

## There is no plan B

Good morning everyone. My name is Chris McAuliffe and I am the Youth Pastor here at G3 church. You can all probably tell that my mom is in town seeing as I've finally gotten a haircut and trimmed my beard. It was long overdue. We are finishing up our series on the book Radical today and have seen how challenging it can be to live a radical life for God. We have discussed many uncomfortable topics so far, such as money last week, and today we will address an even bigger and more controversial issue. The section we will examine is probably the most difficult chapter in the book and centers around Salvation. Salvation is a big Christian term, which basically means being saved from sin and getting into heaven. So, before we get into it, let us pray.

“God, we come to you with earnest hearts and eager minds. Help us feel your presence and hear your call for us today. Speak to us through the scripture so that we may hear your voice and spread your love throughout the world. Amen.”

**Picture 1** Dogs were domesticated thousands of years ago now and share a common ancestry with the wolf. Scientists are uncertain of whether humans domesticated dogs for the benefit of protection and companionship, or if dogs domesticated humans in order to have better access to food and shelter. There's that joke about humans having to pick up dog's poop, but never the other way around. Either way, dogs have entered the hearts and lives of millions of people across the globe.

My family has had at least one dog for as long as I can remember, and we love them dearly.

**Picture 2** This right here is my older brother's dog Bandit. Bandit has his own unique personality, is crazy fast, and is way too smart for a dog. For instance, every time someone opens a door, he watches closely how they did it and finds ways to open it himself, typically when no one is looking. I had the pleasure of watching Bandit for most of the summer and honestly fell in love with not only Bandit, but the daily routine and companionship that he brought to my life.

I live right next to the forest trails of Bethabara and one day, bandit decided he wanted to explore the entirety of the forest. I was locking my door to take him for a walk and lost my grip on the leash for just a second. Bandit, being bandit, took off for the trees and didn't look back. I ran after him, and chased him all the way through the forest for over a mile. My mind began racing with questions of how to lure bandit back, what could happen to bandit, could he survive overnight in the woods, and most of all *what I would say to my older brother*. Luckily after about 10 minutes of chasing him, which felt like an eternity, a family was walking their dog and bandit decided to say hello to their puppy. They grabbed his leash and I finally could catch my breath. I held onto the leash much stronger after that day. I am no longer taking care of bandit and miss him dearly.

**Picture 3** This picture is of our first family dog named Sunny. Sunny brought such joy to our lives and we loved her deeply. We were blessed to be with her for 10 years, before she passed away in 2003. Losing Sunny was tough on my family and we all mourned her loss. I can remember asking my parents where dogs go when they die. Do all dogs go to heaven? I for one sure hope so...

This brings us to the question today of what *does* it take to get into heaven? Who gets in and who doesn't? Can you get in without accepting Jesus? How can we know who makes it to heaven? *If you didn't believe me when I said this is the most challenging chapter in the book, maybe you do now.*

Platt discusses this topic of who gets into heaven and who doesn't in his chapter "There is no Plan B." 7 ideas are presented that aid in answering these very difficult questions. In good conscience, I do

need to admit that I have difficulties with some of his conclusions and would like to explore each point in depth, together.

The first premise is that **all people know God**. This means every single person, regardless of hearing about the Bible or religion, has some sense of the divine. Religions can be found scattered across the world and differ drastically, but almost all of them hold some concept of god or gods. If God is known to all people, it does make sense that people throughout time have had such a yearning for religion. For example, Jesus and Judaism arose in Palestine and North America was on the complete other side of the world. Native Americans did have religion, however, and many tribes believed in a Great Spirit that could be a grasp at understanding God.

As Christians, we believe in one God who is incomprehensible. In other words, God is too big to fathom, to understand, so we need resources like the Bible to help us catch a glimpse of who God is. It's a big reason why we come to church every Sunday, because there is always something new to learn about God. God is so vast that there have arisen many ways to worship God. If you left right now and went to any other church in town, the worship service and feel of the church would be quite different, even though they are also Christian. Thus, Platt concludes that God has made Godself known to all people around the world in some way.

