



**“The Road to Heaven”**

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Eden United Church of Christ  
Hayward, California***

***Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost  
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***I Kings 2:10–12; 3:3–14 (NRSV)***

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), the great British author, intellect, and lexicographer, is often erroneously credited with the statement, “The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.” Members of his modern day fan club maintain a website about the life and writings of Samuel Johnson, and explain:

[That] Johnson said something close, but he was following in others' footsteps. In Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, ... [Boswell] quotes Johnson as saying..., ‘Hell is paved with good intentions.’ Note, no prefatory “the road to...” Boswell's editor, Malone, added a footnote indicating this is a ‘proverbial sentence,’ and quoting an earlier 1651 source (yet still not in the common wording).”

[In another source] Robert Wilson ... provided two other [possible] source[s] for Johnson’s famous line. John Ray, in 1670, cited as a proverb “Hell is paved with good intentions.” Even earlier than that, [the phrase] has been attributed to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1091–1153), [who purportedly said,] “Hell is full of good intentions or desires.” Just how [the declaration] got to the *road* to Hell being paved this way, and not Hell itself, [we] don't know.<sup>1</sup>

*Or do we?* The truth is, we probably do know that and how the road to Hell got paved. Regardless of when the saying was amended, we probably know from our own life experience that the road to Hell is paved with good intentions. We probably can all remember a time when we intended to go in one direction, and ended up at a far different destination.

II

I remember, for example, Picture Day 1972 as one such occasion in my life. My sister, Marlene, and I had just started the 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade. The night before, our mother quizzed us about what we wanted to wear for our school pictures. We had different ideas. I wanted to wear jeans and a T-Shirt. My sister wanted to wear our nicest dresses. Mother said that we were blessed to be twins, and that twins should dress alike. We disagreed, but I

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.samueljohnson.com/road.html>

was in a conciliatory mood, and like most children, wanted to please my mother. So I wore the dress that Mar wanted us to wear for our pictures.

We wore a long cotton dress. The bodice of our dresses was white with navy blue stripes. The sleeves were short and gathered with elastic that was too tight for comfort. The skirt was solid navy blue, with a ruffle at the bottom.

As we were getting dressed for school that morning, I got a big lecture from Mom about how I needed to remember that I was wearing a dress, and how I was going to have to act like a lady, and that I wasn't going to be able to play with the boys at recess. Right then, I knew that I had made a big mistake with my Picture Day concessions.

At the breakfast table, I was reminded yet again to act like a lady at school. I said that I would. I didn't.

Our school bus driver and our teacher told us that we looked really nice. The girls in my class were pretty surprised to see me in a dress, and the boys looked at me quizzically. Our pictures were taken that morning without incident. At noon recess, I resisted the pull to join the boys at football, at least at first. I tried chatting it up with the teacher on duty, but she shooed me away. I hop-scotched and jumped rope with the girls for a while, but that wasn't working out too well with my long dress. I tried swinging for a while, but that got boring, so I gave someone else a turn.

About halfway through recess, one of my guy friends came running over and told me that his team was getting killed at football, and he begged me to join his team for the rest of recess. The temptation was too great. I could hear the voice of my mother telling me to "act like a lady." I made compromises with my conscience about how I would be careful. Suffice it to say, when Steve Anderson threw the long ball to me, and I caught it and saw Phillip Sundblad tearing across the field after me, I forgot all of my mother's "act-like-a-lady" instructions, and I started running as fast as I could toward our makeshift end zone.

Ah, childhood. It was a memorable day. I did score the touchdown, which was rare for me, since I usually played quarterback or lineman. (I know that this news shocks you.) But the day was memorable for other reasons, as you may have guessed. I tore an L-shaped hole in the skirt of my dress, and I never heard the end of it from my mother for ruining my dress—not even after Grandma patched it.

Whether the road to Hell is paved with good intentions, or it's just Hell that's paved with good intentions, I suspect that we get the point. Good intentions don't necessarily produce good results. Our own lives and the historical records of Israel's ancient kings bear the fruit of these truths.

### III

This summer we've been traveling through scripture and the times of Ancient Israel's kings, and discovering some pretty salty stuff about them. Earlier this summer, Brenda and I regaled you with stories from the reigns of King Saul (1030–1010 BC) and King David (1010–970 BC), which are recounted in I and II Samuel. Today, our attention turns to the history of King Solomon (970–931 BC), particularly the early days of his reign, which are described in I Kings.

Israel under Solomon's rule experienced a "golden age," the likes of which no other ancient king was able to replicate. In today's reading, God appears to Solomon in a dream, and the king asks God for wisdom to rule his people justly. God is so pleased with Solomon's request and the fact that it is so different from most other kings—in that he does not ask for power or prosperity—that God rewards Solomon with the wisdom that he desires.

When Solomon employs this God-given wisdom, Israel enjoys peace and prosperity, and the king is able to build the Temple envisioned by his father, David. Solomon was also able to construct majestic palaces and build strong forts to protect the nation against its enemies.

The story doesn't end there. As is revealed in later chapters in I Kings, Solomon was sometimes very foolish. His worst mistakes, in the eyes of Israel's historians, were that he used forced labor to complete his public works projects. He taxed his subjects too heavily. And, he built shrines to the gods which his foreign wives worshipped.

Now, I'm not sure how you would define or rank sins today. Perhaps in the same way as the ancient historians. Perhaps not. Regardless of how we define sin, however, and regardless of how we would rank human error or royal stupidity, then or now, the overarching theme of Solomon's story, and of the ancient kings, in general, is that God does not judge the kings according to their iniquities, but according to God's grace.

