

Acts 16:9-15

9 A vision of a man from Macedonia came to Paul during the night. He stood urging Paul, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" 10 Immediately after he saw the vision, we prepared to leave for the province of Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. 11 We sailed from Troas straight for Samothrace and came to Neapolis the following day. 12 From there we went to Philippi, a city of Macedonia's first district and a Roman colony. We stayed in that city several days. 13 On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the riverbank, where we thought there might be a place for prayer. We sat down and began to talk with the women who had gathered. 14 One of those women was Lydia, a Gentile God-worshipper from the city of Thyatira, a dealer in purple cloth. As she listened, the Lord enabled her to embrace Paul's message. 15 Once she and her household were baptized, she urged, "Now that you have decided that I am a believer in the Lord, come and stay in my house." And she persuaded us.

Psalms 67

Let God grant us grace and bless us;
let God make his face shine on us, Selah
2 so that your way becomes known on earth,
so that your salvation becomes known among all the nations.
3 Let the people thank you, God!
Let all the people thank you!
4 Let the people celebrate
and shout with joy
because you judge the nations fairly
and guide all nations on the earth. Selah
5 Let the people thank you, God!
Let all the people thank you!
6 The earth has yielded its harvest.
God blesses us—our God blesses us!
7 Let God continue to bless us;
let the far ends of the earth honor him.

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

10 He took me in a Spirit-inspired trance to a great, high mountain, and he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. 22 I didn't see a temple in the city, because its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. 23 The city doesn't need the sun or the moon to shine on it, because God's glory is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. 25 Its gates will never be shut by day, and there will be no night there. 26 They will bring the glory and honor of the nations into it. 27 Nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is vile and deceitful, but only those who are registered in the Lamb's scroll of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water,[a] shining like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb 2 through the middle of the city's main street. On each side of the river is the tree of life, which produces twelve crops of fruit, bearing its fruit each month. The tree's leaves are for the healing of the nations. 3 There will no

longer be any curse. The throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 Night will be no more. They won't need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will shine on them, and they will rule forever and always.

John 5:1-9

After this there was a Jewish festival, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 2 In Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate in the north city wall is a pool with the Aramaic name Bethesda. It had five covered porches, 3 and a crowd of people who were sick, blind, lame, and paralyzed sat there.[a] 5 A certain man was there who had been sick for thirty-eight years. 6 When Jesus saw him lying there, knowing that he had already been there a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?"

7 The sick man answered him, "Sir,[b] I don't have anyone who can put me in the water when it is stirred up. When I'm trying to get to it, someone else has gotten in ahead of me."

8 Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." 9 Immediately the man was well, and he picked up his mat and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

When someone tells you that have an open door policy, what does that mean? In one way or another, it means that they're always available. They've taken an initiative with you, to open themselves up to your presence, to your questions, to your concerns, joys and needs. They've committed themselves to your presence and whatever that might bring, as long as you just show up. An open door policy, in this sense, is an active gift, one always available for you to take up, if you choose to accept it. Grace is God's open door policy with us, and that grace is eternal. Our reading from John's Revelation today even suggests that the open door to God's presence is eternal as well. Now, before you call me a heretic, let me explain.

So confident in God's grace was C.S. Lewis that he once wrote that the door to hell is locked from the inside. In other words, the suffering of hell isn't something God sends us to, but something to which we commit ourselves. Take a look at our stained glass window. There's a handle there on the outside, a bar on the door where Jesus knocks, but the lock on it lies within rather than without. This image comes from earlier in the Book of Revelation, where in the 3rd chapter Jesus says, "Look! I'm standing at the door and knocking. If any hear my voice and open the door, I will be with them." In other words, the only reason anyone ever remains apart from God's presence is if we refuse to open the door to heaven, if we don't answer the knocks of God's grace.

