

God's Gonna Cut You Down

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On March 29th of this year the Chicago Blackhawks were playing the Winnipeg Jets on home ice. Their starting goalie Anton Forsberg was injured during warmups that night and was unable to play, so the backup goalie Collin Delia took the net. With 14 minutes left in the third period, Delia was also injured and unable to continue. In a very rare occurrence, the Blackhawks pulled in a fan attending the game as an Emergency Backup Goalie. Scott Foster is a 36 year old accountant who had been playing men's rec league for the past ten years. For fourteen minutes of game time he lived the dream of playing an NHL game. Every more surprisingly, Foster did an excellent job, stopping all seven shots made against him. The Blackhawks won the game 6-2.

That's a great story and it is worth telling just for its own sake, but as you can imagine I do plan on using it to illustrate another point. We'll come to that, so for now just remember Scott Foster and his claim to fame.

Three things I want to say by way of introduction. **First**, when I was preparing this message I didn't realize that it would be delivered on Father's Day, but I actually think it is very appropriate. God is our Heavenly Father and we learn a lot about our relation to him by reflecting on our relationships with our earthly fathers. No doubt we can learn just as much about the nature of God by reflecting on our relationships with our earthly mothers; that would be a great topic for a message on Mother's Day!

Second, when I prepared this message I did not realize that it would be following on the heels of my own earthly father's last day in the pulpit. In his final message last week our retired pastor Greg Anderson spoke to us of preparing now for the heavenly life, focusing on a passage from 2 Peter 3:13: "in accordance with his promise, we wait for a new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home." I haven't spoken to my father at all about the message I am going to give today, but it turns out that I am actually going to echo a lot of what he had to say last week.

At least some of the uncontroversial parts are echoes of Pastor Greg's message. I am also going to say some pretty controversial things so let me be clear that they are my own and not his! I'll give you my own take on the theme he spoke about, and I expect that I won't be as gentle about it as he was with you, but I do find it interesting that in preparing his final message, Pastor Greg's mind was moved in very similar ways that mine was as I was also preparing to speak today.

Finally, a word of caution. I am going to speak today of the powerful love of our Heavenly Father, and of His eternal commitment to us his children. Normally when we turn our minds to such topic we seek comfort, peace, and encouragement. It is indeed the greatest comfort of all to know that there is a God who knows you completely and (still!) loves you perfectly. However, my message today is not intended to be a comforting one. I want to share an idea with you today. It is an idea I've thought a lot of about over the past handful of years, and it is one that I have literally lost sleep over. It terrifies me. This is an idea that seems very common sensical to me, that resonates deeply with all that I have learned about our Father God and our Lord Jesus Christ, and that I think has a lot of biblical support. However, I will not claim that it is a plain teaching of scripture. I'm going to share it anyway, on one condition. Today you are not permitted to sit passively in the pew and receive a message from the pulpit. Today you need to actively test what I have to say. Test it against your own understanding of the things of God, against what you know from your own experiences of the love of our Father, and against your understanding of the scriptures. In any case, I do think it is worth considering carefully and prayerfully, because if this idea is correct, it ought to make a major difference to you right now.

Let us begin by thinking a bit about the heavenly life. What is it that we hope for in the afterlife? What will it be like when we enter into and dwell in paradise? As Christians we recognize that the trials and tribulations of this present life are but a temporary thing; we endure them with the burning hope of better things to come; but what ARE those better things we hope for? I actually think that we know (and CAN know) very little about what heaven will be like. I doubt very much that it will involve sitting on a cloud strumming a harp (though it might *include* that!). I also doubt very much that it will be at all similar to living your very best day on earth, only endlessly; I think that any day at all of this present life will pale so much in comparison that the comparison will be more distracting than helpful. But I do think we know at least two very general things about the heavenly life.

First, when we dwell in heaven we will have fellowship with God the likes of which we cannot even imagine right now. In Genesis we are told that in God's original creation he walked side by side with his children Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In 1 Corinthians 13:12 Paul tells us that "now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face." When we at last dwell in paradise, we will behold God in all of his glory and live side by side with him.

Second, I think we know that the heavenly life will not simply be an existence involving yourself and God, rather it will include an entire community of saints. We will live in fellowship with God the likes of which we cannot presently even imagine, and we will also live in a fellowship with one another for which even the closest relationships we now experience are a mere shadow. In Revelation 21:3-4 John records a loud voice he heard in his vision, proclaiming: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." Our present relationships with other human beings (whether they be our spouses, our children, our co-workers, etc.) seem to involve mourning and crying and pain almost by necessity; imagining a relationship with another human without any of these things is difficult indeed; and yet that is a part of what we hope for in the next life.

