

## Welcome

I want to tell you about the time I fought the law... and won.

When we first moved to Dallas - almost a decade ago now!, we lived in Mesquite, just a block down from an elementary school. That meant that the main road past our neighborhood was in a school zone.

Which I forgot one day.

I pulled out onto our main road and was going 30mph - under the speed limit. Except this was during school hours and I'd forgotten I was in a school zone. I got pulled over and was issued a very expensive ticket.

I was irritated in part because the city didn't post warnings on our street... the School Zone signs were posted on the main road, but when I turned onto that road, I was already inside the School Zone, so there were no signs to remind me to slow down.

I decided to plead my case and throw myself on the mercy of the court. To prepare, I took pictures of the school zone signs and our road, printed them all out and took them to my court date. When I stood before the judge, I started to plead my case, but he waved me off and said, "This is just to enter a plea."

I said I wanted to plead 'Not Guilty', so he marked that down and told me I would be issued a court date. A couple of weeks later, I got a letter in the mail that the city had dropped my case.

I shouldn't have been as disappointed as I was.

But I wanted to plead my case. I wanted to demonstrate to the judge that I hadn't intentionally violated the school zone speed limit. I'm a big fan of those - and the idea of keeping kids safe more generally. I wanted to ask for mercy because I hadn't broken the law on purpose. I didn't even realize the law was there, in effect.

Making that sort of exception isn't outside the power of a judge. In fact, it is exactly this sort of ruling that warms our spirits, a ruling that says, thought you technically violated a law, we don't believe this was your intention, so we're not going to hold you guilty.

I raise this example because we're going to talk about Hell today, and specifically the people who never have the opportunity to hear the good news of Jesus. It doesn't make sense to us that God would send such persons to Hell. That doesn't align with our sense of justice, our sense of mercy or our sense of love.

Could it be that our senses are right here? Could it be that God's mercy is more expansive than we've been told? Could God's love be bigger than we we imagine? I say yes. So I want to begin this morning by celebrating that love with you.

## Message

This summer, we're putting *your* questions front and center. All spring, we collected your questions and we got dozens. We've grouped them all together and are working through them together this summer.

A couple of principles are guiding our series:

Here at Catalyst, doubts and questions aren't enemies of faith; quite the opposite. We think it matters that Jesus asked way more questions than he gave answers.

Secondly, we're not trying to settle questions here. The goal of this series is to creation conversation, not consensus. These messages are the beginning of conversations. Not the end. Our goal is to ask better questions together.

For the last several weeks, we've been exploring questions that get at the nature of God's love for us. From the Cross to the unpardonable sin to Hell, we've been asking how these monstrous things can be consistent with a God who is Love. Today, we're pressing into a space that is all the more difficult because the Bible doesn't seem to speak clearly on it. Let's look at the question guiding us today:

Do people who die without hearing about Jesus really go to Hell? If not, then shouldn't we *not* evangelize?

If you were here a few weeks ago when Sonya preached about Hell, you remember that she cautioned us that the Bible doesn't spend much time on Hell; it's much more concerned about our life on this side of the grave.

With that said, these questions really are about God's justice.

Is Hell forever? Is that really *fair*? After all, if Hell is meant to be punishment, how can *eternal* punishment be just for even a lifetime of sins? That becomes especially pertinent when we consider people we love who never come to know Jesus the way we do.

Beyond that, there are billions of people around the world and throughout history who died without ever hearing about Jesus or worse, were introduced to a false Jesus. If we reject the Jesus presented by crusaders and colonizers, how is it just to send to Hell other people who rejected him too?

Before we dive in today, I want to warn you: we are in territory where the Bible does not speak clearly. We're working with texts that are answering different questions than we're asking.

So we're doing the best we can. We're taking seriously what Scripture *does* say, paying attention to what it *doesn't* and grounding all of this in the character of Jesus.

With that in mind, turn with me to [Romans 1](#).