Later in life, C.S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Great Divorce*. This title was actually a response to William Blake's poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which, to

oversimplify a classic, glorifies hell and denigrates heaven. Now, I know this is a sermon and not an English Lit class, but I bring this all up because, in *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis offers a sort of Christian response that suggests hell is not a desirable place, but instead the sign of our greatest of sins: self-idolatry. We make ourselves God, so the door to hell is locked from the inside because we don't believe we need heaven. Or, in the words of the Book of Revelation, in the heavenly city, "God's glory is our light, and its lamp is the Lamb. **Its gates will never be shut by day**, and there will be no night there." Its gates will never be shut while the light is shining, and there is no night, for Jesus, the light of the world, is the light of the new heaven and new earth. In other words, God's opened the gate to heaven for us, and won't ever shut it.

To understand the importance of gates in John's apocalypse, you've got to understand the importance

walled cities in the ancient world. Cities like Jerusalem had fortified walls with gates that you could lock and barricade in times of war or to try to prevent other dangers, like plague, from entering the population. These were strong, girthy, reinforced doors of iron and wood that, when locked, were impenetrable. Plenty of citizens lived outside of the gates, and so only entered the main part of the city when the gates were opened. Gates were typically open in times of safety to welcome citizens and guests, locals and travelers, to take part in the life of the city. Markets typically took place inside the city walls, so farmers and artisans brought their goods in to sell. Worship at the temple took place inside the city walls, so anyone who wanted to encounter God entered the city to encounter God's presence. Gates were powerful because, when closed, they kept you away from safety, your community and even your God. But when they were open, you could always find

your way to make peace with others and experience God's blessings.

So, when John says that the gates will never be shut, this tells us something incredible, something we might otherwise miss: even in eternity, everyone's still got the chance to come close to God.

Now, this isn't a sort of "all paths are equal universalism." Heaven still makes demands on us, namely that we come seeking the tree of life and that we leave all that is unclean, vile, and deceitful outside the gates. That stuff can't enter. That's where C.S. Lewis helps us to see the radical grace from God. If the door to hell locks from the inside, that means the only thing keeping people away from the river of life, from the Tree of Life, is their refusal to enter the gate. They've locked themselves out of an open door. The lock, so to speak, is our refusal to admit our need for God. It's our vile denial of God's grace, our deceitful belief

that we know better than God, our unclean embrace of selfishness over selflessness. The gate's wide open, so the only thing keeping anyone out is the refusal to enter the gates of grace, that we lock the doors to our own lives and create our own little cells of hell to live in rather than rejoice with our Creator and all creation.

There's another way to think about this. Grace comes to us whether we want it or not. We don't control the reality or the extent of God's grace. What we control is how we live in response to that grace. Of course, it might seem absurd to say that we don't want this grace, but how many times have we seen someone refuse forgiveness because it actually required them to admit they were wrong? That something might need to change? That there was brokenness in their lives that needed healing? Sometimes, our gut reaction to grace, to that open gate that shows us the tree of life and the river of life, is to say, "What's wrong

with my life now?! I'm fine! I don't need new life. I don't need this grace you're offering. I'm fine on my own."

That's the haunting image of C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*. Hell isn't a fiery place where demons inflict torture. It's a place of increasing, self-inflicted isolation. It's no community where people come together to drink from the river of life, no garden where the fruit of the Tree of Life sustains us in goodness together. Just thirst, hunger, and loneliness, a land of dissatisfaction. It's the place where we can never get along with others, so we do life on our own. The lasting image for me was Napoleon – yes, Napoleon Bonaparte – who was so dissatisfied with the world that he built and with all other people that he'd locked himself inside of his mansion that he hated and kicked out even his servants. He rejected not only God's grace, but the company of anyone who might serve his needs, who might help make the world better. Napoleon locked himself inside

that torture, a self-inflicted jail cell, rather than enter the gates of grace.

But the whole plot of the Great Divorce is based on these open gates of heaven, because a bunch of people in this hellish place get on a bus headed toward heaven. In other words, they unlock the door, just a crack, and let some light in. They explore the world of God's eternity. The powerful beauty of this is that, once they enter this heavenly realm, these characters from hell realize that they can't bring their baggage with them if they want to stay. The truth, the magnificence, the joy of heaven makes the sins of selfishness and lust and greed and envy all too painful. Even the grass blades are stronger than the hate that they carry. To enter the gates, to get closer to God, to know the joy of eternity with God, all that is unclean, deceitful, and vile must stay behind, because otherwise all that stuff just makes heaven feel like hell. Some can't handle it and leave

heaven to return to hell on their own volition. They lock the door from the inside. Others, compelled by the beauty, stay and bask in the light of God's Son.

