

Kudos for Raising Hell

"I was a bible-slinging hell defender for many years. My decision to read *Raising Hell* was solely to criticize it. It turned out to be the best decision of my entire life! ...No longer am I wasting my life walking on eggshells of religion." -Randy Serrano, NY

"I'm a former pastor and my joy knows no end after encountering this book! Oh the amazing peace! Finally, a clear, logical, and loving picture of a sovereign God. God is gloriously good!" -Lazar Sretenovic, Australia

"...If you read with an open heart and mind, you will not be able to walk away from this book without feeling that [the] conclusions just might be right." -William Nieporte (www.nieporte.name), VA

"I'm at a place in my life where the character and nature of God is being investigated from every angle, *honestly*, for the first time. Instead of trusting Orthodoxy, I'm challenging the double mindedness of my bible college and seminary education that now stands out to me like a sore thumb, wondering how I could have been so blind. *Raising Hell*...is a great work and will have a far-reaching, liberating effect." -Mike Glenn, CA

"If you've ever felt an inner conflict with what the theologians and pastors of orthodox Christianity teach about hell vs. what you feel in your heart about God's love...read this book! Let go of the notion that only pastors or scholars have the answer your faith questions." -Barb Riley, IL

"This book is an easy read, and will challenge you to your core. If you are a preacher who holds to this [hell] doctrine, you might want to avoid this book unless you're willing to accept the possibility that you were lied to in your seminaries. Julie is very convincing, and I see the truth to be on her side." -Phil Thompson, AZ

"Ferwerda has articulated the message of freedom and inclusion—the gospel as it was intended—better than any other writer or theologian I have read to date. ...Julie's is the sweetest and most gentle voice—I cannot thank her enough." -David Dellman, MDiv, Baltimore, MD

"Ferwerda's book makes me want to stop strangers in the street and say, 'Hey, man. Did you know...?' The things she explains not only make sense, but answer questions she isn't even asking! It's an enjoyable read—I can't recommend it highly enough!" -David McLaughlin, Great Britain

"I'm a pastor and am very impressed by the logic and the obvious amount of time spent in research of this book. It's interesting and compelling, and helped me a great deal in my own search." -Neal Johnson, ME

"Raising Hell isn't wishful thinking or one of those 'hell just can't be real because it would be so mean' books. Each argument is laid out with evidence and a lot of research. I highly recommend it for anyone looking for scriptural proof that God will save all of humanity." -Tony

"I must say that *this is one of the greatest love stories ever written...*would you please lay down your defense weapons and read this book?" -Tim Richmond, OH

"Finally the teaching of everlasting torment is being seen for what it really is: the assassination of God's loving and just character! Thank you, Julie—history will remember you!" -Todd Lange

"Rob Bell's, *Love Wins*, was more about asking great questions; *Raising Hell* is more about great answers." -Tyler B.

"Finally a smart Christian woman who is not afraid to reveal the truth—even if it shakes the foundation of the church to its very core." - Nelson Rose, FL

"I 'stumbled' onto this book that introduced me to a completely different perspective on God's love and purpose for humanity. Maybe I have been naïve...but nobody in my church and Bible study has ever mentioned this Christian perspective." -Peter Utama, NY

"I have been studying this subject for more than 40 years and have read a lot of books. *Raising Hell* is the best of the best." -Walt Childs, FL

"Ferwerda is witty, intelligent, bold, unapologetic, and very well studied. *Raising Hell* will...take you to a place of no return." -Michael Dise, Wake Forest Divinity, NC

"Ferwerda sure finished knocking me off the 'calf path' and helped me go public with the "Good News" in my pulpit." Pastor Don Hendricks, AZ

"After Bible College, I had a few persistent questions—the kind that get people into trouble. *Raising Hell* does an excellent job of opening up the scriptures to answer those questions. Jesus goes from being a wonderful person who gives his best efforts to rescue the few, to being King of Kings, Lord of lords and the Savior of the World!" -Jim Folsom, IL

"Take the leap! I'd like to encourage people who are thinking about reading this book but may be nervous about 'heretical' writings or what your pastor or even friends may say about the subject matter. *Raising Hell*...lays the groundwork for a great deal of questioning—something that I think should be encouraged rather than discouraged as we seek the truth about God, life, love, and the future." -Sarah Elizabeth Jones, FL

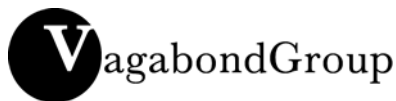
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Raising Hell

Christianity's Most Controversial
Doctrine Put Under Fire

**Quick and Dirty
Version**

Julie Ferwerda



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CONTENTS

Setting the stage...	1
Part 1 Hell: Fact or Fiction?	3
Chapter 1: Lost and Found	7
Chapter 2: Questioning Hell	11
Chapter 3: Who's Going to Hell?	17
Chapter 4: Who's Responsible for Lost Souls?	21
Chapter 5: The Missing Hell	25
Chapter 6: When Hell Became "Gospel Truth"	31
Chapter 7: Satan Wins, God Loses?	37
Part 2 Love Does Not Fail...	43
Chapter 8: Love Never Fails for Children	45
Chapter 9: Love Never Fails the Helpless or the Hopeless	51
Chapter 10: Love Never Fails With Enemies	57
Chapter 11: Love Never Fails for Any...or All	63
Chapter 12: Tracing Gospel History	71
Part 3 Scripture Through Ancient Lenses	75
Chapter 13: Eternity vs. Ages	77
Chapter 14: Jewish Purpose of the Ages	81
Chapter 15: What God Wants, God Gets	89
Chapter 16: Lazarus and the Rich Man	95
Chapter 17: Redefining the Soul	101
Chapter 18: Leaving the Calf Path for Good	105
Resources	112
Endnotes	113

Find more chapters and study resources in the full version of *Raising Hell*, located on Amazon in paperback or Kindle edition. Download the free PDF at www.RaisingHellBook.com.

SETTING THE STAGE...

There's a childhood fairytale by Hans Christian Anderson about a vain Emperor who had a fetish for extravagant clothing. Two opportunistic scoundrels in the kingdom decided to take advantage of the King's vanity by persuading him to buy a tailored suit made out of revolutionary fabric only seen by those who were 'worthy' of its exquisite qualities.

You probably know the story. The Emperor fell for the ploy and, after a sizeable investment, ended up parading in front of his Kingdom in his birthday suit, trapped in between the fear of being exposed as incompetent on the one hand, or, well, being *exposed* as naked and gullible on the other!

As the story goes, everyone played along magnificently, primarily from their own fears of being labeled unworthy, and the resulting community snubfest. From the least to the greatest, everyone behaved perfectly to keep up the falsehood, just as the two scoundrels had predicted. Everyone, that is, except the one who had no important job, no position in the kingdom, and nothing to lose. A child approached the Emperor's carriage and shouted with honest assessment, "What's going on here? Why is everyone ignoring the fact that *the Emperor is naked?*"

What a precarious position for the Emperor. With the evidence as plain as his naked butt, he finally realized that he had been duped, but he could not—would not—admit to it. He thought it better to continue the procession under the illusion rather than admit to his colossal mistake.

While it's easy for us to recognize and even make fun of the gullibility of the Emperor, the reality is that all of us have, at one time or another, fallen for wives' tales, urban legends, fables, and even downright deceptions—it's just part of being human. Even our religious, theological, and doctrinal beliefs are not immune to distortions and deceptions.

As I think back over my lifetime, I notice how many of my beliefs have evolved. Many things I believed as a child or even a young adult are no longer things I believe now. Why not? Because somewhere along the line, I learned that what I had been taught was misguided or false, and adapted my beliefs to new information that made more sense or was more provably correct in my later experiences.

Essentially, we are all on a spiritual journey seeking "truth," though our truths of yesterday may not look so true today. Even the "truths" I

wholeheartedly believe may not be true to you, or vice versa. As we grow and mature, we realize that developing our sense of truth is a lot more of a thoughtful, intentional, and open-minded journey than we once realized.

But what of those historical, “essential doctrines,” and *orthodox* teachings of the Christian faith? Is it safe to challenge nearly 2,000 years of traditional theology-in-the-making on matters such as whether or not there’s validity to the doctrine of hell?

I’ll tell you why we must question the teaching of hell. *The very name, character, and purposes of God are at stake!* In my opinion, it’s not safe to NOT question. Living at the forefront of the information age, I believe we have both the crucial responsibility and the unique opportunity, unlike at any other time in Church history, to make an informed determination of what we believe and why we believe it.

You might also be asking, who am I to question or doubt the majority of today’s mainstream Bible translators, theologians, MDivs, and pastors? I’ve certainly thought about that, but then I’ve also thought about what kind of people to which Jesus gave insight and understanding. Was it the educated religious hierarchy, or was it the simple, uneducated illiterate, all of whom could easily be represented today by people who haven’t been to seminary?

I realize that the premise of this book for some is radical, unsettling, and may initially ignite suspicion, but please keep reading and give me a fair chance to build my case. I’m not asking you to go to South America to drink Kool-Aid, or to wear a toga and sell flowers at the airport, or even to send money. Lay your natural defenses down long enough to read one little book from a perspective that’s likely much different than what you’ve always been taught or believed.

In the coming pages, I’m inviting your inner child to take a journey. Drop the fear of being rejected or labeled, unshackle yourself from the compulsion to conform, and allow yourself to ask (or be presented with) some honest, valid questions.

Dare to ask. Dare to question. Dare to open your mind to the possibilities of a bigger God than you’ve ever heard about before. It could be the greatest decision of your life! Perhaps you’ll find, just as I did, that it’s time for all hell to break loose. Let me take you on my journey...

Part 1

Hell: Fact or Fiction?

The Calf Path

by Sam Walter Foss (1858–1911)

One day, through the primeval wood,
A calf walked home, as good calves should;
But made a trail all bent askew,
A crooked trail, as all calves do.

Since then three hundred years have fled,
And, I infer, the calf is dead.
But still he left behind his trail,
And thereby hangs my moral tale.

The trail was taken up next day
By a lone dog that passed that way;
And then a wise bellwether sheep
Pursued the trail o'er vale and steep,
And drew the flock behind him, too,
As good bellwethers always do.

And from that day, o'er hill and glade,
Through those old woods a path was made,
And many men wound in and out,
And dodged and turned and bent about,
And uttered words of righteous wrath
Because 'twas such a crooked path;
But still they followed – do not laugh –
The first migrations of that calf,
And through this winding wood-way stalked
Because he wobbled when he walked.

This forest path became a lane,
That bent, and turned, and turned again.
This crooked lane became a road,
Where many a poor horse with his load
Toiled on beneath the burning sun,
And traveled some three miles in one.
And thus a century and a half
They trod the footsteps of that calf.

The years passed on in swift fleet.
The road became a village street,
And this, before men were aware,
A city's crowded thoroughfare,
And soon the central street was this
Of a renowned metropolis;
And men two centuries and a half
Trode in the footsteps of that calf.

Each day a hundred thousand rout
Followed that zigzag calf about,
And o'er his crooked journey went
The traffic of a continent.
A hundred thousand men were led
By one calf near three centuries dead.
They follow still his crooked way,
And lose one hundred years a day,
For thus such reverence is lent
To well-established precedent.

