

The following is a parable. A parable, in its definition, is a story that illustrates a lesson. That's the supreme and primary intention here. The musings and the questions are real even if the answers are imagined. It is our hope that our story can exalt the example set forth in Job and the doubting disciple known as Thomas. They are personal heroes to us both, and Biblical models that help shape our individual and collective walks of faith. We pray that this parable might one day, even perhaps this day, persuade you of the same.

- Brian Russo and Taylor Bernstein

"The Parable of Inquiry"

[Job 7:11-21; John 20: 24-29]

May 1, 2011

Sophia: Where am I? Am I in heaven? Wait! Am I dead? Or is this just a dream? It's so... bright in here. This must be heaven, even though I don't want it to be. It's not even how I pictured it. Where are the clouds? The gates? The wings? I mean, this is just something like an empty room. There are chairs, but that's it. It's really nothing special at all.

But how can I be dead? I barely remember anything that seemed like death... One second I was in math class and then it kind of hurt. Kind of like a tingling sensation, but something different, something more painful. And then everything *really* hurt... that's the last that I remember. Is that how it happened? I don't know. Nothing seems certain here.

I was just fourteen years old, how could it have been my time? And more, how did I even make it to Heaven? I mean, I doubted so much that I was told about God. Sure, some parts I had faith in, but what about the rest? I thought having doubts lowered me in the eyes of God, or at least that's what others lead me to believe. Nothing here makes sense.

But if this is in fact Heaven, then Jesus must be here... right? I've got to find him. Surely, he will have the answers to my questions. But where do I find him? This is just a room with two chairs and nothing else! Maybe if I call out to him he will answer, doesn't it say that in the Bible? ...Jesus, Jesus!

Sophia: ...wait, you're not Jesus

Melchizedek: Impressive. What gave it away?

Sophia: Well, for one, you don't have long flowing hair. In fact, yours is kind of out of order. I mean, Jesus wouldn't have a hair out of place. Plus, you'd be dressed in a white robe or something. Maybe even with a circling halo above your head.

Melchizedek: Is that what you really think he looks like?

Sophia: Well, that's how he was drawn, painted and animated...

Melchizedek: [laughing under breath] Animated... Interesting.

Sophia: Well, if you're not Jesus, who are you? Are you Peter? Is this Limbo?

Melchizedek: So many questions...

Sophia: What is this place? Who are you?

Melchizedek: There's really no need to be hasty. Time no longer exists here. This is Heaven, where all things are possible but where everything doesn't exist.

Sophia: What does that even mean?

Melchizedek: It means that this is your place, your personal theatre if you will. Here you can sit with the people you wish and gaze out into an eternity of fantastic possibility. Here you can shape your perceptions however you desire, and together you can dream in an everlasting illusion of all that you will and want. There are no mansions, and there is but only one room. This room. But it can be anything and everything your mind wants it to be.

Sophia: Sounds a bit ridiculous if you ask me.

Melchizedek: Anymore ridiculous than inheriting an eternal palace in the clouds?

Sophia: Fair enough... though you do know that everyone down below is talking about this place all wrong, right? Even ministers.

Melchizedek: Ministers are only human.

Sophia: [gentle smile, short silence]...you said that Heaven is set up in such a way, so that I could sit with the people who matter most to me.

Melchizedek: I did.

Sophia: So, why exactly are you here? Where are my parents, my best friend--

Melchizedek: But they haven't died yet...

Sophia: Well, what about my great aunt – she died. Or even, what about Jesus? I'd rather sit next to him instead of you. I mean, at least I know his name...

Melchizedek: You're right, and for that I'm sorry. My bedside manner, as you now call it, has never been great. But I am here with you because **you** summoned me. You might not have thought you did, but your mind did. My name is Melchizedek and I appear next to those who are uncertain; those who are in want of answers for their many questions; those who come here in doubt as much in belief. Alas, I do not pretend to have all of the answers, but only my best well-informed guesses.

Sophia: This makes no sense. Why would God set up Heaven in such a way? I don't want to sit with Mel-cheese-a-deck or whatever your name is. I'm sorry. But, I want to see God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit – someone I actually know of!

