

## NO EXIT?

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Grace Church in New York  
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*Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.” (Matthew 21:31)*

Jean Paul Sartre was a French existentialist philosopher, author, and playwright of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps his most famous work for the stage is a one-act drama entitled *No Exit*. *No Exit* is a play about what it’s like to be in hell. The curtain opens on a single room and in walks the newest inhabitant of the underworld, a man named Garcin. Garcin is surprised that hell turns out to be nothing at all like the classical depictions of it. There he finds no fire, neither sulfur, nor any sharp metal instruments of torture. “Hell is other people,” he would soon discover. The other people turn out to be two strangers: Inez and Estelle who join him in the room. Because of the wicked lives they lived, the three of them have been damned to spend all eternity together in one little room with no exit. They compose a trinity of hate and dysfunction, perfectly suited to driving each other crazy. The door locks from the outside, and the mind games begin.

Since hell is for all eternity and no one ever sleeps, the passage of time is meaningless. But at length Garcin snaps. He cannot stand a moment more of the sniping and the preying on each other’s vulnerabilities, so he begins pounding on the door and shouting, “*Open the door! Open, blast you. I’ll endure anything, your red hot tongs and molten lead, your racks and prongs and garrotes – all your fiendish gadgets, everything that burns and flays and tears – I’ll put up with any torture you impose. Anything, anything would be better than this agony of mind, this creeping pain that gnaws and fumbles and caresses one and never hurts quite enough.*”

Suddenly, the door opens and a brilliant light shines through from the other side. Apparently, Garcin is free to go. Does he exit the room? No, he does not. He chooses instead to continue in the bitter bickering and torturing of each other. He can’t break free from it. “*We’re inseparable,*” declares Inez, laughing. “*Forever. My God, how funny!*” adds Estelle. Garcin concludes the play by saying, “*Well, well, let’s get on with it.*” The curtain comes down, and we are left to cringe at the thought of such a hell, and why Garcin chose to stay in it.

“*Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.*” In today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew, it was these words that Jesus spoke to the chief priests and elders of the Temple that reminded me of Sartre’s play. On the timeline of Jesus’ life, it was the day after Palm Sunday. He had entered the city in triumph as cheering crowds shouted Hosanna. He had gone straight to the Temple and cleared the courtyard of the money changers. Now, the next day, he was returning to the Temple to preach about the kingdom of God. As soon as he arrived the chief priests and elders of the people confronted him, basically saying, “Who do you think you are? You’re walking around the Temple as if you own the place, and that’s something only the Messiah should do. *By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?*” As you heard, Jesus responded to their challenge with a question of his own, and if they could answer him, then he’d answer them.

The dialogue that follows moves fast, so I will cut to the chase. Jesus wanted to expose the hypocrisy of the chief priests and the elders. They were supposed to be there at the Temple keeping alive the hope that God’s promised Messiah would arrive. But did they really mean what they said? Did they really want the Messiah to come? Did they want the door to the kingdom of

God to open? Apparently not. John the Baptist came, and pointed to Jesus. Now Jesus was in their midst, and all indications were that this was the King who would come in the name of the Lord. When Jesus asked the Temple officials what they thought about John's legitimacy, they knew it was a trap. If they said John had been a fraud, they would be denouncing what everyone deeply suspected was true: that John had been a genuine prophet of the Lord. But if they confessed that John had been for real, then the obvious questions would follow: Why did you reject him? And why are you now rejecting Jesus? The Temple officials were stymied, so they replied, "we don't know." They were lying, and everyone knew it.

Jesus wasn't done with them. He pressed the point of their hypocrisy by telling the short parable about the two sons. When the father approaches the sons and says "Go work in the vineyard today," the first flatly refuses, but later changes his mind and goes. The second son readily agrees, but he's all lip service and never goes to work. Which one did the will of his father? The answer is obvious, and needs no psychoanalyzing. The first son did the will of his father, said the Temple officials. "Ah," said Jesus (and here I will paraphrase), "you are like the second son who says yes to the will of his father but never does it. You say you want the Messiah to come, but now that he's here, you reject him. You say you want the door to the kingdom of God to open, but when it does, you don't walk through. *"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."*

To me, the message of Jesus in today's passage is anything but one of existential despair. The door is open. It is open for tax collectors, prostitutes, and any others who by the living of their lives have said "NO" to God. They can repent. They can change their minds, as did the first son in the parable. The door is open for the chief priests and elders of the people. Note that Jesus didn't say these Temple officials would never go into the kingdom of God. He merely observed that others were entering God's joy ahead of them. They too could change their minds, repent. The door is open for you and me, and the really good news is that we don't have to wait until we die to go through it. Heaven and earth overlap and intermingle together, and those with eyes to see and ears to hear can enjoy foretastes of the kingdom now, today. It takes faith.

It sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? Jesus himself seemed to anticipate the world's strange rejection of grace. In the parables he told we hear again and again how people choose to stay in hell. The elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son chooses to be miserable outside the party, even when his father comes out to him. The early workers who bore the burden of the day and scorching heat grumble and begrudge the vineyard owners generosity. A royal servant whom the king forgives a multi-billion dollar debt immediately goes out and chokes a fellow servant who owes him exponentially less.