A moral lesson this might teach
Were I ordained and called to preach;
For men are prone to go it blind
Along the calf-paths of the mind,
And work away from sun to sun
To do what other men have done.
They follow in the beaten track,
And out and in, and forth and back,
And still their devious course pursue,
To keep the path that others do.

They keep the path a sacred groove,
Along which all their lives they move;
But how the wise old wood-gods laugh,
Who saw the first primeval calf!
Ah, many things this tale might teach—
But I am not ordained to preach.

CHAPTER ONE

LOST AND FOUND

I must have read the parable of the prodigal son in Luke chapter fifteen a hundred times before I noticed the most important, defining detail.

Perhaps you remember the story. One of two sons asks his father for his portion of the inheritance, and then leaves home to squander it on fast living. Far away from home and with no money to his name, a severe famine takes place. He lands a job tending pigs, longing to fill up his stomach with what the pigs are eating, which is better than nothing. But even then, his luck has run out and no one offers him anything to eat. It is then, in his recognition of deepest need and end of self-reliance, that the son remembers the generosity and merciful nature of his father back home. As the realization of the error of his ways sinks in, he makes up his mind to go back to his father to humbly admit his sin and failure, and to ask if he might be taken in, if only as a hired hand. Even if he is no longer regarded as a son, at least he will have something to eat.

Look what happens next:

But *while he was still a long way off*, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

Did you see that? Before the young man could utter a word of remorse, before he had a chance to admit what a screw-up he'd been, the father had been scanning the distant horizon for his son's form and ran to meet him with open arms. We can't help but feel a bit of the father's joy when he recounts to the older brother what this moment meant to him:

...We had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found (vs. 32).

What does this parable reveal to us about God's heart toward His children—even the rebellious, ungrateful, unbelieving, completely lost ones who are as good as dead to Him at the moment? Is this offer of reconciliation being promised to all, or only to a few? Is it limited to this lifetime or does the offer continue into the next, for as long as necessary? Is

there ever a limit or deadline to God's love and patience in waiting for His children to come home?

It was only recently I noticed that the parable of the prodigal son is the third in a series of parables, all revealing the same crucial point: Something of great value has been lost—a sheep, a coin, and a boy—and that which is lost is helpless to rescue itself from its circumstances and must be sought after diligently, *until* it is found and restored to where it belongs. The owner or father is not satisfied as long as even one—one sheep, one coin, or one son—remains lost.

Twice in this series, Jesus conveys the heart of heaven: “In the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” (vs. 7, 10). Doesn't that imply it is necessary that we repent? Of course, but did the son have to repent before he was received into welcome arms? Did he have a choice about whether his father watched for him, found him, and never gave up on him? Did the straying sheep ultimately have the choice not to rejoin the flock? Did the misplaced coin have a choice not to be swept up and put safely into the purse? Do sinners and unbelievers have a choice when it comes to ultimately being reconciled to their heavenly Father? Might the point be, in any case, that the move to “come home” will eventually and always be agreed upon as desirable by the one lost?

In the parable of the lost sheep, it is the shepherd who goes searching for his missing sheep. He does not wait for the animal to find its way home; he searches it out, puts it on his shoulders, and carries it back to the flock. Similarly the woman from the parable of the lost coin searches by lamplight for her missing coin. She does not wait to happen upon it, or consider it hopelessly lost unless fate brings it to her.

These lessons seem to stand in contrast to how most of us are taught that God relates to His children. In our Bible study groups and from the pulpit, we hear time and again that the Lord is our Shepherd, but ultimately this Shepherd waits passively for his flock to come to Him—to choose Him. We learn that He does not search for helpless stragglers and carry them home on His shoulders. Instead He watches over only those sheep that remain in His sight while damning those who wander away or do not know how to find their way home.

The lost sheep, the missing coin, and the prodigal son are really parables about each of us—every person ever born. We have all either

inadvertently gotten lost or willfully left home for the illusion of something better. “All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us *all* to fall on Him” (Isaiah 53:6). Paul’s words also come to mind, echoing the message of the parables: “For *while we were still helpless*, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ...But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that *while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:6–8).

The word “sin” means to “miss the mark.” In ancient times, this idea was about getting off the right path—getting lost. We have all been qualified as ungodly, helpless sinners and path-missers who wandered off the right path, following our own way. Yet isn’t this exactly who Paul says Jesus died for? Was His death for most in vain?

Throughout this book, we are going to explore how understanding the message of these parables and learning the heart of the Father will deliver the fatal blow to any such notion of an everlasting hell, or even the more palatable version of “eternal separation from God.” As we piece together a remarkable story, we’ll find that it can’t be possible that He would turn away even one son or daughter, and that every person, given enough time to “starve among the swine,” will come to the realization that home is where they belong. Even before they can round the bend for home, they will be welcomed with the happy reassurance that the eyes of their true Father never stopped searching the horizon, ready to run to them with loving, open arms. If Jesus’ words are to be our instruction in the matters of life, then we can have assurance that love is the healer of all things. Our Father will ultimately never give up on nor ever reject—ever!

Wait! What about hell?

The Bible mentions hell repeatedly, doesn’t it? Yet hell doesn’t seem consistent with the theme of Luke 15. It doesn’t seem consistent with the Pauline gospels, and it doesn’t seem consistent with many of the words of Jesus. The doctrine of hell tells us that for most of mankind, there will be no fattened calf waiting when they realize the error of their ways and are ready to come home. That, unlike the good fate of the lost son, there will ultimately be no open arms for most of the sons and daughters who have ever lived.

Many of us resist such things intuitively. When you question any loving Christian, they will admit that they desire for everyone to be saved and they cannot truly make sense of the alternative. But pick up almost

any Bible translation and there it is—hell, with its fire and brimstone, its everlasting torture and torment.

So if hell appears to be inconsistent in many ways with the character of God—a God who asks us to forgive all our enemies as many times as necessary, and who tells us that “love does not fail”—could there be a better way to interpret Scripture? If we are free to ask questions like a child, might some of our questions include the following?

- Could there be a reason that some authoritative Bible translations don’t even use the word “hell” or convey any kind of “everlasting destruction” throughout?
- Could it be possible, over the course of two thousand years, that mainstream Christianity has been misguided into believing lies about the character and intent of our loving heavenly Father to the point that it became reflected in Bible translations over time?
- Is there historically and scripturally a viable Christian theological position that doesn’t teach a literal, eternal hell?
- Is hell a necessary component of the Gospel message or the Christian faith?
- Is it possible that the hundreds of years of Church doctrine formation and traditional teachings could have veered off course?

These and many more controversial yet intriguing questions will be discussed and answered in the coming chapters. These will not be answers that merely prey upon emotions, or that sacrifice reason to wishful thinking, but will offer perspectives that are scripturally and historically sound. As we begin to chart new territory, all you have to do is maintain an open mind and concede that there might be a context that differs from the one you accept as orthodox truth now. If you can take that leap, if you can allow yourself to put to the test things that have been foundational to your Christian faith, then let us continue.

I want to start by telling you my story of how I got to the place where I began questioning. Every journey starts with a single step, so let’s start at the beginning.

CHAPTER TWO

QUESTIONING HELL

I'd been waiting with great anticipation for a couple of weeks to make this phone call. When my eighteen-year-old daughter answered her cell phone, I didn't waste any time. "Dani, I've been dying to tell you the exciting news for a few weeks now. I've made some amazing discoveries in my studies lately and, well, you were right all along—*there is no hell!*"

"I knew it!" My daughter yelled in my ear, not requiring any context. From the time she was a young child, it was Dani who first doubted the veracity of this doctrine from her traditional Christian upbringing. It was the child who innately believed in the benevolent character of God.

When I finally revealed my findings to Dani, she didn't know that I'd been immersed in nonstop study for over two months, trying to sort out history and Scripture after the prompting of some startling discoveries. I didn't dare get her hopes up prematurely, until I was absolutely sure.

Throughout my oldest daughter's childhood, she often questioned Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, and especially me about the logic of eternal torment. Certainly she has a very compassionate heart, but it was deeper and more profound than that. She couldn't accept the seeming contradiction of God's supposed unconditional, sacrificial love for all people that somehow vanished as soon as a person died without professing faith in Jesus Christ. She couldn't accept the injustice that billions of people would be punished and separated from God eternally because of a limited period of opportunity and unbelief during their mortal lives, especially when most of those people had no way of knowing about or entering into a relationship with Jesus or the Christian God.

Entering her teens, Dani began going on overseas mission trips, where her inner wrestling only intensified. She witnessed the utter desolation of multitudes of people who had the deck stacked against them since birth—people who had virtually no chance or "choice" of encountering the Savior of Christianity in their squalor and misery. This led to her frequent questioning, inner torment, and eventually disbelief in hell.

In my mother-knows-best reasoning mode, I patiently yet uncompromisingly explained to her, each time I sensed her rejection of such a cornerstone tenet of our faith, what I had been ingrained to believe over a lifetime: “God deeply loves everyone, but He had to give them the choice to love and accept Him or to reject His free gift of salvation. God doesn’t send anyone to hell, people choose to go to hell by rejecting Him.”

“But Mom, not everyone has the same opportunity to choose God or to love Him back. Either they don’t ever get the chance to hear because they don’t live in a Christian country, or they can’t hear because of so many factors outside their control.”

“Dani, we have to believe that in God’s sovereignty and power, He makes sure everyone gets a fair chance to choose. If they haven’t heard, He will reveal Himself to them somehow over the course of their lives and they will be without excuse. Again, God doesn’t *want* them to go to hell—it’s their choice to go there because He won’t force anyone to accept Him.”

I have to admit, when your own child is challenging your beliefs like this, the answers often sound pretty lame to your own ears. I gave her the best explanations I could with what I knew at the time, but even to me, my rationale had serious flaws. I too had been to places like India and Haiti, witnessing the same lack of opportunity people had by not growing up in a loving Christian family or hearing the Gospel. It bothered me too, but I squelched my own dissonance with blind, unquestioning “faith,” assuming that the Christianity I grew up with and the people I looked up to for spiritual guidance couldn’t be wrong. This is all I’d ever known. I had never heard or read anywhere that there’s a historically and scripturally sound alternative to the doctrine of eternal torment—an alternative that many credible scholars and historians agree was the predominant view of Christians for the first several centuries after Christ.

Before that day of the phone call, no matter how hard I tried, my pat answers and misguided attempts at reasoning out the doctrine of eternal torment did not make sense to my daughter. I often worried, while watching her struggle to believe in the loving character of God, and hoped she wouldn’t lose faith until she was able to accept such a core tenet of our faith.

Confronted with Evidence

If you are a conservative Christian, your views on the teachings of the Bible are likely not much different than the views I held. I grew up in an evangelical, hell-preaching, hell-believing church, and continued that course unquestioningly in various church experiences for most of my adult life. I've been actively involved in a gamut of evangelical denominations and ministries and have always believed in hell (a.k.a. eternal torment and separation from God) as the "due punishment" for those who do not accept Jesus as Savior in this lifetime, regardless of when and where they were born, and whether or not they ever heard the Gospel. All my life, I unquestioningly accepted that hell must be true and somehow compatible with God's "perfectly loving and perfectly just" nature. After all, the word "hell" is used numerous times in my Bible version, repeated in many a sermon in church, and the sole reason missionaries for centuries have traipsed the globe in order to rescue people "before it's too late."