I think we know at least these two things about the heavenly life, but these things present a problem to us. Or at least for me; I do not wish to presume and so I am going to simply report some things to you about myself. Maybe they will resonate with you. The problem for me is not just that I do not currently enjoy face-to-face fellowship with God or tear-free relationships with other humans, but that I am not currently *capable* of these things.

Consider the story we read about Moses wanting to see the glory of God. God tells him plainly that "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." Instead of experiencing the sort of face-to-face fellowship with God that we hope for in the heavenly life, God hid Moses in the cleft of a rock, covered him with his hand, and then passed before him with his back turned. Even this was enough to make Moses' face shine so brightly that the Israelites were terrified of him when he came down from the mountain. It seems clear to me that God didn't refuse to meet Moses face-to-face out of shyness or because he just didn't want to. He refused because Moses was not *fit* to behold God in all of his glory. Had Moses looked God full in the face, the

glory of God would have obliterated him; his very being would have just unravelled. Moses was not the sort of creature that was capable of such a thing. Consider a moment in your own life when you were utterly captivated by something beautiful. Perhaps a moment out in the wild when the sun is setting and all is still, or perhaps beholding a great piece of artwork. Perhaps the first time you laid eyes on that special boy or girl... I can clearly remember a night I spent with my family in a tent up on Mt. Baker. I took a short walk by myself before tucking into our tent. It was cold and crisp, and for just a short time the clouds that had been covering us the whole trip up to that point broke. As they drifted away from my field of view the bright stars shone out and the summit of Mt Baker was revealed in the bright moonlight. The beauty of that sight literally took my breath away and made my stomach start to flip flop. I was awestruck. And that was just a mountain. If you can relate at all to that experience, imagine intensifying it million upon millions of times, and you can come to appreciate how the sight of the glory of God would have destroyed Moses. Now Moses was a great man of God, and if he were unfit to look God in the face, then much less am I fit to do so. Creatures such as him and I are simply not capable of taking in an experience like that.

As for my capability of fellowship with another human being without the tears, I'll simply refer you to my family. I am not confident that I am fit to share existence with any fellow creature in perfect harmony for 24 hours, much less for all of eternity. Again, I am simply not the sort of creature that *could* do such a thing, at least not presently.

Recognizing these truths about myself leads to the following problem: If I, just as I am now, were simply plugged into the heavenly life, it would be nothing but misery, even if it did not destroy me utterly. As full of grace as the community of saints is, including me in that community would certainly introduce friction, conflict, and chaos where there otherwise would be none. It would introduce misery for those saints, but it would also be miserable for me; I would not be able to enjoy that life while it is apparent that I am utterly unfit for it.

I'll give you an analogy. Suppose that I had been in the stands at United Centre watching the Chicago Blackhawks on March 29th. Suppose that I had been called into the net instead of Scott Foster. A couple of things you should know about me. First, I've never worn goalie gear in my life. I wouldn't even know what pad goes where. Second, and this is pretty embarrassing, I don't even know how to skate. No doubt that if I had been called into the Blackhawks' net and

the Jets took 7 shots against me, they would have scored 7 goals. The experience would not have been pleasant for anyone; the entire 'hawks team, no matter how gracious they might be, would be painfully aware that I have no proper place there, that all the hard work they put into the game was wasted because I am not able to properly participate, and that probably they would be better off with no goalie at all. Nor would it actually be enjoyable for me! I'd be like a fish out of water, except with 100 mph pucks flying at me. No Thank You.

As poor an experience as that would be because of the fact that I am simply not fit to play on an NHL team, I am many times more fit for that, than I am for the heavenly life. As I am now, I would fit in even less well in heaven.

So we have a problem, or at least / have a problem. I was created for the very purpose of enjoying perfect, blessed fellowship with God Almighty and with my fellow creatures for all eternity, and yet as I currently am, I am not fit to participate in this. In fact if I am honest with myself, I am not even close to being fit to participate. It would require far more change to render me fit to look God full in the face and to live in perfect harmony with all other creatures, than it would take to render me a fit goalie for the Chicago Blackhawks. I suppose one response to this problem would be to just accept that I never will enjoy heaven, in the way that I simply accept that I will never be an NHL goalie. But clearly this will not do. I believe that God himself has made a commitment to me, that as my heavenly Father he will stop at no end to include me in that life. It is the will of God Almighty that I become fit for heaven, and so it is not an option for me to just remain as I am. Let us put that thought out of our minds and say no more about it. How then, shall I get from where I am now to where I need to be in order to enjoy the heavenly life? How do I progress from point A to point B?

