

***In a previous column, you wrote that God doesn't "send" people to hell, but that we choose to live without God. I think that, when we die, God reveals Himself so fully and truly that we are so overwhelmed by his goodness that no one could possibly choose hell.***

First, God loves each and every human being. He wants all men and all women to be saved. Therefore, in some mysterious way, God gives everyone the grace they need to seek and to find him.

We cannot choose God on our own; he first chooses us and gives us the grace we need to be saved. And yet, we must respond to this free gift of grace. God has chosen us; we must choose him. This choice can even happen at the last possible moment. Even when it seems like a person has chosen hell (to all outward appearances), there is a very deep drama happening between God and each person of which we are unaware.

But what if God loves us so much that, at the moment of death, he steps in and makes a last ditch effort to save a person by finally revealing himself completely? And seeing the incredible beauty of God, the soul wouldn't be able to choose anything else. That kind of makes sense. Who could refuse to be attracted to pure goodness?

This is a pretty attractive idea, but it is very dangerous. In the end, this nice idea leads us into three not nice but awful and devastating ideas, until we arrive at the fourth (and most diabolical) idea: that God is the ultimate horror and perversion of the universe.

First, if it is true that God saves all people in the end, no matter what they choose throughout their lives, then life is meaningless. None of it matters. All the decisions you've made throughout your life that went into making you as a person? Irrelevant. If this most important of choices is overruled by God in the end, what happens to the less important ones? Your entire life is obliterated. And in the process, so are you. You were here for no good reason. Ultimately, none of your choices make the least little difference.

And that leads us to the second awful idea. If, in the end, God (out of "love" of course) picks us up by the scruff of our necks, and gently says to us: "Oh no, you don't want to be over there away from me. I am God, and I know what is best for you. You can't be left to decide for yourself. I'll make you obey me by showing you my beauty," we are not free to choose something or someone other than God. Whether he does that through servile fear or through overpowering beauty does not matter. It leads to the same thing: Our freedom is an illusion because, in the end, we don't get to choose.

And if freedom is an illusion, then this entire world is an illusion. That's the third awful idea. Because if we are all walking around under the impression that we are real and our choices are real, and they aren't, then none of this is real. It is like a dream.

In dreams, nothing we do matters. In dreams, we are seldom free to make our own choices. Even more than that, not only would this life be a dream, it would be a nightmare. Because no matter how much you or I have been blessed, we all suffer. This is everyone's experience, and if life is a dream, it is not a good dream, it is a horror movie.

And that leads us to the fourth idea. Who put us into this horror movie? Who makes us stay here? None other than the "so-called" all-good and all-loving God. For centuries, people have asked how God could be all-good and all-loving and still allow us to hurt each other like we do. Why wouldn't he step in and stop us from doing the evil things we do? The short answer is that God has made us free. He has made us like himself: with the ability to love. And if we truly have the choice to love, we must have the choice to not love, to hate, to use others. And God respects this choice because he does not want slaves; he wants sons and daughters who love him.

But why would God making himself irresistibly beautiful at the end of our lives mean that God is a monster?

Let's look at an extreme example. What if, at the end of their lives, God showed himself to Hitler or Stalin and they could not say no to him? Well, if God was planning on overruling their free will at the end of their lives, why didn't he do it before those men caused such unutterable suffering and death? The only explanation is that he doesn't care about the suffering and death of people. He just wants shells of people in the end. He doesn't care about us now. He is evil. And that's what we get if we say that, in the end, God shows himself so good that we cannot help but choose him. In an effort to tame God and make him "nice," we will have made him into the most dreadful, evil and hideous being in existence.

Hell does not make God a monster. It is the only thing that prevents our thinking he is a monster. Our lives are not meaningless. We are free. This life is no dream. Our sins make a difference, just as our acts of love make a difference. God respects the power of our free choice. Remember, if we repent and confess our sins, they are taken away. But that is not the same thing as saying they don't matter. They matter so much that the cost for each and every one of them is the death of God. That's the true love of God.