

The Choice

Have you ever wondered how a loving God could send anybody to Hell?
Have you ever wondered what makes Hell, Hell or what makes Heaven, Heaven?

John had always been an insecure person. He was rejected by his own parents and raised in foster homes. As a teen, he became involved with the wrong crowd and did a lot of things he later regretted. Even into adult life, he carried a heavy load of guilt and shame. But then one day, he heard about Jesus--really heard about Him. He had known about baby Jesus in the manger and Jesus on a cross, but it all had no meaning for him or his life. On this day he heard and understood that Jesus came to die to take John's place, to take John's sin so he could stand before God without guilt or shame. John could know and experience for himself the source of all true love and acceptance--God Himself. John felt clean and new after that day and no longer carried the heavy burden of guilt and shame.

From then on, he had one consuming passion in his life--to know God better. He had an average job in a local company and sometimes struggled to make ends meet. His relatives often criticized him, "A man with your talents could really make it big in the world if you would get another job, work more hours, and really get involved with your work."

But John knew what they were asking and it would involve too much time. He would not have the time or energy he needed to the most important thing in his life--his pursuit of knowing God.

That didn't mean John became a monk or a recluse. He still enjoyed doing things with his friends, quiet walks in the woods where he could appreciate God's creation, and several other interests and hobbies. But if he found that any of these were taking too much of his time, then it was time to cut back his involvement.

He was still occasionally bothered by fear, insecurity and anxiety, but he would take these to God and in His presence, would feel better. He grew closer and closer to God. More and more he enjoyed communing with Him, reading His word, talking with Him, learning to hear His voice talking back to him, and just enjoying worshipping God, being in His Presence. He was close to being content with his life, but he still had a hunger and thirst for a deeper relationship with God that he knew could not totally be satisfied in this life. So he lived in hope, knowing someday he would stand in the presence of his Beloved. His motto in life was Micah 6:8, "He has shown you of man what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Now John had a neighbor whose name was Joe. Joe grew up in a stable home environment and attended church most of his early years. He was never into any trouble as a teen. He did well in college and landed a good position with a growing company. He worked hard, but he also knew how to enjoy life. His motto was, "Grab all the gusto you can." He worked long hours to provide the good things in life for himself and his family. But he also took time for himself. He loved to golf, eat out at good restaurants, and just hang out with the guys on an evening. He owned a Mercedes, had a pool in the backyard, and wore the best clothes. He was an upstanding citizen in the community, a member of the Kiwanis Club, and on the board at his church. However, he seldom had time to actually attend church on Sunday mornings because that was his golf day. But if the weather was bad, he would make it a point to be there and, of course, he never missed Christmas and Easter.

His philosophy of life was "God was in His heaven and He can take care of His end. I'm here on earth and I'll take care of mine. He does His thing and I do mine. I visit His church once in awhile and I ask Him to attend special occasions for me like weddings and christenings." Joe had life "by the tail." He was happy and content. Yes, life had been good to him.

One day John approached his neighbor, Joe, to share with him how God had helped in his life and how much God meant to him. He tried to tell Joe how much God loved him also, and wanted to have a personal relationship with him. But Joe couldn't grasp the idea that God actually, really wanted to be intimately involved in his own life. The thought also made Joe uncomfortable and he thought he preferred to keep God at a distance.

Joe responded, "I'm close enough to God. He's my buddy. I find him in nature. When I go golfing, I find Him in the trees, and rocks, and stuff."

"We can know God a lot closer than that," replied John, "but to do so, we have to humble ourselves and accept His provision. We have to face our sin, which is rebellion basically. It's wanting to control our own lives and be our own boss. Then we have to recognize our dependence on God to deal with our sin. He sent His son, Jesus, who died to take the penalty for our sin so we can stand before Him guilt-free and have a relationship with Him. We can really know God personally and intimately."

"Interesting concepts, but out-dated and old-fashioned. Especially that about sin and guilt and all. As to dependence on God, that's a carryover from the Middle Ages, a cop-out for people who can't handle the pressure, who are weak and failures anyway. Modern man has come a long way since then. And now, with new science technologies, God wants us to take charge of our own lives and our own destiny. Our lives are what we make them. Doesn't it say, 'God helps those who help themselves?'

"I'm a good person--just look at what I've done for the community. I've

never hurt anyone. I give to the poor. I'm not a drunk or dope addict--never have been. I'm happy and content. What more do I need? What do I need with a 'personal relationship with God?' Besides, I don't believe a good God would send anyone to Hell, and so I don't believe in that Hell business either." And with that, Joe turned and walked away.

One Saturday afternoon John was outside mowing his yard when suddenly he felt an intense, crushing pain in his chest. He grabbed at his chest and fell down. Everything went black.

