

Ralph and the Lake of Fire
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Niantic Community Church
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Scripture: Revelation 20:7-15; 21:1-5

The following reflection is inspired by a sermon I heard nearly 40 years ago by my good friend and mentor, Rev. Bruce Van Blair. I modified it with Bruce's permission – to make it my own - and have preached a version of this sermon at each church I have served. I hope the concepts underlying it are as meaningful to you as they continue to be to me.

I. The Big Mistake

You'd think dying in a freak accident would be the most startling thing to ever happen to you, right? For me, that was just the beginning ...

Hi. My name is Ralph. I was 43 years old when I died.

They said it was a real shame: "He was so young." ... "God only takes the best ..." my church friends said. "He had such a wonderful career ahead of him; and such a great family ..."

For the first few days I was in a state of shock myself. I'd been so stupid! Stupid and careless.

You see, there was this tree in my backyard whose limbs were beginning to scrape against my neighbor's house. My neighbor – an 85-yr-old widower named John – hadn't yet complained, but I wanted to attend to it before he did. Money was kind of tight, so I didn't want to call a professional just to trim a single tree. John said he'd trimmed his own trees until he retired. He offered to give me his old climbing equipment and limb saw if I wanted to do it myself. "I'd be delighted to see this stuff put to good use," he said.

The next weekend, I stopped next door to pick up the equipment, hoping to grab it and go. My "honey do" list included not only trimming the tree but spreading a giant pile of mulch that had been delivered out front that I hadn't gotten around to the prior weekend.

I was a bit distracted when I knocked on my neighbor's door, due to an argument I had with my wife, Lilly, the night before. We'd fought over whether or not we could afford to send our eldest son on the church's Youth Mission trip to Peru.

Lilly couldn't understand why we were spending \$1,500 per child to send the youth group down to Peru to build a couple of houses. She said if we'd all just send \$500 down there, they could build their own houses and have money to spare! I'd put my foot down on that remark. Lilly knew perfectly well that building houses was just a tool that would allow my evangelical church to witness to the Peruvians about Jesus Christ. After a lot of "discussion," I finally ended the argument when I asked – or rather, shouted – "What's the price of a single saved soul?"

With our argument still swirling in my head that morning, and the pressure to get my work done, I picked up the equipment from John's garage and left as quickly as possible, even though I could tell the old man was lonely and wanted to chat.

Without paying too much attention, I put on the spiked shoes and looped the leather belt around my waist and the tree. Before I knew it, I had made my way up to my first branch and was ready to trim.

Clutching the limb saw I'd slung around my shoulder, I reached out to set the blade on the branch.

As soon as I reached forward, I realized my mistake. I hadn't really considered the strength of that leather around my waist. It had been sitting unused in my neighbor's garage for 15-20 years. The extra pressure exerted against the back of the belt when I reached forward was just enough to tear the leather. I fell back into the open air.

"Jesus Christ!" were the last two words I uttered – not exactly in praise!

I didn't fall that far. I suppose that if I would have landed directly on the ground, I might have gotten away with a couple of broken bones. But there was that pesky rock wall separating my backyard from that of my neighbor ... The middle of my back landed squarely on the top of that wall, snapping it instantly, like a twig. A few breaths later, I was dead.

II. The Journey Begins

The strangest part of dying isn't being dead. It's the new abilities you suddenly have. I found that if I focused on a person I knew and loved, I could get into their minds, their hearts, and their feelings, almost as if I was them. I couldn't control people, but I could feel and perceive and understand what they were going through following my death, and what they were thinking.

What I found surprised me. I hadn't realized just how much I was loved. It was amazing the way people were grieving for me. Naturally, my wife and children took it hardest, but others were grieving heavily, too. My neighbor was really having a rough time of it. The guilt he experienced over having given me his equipment was excruciating. I'd always thought of John as a gruff old guy that needed to be "saved" one day. (He attended that church on Pennsylvania Avenue. You know – the one with the rainbow flags out front.) But I discovered that John was more shy than gruff, and he had a big heart.