Romans is a unique letter. It's written by the Apostle Paul, but to a church he didn't plant (which makes it unique). Paul is planning a visit to Rome, and he sends this letter ahead of him by way of introduction.

The church in Rome was what today we would call a multi-ethnic congregation. There was a sizable Jewish population, and also a large number of Gentiles. They had some massive cultural barriers to overcome - prejudices and bigotry but also basic questions like what do we eat and do we even eat together?

Paul's letter is designed to address all this, and he does it in a profound, creative way. He works to argue that, despite the vast differences that mark Jews from Gentiles, both groups have the same need for Jesus' salvation. His argument is robust and complex (Romans is 16 chapters long), and we're not going to get into all of it today, but I want to point you toward a couple of provocative bits of Paul's argument that are relevant to our questions about Hell.

Paul himself is Jewish, and as such, he understands himself to be one of God's specially chosen people. The story of the creation of the Jewish people goes back to when the god Yahweh came to a man named Abraham and invited him to follow Yahweh to a new land. Abraham agreed, entering into a covenant with Yahweh on behalf of all his descendants (who would become the Jewish people). To mark this covenant, Yahweh instructed Abraham to circumcise himself and his descendants. Circumcision became a physical marker of Yahweh's covenant.

Keep that in mind as we trace what Paul is doing in Romans. Let's begin in verse 16:

For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile. This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life."

But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them. For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God. — [Romans 1:16-20](#)

Paul insists that God's liberation happens *by faith*. That's a major point in Paul's argument. We're not saved because of what we do - circumcising ourselves or reading our bibles or whatever. God counts our *faith* as the work of liberation.

Then Paul goes on to make a fascinating observation: He insists that humans know enough about who God is to be accountable. How? Through God's creation. Paul believes that creation gives sufficient evidence of the creator that God can judge humanity justly.

And we need to be clear: Paul was not speaking in a world like ours, where the majority of his audience was atheist or agnostic. In the Roman world, *everyone* believed in god. The question was just which god (or gods)? So when Paul argues that creation points to the character of the creator, he's arguing specifically that Yahweh, the God we know in Jesus, can be known through Yahweh's creation.

When Sonya and I were discussing this message, she told me about the Navajo term hozho which means something like "living in harmony with Creator's world". This concept is very similar to the Hebrew concept of "wisdom", which in Proverbs means that one lives in accordance with how Yahweh created the world.

This is how Paul approached the Greeks in Athens in the book of Acts. Though he was deeply offended by the number of idols they worshiped (a posture which demonstrated his Jewish bigotry as much as a holy disposition), when he addressed them, he didn't shame them. Instead, he started with, "Men of Athens, I see you are deeply religious!" He went on to quote some of their own religious texts, illustrating the common ground they had. And then he told them that this God they had known from a distance had come close to them in the person of Jesus.

But Paul didn't assume that people who didn't believe like him didn't have any knowledge of God. Rather, he started with the assumption that they already had some knowledge of God, and worked from there.

What should have happened when Christian missionaries met the Navajo was that they approached the Navajo with respect. They should have assumed that the God they worshiped, Yahweh, the God of Abraham who had made a way for Gentiles like them to be part of God's family. They should have learned from the Navajo, and when they learned about hozho, they could have said, "Hey, this is how we know creator too. And better yet, Hozho became a person like you and me. He gave his life to liberate us and bring us into Creator's heart.

I know we're still a long way from answering those questions, but can we pause here for a moment and stay in this deep truth? That God loves the whole world and God wasn't waiting on US to go to the world? We don't take God anywhere... God is always ahead of us, already working, inviting us to join in.

