

I Believe in God, but Wonder if There Will Be Hindus in Heaven

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This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church! I want to read a passage of Scripture today taken from the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus speaking, beginning with verse 14. Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me--just as the Father knows me and I know the Father--and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life--only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." May God bless the reading of the Word.

I have Israel and the Middle East on my heart this morning, for obvious reasons. Let us pray for peace and a lasting resolution. I have Israel on my heart for another reason, though. I traveled there in 2012, and there were a number of things, a lot of things, that I learned. I remember our guide said to us, when we first got there, he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, you have been reading the Bible in black and white. From now on you're going to read it in color." There were a couple of things that I knew intellectually, but I really didn't know them. You know what I mean? There's one thing about understanding it, and there's another thing in actually experiencing it. Flying from New York to Tel Aviv, both directions, we had very severe turbulence. I mean, I did a lot of praying. But on the way to Israel, we happen to be experiencing turbulence during the time it was the Orthodox Jews' time of prayer. Our flight attendants did everything in their power to try to get them to sit down and not stand and pray, and they absolutely refused. They got up, and they put on their regalia, and they did their prayers at the time of prayer because it was the time of prayer, and they did not care how rough it was. And I saw several of them go down, only to get up and continue to pray. And I thought to myself, "Now, that's devotion." When we got to Jerusalem, we stayed there four days at the end of the trip. And I knew there were Muslims in Jerusalem. I mean, for goodness' sake, one of their most holy sites is the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. But I never expected that the Muslim call to prayer would be broadcasted throughout all of Jerusalem at the time of prayer, and that all of the devout Muslims would get out their mats, stop what they were doing, and kneel down and prostrate themselves and pray, no matter what was going on. And I said, "You know, that's true devotion." And I knew that cognitively, but I had never experienced that before.

The other is more mundane, but it had an impact on me, and it has an impact on the passage of Scripture I read just a moment ago. It's about sheep pens. There are two different types of sheep pens. There's one that the shepherds use during the summer, and there's one that the shepherds use during the winter. The one they use during the winter is a communal pen. That means that numerous shepherds use the same pen. Now here in the United States, we drive sheep, we push them where we want them to go. In Israel, they lead them. And I witnessed a Bedouin shepherd talking to his sheep, and his sheep listened to him and followed him wherever he wanted them to go. During the winter, the shepherds would lead their sheep into this communal pen, and seven or eight different shepherds would use the same pen. And in the morning those shepherds would stand outside the pen and call their sheep. And their sheep would

hear the shepherd's voice and come out, and the other sheep would stay in the pen. I'll never read that passage where Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd and my sheep hear my voice," the same way again. And then there are the summer pens. The summer pens are for individual flocks, and I saw many of them between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea out in the wilderness area. They are roughly circular, made out of rocks that people just piled up through the years, so generally they're about shoulder high. And the shepherd will do the same thing. He will call the sheep and the sheep will follow him into the pen. But there's a catch. There's no door. There's an opening, but there's no gate. Once the shepherd has the sheep in the pen, the shepherd becomes the gate, and the shepherd lies down and sleeps in the opening. And anything that comes out or goes in has to go over the shepherd. He literally lays his life down. And I will never read that passage where Jesus said, "I lay my life down for the sheep," the same way again. That's going to come to bear here in just a little bit.

Today is the last in our series of sermons: "I believe in God, but..." All kinds of excuses, all kinds of qualifications, all kinds of questions, all kinds of doubts, and many of those cause a great deal of consternation among us. This one is no exception. "I believe in God but wonder if there will be Hindus in heaven." There's a great deal of emotion between the two extremes. Who is going to heaven? Bad joke, I admit it! This guy dies and goes to heaven. He experiences heaven as a long hall with a bunch of doors. St. Peter is opening the doors and introducing the different groups. And he gets to a door, and he says, "Now, shh! Be very quiet." And he opens the door. And what the man witnesses is a bunch of people walking around, looking at each other, smiling and being very smug, like nodding to one another. And St. Peter closes the door, and he says, "We had to be very quiet because they think they're the only ones here. And it wouldn't be heaven if they knew anybody else was here!"