However, in 2008, a friend and I began studying the Bible through Jewish lenses. Suddenly, previously obscure passages began to unlock and tie together in profound ways, and we discovered that, without this critical view of the Scriptures, it's almost impossible to decipher the meaning of significant Bible concepts. We became painfully aware of how a lifetime of studying the Scriptures without the correct lenses left our understanding far short of the original intent.

At this time, we also began the illuminating experience of studying the Scriptures in Greek and Hebrew, namely via free online resources. With some time and effort, anyone can learn to dig deeper with tools like a Concordance and an Interlinear Bible. * And for us, that's where all the "trouble" began. Initially, we discovered a significant translation error of a Bible verse. This created a giant problem. For one thing, I had often gotten into big arguments with my husband when he occasionally questioned the inerrancy of the Bible. Repeating learned rhetoric, I insisted that God had sovereignly preserved the inerrancy of His Word, despite the lengthy span of time and fallibility of countless human scribes and translators involved. But in this particular case, the translation error stuck out to us as plain as the Emperor's naked butt.

* An Interlinear Bible is a word-for-word Greek (or Hebrew) to English. Locate an Interlinear online at: scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/Greek_Index.htm.

That set the ball rolling and soon we were exploring obvious translation inaccuracies of many well-known passages. Needless to say, our belief in the “inerrancy of the Bible” was soon shot. The more we questioned and studied, the more inconsistencies and translation errors we found in basically all modern Bible translations (i.e. KJV, NIV, NAS, NLT).

Now, I expect there will be some Bible students and pastors reading along who will think it naïve of me to have ever believed that the modern Bible translations are “inerrant,” since many of them learned about translation errors in their formal training. But unfortunately, most church statements of faith specifically state that “the Bible is the infallible, inerrant Word of God,” and as such, your average churchgoer is expected to agree or risk being marginalized. Recently, some church and ministry statements of faith have been modified to say that the Bible “in its original form” (which no longer exists anyhow, so is an irrelevant statement) is inerrant, but that is the exception rather than the rule. Sadly, out of fear of the backlash, very few pastors feel the liberty to discuss and work through these issues with their congregations.

Some people questioned our ability to discern errors ourselves, suggesting a trained pastor or theologian was needed to help decipher what we were reading. But many of the errors and inconsistencies we encountered were so elementary that even a third grader would have discerned them (examples explored in the full version of *Raising Hell*).

Ironically, what encouraged me that we were not getting off-base in discovering so many translation errors and, at times, even suspecting foul play or agenda, was a verse I happened upon in Jeremiah:

“How can you say, ‘We are wise, and the law of the LORD is with us’? But behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made it into a lie. The wise men are put to shame, they are dismayed and caught; Behold, they have rejected the word of the LORD...” (Jer. 8:7-9)

Right there, in black and white, Jeremiah confirmed that scribes had inserted lies into the OT Scripture writings, many centuries before a Bible was ever published or canonized.*

* *Biblical canon* is a list of books considered to be authoritative by a particular religious community. The Bible wasn’t canonized until at least the middle of the 4th century A.D. Note that the Protestant Bible contains a different set of books than the Catholic or Eastern Orthodox versions.

I'm not suggesting that all translation errors were intentional, but somewhere along the line, people with the authority to influence the theology of billions made some serious alterations. Perhaps they tried to improve what they thought was meant by the original writer or scribe, or they didn't know the meanings of certain words they translated from languages that were not their mother tongue (our modern Bibles evolved through five very different languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Latin, and English). Others who followed them, knowingly or unknowingly continued in the same course, not correcting what was done before.

We arrive at today with several thousand years of Scriptures-in-the-making, communicated from one generation to the next (via oral tradition or hand copied), over four to five language changes, and hundreds, if not thousands of scribes and translators, who were basically the only literates of entire societies (read: major lack of accountability). It's not a stretch to imagine that "stuff happened." Even the Jews have never promoted the inerrancy of Scriptures, but teach that they are inspired writings in varying degrees, open to varying and thoughtful interpretations. Quoting from, *The Seventy Faces of Torah: The Jewish Way of Reading the Sacred Scriptures*,

Even if the Torah contains fairly accurate historical memories, it is likely that these memories were reworked and retold to fit the needs of later times.¹

Surely this doesn't mean that errors dominate the Scriptures, or that truth isn't there to be found, or that we need to throw out everything we've held to. But what I have realized is that getting to the fuller, truer, original intent of the Scriptures is going to take a lot more thoughtful study and "treasure hunting" than most of us have done before.

A Bigger Story

One day, in the midst of probing and researching, my friend and I came across a website highlighting concepts and *verses in the Bible* that led us to believe we needed to question the doctrine of hell (many of which we will explore). Suddenly, something inside my heart shifted. How had I never noticed *all those verses* that seemed to express a much more inclusive Gospel than what I had always been taught? It was hugely unnerving to begin the questioning process, but I also knew that I should practice what I

preached: If you believe you have the truth, you shouldn't be afraid to read or question anything—the truth will defend itself.

When we subsequently located a plethora of *Christian* websites and information on the topic of hell being a contrived tradition of men—a huge surprise in itself—I was shocked, but my curiosity was also piqued. You could also say Pandora's Box had been opened. However, I decided that if this new view of the Scriptures had any merit, it needed to answer all of the classic objections; similar to questions I'm asked now:

- If there is no hell, what did Jesus die for and exactly what then am I saved from?
- What about all the Scriptures that mention hell and eternal punishment?
- Does everyone get off scot-free, no matter what they do? Why not live however we want if we're going to be saved regardless?
- Why evangelize or tell people about Jesus at all?
- How could millions of devout Christians and theologians over many centuries have been duped?
- Isn't this some New Age teaching in an attempt to make God more palatable to the lost?
- How could this satisfy God's demand for justice?
- Isn't the Bible clear that people only get one chance to accept Jesus in this lifetime, before they die?
- Doesn't the New Testament mention hell more often than heaven?

These difficult questions were why I was more than skeptical that my belief in hell could be overturned satisfactory. On the other hand, if it was true that hell does not exist and the Bible doesn't actually support the concept, there would certainly be solid, overwhelming evidence.

With much research, study and patience, we *were* able to find solid, convincing answers to every one of our legitimate questions and objections. We discovered, as I am about to share with you, that this mortal life is merely the introductory chapters in a Magnificent Story—one with a much more glorious plan and purpose than I ever imagined.

CHAPTER THREE

WHO'S GOING TO HELL?

Let's assume for now that orthodox Christianity is right—our Bibles are translated correctly and must be taken literally and unquestioningly on the subject of hell. Let's assume that hell does exist for all the really bad people, like Adolph Hitler and Osama Bin Laden, for all the cold-hearted atheists like Bertrand Russell and Richard Dawkins, and even for lots of nice, loving people who don't say "the sinner's prayer" before they die. If we are going to give equal weight to all passages, not disregarding the ones that don't conveniently fit in with our current belief system, a lot more people must actually be going to hell than those we just mentioned.

Masses. Have you ever noticed that when Jesus spoke to the crowds, He always set up mental obstacles? "All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable" (Matt. 13:34). The disciples, His closest companions, were always complaining that the parables were hard (if not impossible) to understand and asking for explanations.

Assuming that those masses of people were headed to hell (by default, as Christianity teaches), why would He make the truth so obscure, I wondered? Then I found Jesus's reply in Mark 4:10-12.

...His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. And He was saying to them, "To you (disciples) has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, so that while seeing, they may see and not perceive, and while hearing, they may hear and not understand, otherwise they might return and be forgiven."

Hmmm. You have to admit, it's kind of upsetting to find out that Jesus actually hid the truth about how to stay out of hell from the crowds—crowds who got the chance to hear from the "Savior" himself. Apparently he intentionally doomed those large crowds of people forever without a decent chance at belief. If you look into it, Jesus never even spoke to the crowds about "hell" that we know of, only privately and in smaller

contexts to His disciples and the Pharisees—religious people—and only at the most on three or four unique occasions.

Depending on how we interpret what Jesus was doing, we might actually make a case for the Calvinist doctrine of *election* where only a small, privileged few are predestined—chosen ahead of time—for salvation while everybody else is chosen ahead of time for everlasting punishment and separation from God. However, the thought has always seemed pretty weird to me that God would go to the trouble of creating billions of people in His image, knowing ahead of time that He would endlessly reject and torture them. Not only does it fail to correspond with the forgiving and loving nature of God as revealed in Scripture, but also it sounds sort of Voodoo pin-dollish.

In questioning Calvinists about the seeming unfairness of such a doctrine, they often quote Romans 9:14–24, explaining that God hardens most people who ever lived, forming them with no choice of their own into “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.” Of course they assume this passage implies “everlasting” destruction, which it does not, nor does it imply “destruction” in the way we imagine, but we will cover that later.

Such reasoning causes me to wonder how a Calvinist would hold up under the scrutiny of the Scriptures on the topic of “who’s going to hell,” according to modern Christian interpretation? If we are to consistently read and apply all the teachings of the New Testament (NT), it appears that there are a lot more people going to hell than just the crowds who heard parables and the rest of the unbelieving billions in the world since.

Wise and learned (scholarly folks). Jesus, primarily speaking about the orthodox scholarly teachers and religious leaders of His day, also hid truth from these wise and intelligent types.

“I praise You, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants.” (see Luke 10:21–24).

If Jesus “rejoiced” about God hiding truth from educated and intelligent people of his own religious heritage, does that mean He was glad they were going to hell? Wouldn’t this truth also apply to educated and intelligent religious leaders today—including Calvinists?

Disobedient people. Jesus frequently made statements like: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven,

but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter" (Matt. 7:21). Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles made many similar statements to both Jews and Gentiles alike. "Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it. ...let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience" (Heb. 4:1, 11). Does this mean all disobedient people are going to hell? Would this not include many Calvinists, as well as many Christians in every denomination?

Rich people. I wonder if there are any wealthy Calvinists in America? I'm certain that there are plenty of rich Christians in general. I once heard that a new mega-church opens every two days in the U.S.² One recently went up in Dallas for 120 million dollars. Now that's really impressive. Statistics tell us that only two percent of American church budgets go to overseas missions and humanitarian aid, while more than thirty percent or more go just to building projects.³ Yet when I read the Bible, it would appear that wealthy followers of Christ are in for some big surprises:

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver have rusted, and...will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! (James 5:1-5).*

The book of James is written to *believers*. We should certainly take stock of which believers James is warning "in the last days." It seems apparent that American Christians—the wealthiest in the world by far—fit this description better than anyone. And what exactly is he warning them of? If hell is a real place and James is warning wealthy Christians about going there, this should be a little unnerving to many in the Church today.

Did you know that if Evangelical America put just their church building funds toward feeding the poor that they could drastically reduce, if not eradicate, world hunger? Each and every one of us could certainly bring this lesson even closer to home when we consider how we manage our money. Most of us have been raised to cherish and pursue the American Dream at all costs, yet Jesus made this message pretty clear during His ministry. "If you wish to be complete, go and sell your

* See also Matt. 19:23-24; Luke 4:18; 1 Timothy 6:6-19.

possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Matt. 19:21).*

If we are to literally and consistently apply all the passages in our Bibles, and if such a place as hell truly exists (according to modern Christian theology), doesn’t our list of people going there seem to be growing by leaps and bounds? I sincerely hope somebody is left for the Kingdom of Heaven before we get through the rest of the NT warnings.