Melchizedek: It is my intention to help, but I'm afraid you're stuck with me. For you see, God is out, Jesus is on Telex and the Holy Spirit, well she is still stuck on Earth.

Sophia: She??

Melchizedek: But of course. How else do you think the Divine image was personified as **you**?

Sophia: ...Did you ever see the show, LOST?

Melchizedek: LOST...?

Sophia: Yeah, you're just like it. Your "answers" only lead to more questions...

Melchizedek: Hmm, sounds like a good show.

Sophia: So, what did you say before? That God is out? What do you mean that God is out? You say it like he went out to the store for groceries.

Melchizedek: But God is out. Out creating somewhere, trying to perfect other places for life. The last I knew, God was somewhere in the eastern region we call---

Sophia: Wait a second, didn't you also say that Jesus was on Telex? What, on Earth, is Telex!?

Melchizedek: Well that's precisely the thing, Telex is not on Earth.

Sophia: What are you even talking about??

Melchizedek: Telex is another planet. It's quite amazing really. It's the latest one God got right in terms of balance. God thinks that it could even be better than E---

Sophia: Stop! None of this makes sense. Telex. Other planets. The Holy Spirt-ess. This is not what Heaven should be!

Melchizedek: But this is what Heaven is. And besides, I actually thought you would be excited to learn about such things. People wait years before ever finding this out. Some people never do. Not everyone who comes here learns what you just did.

Sophia: But why? Why me? What I have done to have been chosen?

Melchizedek: Well, let's not say chosen. That gets into this whole pre-destination nonsense, and well, let's just not go there. But you are special, and it was by *your* faith that you will see more, but only if you wish it.

Sophia: Well, thank you, I guess. And I do wish it. I want to understand. I've always wanted to understand. That's what made being religious so difficult for me.

Melchizedek: Well, being of religion is quite different than being of faith. Don't mistake one for the other.

Sophia: Okay... [short silence] So is there a Hell?

Melchizedek: That's a bit of a change of pace...

Sophia: You said that I can see more if I wish it. Well, I wish it. I want to understand and get answers to my questions. It's the least I deserve...

Melchizedek: You're right. And you deserved more than what you got. But--

Sophia: But, what?

Melchizedek: That's what comes with creation, unfortunately. There is no good explanation. Bad things happen. They have since the beginning and they will continue until the end. That's why God is still trying to perfect the balance. But honestly, I don't think it's possible.

Sophia: What do you mean?

Melchizedek: Well, think about it like this: Would you want your best friend to be your best friend out of choice or force? Would you want her to want to like you by her own choosing, or have her like you because you told her to?

Sophia: Well, I'd obviously want her to like me on her own.

Melchizedek: Exactly. It's the same here. God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit... they want you to love them, to choose them, but they can't force it. It would be disingenuous. God tried that once and it didn't work out so well; in fact, that world was rather uninteresting. Everyone just blindly worshiped, unquestionably obeyed, and piously believed. It was too programmed, and even, dare I say, too boring. Ever since, God been trying to perfect the balance between granting total freedom while also instituting parameters so to eradicate evil in any of its forms. But with any amount of freedom and sovereignty from the Divine, evil and natural calamity will always exist, and this is why I say, "I don't think it's possible."

Sophia: That's a lot to take in. But... it also makes sense... so, God really is out? Creating still?

Melchizedek: That's right, and Jesus really is on Telex.

Sophia: Preaching the same message he was on Earth?

Melchizedek: Sort of. It varies with the planets and their particular needs.

Sophia: You know, I still can't believe I'm here... but, all of this is really very interesting...

Melchizedek: I thought you'd think so.

Sophia: But, why didn't Jesus come back to Earth? Like, why would he only come for, what was it, 33 years and then leave? Why not return already? Didn't it say that in scripture?

Melchizedek: Should he leave those he's ministering to elsewhere?

Sophia: Well, what about when he's done then?

Melchizedek: And what if he's never done? Besides, he already came to Earth once. That's more than other planets can presently say.