In the end, God's willingness to remain in relationship with Israel and Israel's kings has to do with the sincerity of their intentions, and ultimately, with God's grace. God reframes and reworks our circumstances. Left to our own devices, the road to Hell is paved with good intentions, or maybe Hell itself is paved with good intentions. But by God's grace, the road to Heaven is paved with grace, and we get to travel on that road, because God is gracious and God can and will work through our best intentions. Why?

Because our God is fundamentally in the hope business. God spends more time looking out the front dashboard of our lives than the rearview mirror. God is more interested in the future than the past. God is more concerned about helping us clean up the messes of our lives and move on to experience the joy that God intended, so God does not waste a lot of time pointing fingers and rubbing our noses in the worst that we can do to ourselves or each other. This is good news! It was good news for Saul. It was good

news for David. It was good news for Solomon. And you can be assured that it is good news for us.

#### IV

I wonder, what are the dumbest things you or I have ever done? What royally stupid or hurtful things have we done? What would modern historians or biographers write about our lives?

The answers to these questions probably differ less than the answers that the historians gave about Saul's, David's, or Solomon's lives, because none of us has the power to screw up as badly as they did, but still God knows we are all capable of our own royal mess.

Saul suffered from jealousy over other people's successes, and feared the loss of his own power. David suffered from a "wandering eye" and from a no-holds-barred approach to covering up his mistakes. And Solomon, as we have observed today, indentured his own people, taxed the last pennies out of paupers to pay for his public works projects, and broke the first commandment right in front of God's and everybody's eyes.

So, the moral of the history of the ancient kings, in my view, is that if God could work with these guys, he can work with us. Actually, that's not just my view, that's the gospel's view.

Paul reminds us of this gospel truth in his letter to the Romans, Chapter 8, verses 31–29, where he writes:

<sup>31</sup>What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup>He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup>Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup>Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, ... who indeed intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup>Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... <sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I repeat, the moral to the story of the ancient kings—and the gospel truth—is that if God could work with those guys, God can and God does work in and through us—especially through our intentions.

While good intentions do not automatically translate into good outcomes, God knows we have to start somewhere, and without good intentions, good results are not possible.

*Are we hoping that a student we love will learn to read or write, or to memorize their multiplication tables or the periodic table, or finish high school or college?*

If so, is the intention, the desire, evidenced in that child? My twin sister, who was once reading at the lowest level when we were in grade school, became the valedictorian of our high school class, and was awarded “Teacher of the Year” this week. Marlene tells me that she can teach any student to read who wants to read; but she says, “The desire to read has to come from within the student. Teachers can encourage that desire, but they can’t give it to their students.”

*Can this marriage survive?*

Longevity in marriage is not an end in itself. I’ve known divorced couples who’ve gotten along better and who’ve raised healthier families—after they dissolved their marriages—than some couples with whom I’ve celebrated golden wedding anniversaries. So in my view, longevity in marriage is not an end in itself. That said, no viable, loving relationship is sustained, let alone nurtured, without good intentions. One marriage counselor whose work I read a few years ago, and whose name now escapes me, made the point that healthy relationships continue to grow in healthy ways, so long as both parties see a future in the relationship and continue to infuse that relationship with their best intentions. When the future seems fogged over, and the good intentions seem lop-sided or altogether absent, the time to make that couple’s counseling appointment is long overdue.

*Is someone we know struggling with an addiction to booze or drugs?*

Sure, 12-step counselors and loved ones hear promises from addicts about getting clean and sober all the time, but sobriety is only maintained when the desire to get and remain clean and sober comes from within the addict and is maintained by the addict. God can and God will work in and through an addict’s intention to remain clean and sober—as long as that intention is sustained. No one else can put and sustain the intention of sobriety in the heart and soul of the addict. Addicts have to bring that intention to the table. They have to work the program. They have to walk the talk of sobriety, or their addiction devolves into a terminal illness.

V

To review, we’ve taken a peek at the life and times of some of Israel’s most famous kings, and gained a keener sense of their intentions and outcomes in life. We’ve also touched briefly on a few circumstances in contemporary life where good intentions significantly affect real-life outcomes. Perhaps we agree that even if the road to Hell or Hell itself is paved with good intentions, the road to Heaven starts with good intentions and is paved with the grace of God.

Sometimes we experience that grace in the person and work of Jesus Christ, but probably most of us know that grace existentially through a teacher who fans the flames

of our flickering love of learning; through a counselor who challenges us to face the truth about our fledgling marriage; or through a 12-step sponsor who holds us accountable for our own recovery.

Perhaps too, our story is a little different from the examples that I've shared, but perhaps enough has been said so that you know how the gospel truth touches you today, and what good intentions need to be fanned into flame in your life and relationships.

Regardless of what our individual stories are, regardless of whatever royal messes we may have made of our lives, the good news of the gospel is timeless. It is grounded in the stories of the ancient kings, and proclaimed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That truth is this: Our God is fundamentally in the hope business.

Our God spends more time looking out the front dashboard, than the rearview mirror of our lives. The God we worship is more interested in our futures than our past. Our God is more concerned about helping us clean up our messes and move on, than pointing fingers and rubbing our noses in our mistakes.

To be sure, we can and we need to learn from the past. We can and we do need to ask for forgiveness and grace. We can and we do need to open our hearts to God's healing and hope. And when we do, we too experience the rewards that God offers us and all people. This is the gospel's truth. Thanks be to God. Amen.