but in His spiritual image. We were not created flesh and blood with a soul; we were created as spiritual beings in a body of flesh and blood. The plan of the Almighty Triune God – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, Who Themselves live together in perfect harmony – was, and still is, for mankind to join Them in that Fellowship of loving spiritual communion for eternity. What a *privilege!*

When He was finished God pronounced His creation to be “very good”. He appointed Adam and Eve stewards of His Creation and gave them Dominion over all the Earth – the birds of the air, the living creatures on the land, the creatures under the sea – and told them to multiply and care for it.

Around 571 BC Ezekiel prophesied against the city of Tyre because of its ungodly behaviour. Although he was speaking of the king of Tyre, what Ezekiel says below is unlikely to apply to a man but can be reasonably interpreted as applying to the spiritual power behind that man, Satan:

“...You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.

You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: ruby, topaz and emerald, chrysolite, onyx and jasper, sapphire, turquoise and beryl.

Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created they were prepared.

You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you.

You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones.

You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you...

... So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled you, O guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones.

Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor.

So I threw you to the earth;....” (Ezekiel 28:11 – 17)

Who knows for how long Adam and Eve walked in perfect communion with our Holy God? Who knows for how long Satan tried to persuade them to disobey God and eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil? For temptation is not sin; while they resisted they remained in perfect communion with our loving Father.

But then one dread day Adam and Eve succumbed to Satan's blandishments. They decided to ‘become as God’. They decided to be masters of their own fate. They disobeyed our Heavenly Father and broke the only “don't rule” that He had given them. They had total freedom over every other aspect of their lives, but Satan the serpent focused on the only prohibition that God had lovingly put in place for their own good, and finally seduced them into disobeying Him:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3: 1 – 5)

And in a sense the serpent was right, because they didn't die – physically. But the serpent was misquoting God. He wasn't telling the whole truth you see (he never does), because they did die spiritually. As a result they lost the perfect state of communion they had had with God.

To Adam [God] said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." (Genesis 3: 17 – 19)

In addition, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God they effectively resigned from His Family and joined Satan's 'family' or kingdom - spiritually. In so doing they unknowingly ceded Dominion of the Earth, which God had granted them, to Satan. They – and we - became 'puppet rulers' because the real power behind the throne is now Satan (Jesus called Satan 'the prince of this world' and 'the prince of the air').

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. (Romans 8: 20 – 22)

Thus we, the descendents of Adam and Eve, are born 'fully paid up members' of Satan's family, whether we like to admit it or not. Or to put it in computer-speak, since the Fall our default setting is Satan's family.

But fortunately matters didn't end there: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. " (John 3: 16 - 17)*

God loves us, you and me, far too much to leave us all in the lurch because of a bad decision by our ancestors, be they Adam and Eve or more recent. He predicted this the day He discovered that Adam and Eve had disobeyed Him and resigned from His Team:

So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, "Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." (Genesis 3: 14 – 15).

Jesus, a man born of woman, defeated Satan by His death and resurrection, 'crushing Satan's head'. And while for the moment Satan has dominion over us (and of the earth) as ceded to him by Adam & Eve, enabling him to 'strike at our heels', this too will ultimately end.

So in the fullness of God's time, as Isaiah prophesied 700 years before it happened, Jesus was born of a virgin (Isa 7: 14). He grew to manhood and entered into His God-appointed ministry, finally dying an agonising death on a Roman cross to pay the price for our sins, yours and mine. It wasn't the Jewish or Roman authorities who nailed Jesus to that cross - it was Adam and Eve and their descendents all the way down to you and I, through our sins, who put Him there.

"... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53: 5 – 6, in approximately 700BC)

And then on the third day, that glorious first Easter Sunday, the risen Jesus joins Cleopas and a friend as they are dejectedly walking back home to Emmaus from Jerusalem, and asks them what they are talking about. They told Him how Jesus of Nazareth, "a prophet powerful in word and deed before God" had been crucified on the Friday...

"...but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place.

In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see." (Luke 24: 21 – 24)

Jesus gently chides them for being so blind, and then ... *“beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” (Luke 24: 27).*

As they approach their home village, Cleopas and his friend insist that Jesus spend the night with them because it is already late in the day. Then as Jesus breaks the bread and gives thanks they suddenly recognise Him, and he *“disappeared from their sight”*.