Gentiles. In the days of Jesus, it appears that all the Gentiles (non-Jews) went to hell. I realize this changed when Paul came on the scene, but before Paul, I guess all Gentiles were pretty much doomed: “These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans...” (see Matt. 10:5–6; 15:22–24). This has always bothered me a great deal. If Jesus knew the Gentiles of His day were going to hell—the worst fate a person could possibly imagine—how could He ignore all of them? How could He ignore *any* of them?

Jews. After the days of Jesus, when the Gentiles finally got included in the plan of salvation, it appears that there was a big shift and all the unbelieving Jews started going to hell. Quoting from Romans 11:7–10,

God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not, down to this very day... Let their table become a snare and a trap, and a stumbling block and a retribution to them. Let their eyes be darkened to see not, and bend their backs forever.”

If we are to consider and apply all passages equally and fairly from our modern Bible translations, the Kingdom of Heaven sounds more and more like some ultra-exclusive club, with a very limited membership. Even the Calvinists should be feeling pretty insecure, as should those in the Arminian (free will) camp.

So now who is left for the Kingdom? Maybe a few missionaries who gave up everything to follow Jesus? Mother Teresa, assuming she actually said the sinner’s prayer before she died? Perhaps children who have not yet reached “the age of accountability,” and the unborn? Unless there’s an alternative to what we’ve always been taught and believed, the odds don’t look good for most of the rest of us.

* See also Matt. 25:31–46; Luke 6:2–21; 14:7–14.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHO'S RESPONSIBLE FOR LOST SOULS?

If hell is real, who is ultimately responsible for spreading the word and preventing billions of people from going there? The Calvinists (somewhere between ten and thirty percent of American Christians⁴) are probably off the hook for the moment, since they believe those who will be in “heaven” are chosen for it ahead of time. They basically believe that no pre-appointed believer will miss out on their get-out-of-hell-free pass, even if their Christian neighbor slacks in sharing Jesus with them. God will simply send somebody else to show them the way.

But for the majority of Evangelical America, those who believe one’s “free will” decides their eternal fate (a.k.a. Arminianism), they’ve really dropped the ball in keeping as many people as possible out of hell. How can a person exercise his or her “free will” to believe in a God and Savior of whom they have never heard? Don’t those who do know about Jesus and who believe in hell possess a grave responsibility to make sure everyone is offered an informed choice about their eternal destiny?

I have heard a few Christians back down at this point and say that those who have never heard will be given a “fair” chance to believe later, at the Judgment. If that’s the case and those people will have a chance later to profess Jesus while being dangled over the lake of fire in the presence of God—a situation that will take no faith at all—then wouldn’t it make more sense to stop sending missionaries to them? Maybe we are *sending* people to hell by giving them a choice now, in a world where they have to choose by faith. But would this be fair to the rest of us who did encounter the responsibility of hearing now and who had to choose by faith or potentially be doomed forever because of it?

As to the orthodox majority who do believe that anyone who doesn’t profess Christ in this lifetime goes to hell, I guess what bothers me most is this: If they (and this should have been *thee question* for my old hell-believing self as well) really believe that most of those people they know and care about—next door neighbors, “lost” family members, beloved friends, people of their community, and destitute multitudes such as the

147 million orphans of this world—are going to a never-ending, terrifying, fiery hellhole of torture where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” why are they not out 24/7, sharing the love of Jesus with the lost multitudes...or at least trying out a few parables on them? Why are they going about life as usual, attending soccer games, church socials, Super Bowl parties, luxury Christian cruises, shopping sprees, beach vacations, beauty appointments, and even expensive Holy Land tours? If they really believe that hell is real, why are they not expending every penny and every spare minute they have to snatch as many people as possible from “the lake of fire” before it’s too late? Why are they only tithing ten percent of their income when they could be sacrificing so much more to support more missionaries in order to win more souls? Why are they not volunteering every week for the street evangelism team or down at the local hospitals and nursing homes, trying to save those who are teetering on the edge of eternal conscious terror?

For those of us who have adhered to the notion of salvation by free will, how many people over the course of our lives have we been responsible for sending to a never-ending BBQ, just because we were too lazy, or too timid, or too preoccupied to help them find their way? Why does the thought of hell not deeply affect most of us, changing the way we live our everyday lives? Sure, it’s up to God to convict and transform a person’s heart, but isn’t it up to those who are convinced hell is real to plant the seeds and spread awareness?

Motivation or Manipulation?

I like dissecting themes in Scripture to see what I can learn about usage and intent. The first thing I notice about the word “gospel” is that it actually translates, “good news.” The next question I want answered is, for whom is it good news? In Luke 2:10 the angel says, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy *which will be for all the people...*”

Have you ever wondered how the Gospel can be good news for *all people* if most people will never benefit from it? If most of the people who have ever lived are going to hell, wouldn’t the “good news” actually be really bad news for multiple billions? Perhaps if hell is true the angel should have said, “I bring you good news of great joy for only the people who receive it and believe it.”

Once I looked up “good news” in all the places it occurs in the NT Greek. It appears fifty-two times as an action, “bringing good news,” and seventy-three times in noun form, “good news.” I could not find one instance where it was used in the context of hell or everlasting torment or even judgment—like the way we use it when we share the gospel/good news today. In other words, the NT writers didn’t share it as “*The good news or else! Turn or burn!*” So when did this change?

Acts records NT believers sharing the good news with Jews and non-Jews alike. The lengthy message in Acts 2:14–3:26 is the perfect opportunity for Peter to tell the unbelieving men of Israel that if they don’t shape up and accept the message, they’re going straight to hell. Yet Peter fails to seize such an opportunity. “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus...whom heaven must receive *until the period of restoration of all things* about which God spoke by the mouth of His prophets from ancient time” (Acts 3:19–20).

Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, also blows his opportunity in Acts 17:30–31 when he delivers a gracious and inclusive message to the learned men of Athens, who were idol-worshiping, pagan Greeks: “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to all people that everyone everywhere should repent (Greek: obtain a new outlook), because He has fixed a day in which He is about to be judging the inhabited world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, *furnishing belief to all* by raising him from the dead” (MLT[†]).

As we will continue uncovering, God’s judgments do not inherently indicate an everlasting hell sentence. Isaiah 26:9, to which Paul likely referred here, explains their purpose: “When the earth experiences Your judgments the inhabitants of the world *learn righteousness*.”

Here’s my experience. If you even suggest to people that they should leave hell out of it when they share the good news about Jesus with others (like Paul and Peter did), the first thing they ask is, “Well, if I leave out hell

* NASB uses the word “proof,” but the Greek word, “pistis,” is correctly translated as “faith” 241 out of 243 times in the NT. See *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament: Illustrated from the papyri and other non-literary sources*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1914–1929, pg. 515. Available on Google Books.

† MLT stands for “More Literal Translation.” Derived from the Greek Interlinear at: scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/Greek_Index.htm.

—what’s left? What do I tell people they’re being saved from?”

First of all, if you have to use the fear of hell to get people into the Kingdom, then what does that say about your gospel? What does it say about your God? If hell is the most powerful motivating factor for getting people saved, then they are only being manipulated into something out of fear and coercion, not out of love and desire. I daresay that those people are not really *saved* after all—they are buying into fire insurance! This is the very kind of religion Jesus criticized when he stated, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Matt. 15:8).

I’ve had people say to me, “If I found out there’s no such place as hell, I’m afraid I would get complacent in sharing my faith. I mean, what would motivate me to try to love people and to share the Gospel with them if they’re not being saved from hell?”

The purpose of Heaven’s Good News is relationship with our Father, not fear of Him. It brings abundant life *now* to people who are suffering in loneliness, emptiness, and lovelessness. It’s not about being saved from hell, but about every person who ever lived being saved from the gloom and despairs elicited by all forms of death—the curse of Adam.

As we’ll soon discover, understanding the *true Gospel* will release us from the frantic bondage of only having X number of days during our mortal lives to save the world (even though most of us aren’t trying all that hard to do it anyhow). Remember that even Jesus lived an unhurried pace. He was calmly intentional, investing in relatively few individuals, ignoring many, and speaking in riddles to most. Only those “with ears to hear” could understand Him and believe. But even then, ears to hear and eyes to see do not originate with people. “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not, down to this very day” (Rom. 11:8).

With verses like these and the lifestyle of Jesus in mind, let’s be honest. If a place like hell exists, Jesus would be the most unfair and unloving “savior” that the world could have encountered. Add to that, if you’re not a Calvinist and you’re not doing everything you possibly can to keep people from hell, then you are personally responsible for many a lost soul. On the other hand, if The Good News is really just that—*good news*—then perhaps your job description has marvelously changed!

Now we must figure out what to do with all the teaching and propaganda we’ve heard all our lives about hell. That should be pretty easy. For starters, hell isn’t even found in the Scriptures!

CHAPTER FIVE

THE MISSING HELL

In my experience, it never occurs to most Christians to research what evidence there actually is for the doctrine of hell, as taught in church. It seems like a given—the sky is blue, winter is cold, socks get lost in the washer and...there is a hell. Sure, the word “hell” is found in most modern Bible versions, but is there any concrete evidence to support such a teaching as eternal torment or separation from God?

Bible scholar types are big about interpreting Scripture *in context*. So let’s consider the context of the entire Bible, beginning with Genesis. If one were going to defend their position on hell, Genesis would be the first obvious stop. I should think that if God wanted to present the ramifications of the most crucial choice and potentially fearsome destiny for mankind—the price for sin—in *the beginning* is where He should lay it all out, not waiting until the middle or the end. So what does God say?

“From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it *you will surely die*” (Gen. 2:16–17).

Nowhere in this passage does it say they will “die forever,” or they will go to a place of eternal suffering. It just says they will die, as in stop breathing, or kick the bucket. Obviously, Adam and Eve didn’t die the same day they ate. That’s because the more literal text offers a progressive sense of entering into the death process. The Greek Septuagint* says, “to death you shall die.”

The apostle Paul referred to this first act of disobedience and the ensuing implications for all people. “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all people, because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12). Through Adam, everyone inherited sin and sin’s consequence—dying. Mortality. All people are born dying. And as far as I can tell, everyone dies.

* The Septuagint (LXX) is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (OT), produced in the 300-200 BC era for Greek speaking, exiled Jews.

After looking for evidence of the dire warnings in Genesis, the next place I would look for clear warnings would be throughout the OT. Were people properly warned of hell's disastrous consequences throughout? Were the people in Noah's day warned before they were destroyed? Did the prophets declare that the people should repent or they would go to hell? If not, wouldn't this be infinitely irresponsible and unfair?

The notion of hell is suspiciously missing from the OT as the destiny for most of mankind, unless you read the KJV or TM (The Message), both of which include the word *hell* over thirty times. Do KJV and TM know something others don't? Why the inconsistency?