When he came to, he found himself standing up without pain, looking down at himself lying in the grass. He saw the neighbors running over and heard the scream of the ambulance siren. He was confused for a minute, thinking, "What's all the commotion? I'm fine."

But then he saw standing at his side a being over seven feet tall dressed in a white, glowing robe. Even his skin seemed to shine and emit a radiance. This being smiled at John and reached out to take his hand. "Come!" the being spoke to his mind.

John hesitated for a second thinking, "Where are we going?"

The being smiled again and replied, "to meet Him."

All the desire and passion John had had to be closer to his God flooded through him. With great excitement and without a backward glance, John stretched out his hand and said, "Let's go!"

The being took his hand and they started off. Passing through a long tunnel, they finally came out to light on the other side. There they were met by another being, similar to the one holding his hand. This second being also smiled and extended his hand. "Welcome, John. We've been expecting you." As his hand touched John's, he felt love and acceptance like he never had before.

Then the being turned and stretched out his arm motioning to what was before them--a vast wall of fire, high as he could see, and as wide. There was no way around or over it. He could not see through or beyond it. John looked back at the being questioning, "What is this and why? This looks like Hell. Where is my God and my Lord and Savior Jesus? I expected to see them. Why the fire?"

The being calmly replied, "The fire is the Presence of God. You will find what you seek there."

Fear rose up in John and the thought "turn and flee" but he could not for the being still held his hand firmly and there was nowhere to run if he could. So he looked closer at the wall and noticed this time that the flames on his far left were glowing with a white hot and blindingly bright fire. He could not stand to look at them for more than a second and he could feel the intense heat. On the other end, he saw the flames more orange-red. He could stand to

look into there--in fact, they almost welcomed him. He could feel much less heat coming from them. He thought to choose the dull red-orange flames when the being broke into his thoughts.

"The choice is yours, but you must know the hottest, brightest flame is where the Presence of God is strongest."

John hesitated for a second and plunged into the hottest, brightest flame he could see. The searing pain, the burning, was excruciating, not just a burning on his skin, but the flames penetrating his whole body burned through his whole being. He felt as if his whole self was being consumed and he would be no more. The pain was too intense, he cried out and then lost consciousness. And while he lay there, the flames did their work and John's old nature, his sinfulness and selfishness, was totally consumed and gone.

When John finally awoke, he noticed several things. Fear which had plagued him all his life (often below his level of consciousness, but just enough to make him experience an undercurrent of anxiety), this horrible fear he had lived with was completely gone. The insecurity he had from childhood was gone, replaced by love and acceptance that flowed around and through him. It was so real he could feel it as a tangible substance. He felt as if he were immersed in liquid love. All his other problems, struggles, sins, bondages, including the blackness he knew was in his heart, all that tormented him--all gone--totally and forever. He was free and his spirit leaped for joy. He had never experienced freedom like this before. He recognized and remembered that he had had a taste of this when he first came to Jesus, but this was the total freedom he had longed for. The bondages could not come back. They could not withstand the flame. All that was gone forever.

Then his attention returned to the fire he was still in and the flames which burned all around and through him. No longer did they bring pain, instead it was a gentle warm energy almost like mild electricity passing through him. He sensed his being feeding on and thriving in the flame. It was wonderful. He felt completely stripped, naked, open and exposed, yet he also felt clean and unashamed. He remembered the scripture in Jude 24, "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to make you stand in the Presence of His Glory blameless with great joy." Yes, this was what he had so longed for. His God was there all around him and in him. He dropped to his knees in worship as tears of gratitude and joy flowed from his eyes.

He stayed there in this position for a space of who knows how long (for there was no time there) communing with his God for there were now no barriers and their spirits could unite as God had planned all along.

After awhile, John looked up and saw some other beings coming to him. A few he recognized as friends or relatives that had died before. They came to him and welcomed him and said, "Come with us. It gets better." And as they said this, John realized he was hungry and thirsty again for an ever closer relationship with God.

Again the beings said, "Come with us. We will take you to Him." John knew they meant Jesus and the desire to see Him and to be with his God came stronger than ever before. Somehow he knew this is the way it would be, each time the desire would be fully satisfied and then it would come back on a deeper level only to be satisfied on a deeper level and again and again. Forever, he would be in the presence of his God experiencing and knowing and loving and communing on deeper and deeper levels--yes, this was Heaven.

The next weekend, Joe was out on the golf course. He had just swung his club, hitting a long shot down the fairway, when suddenly, his chest felt like it was caving in on him. He passed out and when he awoke, he was standing, looking down at himself. He was puzzled and then noticed the being standing next to him. He was tall, at least seven feet and his skin and clothes radiated light. Joe felt a couple of twinges of fear, something foreign to his experience, but the being smiled as he extended his hand toward Joe. So Joe reached out and took his hand.