In Westminster Abbey hangs a famous painting by Hollman Hunt. It depicts the famous verse in Revelation 3: 20, Jesus speaking: *“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”*

The painting is of a man (Jesus) with a lantern in His left hand, standing before a door with His right hand outstretched in the act of knocking on the door. The door is heavily overgrown with thorny creepers and brambles, and there is no handle visible on it. A friend of Hollman Hunt's pointed this out to him, thinking it was an oversight. Hollman replied: *“No, it isn't a mistake. The handle is on the other side of the door. The door has to be opened from the inside.”*

You see, Jesus and His Holy Spirit will never barge Their way into your life or mine. They will only come in if we invite Them in. *It is entirely up to us.*

Rewind to Genesis 3:

Our ancestors Adam & Eve decided to join Satan's family, thereby condemning us all to being born into his family as well. Today Jesus is knocking at the door of your life, and has been all your life. Have you been like Cleopas and his mate, blissfully unaware of His presence for most if not all of your life?

I certainly was. For 52 years of my life I didn't see Jesus walking next to me nor hear Him knocking at the door of my heart. At times I deliberately turned my back on Him. Yet He never gave up on me, He kept walking with me, blessing me, constantly knocking on the door of my heart.

Until finally, on 11th May, 1997 on an Alpha Course, I heard and responded to His knock and opened the bramble & creeper encrusted door of my heart a crack.

What a blessing! What a joy! What a homecoming! As I have soaked up His Word I have grown in my relationship with Him. As I have progressively opened the doors of more 'rooms' in my heart to Him, my life has started to make sense and begun to have real purpose, not the worldly goals I had previously espoused. Not that life suddenly became a bed of roses, it didn't. But then Jesus never promised that. On the contrary He warned His Disciples that the world would hate and persecute them *“as it has hated and persecuted Me”*.

So what really changed for me?

In spite of being a naturally-born member of Satan's 'family' in body and spirit, on that 11th May I made the conscious decision to choose Jesus. The Apostle John wrote *“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...” (John 1: 12)*. On that day I decided to exercise this right. I deliberately chose to re-join God's Family – the Family that Adam & Eve resigned from - and became spiritually re-born into the Kingdom of God by accepting Jesus as my Lord and Saviour (remember Nicodemus in John 3: 1 – 18? It took him a while too, but he finally got there! Read John 19: 38 – 42).

It is a decision I daily rejoice in having made. To live now without my Saviour would be like trying to scuba dive without an air tank.

The Apostle Paul put it like this:

If death got the upper hand through one man's wrongdoing, can you imagine the breathtaking recovery life makes, sovereign life, in those who grasp with both hands this wildly extravagant life-gift, this grand setting-everything-right, that the one man Jesus Christ provides?

Here it is in a nutshell: Just as one person did it wrong and got us in all this trouble with sin and death, another person did it right and got us out of it. But more than just getting us out of trouble, he got us into life! One man said no to God and put many people in the wrong; one man said yes to God and put many in the right. (Romans 5:17 – 19, The Message)

To summarise:

- There are two spiritual families, Satan's family – the world's – and God's Family.
- Adam & Eve were created as members of God's Family but decided to resign and join Satan's.
- Since then we have all been born by default as 'paid up' members of Satan's family, whether we like it or not.
- Father God, because of His fathomless Grace and great Love has provided a way for us to re-join His Family, and His name is Jesus. It costs us absolutely nothing but a decision. It cost Jesus His life.

- Jesus is the only way back to God: (*John 14:6*) *Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me."*
- This is very important: The family we choose in this life is the one with which we will spend all eternity; God honours the choices we make, and He will honour this one as well. The letter to the Hebrews reads: *Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.* (*Hebrews 9: 27-28*) – and by implication, Judgement for those who are not.
- Please read Revelation 20: 10 to 21: 8 for a brief outline of the alternate eternities that await members of these two families (the Book of Life is God's list of all who have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour).
- A final thought here: Jesus was – or is! – a Jew. In today's terms He would, I suppose, be deemed to be a Messianic Jew...

It is also important to realise that failing to make a decision is effectively a "No" decision:

Jesus speaking: "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters..." (Matthew 12:30)

and:

"Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." (John 3:18)

[please note that the original Greek word in John's Gospel for 'believes' does not mean "intellectual assent" but "to be totally committed or surrendered to". Satan and his demons believe 'intellectually' in Jesus – and tremble! Someone once said that tragically many will miss Heaven by 18 inches – the distance between their heads and their hearts].

In all religions, people are born into the 'religious culture' of their families.