Let's consider the Hebrew word that KJV translates as hell; it's the Hebrew word *Sheol*. Sheol is more accurately translated as *place of the dead*, or the *unseen*. Throughout the OT, both good and bad people end up in Sheol. Rather than a literal grave (in the sense of a hole in the ground or tomb, which has a different Hebrew word), Sheol is the concept people devised in ancient times to imagine and describe the afterlife experience for which they had no knowledge. In ancient Babylonian, Egyptian, and Greek cultures, you see numerous mythologies and imaginations about this afterlife, each culture influencing and building upon later thought. So the word translated as "hell" by KJV and TM is actually this word, Sheol.

Here's the deal. KJV translates Sheol as *hell* whenever they want to convey it as the fearsome destination of the wicked (e.g. Ps. 55:15, 91:17, KJV). However, when portraying the fate of the righteous, they translate it *grave* (e.g. Ps. 89:48, Job 14:13).^{*} Same exact Hebrew word in both cases!

In the rest of the popular versions, the literal translations, and the Hebrew and Greek texts, there are NO references to hell in the OT, or of the concept of everlasting tormenting flames—not one. Sure, some theologians will try to find a connection between a few obscure passages, but most reputable scholars (including evangelicals) have admitted that the OT doesn't provide any clear references at all. Next obvious stop...

New Testament Hell

There are essentially *three different* Greek words that have been interchangeably translated as "hell" —Hades, Gehenna, and Tartaroo, but

^{*} Interesting translation statistic: KJV translates Sheol thirty-one times as "grave," thirty-one times as "hell," and three times as "pit" in the OT.

not one conveys hell as we know and hear it taught today. *Hades* is the NT or Greek equivalent to the Hebrew word, Sheol. *Tartaroo* is only mentioned once (2 Pet. 2:4) and appears to be a temporary state of confinement. Of note is that *Tartaroo* is a *verb* meaning, “to cast down,” yet it’s used in 2 Peter as a noun, a *place* called hell. An accurate translation should read, “but cast them down and committed them to pits...”

The word most often translated hell in the NT is the word *Gehenna*, found only twelve times—once in James and the rest occurring in the Gospels. In the Gospels, Jesus warned about *Gehenna* on only four unique occasions in Matthew. Mark and Luke only use it in one passage (repeating Matthew), and John doesn’t use it at all.

Gehenna (or Gehinnom) is a literal valley near Jerusalem. In the OT Hebrew it was called, “the valley of Ben-Hinnom” or “Topheth.” This valley, still in existence today, is located just outside Jerusalem and was notoriously a place where extreme forms of idol worship were practiced, resulting national, collective judgment for Israel. In this valley, some Israelite parents sacrificed their children in real fire to their false god Molech, an act that God referred to as “evil, detestable, and an abomination” (Jeremiah 7:30–31). Ironical, huh? Because the Israelites did such a thing—a thing that God says “never even entered His mind to do or to command”—they are reported by their own prophets to have come under severe judgment in this very valley.*

By the times of the NT, most scholars today acknowledge that this valley had turned into a garbage dump outside the city gates of Jerusalem, where fires were always burning to consume trash and dead bodies; where worms and maggots roamed freely throughout the refuse. Lepers and criminals were sent to live there in shame, away from the rest of society. On the next page, notice how the definition from Biblestudytools.org demonstrates the transition from original meaning to the later more ominous definition, influenced by enthusiastic hell proponents.

One should wonder why Jesus would refer to a literal valley that the Jews were familiar with just outside their city gates, and expect them to infer that it *really* meant a place of eternal torment. Why would “hell” not have its own conceptual word and associations carried over from the OT?

* See Jeremiah 7:32 and 19:6–15.

Geenna



Share this

The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon

Strong's Number: 1067

Original Word

geenna

Transliterated Word

Geenna

Phonetic Spelling

geh'-en-nah

Definition

Hell is the place of the future punishment call "Gehenna" or "Gehenna of fire". This was originally the valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem, where the filth and dead animals of the city were cast out and burned; a fit symbol of the wicked and their future destruction.

Word Origin

of Hebrew origin (01516) and (02011)

TDNT Entry

1:657,113

Parts of Speech

Noun Feminine

NAS Verse Count

Matthew	7
Mark	3
Luke	1
James	1

Total 12

NAS Word Usage - Total: 12

hell 12

Greek lexicon based on Thayer's and Smith's Bible Dictionary plus others; this is keyed to the large Kittel and the "Theological Dictionary of the New Testament." These files are public domain.

The fact is, if Gehenna truly represents hell, it is dangerously infrequent in the NT as a place to describe the eternal fate for most of mankind. If people are only given "one chance" in this mortal lifetime to get it right, shouldn't hell litter the entire NT...in fact, the entire Bible? Wouldn't it be totally wrong and irresponsible of someone like the Apostle John, and especially the Apostle Paul, not to include any mention of hell or eternal torment in their books? And even moreso in the book of Acts, where The Good News is being proclaimed to Jew and non-Jew alike?

We should also be asking how and why Gehenna suddenly got renamed *hell* and nobody at least explained that to us in church. I've spent a lot of time trying to sort out in my mind how translators and those who study and teach Scriptures made the conceptual leap from Gehenna to hell. I'm sure that the passage of time and certain traditions aided the degradation process, as we read about in the *New World Encyclopedia*:

Originally, Judaism described life after death as a bleak underworld named Sheol, which was known as the common pit or grave of humanity. However, with the influence of Persian thought and the passing of time, the notion of "hell" crept into Jewish tradition and became associated with the biblical word Gehinnom... Jews who embraced this view of hell included the group known as the Pharisees.

...It was the Pharisees who best weathered Roman occupation, and their belief in Zoroaster's heaven and hell was passed on to both Christianity and Islam. ...“Gehenna” is sometimes translated as “hell,” but the Christian view of hell differs from the Jewish view of Gehenna.⁵

When Jesus warned His disciples and the religious leaders of the fires of Gehenna, He wasn't warning them of eternal hell. I believe He reminded them of real world consequences for their nation's blatant transgressions of the timeless teachings of the Torah through acts of injustice (i.e. ignoring the needs of the poor and violent takeover of land). Some people call it “karma.” It has been suggested that Jesus predicted the impending Roman siege against Jerusalem in 70 A.D, about forty years later, when more than a million Jews were starved or killed inside the city and their dead bodies were reportedly taken outside the city and burned in the garbage dump of Gehenna.

It's certainly quite possible that Jesus' warning about Gehenna may apply in a futuristic, symbolic (relational or spiritual) level when he sets up his Kingdom on earth (Is. 66:23–24). I fully suspect it would then be more of a condition of internal sorrow and remorse over one's previous actions that caused harm to others, a topic we will continue to explore.

For the moment, let's entertain the idea that Jesus was referring to hell as we know it—some kind of never-ending conscious torment after death. Jews of that day would have been completely perplexed since there had been no warnings of such a place in their instructional resources—the Torah and the Prophets. The warnings against serious offenses throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, like murder, allowed for physical death or mortal (temporary) consequences. The very few verses that seem to imply “everlasting” destruction are translated from the word “olam,” a word decidedly associated with duration of time, not eternity. Even the first definition of *olam* in Strong's Concordance* is “long duration.”

Noted on the Wikipedia page, *The Problem of Hell*⁶ (referenced here for the sake of reader benefit), is a quote from St. Isaac of Syria's writings around the 7th century:

* Strong's *Exhaustive Concordance* is one of the most widely used Bible reference tools of our day for studying the original languages of the Bible.

In some ancient Eastern Orthodox* traditions, hell and heaven are distinguished not spatially, but by the relation of a person to God's love. "...I also maintain that those who are punished in Gehenna, are scourged by the scourge of love. ...It would be improper for a man to think that sinners in Gehenna are deprived of the love of God...it torments sinners... Thus I say that this is the torment of Gehenna: bitter regret." —St. Isaac of Syria (7th Century), *Ascetical Homilies* 28, Page 141.⁷

It's crazy to think that God's authoritative message to humans would be so lacking in crucial details and evidence! In addition to the Israelites and Jews not subscribing to a concept of an afterworld of torturous, burning flames, they also held no concept of "eternity." Taking a quote from the Jewish Virtual Library: "Jewish teachings on the afterlife are sparse: The Torah, the most important Jewish text, has no clear reference to afterlife at all."⁸

What About the Apostle Paul?

As non-Jews, our last remaining hope and best bet for finding out about hell would have to fall on the Apostle Paul. NT non-Jewish converts had no history with the God of Abraham, and therefore needed a thorough education on the impending consequences of endless doom for unbelief, right? Anything less would be horribly inexcusable.

Well, guess what? Paul never mentions Gehenna. Paul never mentions hell. Only *one place* he mentions being taken away from the face of the Lord for *age-lasting destruction* (2 Thess. 1:9), but the translators erroneously rendered it, "eternal destruction." I might add that even the word "destruction" is not what it appears, but we'll get to that soon.

Perhaps you are now asking, "You've made some good points, but how is this possible? Christians have been teaching hell, preaching hell, and sending out missionaries to save people from hell for hundreds of years. When did hell become a thing?" When I set out to research this question, I was completely surprised at what I discovered!

* The Eastern Church was established by earliest Christian converts.

CHAPTER SIX

WHEN HELL BECAME “GOSPEL TRUTH”

If you study a bit about Church history since about the second century, the term “orthodox Christianity” really becomes an oxymoron. Merriam Webster defines *orthodox* as, “conforming to established doctrine, especially in religion.”⁹ You might also hear it defined as “right doctrine.” Orthodox suggests that there are certain truths and doctrines that have always been peacefully and consensually agreed upon, accepted by the majority of “people like us” throughout all the centuries, while those who entertain opposing ideas or who question too persistently are usually labeled as liberal or heretical. In fact, these are the assumptions I grew up with in church, and I never heard anyone challenge them. It’s as if mainstream Christianity wants you to think there has always been this harmonious consensus, and if you are to question, you will be singlehandedly going against 2,000 years of what “those who are in the right and who are following the Spirit of God” believe and accept as truth.

While I do believe that tradition and orthodoxy can have their place in preserving certain truths, much of Western Christian Orthodoxy has been preserved and strongly implemented out of fear and control, as a way to “protect one’s turf” while suppressing valid questions and ideas. What’s particularly ironic is that the modern Evangelical Church tries hard to distance itself from the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, yet much of today’s orthodox theology comes directly out of the councils, doctrines, and creeds established by the early Roman Catholic and Latin Church.

Since the very beginning, Church history has been rife with unrest, conflict, and even bloodshed—primarily over matters of establishing orthodoxy. While you might think that such unrest was primarily a European and Mediterranean phenomenon, the Church in American history is far from excluded, which you can easily learn more about in history books, on websites, and through some great documentaries like the six part series, “God in America,” available on Netflix.

Being armed today with more ready access to Church history, it's time for us churchgoers to rethink the *myth of orthodoxy*, particularly when so firmly imposed on us as having "always been this way."

For instance, many Christians insist that if you question hell, you are rejecting what has always been agreed upon by the Church, yet the doctrine of eternal torment was not a widely held view for the first *five centuries* after Christ, particularly in the early *Eastern Church*, the Church of the early apostles and Church fathers such as Paul, Clement of Alexandria, St. Gregory of Nyssa, Origen, and others.