Even though the old man approved of *my* beliefs about as much as I approved of *his*, he admired me and my family. He saw me as a devoted husband and loving father. I reminded him faintly of his own son who had been killed in the Vietnam War. John had urged his son not to burn his draft card, which sent his son to Vietnam; and he'd urged me to use his old equipment, which sent me to the stone fence. I wanted somehow to reach out and tell him, "It's okay. I'm fine. My family will be fine, too. You're not a bad person because of what happened."

Turning my attention to my friends, I was both heartened and surprised by what I found. What surprised me was that most of the flaws I have – that I thought only I was aware of – were actually quite transparent to those people who knew me well. My self-righteousness, my envy of others

whom I considered more “successful” than me, my ego ... my friends saw all these traits quite clearly. But they still loved me. They still respected and admired me. It was a humbling experience.

Frankly, I realized how judgmental I'd been while I walked this earth. I defined people more by their faults than by their gifts. If only I had been able to look past other people's faults as easily as others overlooked mine!

Of course, not everything I found in people's thoughts about me was so touching. For instance, my wife thought I still resented the fact that she had decided to go back to school for her MBA. Yes, I had put up a fuss at first. Her quest for knowledge and career advancement intimidated me, as the “man of the house.” I only had an undergraduate degree and a mid-level management job. But I eventually recognized that Lilly's advancement wouldn't diminish me in any way. Going back to school was a perfect opportunity for her. I changed my heart, but I guess I never really let my support show as much as I thought.

Worse, my son had very little idea of how much I loved him. He felt like a failure in my eyes – like he was never good enough for me. That mission trip I had him going on? The only reason he agreed to go was to please me. He'd already made up his mind that he'd “convert” a couple Peruvians and come home with victory stories to share with me.

My son harbored secrets, too. He'd done some things that convinced him beyond a shadow of a doubt that if I ever found out about them, I wouldn't love him anymore. He didn't know that I was once young and stupid myself. He suspected that God had already concluded that he was unlovable. In fact, he wondered if God had used my death as a way of punishing him for sins! I could hardly bear the shame and torment he was experiencing. I wished I had shown him clearly that nothing could separate him from my love or from God's.

As I turned my attention to others, I soon found that some of the people I thought were my friends and allies really didn't care much for me at all. Two of my co-workers' biggest concerns after I died were which one would get my corner office. A couple of my Men's Fellowship “friends” were more concerned about whether my family would continue their tithe than anything else. I quickly learned to tune out these people. Really, it was only the people who I loved and cared about most that I could easily tune in to anyway. Others came in like a radio that's not quite tuned in to the right frequency.

As time passed (not that I experienced time in the usual sense) I found myself gradually becoming less interested in what was happening on earth. It wasn't that I loved my family or friends any less, mind you. I just wasn't as interested anymore. I wondered if maybe this was part of God's plan to gradually wean us off of life on earth in a gentle way.

III. “Heaven”

As I began to lose interest in the earthly realm, my focus began to shift to the realm in which I found myself. I discovered that there were other souls around me – plenty of them. But in many ways, I was like a newborn baby in this Realm. I could make out these souls, but they were all kind of fuzzy, without much detail, and it was hard to make out what they were trying to tell me.

We communicated without speaking, through our thoughts and feelings. At first, I found it harder to tune into these souls than it was to tune in people on Earth. I could focus on their thoughts and feelings only for a few minutes before having to retreat into myself from the sheer exhaustion of concentration. I figured this was probably part of God's plan, too. We perceive things only in bits and pieces at first so we're not overwhelmed. God wants us to take time at first to reflect on our lives on Earth, assessing what kind of people we were, and what we gained from the experience before immersing ourselves in the new context.

Certainly, this is what was happening to me. I began to look over my life from this new vantage point. I must confess that my assessment was not particularly flattering. I had never committed any "great" sins. And I was impeccably honest; a hard worker; a devoted husband. But I grew increasingly disappointed with what I found within myself beyond these superficialities.