Who's going to be in heaven? It would be arrogant of me to try to define that. What I want to do today is give you some information so that you can answer that question for yourself. I've answered it for myself. There are two extremes. One is Christian Exclusivism. The other is Christian Universalism. Christian Exclusivism believes that only people who accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior will be in heaven. And for them, that means that you've got to say the words. And if you don't say the words, you are going to hell. For them it's black and white. That means that all Jews, all Muslims, all Hindus, all Buddhists, and everybody else who does not say the words is going to hell, period. In its extreme form that means all babies, all children, all mentally handicapped, and those who have never heard are going to hell. At the other extreme, the Christian Universalists believe that those who accept Jesus Christ as their Savior in this life will go immediately to heaven. And those that don't, do go to hell, but they're going to get a chance to change their mind in the afterlife, from now on. And they believe that once you stay in hell long enough, you will change your mind, and that everybody will eventually be saved. Did you know that among the groups that established Central United Protestant Church, there were both of those extremes? Yes. In the doctrinal statement of one of the founding groups of this church, they said they believe that babies went to hell. I don't agree with either group. With the Christian Exclusivism, just no. No. I do not believe that sending children, babies, the mentally handicapped to hell is the God that I know, and I reject that. I also reject Christian Universalism, because for a narcissist, someone who believes the world revolves around them, heaven just would not be heaven. And God is not going to force God's Self on someone. So, I reject both of those.

I want to talk just a little bit about our passage of Scripture and then about what salvation means. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd and my sheep hear my voice. I know them and they know me. They recognize my voice. They listen to my voice." The Apostle Paul says, on several occasions, that God has built within all of us part of Himself that reaches out to God. Did you know that no civilization has ever been discovered that did not have a belief in God of some kind? Did you know that? Archaeologists have never discovered a civilization that did not have a belief in God, to some degree. In our passage, Jesus says, "I have other sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. And they too will hear my voice." Now, this is just a factoid. I won't charge you for this! In the Gospel of John, in almost every story, there is a superficial meaning, and then there is a deeper meaning. Many see that in this passage. When Jesus said, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen," he almost certainly was talking about you and me, Gentiles that would one day come into the fold and be a part of the flock. On a deeper level, there are many who believe that Jesus may have been, may have been, may have been, **may have been** talking about other religions, other faiths that seek God earnestly.

Jesus said, "I lay down my life for them all. I lay down my life for them all." Jesus laid down his life for them all. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me." He laid down His life out of love; He laid down His life out of obedience; and He laid down His life voluntarily. Now, you and I know that we do not earn salvation, right? We know that. We don't earn salvation. Salvation is God's gift to us. We are saved by grace through faith. We are saved by God's initiative. We are saved by God's love. We are saved by God's righteousness. We are saved by God's kindness. We are saved by God's mercy. We are saved by God's grace. And our part is an act of faith. Our part is an act of faith. The question is: Do other people of other religions earnestly seek God in faith? Do they? Do those Orthodox Jews, that I saw getting thrown around on the plane, earnestly seek God in faith? Do the Muslim people, that I saw stop everything they were doing, kneel down and prostrate themselves on the ground, do they seek God in faith? Did Gandhi, that we talked about last week, earnestly seek God in faith? Salvation is a gift of God to be given to whom God chooses, who earnestly seek Him in faith. Now, do you or I know what is in a person's heart? Do you know? I wish you could have seen those kids' faces when I said my friend was a kindergarten teacher. (This is in reference to the children's sermon today.) If you would see him walking down the street, coming towards you, most likely you would pass over to the other side. Only God is in a position to see what is in our hearts.