This important discovery led to many others, like the fact that the expansion and proliferation of pagan myths about the afterlife, repackaged as eternal, fiery torment, originated in the Western (Catholic) Church, namely by Latin theologians and Church leaders from Rome. This was most likely because of political expediency and as a means to control the average churchgoer with fear. Later pop culture added fuel to the fire (pun intended) through imaginative works like *Dante's Inferno*.

For the rest of this section, we will look at a very brief and condensed history of how the teaching of eternal* torment originated, as well as some historical evidence for the early Eastern Church's teaching on the assured and eventual salvation of all people. For starters, three particular men of great power and influence were primarily responsible for the inception of eternal torment theology.

Dr. Ken Vincent, retired psychology professor from Houston Community College, and author of over one hundred books in the fields of psychology and religion, notes:

The first person to write about "eternal hell" was the Latin (West) North African Tertullian (160-220 A.D.), who is considered the Father of the Latin Church. As most people reason, hell is a place for people you don't like! Tertullian fantasized that not only the wicked would be in hell but also every philosopher and theologian who ever argued with him! He envisioned a time when he would look down from heaven at those people in hell and laugh with glee!¹⁰

* For a fantastic history on how and when "eternal" anything got inserted into Scriptures, read the in-depth article, "Whence Eternity? How Eternity Slipped In," (http://thetencommandmentsministry.us/ministry/free_bible/whence_eternity).

Out of the six theological schools in Tertullian’s day and beyond (170–430 A.D.), the *only* school that taught the doctrine of eternal torment or hell to its students was the Latin (Roman) school in Carthage, Africa. Four of the other five taught that, through the death and resurrection of Christ, all people would be saved through restorative judgment and reconciliation in a plan of ages.¹¹ As earlier mentioned, this teaching was called, “Universal Salvation” or “Universal Reconciliation.” Dr. Vincent says,

By far, the main person responsible for making hell eternal in the Western Church was St. Augustine (354–430 CE). Augustine...was made Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. He did not know Greek, had tried to study it, but stated that he hated it. Sadly, it is his misunderstanding of Greek that cemented the concept of eternal hell in the Western Church. Augustine not only said that hell was eternal for the wicked, but also for anyone who wasn’t a Christian. So complete was his concept of God’s exclusion of non-Christians that he considered un-baptized babies as damned. When these babies died, Augustine softened slightly to declare that they would be sent to the “upper level” of hell. Augustine is also the inventor of the concept of “hell Lite,” also known as *Purgatory*, which he developed to accommodate some of the universalist verses in the Bible. Augustine acknowledged the Universalists, whom he called “tender-hearted,” and included them among the “orthodox.”¹²

Not only was Augustine somewhat the champion of the hell doctrine in the Western Church, he also had a major influence on the onset of religious bigotry and hate campaigns in the following centuries.

In the 1907 book, *Lives of the Fathers: Sketches of Church History in Biography*, written by Frederick D. Farrar, who was Chaplain in Ordinary to the Queen of England, we read about Augustine:

The advocacy of hell came primarily on the scene with Augustine: In no other respect did Augustine differ more widely from Origen and the Alexandrians [Eastern Church] than in his intolerant spirit. Even Tertullian conceded to all the right of opinion.

[Augustine] was the first in the long line of Christian persecutors, and illustrates the character of the theology that swayed him in the wicked spirit that impelled him to advocate the right to persecute

Christians who differ from those in power. The dark pages that bear the record of subsequent centuries are a damning witness to the cruel spirit that actuated Christians, and the cruel theology that impelled it. Augustine was the first and ablest asserter of the principle which led to Albigensian crusades, Spanish armadas, Netherland's butcheries, St. Bartholomew massacres, the accursed infamies of the Inquisition, the vile espionage, the hideous bale fires of Seville and Smithfield, the racks, the gibbets, the thumbscrews, and the subterranean torture-chambers used by churchly torturers.¹³

Samuel Dawson, author of, *The Teaching of Jesus: From Mount Sinai to Gehenna a Faithful Rabbi Urgently Warns Rebellious Israel*, says:

Most of what we believe about hell comes from Catholicism and ignorance of the Old Testament, not from the Bible. I now believe that hell is the invention of Roman Catholicism; and surprisingly, most, if not all, of our popular concepts of hell can be found in the writings of Roman Catholic writers like the Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), author of *Dante's Inferno*. The English poet John Milton (1608–1674), author of *Paradise Lost*, set forth the same concepts in a fashion highly acceptable to the Roman Catholic faith. Yet none of our concepts of hell can be found in the teaching of Jesus Christ!¹⁴

Following on the heels of Augustine, the greatest influence on today's hell theology via most modern Bible translations came from Jerome's *Latin Vulgate*. Jerome translated this tainted version of the Scriptures from a very inferior Latin text in the late 4th century:

For over a thousand years (c. AD 400–1530), the Vulgate was the definitive edition of the most influential text in Western European society. Indeed, for most Western Christians, it was the only version of the Bible ever encountered. The Vulgate's influence throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance into the Early Modern Period is even greater than that of the King James Version in English; for Christians during these times the phraseology and wording of the Vulgate permeated all areas of the culture.¹⁵

What was the problem with Jerome's Bible? It was heavily influenced by Latin hell-inventing theologians like Tertullian and Augustine. When you realize that the hell doctrine was so late in being adopted by the

Church (and hence, Scriptures), the poorly constructed walls of orthodoxy begin to crumble. It was several hundred years after Jesus and the apostles that men began formulating many of these new Church doctrines and creeds, many still a part of Evangelical Christian orthodoxy to this day. Had our old English Bibles been translated directly out of the Greek instead of Latin, it's very probable that the doctrine of eternal torment would never have found its way into our modern Bibles and theology at all. Many of these doctrines were strong-armed into the Church through major dissention and even bloodshed, with intolerant, oppressive Church leaders insisting that they were “led by the Spirit” on such matters.

Hell Discrepancy

As the centuries went by, and after the Bible was translated and retranslated into Latin (mainly from Greek), more than twelve centuries later it was translated into English (from Greek and Hebrew) with the advent of the original King James in the 1600s.

It's not hard to see how morphing Church beliefs and language changes influenced each Bible version that came along. In his book, *The Bible in English: its history and influence*, David Daniell notes that when King James gave the translators instructions for working on his King James Authorized Version in 1604 (a seven-year project), he intended to make sure that the new version would “conform to the ecclesiology and reflect the episcopal structure of the Church of England and its belief in an ordained clergy.”¹⁶

Since then, it has undergone over 400 more years of translator interventions and theological interpretations. When you consider how many people, opinions, doctrines, misunderstandings, language barriers, as well as political and theological agendas may have worked into the mix over 2,000 years, it's hard to believe (and shouldn't be believed) that the Bible has maintained inerrancy or complete adhesion to the original intent.

In fact, even Scriptures themselves never claim inerrancy. People primarily depend on two verses to build a case for Bible inerrancy. “All Scripture is inspired by God” (lit. “God-breathed,” 2 Tim. 3:16), and “For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:18).

As you carefully read these verses, is either of them claiming biblical inerrancy? The Scriptures, as given originally, were inspired; and nothing God has said will pass away until it is fulfilled. We have read too much into those verses. In fact, when 2 Timothy was written, the only Scriptures available were the Torah and the Prophets. A second point is that even if Scriptures were inspired as given, their correct interpretation still depends on the inspired mind of the one reading them. Think about how one verse of the Bible can have a dozen interpretations, depending on who's reading it. This is how more than 30,000 church denominations have been formed. This is how Calvinists and Arminianists are reading the same Bible, yet coming away with completely different impressions of the core teachings.

We will explore several scriptural errors more in depth later, but here's a great visual example on our topic of hell. If our Bibles are truly accurate and reliable, wouldn't you expect all of the major translations to have the same number of hell occurrences? Here is the astonishing incongruity of how many times the word, "hell," occurs in some of the more familiar versions:

The Message=56	New American Standard=13
King James=54	LXX (Septuagint)=0
New King James=32	Young's <i>Literal</i> =0
New Living Translation=19	Concordant <i>Literal</i> =0
New International=14	Complete Jewish Bible=0
Amplified=13	World English Bible=0

My whole life, I never even knew that there was such a disparity in the number of occurrences of the word hell in different Bible translations. I assumed everyone was in agreement, since they were taking from the same text. It was really eye opening to make this discovery. After such a discovery, it was like I began to "wake up." I began to see how many beliefs I had that weren't provable and really didn't make rational sense.

For instance, one day the thought occurred that, if hell is really true, and God is actually losing most of His creation to evil and darkness, you could say that good is overcome, and darkness overtakes light. Ultimately, Satan wins the tug-of-war over creation, and God loses. What a terrifying thought – how did I ever get through life with such a fatalistic view?

CHAPTER SEVEN

SATAN WINS, GOD LOSES?

Best selling author, Bart Ehrman, was raised a dyed in the wool evangelical who studied at Moody Bible Institute, graduated from Wheaton College, and later received a PhD from Princeton Theological Seminary. At a very basic level, something happened to turn him into an avowed agnostic who now challenges problematic doctrines of Christianity, both in his books and in the classroom, where he teaches religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In his famously controversial book, *Jesus Interrupted*, Ehrman discusses his experiences in seminary where he learned of many biblical errors and inconsistencies during his studies and lectures. It was then that he realized a majority (if not all) pastors learn about these biblical problems in seminary, yet fail to teach their congregations. Bart says,

Perhaps pastors are afraid that if the person in the pew learns what scholars have said about the Bible, it will lead to a crisis of faith, or even the loss of faith. My personal view is that a historical-critical approach to the Bible does not necessarily lead to agnosticism or atheism. It can in fact lead to a more intelligent and thoughtful faith—certainly more intelligent and thoughtful than an approach to the Bible that overlooks all of the problems that historical critics have discovered over the years.¹⁷

Ehrman went on to say that it was not the errors, inconsistencies, and contradictions in the Bible that ultimately led to his agnosticism; rather he says that in spite of those, he could still see a divine finger print of authenticity and could have gone forth in faith beyond the Bible errors alone. But similar to the objections of the renowned Christian-turned-atheist and college friend of Billy Graham, Charles Templeton, Bart's struggle went deeper.

There came a time when I left the faith. This was not because of what I learned through historical criticisms, but because I could no longer reconcile my faith in God with the state of the world that I saw all around me. There is so much senseless pain and misery in the

world that I came to find it impossible to believe there is a good and loving God who is in control, despite my knowing all the standard rejoinders that people give.¹⁸

Ehrman is partly making the point that, in light of most people “going to hell,” their suffering in this world makes no sense. He goes on to express his utter contempt of the idea that a God would torture people 30 trillion years for sins they committed over the course of thirty years, referring to a god like that as a “divine Nazi.”¹⁹

Sadly, I think Bart is right. Without realizing it, the “god” we have put our hopes in and portrayed to the world is more like Hitler than Mother Teresa. The god we have unwittingly manufactured has feeble hopes for His own children—hopes that are dependent upon faulty human free will, and confined to the length of His children’s brief, mortal lifespans. Along with that, He’s either too short-tempered and callous to forgive His enemies and save them, or He’s too weak and limited in His power to eventually overcome their stubborn wills and save them. As a result, orthodox Christianity would have you believe that more than 90% of God’s own creations are headed for everlasting doom because He’s not all that “mighty to save.” Apparently, *Satan ultimately wins and God loses*. But is this the true God revealing Himself to us through the original intent of Scriptures? Does this sound like a loving, all-powerful heavenly Father?