## Song

Okay the Greeks and the Navajo and every other Gentile people could know Yahweh, the creator, before Jesus. In fact, according to Paul, know Yahweh well enough to be accountable for their sin. Isn't that worse? Doesn't that mean they all definitely go to Hell? Not, according to Paul, if Abraham is righteous. **Let's flip over to [Romans 4](#)**. This is where Paul is really starting to get into his argument. As we read here, I want you to see what Paul is doing: he's about to argue that Abraham is not just the spiritual father of the Jews. Because he believed *before* he belonged to God (by circumcision), he's the spiritual father of the Gentiles, too. This is a wild ride. Let's go:

Abraham was, humanly speaking, the founder of our Jewish nation. What did he discover about being made right with God? If his good deeds had made him acceptable to God, he would have had something to boast about. But that was not God's way. For the Scriptures tell us, "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith." When people work, their wages are not a gift, but something they have earned. But people are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners.

David also spoke of this when he described the happiness of those who are declared righteous without working for it: "Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sins are put out of sight. Yes, what joy for those whose record the LORD has cleared of sin."

Now, is this blessing only for the Jews, or is it also for uncircumcised Gentiles? Well, we have been saying that Abraham was counted as righteous by God because of his faith. But how did this happen? Was he counted as righteous only after he was circumcised, or was it before he was circumcised? Clearly, God accepted Abraham before he was circumcised!

Circumcision was a sign that Abraham already had faith and that God had already accepted him and declared him to be righteous—even before he was circumcised. So Abraham is the spiritual father of those who have faith but have not been circumcised. They are counted as righteous because of their faith. — [Romans 4:1-11](#)

The implications of this are huge. Paul is talking about righteousness. He's talking about how we are made right with God. This is salvation language. And his insistence is that what saved Abraham was his trust in God's promise.

Abraham didn't know about Jesus. God didn't explain the plan of salvation to Abraham. God didn't walk Abraham through the sinner's prayer. God said, "Trust me" and Abraham did and *that was sufficient for God*.

My friend Tom, who is also a pastor, says it like this: God holds us accountable for how we respond to the revelation of God we have received.

Paul believed in his bones that Creator is known through creation. I believe our Navajo siblings are a testimony to this - that they know Creator and know we were created to live in hozho is evidence of the kind of faith that Abraham had.

Did every Jewish person before Jesus follow the path of wisdom? Far from it - that's why Proverbs warns about the dangers of foolishness.

Does every Navajo person walk in hozho? Of course not. Faith is always a choice. Faith is always a *relationship*.

And friends, when it comes to conversations around Hell, I think we need to keep the word *relationship* front and center.

I know in *my* bones that millions have been introduced to a false Christ, a Christ who comes to kill them, destroy their culture and steal their children. Jesus didn't come to steal, kill and destroy - that's the thief. He came to give abundant, eternal life.

Do you know what emotion all Jesus' parables about Heaven and Hell have in common? Surprise.

In every story Jesus tells about the afterlife, people are surprised about who's in and who's out.

I know in my bones that on the last day, there are going to be people from so many nations and peoples who meet Jesus and go, "Oh, *you're* Jesus?" You're not who the missionaries portrayed you to be at all. In fact, I knew you all along.

And I know in my bones there are going to be some who think they're Jesus people who meet Jesus and go, "Wait who are *you* supposed to be? Where's your sword, your rifle? Where's your flag of conquest?" And it'll turn out they never knew the God in whose name they waged war and genocide.

Friends, we always talk about salvation in terms of relationship with God. Until it comes to Hell, and then suddenly, it's a legal status and you're either in or out.

But the Bible is clear from start to finish that the question is relational. Are you a child of God or not?

And in the end, there are going to be some who realize they never knew the God they thought they did. And others who realize they were closer than they ever imagined to the God who created them and has always been with them.

## Communion + Examen

Jesus is the one who made a way to the Father. He invites us to this table, to a family meal.

Where in the last week have I experienced God in the world around you?

When have I failed to pay attention to God this week? What has distracted me?

What might prevent me from paying attention to where God is at work this week?

How can I look for God in the world around me this week?

## Assignment + Blessing

Look for God in the world around you.