There are two popular answers to this question in Christian circles but I have come to believe that there are some deep problems with both of them. I'll describe them briefly and explain my reservations about them before suggesting a third alternative.

First, some think that the problem I have described is just based in a misunderstanding. They would say that it is not God's end to render *me* righteous or holy. I am a depraved enough creature that no power in heaven or earth could accomplish *that*. Rather, through my acceptance of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, Christ is able to share *his* righteousness

with me. I will never gain a righteousness of my own, but I will be covered with the righteousness of Christ, and will enter the blessed realm by his merits. Like a stone covered with gold foil, I will be covered by Christ's righteousness so thoroughly that when God looks upon me he will see only the purity of his begotten son, and not the underlying corruption of his created one. In this way I will have a place in the heavenly life.

There is something right about this response. It correctly emphasizes that we cannot get ourselves out of this mess we've placed ourselves into by our own power alone. It correctly maintains that apart from Christ we are like a branch that has been cut off from the vine, and can do nothing but wither and die. As a complete solution to our problem, however, I find it unsatisfying, for a number of reasons. Most importantly, it seems to *either* involve an element of deception or subterfuge, or else it is simply another way of saying that I will be annihilated and Christ alone will dwell with God in heaven. That is, either Christ's life so takes over my own that there is nothing of me left, or it masks my unfitness enough to allow me a place in heaven, but does nothing to alter that basic unfitness. If I do persist and live as a participant in the heavenly life, the thought is that I remain, at core, a sinner. I am cloaked in the righteousness of another, but I am not myself righteous. God, however, is not fooled by appearances; he sees everything exactly as it is. I find it very difficult to believe that my Father God will be eternally satisfied leaving me pretty much as I am, but allowing me a place at his table because of the merits of another. I find it equally difficult to imagine that I could thoroughly enjoy such an existence, if I am not transformed in such a way as to have a place of my own at that table; to truly *belong* there. If no power in heaven or earth is sufficient to change my heart and render me righteous, then better to be done with me altogether. Make me righteous, Father, or let me die.

A second solution to the problem is one that I have spent most of my life assuming, and I would guess that it is the default assumption for many of you as well. The thought is that we WILL be transformed so as to become fit for the heavenly life; we will be made righteous; and that this will happen by the power of God in an instant upon the occasion of our death. After dying in this earthly life we will be resurrected by God into a new life, and in that state we will be made perfect. We can and should work towards that end in this life, but ultimately God will accomplish the task of moving us from point A to point B by creating us anew in the next life.

Again, there is undoubtedly something correct about this. The transformation of a creature like me into a creature holy and perfect in every way can be nothing less than a mighty work of God. My concern is with the assumption that this transformation will be done wholly *by God to us*, and that it will take place in an instant; that we will pass away in this life and then awake the next moment as a radically transformed creature. There are a couple of problems with this.

First, it seems that there are limitations on the amount of change a thing can undergo over a short duration of time, and still remain the very same thing. Take an example. I own a 1985 Yamaha Vmax motorcycle. I've owned it for over 10 years and when I first bought it, all the parts were stock. Over the last decade I have disassembled, modified, and replaced almost every part on it. It has a new exhaust system, new brake system, new turn signals, mirrors, handlebar. Most recently I replaced all the internal gaskets and o-rings in the carburetors. Despite all these changes, I think it is the very same motorcycle I began with. However, if we imagine all those changes being made in an instant (if one moment I was looking at my bike in its original condition, then turned my back for a second and looked back to see it in its present condition) I think I would want to say that it is not the same motorcycle. Now this raises all sorts of fascinating and interesting philosophical questions that I'd love to get into with you someday, but I won't touch them now. We can appreciate the same point when it comes to human beings. Consider all of the changes that have been made in your own heart, mind, and soul since you were 16 years old. You persisted through those changes; you are now the very same human being that you were back then. However, if you imagine someone (maybe your father) undergoing the same degree of change in an instant instead of over many many years, I think we would be inclined to say that there is a different person there. We'd say that your father had a mental break, that he is no longer with us, and maybe that there is some other person living in his body.

The sort of change that would need to happen in my heart, mind, and soul to render me fit for heaven is many many times more dramatic than the total change I've undergone since I was 16 years old. If that sort of change was simply implemented by God in the instant of my death, I'd be inclined to think that it would destroy me; that in fact God is ending me and creating some new other person. I am not convinced that it is possible, even for God, to change a person *that much* except over a gradual progression of smaller steps.