However becoming a Child of God, a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, is an individual, personal decision. Every single person has to decide whether to accept or reject God's offer of eternal salvation by accepting Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour. True Christianity is a Relationship, not a religion – a relationship with our Abba Father through His Son Jesus Messiah, empowered by the Holy Spirit, a relationship that each one of us has to consciously choose to establish, and then consciously choose to grow and mature. Because becoming a follower of Christ is not a destination; it is the start of an exhilarating journey!

'Going to church' doesn't make you a Christian, any more than sitting in your garage would make you a car. Equally, being born into a Christian family will no more make you a 'Christian' than being born in a MacDonald's restaurant would make you a hamburger. I cannot conceive of any more chilling words than these ones of Jesus:

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord', shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in Heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your Name, cast out demons in Your Name, and done many wonders in Your Name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practiced lawlessness!'" (Matthew 7:21-23)

What about those who have never heard of Jesus? I truly do not know, but one thing I do know: God loves each and every one of us with a height & depth, width & length, way beyond our comprehension, and He is ultimately wise and just. *"He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3: 9).* Whatever He decides will be completely just. However, this is a 'red herring'. You who are reading this and I both know about Jesus, so the question is irrelevant in our case.

There are no 'fence-sitters' in Heaven. Given that we know about Jesus, this is a choice that each one of us has to make. You either consciously decide to be 100% in God's Family, or by default you are in Satan's (there's that 'default setting' again).

But the good news is that there are no barriers to entry or qualifications required! In his letters to the Galatians and Ephesians Paul wrote:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3: 18)

- Every other 'faith' is a religion where it is all about **what adherents have to do (future tense) to reach up to their 'god'**.
- Christianity is all about a relationship with Jesus and **what God has done (past tense) to reach down to us.**

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2: 8-9)

Do NOT allow a negative past experience(s) of 'the church' to cause you to reject Jesus – that'd be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Jesus' biggest disagreements were with the religious authorities of His day (see Matthew 23), and eventually they killed Him by nailing Him to the cross. Do not allow a negative experience of 'the church' to kill Jesus' simple, very beautiful message of salvation that the Gospels (= 'good news') proclaim in God's Word, the Bible.

The Father longs to welcome everyone in the Name of Jesus, no matter what our age, race, colour or creed (previous religion), and no matter what wrongs we may have committed in the past.

Remember one of the criminals crucified with Jesus? He repented and asked Jesus for forgiveness literally hours before he died after a life of wrongdoing, and Jesus told him, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise" (see Luke 23: 39 – 43). It is never too late for Jesus to forgive and accept us back into His Kingdom; or to continue with the metaphor, back into God's Family.

The Apostle Paul who wrote two thirds of the New Testament was a murderer – after participating in a sham trial he presided over the stoning of Steven, the first Christian martyr. Yet when Paul chose God's Family, not only did God forgive him, He used him mightily to lay the foundation of His Church, which is the Body of Christ and God's earthly Family.

And so we come to the crux of the matter. Each one of us has to make this choice:

Which family will you choose? Remember, no decision is a "No" decision.

Jesus puts it like this:

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." (Matthew 7: 13-14)

John Wesley put it like this: *"Get these three Principles fixed in your hearts: that Things eternal are much more considerable than Things temporal; that Things not seen are as certain as the Things that are seen; that upon your present choice depends your eternal lot."*

So which do you choose? The small gate or the wide gate? Things Eternal or things temporal?

Your eternal future depends upon it.

How do I choose God's Family (ie the Small Gate)?

You say a simple prayer, essentially saying, "Sorry, Thank you, Please". This is not a magic formula or some mysterious religious initiation rite. This is about being open and honest with the Living God.

If you are at a loss for words, try saying something like this:

"Dear Jesus, I am truly sorry for all the wrongdoings and mistakes I have made in my life, especially for turning my back on You (*spend a few moments bringing any 'stuff' you can think of to God*). I now turn away from everything I know to be wrong.

"Thank you for dying an excruciating death on the cross and paying the full price for all of my sins (*reflect for a few moments what that must have been like for the man Jesus*).

"Please come into my life now through Your Holy Spirit and empower me to become the person you always meant me to be. Please help me to fulfil the destiny You have had planned for me since the creation of the world.

"Amen".

***If you prayed this prayer or one like it: "WELCOME TO GOD'S FAMILY!
Your eternal life with the Most High God has just started..."***

Please let us know so we can help you grow in your relationship with Jesus, and go to www.hoare.co.za/important.htm for more on this.