For instance, I saw clearly that my son's perception of my judgmentalism was true. I loved him dearly, and because I loved him, I wanted him to achieve the kind of success that had been so elusive for me. I kept pushing and pushing him to do better, never entirely satisfied that he was achieving what I wanted for him.

I was also concerned for his salvation. I wanted to make sure he held onto his belief in Jesus. It terrified me to think of what was in store for him should his faith ever falter. More often than I'd like to admit, I let fear guide my actions toward my son, not love.

In fact, I saw clearly how most of my actions – even the most apparently loving and generous-spirited ones – were based more in fear than love. So-called "generous" acts toward many were really attempts to show them how generous-spirited and fun Christians can be in the hopes of converting them and saving them from hellfire. When I wasn't trying to convert others, I was just trying to shore up my own faith. I talked about how much God loves us and how wonderful it is to follow Jesus as much to convince myself than anyone else.

I think what I found most problematic was my hypocrisy with respect to sin. I was so condemning of those I considered to be more sinful than myself. I found that my judgment toward them came mostly out of envy. I wanted to do many of the things I saw others doing, but was too afraid that God would punish me. I resented others for "getting away" with sins that I would be punished for. I especially resented those who sinned all their lives only to "come to Jesus" at the last minute and be saved. It was like they got to have all the fun yet received God's eternal reward anyway. "How unfair!" I had thought. Yet, from my newfound vantagepoint, I'd seen how the things we call "sins" that genuinely *are* sins are those things that make life harder, not easier. They create tremendous complications and burdens for people. No one is "getting away" with anything when they sin. They're just making their lives – and often that of others – more difficult and heavier.

As I continued assessing myself, I began to wonder about where all this was heading. I realized how utterly I had failed the test of life on Earth. How could God possibly have weighed me in the balance and declared, "You are worthy of Heaven"?

That's when disappointment gave way to blood-curdling fear. I started wondering if maybe this process of self-assessment was something that God set up so that I would eventually agree with whatever terrible judgment – and punishment – God might have in store for me. I'd tell myself,

“Hey, I’m not really that bad. And besides, Jesus is my ‘Get Out of Hell Free Card,’ isn’t he?” Yet, my thoughts and actions proved that I may have confessed Christ with my lips, but I really hadn’t made him Lord of my heart. Would God send me to hell for this?

I sought out other souls for answers. “What’s going on?” I would ask them. “Am I going to come to some terrible judgment?” Each one would simply laugh and say, “No, no! You have nothing to fear. This is *heaven*. You’ve been judged and found worthy by God. You made it to the Good Place!”

Some of these souls said they had seen Jesus. Most believed Jesus would come again someday to live with them forever. They seemed so perfectly content with themselves; so happy and self-assured. I couldn’t relate.

As time passed, something began to bother me about my communications with these souls. I realized that we had the ability to shield certain thoughts and emotions from others. We weren’t as transparent to each other as I’d thought.

As I conversed with more and more souls, I frequently encountered little snippets of a picture that was tucked away far back in their minds so as not to cause disturbance. It was an image of a Lake of Fire into which souls were being tossed!

IV. The Lake of Fire

This unsettling image contrasted sharply with the happiness and self-assurance exuded by the souls around me. Yet, I kept encountering these little glimpses of The Lake – so many that I could piece together a pretty good picture of it without ever having seen it myself.

Then one day I did see it. Off in the distance. (In this realm distance is governed by perception more than space.) I saw that Lake ... and I heard the screams of souls who were being tossed into it ... I was terrified! But I felt drawn to come closer.

I couldn’t communicate with these poor souls, but I could tap into their thoughts and feelings. Much to my horror, I found that they had made assessments of their lives much like mine. They had reached the same sobering conclusion that they were not worthy of Heaven. Granted, some of them were grieving over having committed terrible acts of violence and betrayal, but not all of them. In fact, most were like me – giving God lip service but never having fallen in love.