Why do people choose to stay in hell? We've all met them. Perhaps it's fear of what may be on the other side. Perhaps, like the chief priests and elders, they are in too deep with the old familiar ways, and too comfortable to run after someone like John or Jesus. Perhaps, like the second son, they just prefer goofing off. People choose to stay in hell for many reasons. In Sartre's play *No Exit*, the character Garcin chooses to stay because he doesn't want to leave Inez to gloat with her thoughts that he's a coward. He wants to convince her of something she will never believe for all eternity: that he's brave.

Perhaps it's wrong-headed ideas about God that close the door. Today's Old Testament reading from Ezekiel is another case study of how people get stuck in hell. It dates from hundreds of years before Jesus, when the Jews had been in Babylonian exile for more than a generation. "Why are we stuck in hell?" they wondered. The best theological thinking reasoned that it must be inherited guilt that was keeping them there. The current exiles themselves were innocent, but God was punishing the sins of their parents down through the generations. Apparently, they even

spoke a little proverb about it, a proverb that mocked and cursed the ways of God: *The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.* The ways of God were unfair, they said. *Open the door! Open, blast you.*

What was the word of the Lord to the exiles through the prophet Ezekiel? In many ways, it's the same as the message of John the Baptist, and the same as the message in Jesus' parable of the two sons. You can repent. You can change your mind and begin walking through the open door out of exile and into God's kingdom. One of the underlying themes in the Book of Ezekiel is a shift away from the notion of collective guilt toward individual responsibility.<sup>1</sup> If you lived a wicked life, God would hold you alone morally responsible, and not your children. God would never entangle you in a web of guilt from which there was no exit. What is more, if your initial response to God was a resounding NO, like the first son in the parable, it's never too late to change your mind. So "*get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!*" concludes Ezekiel. "*Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone,*" says the Lord God. "*Turn, then, and live.*"

The message of Ezekiel and the message of Jesus is an invitation to trust in the goodness of God. Too often, too many people have concluded just the opposite: that God, if there is a God, must be against us. Or God is absent and leaves us to the eternally futile task of trying to justify ourselves. Or God takes sadistic delight in grieving the children of earth. It's not for nothing that they call natural disasters "acts of God." God must enjoy inflicting suffering on people. No. God takes no delight in the death of anyone. Tens of centuries ago, this word of the Lord through Ezekiel was a novel idea, and sadly, it is still news to many ears today. So perhaps for you, your first steps through the door might simply be trusting that God is for us, not against us. The truth is, God loves the world and everyone in it. God so loved the world that he came to us in *Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.* In him, God has brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life. Even this morning, in the Eucharist we share, God opens the door and gives us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. God fills us with the Spirit of Christ. He lives in us, and we in him. The new heart and new Spirit of Christ is ours, within us. We have what we need to walk through the door.

Last summer I took my son James on a hiking trip to Iceland in celebration of his high school graduation. Our expert travel agent Stacie had arranged a terrific itinerary for us. We had five days to circle the island in a rental car that even featured a mobile hot spot so we could stay in touch. We could pull off the road to hike toward any sites that caught our interest, and we had a place to stay every night.

The first day I was fighting jet lag as we pulled into the tiny town of Hvammstangi. In fact, the town is so tiny that no one works the desk at the hotel where we had a reservation. You check yourself in, and obtain the key to your room with a code to a lock box that they send you well in advance. But I had forgotten this detail. Sleep deprived as I was, I expected to find someone there to walk me through the steps of checking ourselves in. It would be like the kiosks in the Washington DC Metro that you use to buy your own ticket. Unless you use these things every day, the kiosks for buying your own ticket are so complicated that you need a person there to show you how to buy your own ticket. You count on this person's being there.

Likewise, I figured that checking into my Icelandic hotel would be the same. I had a folder full of important papers with all the details of our hotel bookings. This I brought to the desk to confirm our reservation, but true to their word, no one was there. I began searching the place,

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<sup>1</sup> Eichrodt, Walther. *Ezekiel: A Commentary*, The Westminster Press, 1970, p. 236.

looking for someone, anyone, who might tell us what to do. Apart from a few grazing sheep out front, we found not another living being. Still with my papers in hand I began quietly (or not) cursing the cockamamie system of self check in. It was like starring in an inverted episode of a Sartre play, this one called *No Entrance*. I knew which room was ours but I couldn't get in. I wanted to pound on the door and yell, *Open the door! Open, blast you*. Finally, thanks to the mobile hot spot in the car we were able to message Stacie, who assured us that we had the code in the folder. Sure enough, there it was. All along I had what I needed to walk through the door. The door opened, and after obtaining dinner we slept the sleep of the saved and thankful.

Life in Christ can be like getting into your hotel room in Hvammstangi, Iceland. We who claim the faith of Jesus, and receive him today through his gifts of bread and wine, have what we need to open the door and dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Dear People of God: We are free to go. We are free to leave exile, free to leave hell. *Well, well. Let's get on with it.*

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