Sophia: I guess. But why only live for 33 years? Why not live longer so that his message could have been heard by more people?

Melchizedek: That I've never been sure of myself. I've asked even, but haven't really gotten anywhere. It always comes down to something about numbers and their importance. Something I admittedly claim no knowledge of.

Sophia: But you actually talk to Jesus, and ask him questions and things?

Melchizedek: I do. He's a pretty cool guy.

Sophia: Pretty *cool*?

Melchizedek: Yeah, I guess he is pretty great. He does God's work everywhere he is sent even though it always ends the same.

Sophia: You mean, always in crucifixion? Why would God want that? In fact, why does God allow for suffering at all? Why would God allow me, or his Son even, to die so soon? ...So young? Why wouldn't God stop it?

Melchizedek: Because, as I said before, it's not perfect. It can't be. Otherwise the balance would be thrown off. Plus, excluding sending Jesus to new places, God really does remain in the cosmic background. The covenant with Noah was as true as truth itself.

Sophia: So Noah actually existed? The ark? All the animals?

Melchizedek: Well, on a smaller scale, but yes. And ever since then, God just creates. Nothing, but creation.

Sophia: But that's a horrifying answer though isn't it? Why create something if you know that it will always lead to sickness and death?

Melchizedek: It's really no wonder why you're here... for that is such a good question, Sophia. A heavily debated one in fact, even between God and Jesus himself. Do you remember when Jesus cried out—

Sophia: "My God, my God why have you forsaken me"

Melchizedek: Exactly! That was a real exchange between them. Jesus has never fully understood why, and neither have I nor others. It's not that God is evil or anything either, quite the opposite, for there are as many tears there as there are anywhere. It's just the way it is and always was. The alpha and the omega I guess.

Sophia: ...I really wish I could meet Jesus.

Melchizedek: One day you will, and I know that he would feel the same about you.

Sophia: Really? About *me*?

Melchizedek: Yes, about you. That's what this is all about. Why you are here. Because you ask the questions, just like Jesus did, just like all of us here have and still do. Because you have never settled for a blind faith, or simply that which your church or parents told you to believe in, but because you walked your own path with an earnest inquiry to know God.

Sophia: So questions are a good thing? Doubts even?

Melchizedek: Absolutely. Obviously you've heard of Job, right?

Sophia: Of course I have. But he never questioned his faith I thought, even though all of the worst things happened to him?

Melchizedek: But he did question God. In fact, he virtually yelled at God. Challenged God even. Yes, he maintained his faith, but he did so without exempting his questions. That's what faith is. That's also why he's in his own room right now, not too far down the way in fact. ...One cannot live in these rooms without first having had their questions. If they were void of doubt then they ceased to journey with their faith, and thus they never made it here.

Sophia: So God would rather that we ask questions than blindly accept everything? I guess that makes sense. I mean, didn't Jesus' own disciple do the same thing? Thomas, right? When Jesus had been raised from the dead, even one of his disciples didn't believe the story, right? He too needed confirmation. ...And, Thomas was chosen by Jesus too, so Jesus must have liked him, welcomed him even... That's why I always liked Thomas you know... because he made me feel like my doubts were okay, since he himself had them, and because Jesus personally chose him as a disciple. ...But I was never sure.

Melchizedek: Well now you can be sure...

Sophia: I guess I can...

Melchizedek: Earlier you asked what Hell was... do you still need or want to know?

Sophia: Yes, I think I do. My mind is never satisfied... (smiling)

Melchizedek: I know (returning the smile)... Well, Hell is the state when you cease to walk with God by faith. When you either dismiss or accept everything without a critical thought. Hell has nothing to do with fire, damnation, or any of that fantastic literary drivel. It's simply the opposite of this place. It's an eternal darkness, where people just stare blindly and mindlessly forever unto the end.

Sophia: ...And here we sit in the light, our eyes and minds forever wide open...

Melchizedek: That's right, Sophia, that's exactly right... being here isn't too bad is it?

Sophia: You know... it isn't... [smiling deep in thought]

Amen.