They were off, down a long tunnel. Joe remembered reading about near-death experiences people had had that involved a tunnel. The thought came to him, "Death! No!" He did not want to die, not now, not yet. He was enjoying life. He turned to look back. He struggled to free his hand which was held firmly with the grip of this giant being. He could not free himself. He could not return. He cried out to God, "God, it's not fair, it's not my time yet. I'm still young." But the being turned to look at Joe and he knew; yes, it was his time and there was no going back.

And so, optimistic, self-reliant Joe thought to himself, "Well, I'll just have to make the best of this new situation. I did pretty well in life. I should do pretty well in the hereafter. God will surely be glad to have such a fine person as myself to enter those Pearly Gates. I'll be a real asset to Heaven."

Soon they emerged from the tunnel and came to another tall, radiant being. As he took Joe's hand and looked him squarely in the eyes, Joe's eyes faltered under that piercing gaze and for the first time in his life, Joe began to have his doubts about himself. Just maybe, Joe was in a situation he could not control.

The being motioned with his free hand and Joe saw, instead of gates of Pearl, a wall of fire. Joe shrank back afraid, "There must be some mistake. God wouldn't send me to Hell."

The being replied, "No, He won't. This fire is the Presence of God, 'Heaven' if you will, for Heaven is where God's presence is."

Joe didn't like this idea too well. He had never thought about Heaven like that before. He thought it was just a place of fun and games and pleasures. He never really expected to have to deal with God. I mean, God in

Heaven was okay as long as Heaven was off there somewhere. But actually, being with God? That was another matter. If God was really there, it was His place. He was in control and Joe wasn't. He didn't like that idea. Maybe he and God weren't such good buddies after all.

Joe looked at the wall of fire again and noticed that one side was hotter and brighter. He could feel the heat coming from that side. The other side was more a dull red and not nearly as bright.

The being, noticing Joe's hesitation, explained, "The hottest, brightest side is where the presence of God is strongest. Choose now where you will go!"

But the choice had been made years ago when Joe had chosen his own pursuits and interests above God. So now, confronted with His actual Presence, he felt uncomfortable and shrank from it. "I'll go where it's not so intense, where I'll still have some control. Where I can still be me." And so he plunged into the dull red glow at his right.

The pain was searing, intense, and unbearable. He passed out. The flame was hot, but not hot enough to burn away Joe's old carnal sin nature as it had with John, for if it had, there would have been nothing left of Joe because that was all he was. But the flame did burn away all the pretenses, defenses and coverups he was hiding behind and exposed his very heart.

When he came to, he realized the physical pain was no longer as intense. It was hot and very uncomfortable, but just bearable. However, for the first time in his life, he felt alone, naked, vulnerable, weak and helpless. He was in a situation he could not control and he was most uncomfortable. His inner being was exposed. He saw himself and his supposedly good life for what it was--an ego trip. He did nice things so he and others would think well of him. He felt eyes all around him looking at him, laughing at him. They knew. He thought over his life--even his going to church. He didn't care about God, just how it made him feel, sort of pious and better than others. Then he remembered the unkind and selfish things he had done to people so he could come out on top. He felt their hurts. He had forgotten about a lot of things that now came back to him. He saw himself for what he really was, a self-centered, self-righteous fool. His whole life was characterized by selfishness and "doing his own thing." The weight of guilt and shame was too heavy. He sank down burying his face in his hands and wept bitter tears, an empty, broken, soul of a man, desolate and alone.

Then after awhile, he noticed a hunger and thirst rising from within, not for physical food or water. It was more like a desire, a deep longing for something or someone. He didn't know what it was for. He remembered when he was still alive, occasionally feeling a twinge of this, but as soon as he felt it, he would get busy doing something--go golfing, work harder, get involved in a community project; there were lots of things to do. But now, there was nothing. The hunger and thirst were there. He could not deny them or run from them or cover them up. The hunger and thirst grew and the agony of it was

great, but there was no escape.

And then it hit him and he knew and understood, to bear the guilt and shame, to suffer the hunger and thirst--the deep longing for something that will never be satisfied--forever. This then was Hell.

Scriptures for discussion:

Psalms 16:1	Nahum 1:5,6
Psalms 68:2,3	Daniel 7:9
Psalms 97:3-5	Zechariah 2:5
Psalms 139:7	Mark 9:49
Psalms 140:13	I Corinthians 1:8
Psalms 50:3	I Corinthians 3:13
Isaiah 31:9	II Corinthians 6:21
Isaiah 33:14	II Thessalonians 1:9
Isaiah 43:2	Jude 24
Isaiah 10:16-19	Revelation 14:10
Deuteronomy 4:24	