The **second and third points** are similar in all people reject God and all people are guilty before God. Nobody's is perfect and we all have times where our actions are contrary to the nature of God. I know I have had my fair share of screw ups over the years and am by no means past messing up. There are countless times in the Bible where people have rejected God, but one of my favorites is when Peter denies Jesus.

Jesus is at the Lord's Supper, which is the final meal he has before he will be taken away to the cross. Jesus says to Peter, (**Luke 22:34 NRSV**) "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me." Jesus predicts that Peter will betray him, and what does Peter do? That's right, he denies him anyway. Jesus is later taken away to be put on trial and Peter follows from a distance. Three people approach Peter and ask if he is one of Jesus' followers, some because they recognize him, and others because they see he is from the region of Galilee. Each time, Peter denies being a follower of Jesus, either out of fear for his life or embarrassment. Sure enough, after the third time the cock crows and Peter realizes what he has done. Peter denied knowing Jesus, which shows his rejection and was guilty of what Jesus had said he would do. Jesus even warned him beforehand and Peter still messes up. Peter is a disciple, he had contact with Jesus, witnessed miracles and still both rejected and was guilty before God. In a comparable way, I believe we all have times where we may reject God and fall short.

The **fourth point** brought up is where things start to get serious. All people are lost because we reject God. We have already established that we all mess up and fall short of God, but it is because of this that we need something else. Christians typically like to think of this in terms of sin, but perhaps misinterpret what sin truly is. I would like to offer a new way to imagine sin for us today...

**Sin means, "to miss the mark."** One way to help us think of this is to picture a dart board. If you are playing 301, the goal of the game is to knock off points from your score until you reach zero. You take 3 darts per round, fling them at the board and subtract whatever points you get from 301. When you get to the end of the game, you must get the exact number that will get you to zero. Let's say you have 13 points left, if you hit a number above 13 you will end your turn immediately and go back to 13 points. You have to hit the number 13, or a combination of throws that adds up to 13, in order to win.

Thinking of sin in this way, when we sin we miss out on what God is calling us to do and fail to live up to our full potential. Sinning doesn't set us back to square one, or in the dart game back to 301 points, but we do have to go back to where we were, say 13, and readjust our strategy. Rejecting God through sin, then, is an act that stops us from moving forward. If our goal is to become the people God has called us to be, then we must try to hit that 13 and move onto the next game, for there is always something else that we can work on to grow closer to God. We will continually miss the mark, but luckily, God has provided a way for us eventually move past that.

This brings us to the **fifth and sixth points**, that God has made a way to salvation for the lost and Jesus shows us the way to God. Jesus was crucified on the cross and in doing so washed away our sins. Jesus provided a way for the lost in this, allowing us to find salvation and eternity with God. We are then able to have a more fulfilled and Spirit filled life because of Jesus. The Gospel of John has a beautiful metaphor for how Jesus accomplishes this. Jesus says:

<sup>14</sup>I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. (**John 10:14-15 NRSV**)

A shepherd is a person who looks after a collection of animals. Shepherding was hard work, as they have to work around the clock to ensure the safety of their flock. If they left them unattended, a pack of wolves or other animals could easily come and kill off a large section of the herd. Shepherds risked their own lives to protect their sheep, because their entire livelihood was based on their herd. They had no income or status apart from their animals, so they made sure to keep as many of their flock safe.

As followers of Jesus, we are part of Jesus' flock. Jesus knows each one of us and we know him. He protects us and guides us to safety. God sent down His son, so that we could follow his lead into heaven. In conquering death, Jesus made known a new way to reach salvation, one that was made possible by his love for us the sheep. Yet, how far does Jesus' love extend?

The **seventh point** from Radical is a call to spread the Gospel. The first question we must ask then is what is the Gospel? Many of us would think of the Bible as the Gospel, or containing the Gospels in the form of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but the gospel also means generically "good news." The good news is that salvation is for everybody. Any sin that may taint us, be it original sin to a deadly one, does not hold us back from the radical love and salvation found through Jesus Christ. It doesn't matter what we have done, or mistakes we have made, we can always find our way back. Ultimately, this means that death is not the end, because love conquers death. Who then is this good news or Gospel for? Everyone.