I am reminded of the story when the great prophet Samuel was selecting the second king for Israel. God had revealed to Samuel that it would be from the house of Jesse. And Jesse called his sons in and had them pass before him, and they were big, strong, handsome guys. And each one, God said, "No, no, no, no, and no." And when the last one passed, he said, "No!" And Samuel said to Jesse, "There's got to be more, because God has rejected all of these." And Jesse said, "Yeah, there is..." Now, the rest of this is going to be the Mars' paraphrase, okay? "There is. There is. There's one more, but he is the runt of the litter." Samuel said, "Well, go get him," and they brought him in, and God said, "He is the one." And Samuel's response is: "God, You have got to be kidding. You have got to be kidding. This kid is a runt. He's got red hair and freckles. He's cute! And you want him to lead us into battle? We're going to get laughed off the battlefield!" And God says, "Samuel, you're looking at him as a man. You're looking at his appearance.

I'm looking at his heart, and he has the heart of a lion." You and I are not in a position to look into a person's heart.

Jesus is the way. Salvation is a gift of God's grace that we accept through faith. The question becomes: Do other people in other religions have faith in God, as they understand faith in God? Do they? Which brings us to the third option, where most of us find ourselves to one degree or another, and that is Christian Inclusivism. There are a number of noted people who believed in Christian Inclusivism: C. S. Lewis, William Barclay, John Wesley, Billy Graham. Christian Inclusivism says we are saved by grace through faith, and God gives the gift of salvation to whom God chooses, based on God's criteria. Let me say that again. We are saved by grace through faith, and God gives this gift of salvation to whom God chooses, based on God's criteria. You and I don't get to choose. That's God's prerogative and God's alone. When I start trying to answer this question, I go to Romans, chapter 2. Paul spends almost the entire chapter dealing with this. And to boil it down to what I think he says, he says we will be judged according to what we have had the reasonable opportunity of knowing. Let me say that again. We will be judged by what we have had the reasonable opportunity of knowing. For me, that answers the question about those who have never heard. For me, that answers the question of those who are reared in other religions. What do you think you would be today if you were reared in a Muslim country by Muslim parents and you didn't know anybody who was not a Muslim? It also answers for me the question of those who have never had a chance to say, "I accept Jesus." I'm reminded of the three kids that I have baptized in ICU just before their parents turned off life support. I'm reminded of the little girl that I baptized after she had died of SIDS. I'm reminded of my brother who was stillborn, after my mother carried him for nine months. I'm reminded of my cousin Robert Linn, who grew into his 30s but never had the mind any greater than a two-year-old. What about them? You see, this answers those questions for me: that we will be judged according to what we've had the reasonable opportunity of knowing.

Now, I hear some of you arguing with me. Yeah, I can hear you. "So why do we spend all this money to send missionaries all around the world?" Come on. Isn't the Christian faith about more than just fire insurance? Isn't it? Isn't our faith about much more than just going to heaven? The Christian faith is about much more. Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly." This isn't pie in the sky, in the sweet by and by, when you die. This is life here, in this world. In Jesus we see all that God has always been, and we see what you and I were created to be. No other religion teaches that. Jesus teaches us about love, about mercy, about grace, and about forgiveness, and that you can be forgiven here, and you can learn to forgive here. We learn that God loves us and is on our side: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." No other faith teaches us that God loves humanity so much, He was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf. That is why I'm Christian, and that is why I share my faith. I want other people to experience what I have experienced. How about you?

So, we are saved by grace through faith. And God gives this gift of salvation to whom God chooses, based on God's criteria. And you and I don't get to decide. Our job is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. That's our task. That's our job. That's what we do. Don't get distracted! My motto is: Love 'em all; let God sort 'em out. Let's pray.

Lord, we are so grateful that You do not judge us based on superficial details, but You look deep within our hearts, and You know who we are. You know what we are, and You know what we are capable of. And we trust this to Your mercy. We trust ourselves, our salvation, to Your grace. Now, Lord, help us as we deal with all of Your children in a loving, gracious, and compassionate way. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.