So, what does this all teach us about God? About eternity?

This means that the power of God's grace extends even further than we can imagine. Many of us, myself included, make the assumption that there's a timeline on God's grace, that our earthly deaths close the door on our chance to embrace the salvation that God offers. Much of contemporary evangelism is built on that assumption, that someone has to make a decision before they die, or else God's grace runs out. How many billboards have you seen in the South that say, "Do YOU KNOW where you're going when you die?" replete with pictures of puffy clouds on one side and a fiery blaze on the other. The not-so-subtle assumption is that, if someone doesn't become a part of

God's kingdom before death, then, well, they're out of luck because God's grace, love, compassion, can't extend beyond the grave. Goodness that sounds nothing like an Easter faith.

Revelation, though, tells us that even in the new heaven and new earth, God's left the gates wide open. Access to God isn't shut off forever once the coffin is closed. Hell's not cut off from heaven by a chasm, but only by our refusal to enter the wide open gates. We're not locked in a cell by God's condemnation, but instead by our refusal to enter God's presence. That means that, come the new heaven and the new earth, people just might still enter those gates, leaving behind the vile, deceitful, unclean habits and identities that weigh them down, and instead drinking deep from the river of life, eating fully of the tree of life, experiencing the Kingdom's healing from the leaves of the tree.

God's grace is an open door policy, or in the words of revelation, an open gate policy. When we're ready, we can come and seek the help we need. We can come and celebrate the joys of eternity. We can leave behind those things that isolate us, that plague us, that kill us, and instead eat full and drink deeply of those things that bring us true, vibrant, abundant life.

Some fear that this might be a deterrent to evangelism. If people don't think they need to embrace Jesus before they die, then what's the point of sharing the Gospel? I just think about this in an entirely different way. First, salvation isn't about scaring people into safety. Jesus isn't about terrorizing people into obedience. That's manipulation, not salvation. Instead, salvations about compelling us with goodness, wooing us with love, inspiring us with the miraculous. If the gate's not closing, then we've a different kind of story to tell about heaven, about eternity, one that

we show people not in a moment of decision, but in a lifetime of living.

Rather than forcing people to make a decision that they're not ready to make, we instead get to develop relationships with others and show them what grace looks like. Rather than constantly face them with damnation, we get to live our salvation alongside of them. That's why we're created as God's children and God's images in the world, to reflect the goodness of heaven, not to focus on the hellish lack of God. Our lives, rather than an argument about an immediate decision for Jesus, instead become living portraits that paint the picture of God's love for the people we encounter in our lives.

Of course we want people to experience salvation, to join the church, to know Jesus. Seeing these open gates in Revelation helps us to enter this process more organically, more authentically. It reminds us that God's grace doesn't

stop at the moment of death, but extends forever and ever. Amen. This is an eternal life-long process where we may plant seeds for salvation, others may water them, but God causes the growth. In the New Jerusalem, the heavenly kingdom, God's gates are always open to receive the rebels and make them children. All that's ungodly – vileness and deceit and all that dirties the divine image – must stay outside that gate, but we can take off all that's ungodly. It's already been washed away by the waters of baptism and the blood of the cross, so we can once again leave them behind. God's grace is so massive, so expansive, so powerfully offered to all humanity, that there's always an opportunity to leave behind the isolation and loneliness of sin, to unlock the door to hell, and to take up the resurrection life alongside Christ.

Our job, as the church, is to live that resurrection in such a compelling way that people see the beauty of eternity

now, to share the river of life that comes through the baptismal font, to share the fruit of the tree of life, that tree that we know is the cross of Christ, and that fruit that we know is the bread and wine of communion. Our job is to share eternity today, to live a Kingdom life, to help the prisoners find freedom, and call all to enter this gate of Jesus' everlasting life. That's a resurrection life worth living now and forever. Amen.