There is another problem. If God is in the business of taking creatures like me and simply rendering them fit for heaven through his own power, performing the operation on them as a surgeon operates on a comatose patient, then it becomes very hard to understand the purpose of making creatures like us in the first place. Why not begin with creatures fully fit for the heavenly life, or why not perform that transformation immediately upon their expression of faith in Christ, instead of waiting for the death of our earthly body? Why subject us to the trials and tribulations of this life, if in the end God is going to transform us by his own power anyway?

I've found that a part of the most satisfying answer to questions like this comes from recognizing the value of achievement. Suppose that your daughter sets a goal for herself of becoming a champion musher and winning the Yukon Quest. Suppose that there are two ways that you could participate in helping her with this goal. One way is to encourage her, coach her, help her buy dog food, attend her training runs, and generally support her and her dogs through the long and difficult process of developing the skills and toughness required to become champions. The second way would be to slip a magic pill into her glass of milk and into the dogs' food dish, that would give them the required skills and toughness in an instant. Either way, suppose she attains the goal of winning the Yukon Quest. Who among you would use that magic pill? Wouldn't using it diminish the end result? Wouldn't your daughter lose out on something of great worth if you simply rendered her into a champion musher in that way?

Take one more example. A rich young ruler once approached Jesus, asking him what must be done to inherit eternal life. Jesus replied that he needed to follow all the commandments, refraining from theft, adultery and murder, and loving his neighbour as himself. The young man claimed that he had observed all the commandments since his youth. Jesus tells him that he still lacks one thing. He needs to sell all that he has, give the money to the poor, and then come and follow Jesus. The man goes away with great sorrow because he is very wealthy. Now, clearly, God could have separated this man from his wealth for him. God could have caused his crops to fail or his stocks to crash, and at the same time God could have redistributed that wealth to the poor. But just as clearly, if God had done this for him, it would have done nothing to prepare him to live the heavenly life. Taking the next step toward fitness for heaven required that the man give up his wealth on his own.

I would suggest that all sin is like this; that a true repentance from and victory over sin requires a person to adopt or endorse an utter rejection of that sin. One being cannot repent on behalf of another being, not even if the first being is God. Of course this is not to say that God can do nothing but wait patiently for us to repent of our sins. As the Almighty, God has infinitely many resources to coax, persuade, cajole, and steer us toward repentance. He can also make the consequences of refusing to repent more and more undesirable for us. And, as our Father, he has made the commitment to stop at nothing that will bring that change about. The bigger point is that it is not obvious that God can achieve the end he desires for us - rendering us fit for heaven - just through an act of his own power upon the instant of our death in this life. That change may require our participation, and it may require a process of gradual steps like any other radical change to a person. That is the third solution to our problem of how to move from point A to point B. If we depart this life without yet being fully fit to participate in the heavenly life, then perhaps we ought not assume that the remaining work to be done will all be done for us by the power of God. There may yet be a process that needs to be completed.

We come now to the terrifying thought I warned you about. Hebrews 12:7ff:

“God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? 8 If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. 9 Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! 10 They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. 11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

If you are like me, you have been assuming that the hardships we are to count as discipline from the Lord are confined to this life, with the assumption that if we leave this life without yet being fit for heaven, then God will perform the rest of the work that needs to be done on his own, and we will immediately participate in heaven in the next life. Suppose that it isn't quite

that simple. Suppose that the remaining work that needs to be done to separate us from our sins will be at least as difficult for us then as it is now.

In fact, if the Lord disciplines us as a good human father disciplines his children, then we have reason to fear that it will be even more difficult for us then than it is now. In my own home, if something needs to get done, you are given plenty of opportunity to do it on your own, the easy way. But if it needs to get done and you will not do it the easy way, then what comes next? We do it the hard way, and that might involve many tears. Right now we have been given a vision of the great glory of our Father God and of the great end he has in store for us. We are recipients of his promises in this regard. We have been empowered with the Holy Spirit, who constantly pushes us toward the narrow way that leads to life and away from the broad way that leads to destruction. We have a brilliantly shining example of Jesus Christ himself, who came to show us how we ought to live. We have every opportunity right now, in this life, to come out of our sins and to become fit for heaven. What if this life *is* the easy way? After all, what good father would begin by offering his children the hard way to accomplish something instead of beginning with an opportunity to do it the easy way? If we will not do this the easy way, then what if it needs to be done the hard way before we can take up our promised position within the Kingdom of God? If a child called in for dinner insists on continuing to play in the mud puddle instead of washing up in the warm soapy water, then he is in danger of being sprayed down with the cold garden hose instead. The Father WILL have his children at his dinner table; but he will not have them there with mud on their faces.