Now we must ask the tough question. Turning back to our "do dogs go to heaven?" question, Platt would tell you that only those who believe in Christ can get to heaven. Many Christians do believe this and there is evidence to back it up. I for one love my family's dogs, and even though bandit is really smart, he can't possibly fully understand who Christ is. I would like to offer a different conclusion than Platt, if you would be so kind as to indulge me for a minute. I do not claim to know the full intentions of God the Creator, but maybe there is a little more wiggle room in this discussion of who gets to heaven. I believe that dogs can make it into heaven so I would like to turn once again to the Gospel of John to see if we can fit our dogs in with us as well...

<sup>14</sup>I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup>I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my

voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. <sup>17</sup> For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. (**John 10:16-17 NRSV**)

If we as Christians are Jesus' flock, who are the other sheep? Jesus clearly says he has other sheep who do not fall under this "fold," or we can think of it as Christianity. There are other sheep who do not know Jesus, but who Jesus knows and will not leave behind. Who is going to reach out to these other sheep? Jesus himself.

You see, when Jesus died on the cross, he didn't stop working in the world. The Son is still at work and calling more people into his flock. Anyone can turn to him and receive the radical love that we are meant to feel as followers of God. I believe that God does not hold back on anyone, but brings everyone into the fold, into salvation, into oneness, so long as they listen. Jesus says, the other sheep *will* listen to his voice in verse 16, so *at least* some will join the ranks.

Historically, this played out with the struggle between the Jews and Gentiles as to whether Gentiles could become Christians. You see the Gentiles were not Jewish, as in circumcised, but the early followers of Jesus allowed for them to enter. We can see this in Paul's letters as he was writing to cities and communities of both Jews and Gentiles.

We can't really know who these other sheep are in the Gospel of John, but there is a possibility that those who don't know Jesus will have a last chance to listen to the voice of Jesus. Bandit may not be able to comprehend Jesus, but he sure can listen when called by Jesus and I'll hold onto the chance that we will get to see Sunny again one day. And if we can fathom that there is a place for dogs in heaven, how can we exclude other people outright?

While we can't totally know who will make it in and who, if any, won't... we do know that we can get there through Jesus. This brings us back to the title of the chapter: **There is no Plan B**. These seven steps have shown us that we all fall short, but Jesus helps us find salvation and is calling us into his love. What does this mean for us today? It means we should spread this good news.

Jesus is the shepherd that wants to protect us from harm's way. Jesus gave his life so that we could live. Once we have experienced this love, there is no going back, there is no plan B. Each one of us is loved so immensely that we cannot even comprehend it. We are no longer weighed down by our sin, left to feel guilty for all of eternity. Instead, we are called to eternal life because of the love of God experienced through Jesus. Now that we have experienced that love, it is our job to go out into the world and spread it. For how can we hold onto this sense of belonging and not want others to experience it as well? Platt calls us to this in saying, "Will we risk everything- our comfort, our possessions, our safety, our security, our very lives- to make the gospel known among unreached people?"

It isn't easy. It's uncomfortable and at times dangerous to share about our faith. Yet, there are so many people out there who are longing to be part of a flock. Longing to hear about how they are loved so much that someone was willing to die for them. Longing to find hope that this messy life is not the end. Jesus has done all the heavy lifting. It's now our call to be the people who share that love with everyone around us. Maybe it's a call to go on a mission, maybe it's a call to buy a homeless person lunch, or maybe it's a call to show someone they are not alone in the world. Whatever the case, we have caught a glimpse of the love of Jesus and so let's share it.

I'll end with a poem by **Robert Frost**. "We dance round in a ring and suppose, But the Secret sits in the middle and knows." The truth of this whole topic is we can never completely know who gets in and who doesn't. We can debate all we want about whether people of other faiths are doomed, but there

is a danger in supposing, in being in the ring, because we, as human, can easily be wrong. I for one am wrong all the time and in no way have all the answers. Instead of taking a strong stance one way or the other, let's try to stick to what we know. We know that scripture tells us we can get to heaven through Jesus or we can get to the center of the ring in the poem. Let's focus on that, rather than worrying over or condemning those who we think won't get in. Jesus' life was an example for us to embody, to take on. Jesus exhibited a non-judgmental love and continues to work in the world. It is on us, then, to let others in on the secret. Amen.