With great urgency, I sought out the happy souls, saying “Listen, you know this Lake of Fire. What is it? Why are people being thrown into it?” They all said, “Don’t worry. That fire is not for you. It’s for *sinners*! They have passed outside of God’s love and protection. But God as found all of us worthy and rewarded us with eternal life in heaven.”

That’s when I realized that I absolutely did *not* belong where I was. I belonged out there, in the fiery lake. My heart turned cold toward God. I resented the fact that God would put people in such anguish just for having failed a test they never fully understood. Strangely, I felt a newfound peace in turning my back on God.

I have to confess that a haunting question arose shortly thereafter: Did that Lake of Fire utterly destroy a person, or did it keep burning and torturing a person for eternity, as I had been taught by my church? If so, how could a loving God do this?

I brought up these questions with some of the other beings. They didn't exactly appreciate the question. They angrily struck back, "God's love and justice cannot be questioned! We don't make the rules here. God does. If God has determined that these others must suffer for eternity for what they've done, how can we resent God for this? And certainly, you should never – ever – resent your own salvation! Jesus died for you and you accepted his sacrifice. That's why you're here. That's why we're all here."

Just then I got this incredibly clear notion of Jesus on the Cross. It was so bright, like a thousand suns lit him up. That image set my heart ablaze for a fraction of a second, then it disappeared as quickly as came.

V. The Lake of Love

Sometime later, I found myself once again at the shore of that Lake of Fire. I watched the souls plunge into the fire, heard their screams, felt their pain. And I noticed that just a few yards up the shore from me was a Being unlike any human. He looked at me and asked, "What are you doing on the shores of these waters? Why are you not with the rest?"

I stood there silently for what seemed like an eternity. I wanted to be absolutely clear about how I felt before responding. Then I said, "I am for The Lake. I am not like these happy ones. I find that I care more and more about those who are out there and I want nothing to do with a God who would send them to this fate. I do not know what punishment lies in store for me, but I want to be where they are, for they are my people. I am one of them."

The Being didn't move, but I saw a glimmer in his eye, and suddenly I found myself thrown out into the middle of The Lake! The searing pain caused me to scream. I started falling. I was surrounded by flame on all sides of me ... falling ... falling. The flames seemed to burn on the outside and the inside ... burning ... burning ... I found that they hurt, but didn't hurt as much as I would have imagined. They kept burning ... I kept falling ... like time was standing still.

As those flames licked against and through me, I found the pain receding, and I was strangely becoming happier. After a while, my face broke out into a brilliant smile! I couldn't make it go away. The weight was lifting. The pain ... the frustration ... the despair ... the shame ... it was all burning away, like so much chaff. Gradually, I was discovering what it was like to be pure ... truly *pure* and light.

That's when I heard the voice. It said, "Ralph, didn't you know that I would baptize you with fire?" Then, the fire was gone.

Appearing below me – far below – I saw an incredible Realm stretching out seemingly forever! The intensity of the colors, and the smells – even the tastes, which somehow I could perceive – was all so incredible! Beholding this Realm was the most marvelous experience I'd ever had. That's when I

realized that I was being carried down in the arms of an angel. The angel looked at me, smiled, and said, "It ain't much but we call it home!"

As time passed and I found myself more fully acclimated to this new Realm, my heart was drawn back to those souls up above. I asked someone, "What about them?"

A big grin appeared on the soul's face and she said, "You know, they all get here eventually. All of us here started out up there. Some of us were there for quite a long time. It's hard, you know, when you feel like you know everything there is to know. It's hard to allow new truth into your heart, and to let it change you. But eventually they get sick and tired of pretending. They get tired of their own arrogance and they find themselves on the shore of the Lake of Love."

"Lake of Love?! I've experienced it, but I still can't believe it."

"Watch your lip," she told me, "or we may have to send you back up to Hell!"

"You can do that," I said, "but I will jump back into that Lake so fast you'll have to be quicker than lightening to catch me."

She just chuckled and said, "You know, that's the problem with you ingrates. Once you've experienced the Love, there is no kind of Hell anywhere that scares you ever again!"

And Jesus said, "Amen."