Does God Stay Angry Forever?

If people go to an everlasting hell for rejecting God, then that would imply that God will have everlasting enemies. It would seem then that God would have at least a part of Him that remained in a constant state of righteous anger at His enemies—forever. But is this what the Scriptures teach or how God portrays Himself? Does He stay angry and keep a record of wrongdoings forever?

“For I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry” (Is. 57:16).

“For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all” (Rom. 11:32).

Though some people may try to make a case that these (and so many others similar passages) only applied to Israel, why should He show favoritism and forgive some people but not others? Though it may appear to the contrary at times, we are all equally valued to God and He pointedly

declares that He doesn't show favoritism (Deut. 10:17, Romans 2:11), but only works through some people sooner in order to bring the same opportunities to all.

In his groundbreaking book, *The Inescapable Love of God*, professor of philosophy, Thomas Talbott says,

As the Augustinians (the foundational belief system inherited by most of Christianity today) see it, God opposes sin enough to punish it, but not enough to destroy it altogether; instead of destroying sin altogether, he merely confines it to a specially prepared region of his creation, known as hell, where he keeps it alive for an eternity. According to our alternative picture, however, God forgives sin for this very reason: In no other way could he oppose it with his entire being. ...So the opposite of a sinful condition is a state of reconciliation.²⁰

Death Swallowed Up For All Time

As we've previously noted, Orthodoxy teaches that billions of people will be in a state of "everlasting spiritual death." Yet, in the Bible, not once do you find evidence of "spiritual death," at least not in the way it is taught in church today. When it comes to death, the Bible does allude to different forms and types of death, both physical and metaphorical, but nowhere does it teach that any of these is final or eternal. Let's take a look.

The first (physical) death. Everyone experiences the "curse" of Adam, or death of the mortal body. In chapter 5, we read about Adam's death (Gen. 2:17) passing on to all people. Interestingly, in Hebrew, "Adam" means "humanity" or "mankind."

The second (spiritual or metaphorical) death. The second death is obviously not literal, but is the necessary overcoming of the rebellious, self-serving, divisive, "fleshly" nature of each person that is not in agreement with the loving Father's nature and all-inclusive will for His creation. I now believe that this second death is the inward remorse and response that happens when we are awakened to the damage we have caused ourselves and others. Some people voluntarily surrender to this death in this lifetime, while I believe others do so in a future age.

“If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 16:24–25).

Loss of abundant life. I see a third form of death resulting from personal choices. It’s no surprise that our choices bring life or death *now*—death of dreams, peace, joy, and purpose. Our choices surely can lead to physical death, but frequently they lead to the death of abundant, purposeful living. To live selfishly by treating others unjustly, whether a Christian or not, often leads to hardships and death of dreams; to live by the two greatest commandments—love God and people—leads to a life of blessing by being in communion with God (and others), enjoying His best for life. “He who does not love abides in death” (1 John 3:14).

Is there any form of eternal death? Not if you take God at His word. There are several passages where God declares His intent for all forms of death, making no exceptions. Isaiah 25:8 is one of my favorites: “*He will swallow up death for all time, and the Lord GOD will wipe tears away from all faces, And He will remove the reproach of the people from all the earth; For the LORD has spoken*” (see also 1 Cor. 15:53–55 and Rev. 20:13–14).

“Hold on!” you say. “If you read in Revelation, those resurrected people who are not written in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire. Isn’t the lake of fire the same as hell or everlasting death?”

Lake of Fire

I love how most Christians interpret Revelation. They read about the woman riding on the beast, the red dragon with seven heads, the harlot sitting on many waters, and people standing on the sea of glass and fire, and they all say, “Obviously those are symbolic.” But as soon as they get to *the lake of fire*, aack! “That’s totally literal!” they say. But at the beginning of the book, John clearly states that all of Revelation is *a vision*. Revelation is the only place in the entire Bible that even refers to the lake of fire.

Fire is a fascinating concept in Scripture. It’s almost always figurative or symbolic with the purpose of purifying, refining, and for accomplishing general *good*. The Greek word for fire, “*pur*,” is the word from which we get all forms of our English word, *pure* and *purify*. When interpreting and gaining an understanding of the symbolism of the lake of fire, it’s helpful to check out a few ways the word fire is used throughout Scripture.

- God is “a consuming fire” (Deut. 4:24; Is. 30:27; Heb. 12:29)
- Believers are anointed with fire (Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16; Acts 2:3)
- God will judge “all flesh” with fire (Is. 10:17; 66:16; Rev. 19:15)
- Fire acts as a testing, refining, and purifying agent, removing the “chaff” from our lives (Is. 48:10; Matt. 3:12; Luke 3:17; 1 Pet. 1:7)
- The Israelites were refined in fire (Deut. 4:20; Is. 31:9; Jer. 11:4)
- Fire “destroys” enemies,* hypocrites, those who ignore the needs of the poor (Matt. 3:10; 7:19; 13:40–43; 25:31–46; Heb. 10:27).
- *Everyone* will experience purification by fire (Mark 9:49)

One thing I have learned in studying the Scriptures is that, if it doesn't make rational sense or fit the overarching, consistent character of a loving and inclusive God, it's probably not true. Like the idea of fire endlessly burning a human body. Literal fire only burns as long as it has something to consume. A flesh and blood person couldn't burn more than a few hours. Frequently throughout Scripture, God compares the purifying process in us to that of silver or gold being refined in fire, burning away the dross and impurities. With regard to people, fire typically is used for the ultimate good of the one being put through it.

In Zephaniah 3:8–9, we read about the nations and all the earth devoured by fire. Does God tell us *why* people are devoured by fire?

“All the earth shall be consumed by the fire of my zeal. For then I will transfer upon the peoples one tongue...for all to call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him under one yoke” (Septuagint).

Does Satan Really Win?

Is God's own creation spinning out of His control? Does man's “free will” or even Satan's will trump God's will in the end? If you believe that billions of people are headed toward everlasting separation from God in fiery torment, perhaps most of them out of ignorance, or because of their bad or misinformed choices, or because Satan successfully deceived them, you essentially believe that Satan wins and God loses. In this scenario, the

* A case can be made that an enemy is “destroyed” when he or she has become a friend. Hence, fire is often portrayed in the Bible as reforming a person's character to the point that they are no longer enemies of God or others, but friends.

world is nothing more than a cosmic game of tug-of-war, and in the end, God lets go of the rope and allows most of His children to be overtaken by unstoppable, unpreventable, and everlasting evil. At this point, He must admit to defeat. He must also admit that most of His children are nothing more than throwaways who are not worth fighting for. Do these sound like the traits of a loving and all-powerful Father?

Cover to cover, the Bible is an extensive collection of verses that firmly declare God's absolute power, sovereignty, and unstoppable will over His creation. Job says that no one can ultimately oppose God, and no plan of His can be thwarted or foiled (Job 23:13; 42:2). David says that God's plans stand through all generations (Ps. 33:10–11; 135:6). Solomon says God works out everything for His own ends, determines the steps and destiny of man, and all His purposes prevail (Pr. 16:4, 9, 33; 19:21; 21:1). Daniel says: God does as He pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth (Dan. 4:35). Last but not least, God says...

"I am the Lord, the God of all flesh; is anything too difficult for me?" (Jer. 32:27). ...I have sworn by Myself, the word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness and will not turn back, that to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance" (Is. 45:23).

If these verses are true, we can only conclude one of two things. Either God wills for most of His children to suffer eternal loss, or God wills for them to be brought back home. Either way, it is clear that He is going to have His way. So then...what exactly is it that God wants?

For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior; *who will have all men to be saved*, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. (1 Tim. 2:3–6, KJV).

There you have it. God wills all people to be saved, Jesus actually gave Himself for everybody—not just in theory—and hell is nothing more than a myth of men. Now it's time to explore the truth about the character and heart of a Father who is the definition of LOVE. Let me introduce you to the greatest marvel of all time—truly the greatest Story ever told. It has completely transformed my heart and my life forever!

Part 2

Love Does Not Fail...

(1 Corinthians 13:8)

CHAPTER EIGHT

LOVE NEVER FAILS FOR CHILDREN

“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget, I will not forget you!” –Isaiah 49:15

At a writer’s conference a few years back, I had the privilege of meeting Kent Whitaker, a writer who was there to present his manuscript to editors in hopes of sharing his story with the world. Kent’s unforgettable experience involved the murders of his wife and youngest of two sons in 2003. When his family of four returned home from celebrating their oldest son’s college graduation over dinner, they met a gunman lying in wait near their front porch. The gunman fired several shots at the family, but only Kent and the oldest son made it out alive.

The night of the murders, Kent lay seriously injured in the hospital, trying to make sense of losing two of the dearest people in his life. “On the one hand I was beginning to absorb how radically things had changed,” Kent writes in his book *Murder by Family*, “while on the other I had a calm assurance that I was not alone and that God would knit whatever happened into His plans for good.”²¹

Somehow Kent vowed that night to trust God, regardless of what was in store for him in the coming days. But that wasn’t all. On his hospital bed, Kent sensed the unmistakable prompting of God, asking him to do the unthinkable – *to forgive the murderer*. Though a large part of him fought for revenge, another voice prodded his heart toward mercy.

“My heart told me that I wanted whoever was responsible to come to Christ and repent for this awful act,” he writes. “At that moment I felt myself completely forgiving him. This forgiveness astounded me, because earlier I had experienced feelings of incredible sadness and intense anger—even the desire to kill the person responsible with my own hands. Little did I realize just how important my decision to forgive would be in the coming months.”²²

As the investigation unfolded, the shocking truth emerged: the mastermind behind the murder plot was none other than his oldest son Bart! Serious psychological issues starting in his youth led Bart down a

path that culminated in hiring an assassin to shoot his own family. Little did Kent know that night in the hospital that God actually urged him to forgive his own son – before his son had even repented!

The moral of this story makes a deep impression on me. If God supposedly quits on His own children for lesser offenses, why would He ask someone like Kent to forgive his son for one of the worst imaginable offenses? Does God expect that Kent should be more loving and merciful than Himself? Does God ask earthly parents to do what He Himself is unable or unwilling to do?

Earthly Parental Love

Most parents will never know the degree of forgiveness toward our children that Kent knows first hand. Most of us are dealing with small acts of rebellion and inconsideration, by comparison. But the question remains: Is there *anything* – from the viewpoint of a functional, loving parent – that my children could do that would erase or cancel my love for them? Is there anything they could do that I would deem as deserving endless or even overly harsh punishment? Is not my “punishment” upon them intended to be completely corrective and restorative? I’ve had this conversation with certain folks, and it usually goes into something like this:

Me: “As the perfect Parent, God would never overly punish or abuse His children in ways that you and I, as loving parents, wouldn’t do to our own children.”

Folks: “Well, God’s ways are above our ways and we can’t fully understand now. His justice demands consequences – either His children believe in this lifetime or they face everlasting punishment and condemnation. Someday we will fully and willingly accept this.”

Me: “So you believe that God makes us in His image, instilling in us His fatherly heart and tenderness toward our children, commanding us to love our children selflessly and unconditionally and, like the prodigal son’s father, not to give up on them. Yet you then believe the original Father is going to give up on most of His own estranged children forever?”