Biblical imagery abounds to warn us of this very thing. Christ is the vine, we are the branches, and God is the great Gardener. The gardener expects the branches to bear fruit, and with the very life of Christ flowing through us we have every opportunity to do just that. But a branch that does not bear fruit despite all the right conditions being offered to it is in danger of the Gardener's pruning shears. Typically we interpret Jesus' lesson here to be that the unrighteous who will not confess faith in him are like branches separated from the life-giving vine. They will be gathered up and committed to the flames. If this is so; if unrighteous souls are in danger of hellfire, then surely the same end is in store for those *parts* of our own souls that bear bad fruit. If a branch that bears bad fruit will be cut away, then surely the same can be said for a *twig* that bears bad fruit on an otherwise healthy branch.

God is like a farmer who takes his winnowing fork to separate his wheat from the chaff, and then gathers up the useless chaff to be burned. Typically we interpret this analogy from Jesus to mean that God will come in judgement of all humanity to separate believers from unbelievers, gathering the first into his home and destroying the rest. If God will sit in judgement of humanity, separating faithful souls from unfaithful ones and committing the latter to the flames, then surely he will also sit in judgement of us as individuals, separating the good wheat from the useless chaff *within our own souls* and treating the chaff in the same way. If there are parts of your soul that have no place in the house of God, then you invite his winnowing fork to separate you from them.

God is a woodsman whose axe lays at the very root of that tree of wickedness that, I must confess, still resides in my own life. If I will not put that tree to death the easy way, then I invite the Woodsman to take up that axe and make me do it the hard way...

TAKE AWAY - WHY DOES IT MATTER?

We cannot participate in heaven until we are fit for heaven; until we are the sort of creatures able to look God full in the face and to genuinely love our neighbours - ALL of our neighbours - more than we love ourselves. An exception to this; that is, allowing a creature into heaven who is not fit for the heavenly life, would only introduce misery for everyone, that very creature included.

Some of you here today have been living your life with this thought in the back of your mind (I am hazarding a guess here only because I know I've harboured this thought myself): "I trust Jesus to deal with all of my sins for me. Upon my death he will make me holy, and I will go to heaven to enjoy God forever. Since that will happen anyway, there is no pressing need for me to deal with my sins now."

Few of you would actually say those words to yourself, but if you are honest enough I'd bet that you would admit that something like this attitude resides in some corner of your soul. If there is even a chance that what I've shared with you today is close to the truth, then there is no more dangerous thought for a child of God than that one. God is your Father and he loves you dearly. His end for you is nothing less than an eternity of blessed joy, but before he can include

you in that, you must be made fit for it. I believe that it is a great folly to assume that becoming fit will ever be more easy on you than it is now.

Stop it. Stop assuming that your sins can safely wait until tomorrow to be dealt with. Come out of your sins NOW, while you still have an opportunity to do it in this life. Follow Jesus, not just in word but in deed. Live even now (not later!) according to the pattern that he gave us. Listen attentively to the Holy Spirit when he condemns those things you do in the dark places when you think no one is watching you. Allow him to shed light on those corners of your soul that you know exist, but have been frantically trying to ignore. Do not put this off until tomorrow, for the Lord is coming like a thief in the night. Even now, God is sharpening his pruning shears, preparing to cut away those twigs in your soul that bear bad fruit. If you do not rid yourself of them the easy way, then you are in danger of God cutting them from you the hard way. My friends, my dear brothers and sisters, DO NOT imagine that being pruned by the Gardener will be a pleasant experience! Right now, our great Father's great Axe is laying at the very root of the tree of sin that you have allowed a place in your life. If you will not put that tree to death while you still have time in this life, then our Father will take up his axe and do it the hard way. DO NOT imagine that will enjoy it when he lays into those roots and begins chopping away. Spare yourselves from that awful axe! You have time yet to come out of your sins but one day God will come for you, like a thief in the night. Right now, our Holy God is stoking the holy fire in his great furnace. If you will not put away your sins the easy way, then he will burn them from you the hard way. DO NOT imagine that those fires will be a comfort to you when they destroy all that can be destroyed in your soul. One way or another, our God WILL have you clean. His aim, OF COURSE, is not to cause you pain or discomfort. His aim is to have you glorified so that you can take up the place he has prepared for you in his House. But the means to that end may well involve pain and discomfort, particularly if an easier path has been neglected. In the words of the poet Johnny Cash, "You can run on for a long time, but sooner or later God's gonna cut you down."

BENEDICTION

1 Th. 5:23-24 - Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.