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Two Doors (Work Station Two)

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Gary B. Swanson

Most anthologies tracing the historical development of the short story as a literary genre contain an engaging tale authored by Frank Stockton, first published in an American magazine in 1882, entitled “The Lady or the Tiger.”

This is an account of a despotic king who administers justice in extreme cases in an amphitheater with an elaborately arranged public spectacle. The accused is placed on a stage facing two doors and must choose to open one of them. Behind one door is a savage tiger; behind the other, a beautiful woman of age and station similar to the accused. If he opens the door hiding the tiger, the beast is primed to tear him apart. If he opens the door hiding the lady, he is immediately married to her, and he is set free. It matters not whether he is already married or in love with someone else. The king likes the idea that the accused is, in a sense, deciding his own guilt or innocence through his own choice.

One day the king discovers that

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his daughter and a young courtier have fallen in love. Furious at the young man’s audacity, the king refers the situation to his court of two doors. Nifty arrangement from the king’s perspective: either way, he puts an end to a relationship that he considers most inappropriate.

This particular case is further complicated, however, by the fact that the princess, always seated at the right of her father during these occasions, has been able to use her authority to learn what is behind each door. Furthermore, the young lady who has been chosen to stand behind a door for this event has been selected from the princess’s own retinue. And several times in the past, she has aroused the jealousy of the princess for the supposed mutual attraction between her and the young courtier now on the stage.

The young man, aware only of the princess’s love for him and not of her jealousy, looks quickly and expectantly at the princess. Because all eyes in the breathless audience are

upon him, he is the only one who sees a furtive signal from the princess as to which door to open. He turns and strides confidently toward it.

The concluding lines of “The Lady or the Tiger” doubtless bring a smile for some readers and a frown for others.¹ But in a sense, we all stand in the arena of time and face a choice between only two alternatives.

It’s interesting that people often use old and familiar expressions without any hint of where the sayings have come from. In the English language, it’s a pretty safe bet that the most frequent sources of such expressions are Shakespeare or the King James Version of the Bible.

In his play *As You Like It*, Shakespeare famously depicted the scenario of the role of each of us as participants in some kind of cosmic drama: “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” This conceit at least implies an audience, something that users of this expression often deny.

But Ellen White, too, sometimes describes the narrative of the human experience in theatrical terms. She refers frequently to inhabitants of other worlds as audience to the scenes of history.² Her working title for this epic blockbuster was “The Great Controversy.”

And God’s Word describes the importance of choice through

Joshua’s dramatic flourish in confronting the people of Israel—like the young man in “The Lady or the Tiger”—to select one of only two alternatives: “[C]hoose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15, NKJV).

In today’s pluralistic culture, the concept of only two choices is too restrictive—in fact, too intolerant. With regards to choosing what to believe about truth, most of those in contemporary society much prefer to leave that decision up to the individual: What Jack has accepted as truth for him is every bit as valid as what Jill has decided is truth for her.

“The philosophically pluralistic theories hold that objective truth is inaccessible and that meaning resides not in external reality or texts but in the interpreter. . . . Nobody is any longer expected to give an objectively valid reason for whatever hope he or she retains.”³

Mega-celebrity actor Johnny Depp expressed this worldview simply and succinctly in a television interview with James Lipton: “In religion you pick and choose the things that work for you.”⁴ This is cafeteria-style religion. It is worldview seasoned to taste. On the surface, it sounds so reasonable, so fair and



open-minded. And Johnny Depp is *so cool!*

But once the Bible has been accepted as God's Holy Word, the inspired written expression of His effort to communicate with the human race, there are truly only two choices—two doors from which to choose. “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Ex. 20:3, NKJV).

Even to many Christians, this sounds “so Old Testament.” But the New Testament is every bit as clear: Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6, NKJV). He never claimed to be one of many choices from which we can choose. This issue isn't multiple choice. Instead, it brings a whole new meaning of cosmic proportions to the true-false question.

Elsewhere He says, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18, NKJV).

C. S. Lewis: “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell.”⁵

Jesus also said: “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved” (John 10:9, NKJV).

Barclay describes ancient sheepfolds that were large open areas that were walled in with only one entrance. The entrance was open, so

the shepherd lay down and slept across the entrance. The shepherd was, literally, the door.⁶

During the Christian phase of Bob Dylan's creative life, he was very clear on the binary choice that humanity faces: “It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody.”

There is an essential difference, however, between the two choices that humanity faces and those of the young courtier in “The Lady or the Tiger.” When we stand on the stage and must make our choice, we can look to the Love of our life with the utmost confidence that He has already indicated the correct door to choose.

We make that choice every day—every moment—of our lives. And it isn't mere guesswork.

REFERENCES

¹ Those who have never read “The Lady or the Tiger”—or who would like to revisit it—may access it online, at their own risk, at <http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/LadyTige.shtml>.

² See, for example, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 78, 79, 336; *Prophets and Kings*, p. 148.

³ Carl F. H. Henry, “Postmodernism: The New Spectre?” in David S. Dockery, ed., *The Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1995), p. 41.

⁴ *Inside the Actors Studio*, Episode 812, 2002.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1981), p. 45.

⁶ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), vol. 2, p. 58.