Folks: “Well, yes, ultimately it has to be that way.”

That kind of god sounds more like a cruel, hypocritical, deadbeat dad than a loving, longing Father. Yet it is the “Abba” kind of Father we find in the Jewish tradition. Rabbi Stephen Wylen addresses the contrast between the Jewish and Christian views of God:

When Jews read the Bible, the God whom we Jews meet there is in the image of a father who loves his children with an overwhelming passion. This father has very high expectations of his children, but he also indulges them. He loves to treat them well and make them happy. Some Christians believe that the God of the Old Testament is a stern God of strict judgment without mercy, but a religious Jew would not be able to discover such a deity in the Hebrew Bible.²³

To say that God plans to throw most of His children away or lock them away in a fiery dungeon suggests that I have more love than God, yet He claims to embody a love that is unfailing, patient, and relentless. If in fact it does fail and cease for most of His children, that would make Him a liar.

Obviously God is no liar; He *is* love. All people who have lived since the dawn of time are a continued expression of that love. Our opportunity to participate in parenting is so that we can more fully understand His unfailing love for and His attachment to each and every one of us.

Characteristics of Loving Parents

One of the best ways to begin grasping the truer character of our Father God is by studying characteristics of loving parents.

Loving parents only intend good for their children. No good parent ever sets out to make their kids lives' miserable. Our kids may see our discipline that way, but ultimately everything we do is with the intent of helping them become successful, contributing members of society with the ability to nurture loving relationships throughout their lives. Could God's intent be any less for His children? In his 1843 book, *The Plain Guide to Universalism*, Thomas Whittemore wrote:

[God] would not have created intelligent beings, had He known they were to be forever miserable. To suppose that God would bring beings into existence, who He knew would be infinite losers by that existence, is to charge Him with the utmost malignity. The existence itself would not be a blessing, but a curse; the greatness of which cannot be described.²⁴

Loving parents make sure the punishment fits the crime. Can you imagine punishing your children for the rest of their lives for an act (or season) of rebellion? I have a good friend whose eighteen-year-old son was out

drinking one night and got into a fatal car accident. This son, though good-natured and very loving, had been giving her problems for a couple years through a season of rebellion against the values of the home. After he died, the thought never entered her mind, "Well, it's too late for my son, I want nothing more to do with him because of his rebellion. Sure it's sad, but he went too far and now he's getting his fair punishment."

No! The mom was heartbroken, longing for her son...aching for the days when she had a living, loving relationship with him. She will *never* stop loving or longing for her son to "come home," no matter what he did.

One little-understood intent of the Levitical Law, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," is the underlying admonition to not over-punish the offender, while at the same time providing a way of restoration to the community. Yet many Christian teachers have turned this law on its head, making it about getting even. This is not God's way.

Loving parents understand that there are factors behind disobedience. Frequently you hear parents of toddlers defending their ill behavior. A good parent, knowing their child intimately, is able to offer patient understanding when the need arises. As this same child grows up, life often inflicts wounds and scars on his or her heart. Good parents know that there are factors that contribute to why their children do the things they do—physical pain, exhaustion, sin or dysfunction of those around them, emotional hurts and scars, injuries caused by others, disabilities, genetic disorders, chemical imbalances, and disappointments of life. How much more must God understand why His children act the way they do and plan ways to help them overcome?

It's easy to assume that we all have a choice to "be good," especially if we have grown up in a loving home with little pain and suffering. But many of us have never tasted the hard life. Many of us have never been severely mistreated, abandoned, abused, or exploited. How could we not expect and believe that the heavenly Parent understands the deception of and resulting rebellion by His children who are offered little love or kindness during their mortal lives? How could we be so narrow-minded and unloving to judge that any of these people "chose this path" or "deserve what they get?" Even God's seemingly hardened and rebellious children are treated with patience. "He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities" (Psalm 103:9-10, NIV).

Loving parents demonstrate fair and consistent character. Suppose you had a set of “loving parents” who had four children. For whatever reason (rebellion, disobedience, or personality conflict) the parents locked one of the children in the basement where they isolated and punished the child excessively. Do you think the other children in the home could really trust parents who could do this to “one of them”?

As I consider how Christianity is portrayed to the world, is this not the “loving parent” image we have unwittingly pinned on God? Is this perhaps the reason many people are not willing to trust in “a god like that” and why so many violent atrocities have been done in God’s name?

Truly loving parents demonstrate trustworthiness, fairness, and consistency with all their children, creating a sense of fearlessness and security that leads to thriving in the home. And if the children are to emulate these kinds of parents, such behavior breeds peace, acceptance, and unconditional love among the whole family.

Loving parents ultimately long to be restored in relationship. Every loving parent longs to be reconciled to the wayward child. The focus of Levitical Law was to teach people that *reconciliation* is the satisfaction (atonement) for sin and broken relationships, not destruction or casting away. The intent of the Torah was to recompense the one injured and restore the offender to society. In the case where there was no recompense in this lifetime for certain crimes against a victim (like murder), death was the allowable (not desirable) consequence. Philosopher Thomas Talbott offers,

What, specifically, does perfect justice require? ...It requires, first, that sinners repent of their sin and turn away from everything that would separate them from others; it requires, second, that God forgive repentant sinners and that they forgive each other; and it requires, third, that God overcome, perhaps with their own cooperation, any harm that sinners do either to others or to themselves.²⁵

It is true that sometimes as parents we have to take a heavy hand with our children, causing pain or separation of relationship for a time. Ultimately however, our deepest desire is to weed out rebellion. Sometimes a short term separation or conflict is worth the end result—a child who learns a valuable lesson through pressure, who does not want to repeat that behavior, and who comes to us in humility, realizing the error

of his or her ways and desiring a restored relationship. This is the sentiment behind the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15.

Loving parents never give up. It's double-minded to tell the world that God loves them unconditionally, yet if they don't pray a certain prayer before they die, this love becomes very conditional and temporary. Interview 100, 1,000, or 1,000,000 devoted parents and you will not find one that would give up on their children—*ever*. How could we believe that the Prototype Parent could ever give up on even one of His children?

"If EVER you should be avowing with your mouth Jesus is Lord...you shall be saved" (Rom. 10:9, MLT). That little word "ever," found in many NT verses, is very important because it implies that it is never too late.

According to the Scriptures, all humanity is God's offspring through the "first born of all creation" (Col. 1:15). That's right. You don't have to be a Christian to be one of God's children, as Paul explained to the Greek idol worshipers in Acts 17. In turn, God gave us our own offspring so we could understand how valuable we are as His image bearers. Just as our children are physiologically the sum total of the genes we have passed onto them, we each possess the spiritual DNA of our heavenly Father. In order for His nature to be fully expressed and for creation to be perfectly restored, all of these divinely patterned expressions of Him must be gathered back to Him in perfect unity of purpose (love), yet retaining our unique individuality.

The Scriptures describe God as a "consuming fire." Ancient Hebrew teachings describe all people as "divine sparks" out of that Fire, expressing His vitality and passion in the world. This is why people everywhere are stunning, unique, and magnificent reflections of the Divine through our gifts, dreams, talents, and desires. Through each of us is revealed a different aspect of the God-nature. For Him to lose even one of those sparks would mean He loses an aspect of Himself.

Is it not the same with our own children, each their own yet fully out of us? When I consider the bond earthly parents have with our children, I know it is utterly impossible that God would ever ask us to lose a part of ourselves forever, any more than He would ever intend to give up a part of Himself. His answer is not damnation, but regeneration and healing.

A true father's love cannot be earned, and it cannot be done away with. Just as we would never give up on our children, God will never give up on His children; His love will not fail them.*

* 1 Corinthians 13:8.

CHAPTER NINE

LOVE NEVER FAILS THE HELPLESS OR THE HOPELESS

“An act of love, a voluntary taking on oneself
of some of the pain of the world, increases the courage
and love and hope of all.” –Dorothy Day

Those of us who “were there” will never forget the impact of 9/11 on us collectively. As if it wasn’t surreal and haunting enough just watching it on TV, then there were the personal accounts. I remember being most impacted by details surrounding the sacrifices made by the firemen and rescue workers. Office worker Cary Sheih barely made it out of the towers alive, later offering one such account:

As I relive this moment over and over in my mind, I can’t help but think that these courageous firemen already knew in their minds that they would not make it out of the building alive, and that they didn’t want to endanger any more civilians or prevent one less person from making it to safety.²⁶

I have often thought of these firemen in the years since. I’m sure that at least some of them were probably not “saved” in the traditional Christian sense of the word. Most of them were young men—singles, husbands, and fathers—with their whole lives ahead of them. Yet, they willingly and perhaps knowingly made the greatest sacrifice known to mankind, and they did it for total strangers.

Before my theological shift I used to wonder, *what happens to the rescue workers who did not profess faith in Jesus before they died? Did they selflessly take the hit for others, cutting short their one shot at life, only to be doomed forever?* Certain passages began to surface as I thought about these men:

“Here is how to measure love—the greatest love is shown when people lay down their lives for their friends... (Jn. 15:12-13); “...love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8).

When I have suggested on my blog or Facebook that people's love for others might trump the necessity of "the sinner's prayer" in any kind of future judgment, I've gotten plenty of responses like this: "The 'good atheist' (or agnostic), no matter how benevolent and kindhearted, will be judged by God and found infinitely lacking." I can't be overly critical of this kind of ignorance because I once believed that way too. These days, I know better than to think they are "infinitely lacking." There's an awesome passage about this very topic by Paul (see Romans 2:12-16). Here's a snapshot:

It is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts...

One of the "greatest commands," which sum up of the entire law according to Jesus, is to love your neighbor as yourself. How could God ignore the sacrifices of these rescue workers in light of His own measuring stick? It would be completely contrary to His nature and His name! The 9/11 firemen (and many other selfless heroes throughout history) deliberately put themselves in harm's way so that those individuals they rescued could have a second chance at mortal life. I believe it was love—not duty—that truly made them heroes of the day. They chose to love in a way that few ever consider or demonstrate in this world. I believe that when these people are resurrected, they will stand before the Judge and He will declare that, because they learned how to love, they are justified as doers of His law and they are already sons of Love. Love truly never fails, whether in accomplishing its mission or in receiving its reward.

Widows and Orphans

There are an estimated 147,000,000 orphans in our world today, not to mention widows, lepers, and other destitute. One who believes in hell should find it strange that, though God frequently speaks of assisting orphans and widows throughout His Word, He almost exclusively exhorts His followers only to defend their rights and feed them. "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit

orphans and widows in their distress..." (James 1:27). Never once does He say to share the Gospel with them or snatch them from eternal flames.

If God were planning to send most of the world's poorest of the poor to hell because they don't believe in Him, why would He care about meeting their physical needs while they're alive? I don't see what difference it would make for these outcasts to have a few extra years of full stomachs while living in a "hell on earth" in every other way. We'd basically be prolonging their suffering and giving them a little pat on the back before sending them off to everlasting doom.

Many of the orphans I've met might welcome a quick departure from the existence they face daily in this world—sickness, starvation, terror, abuse, complete rejection, sex slavery, and other forms of exploitation. Should I expect that, because nobody told them the Gospel, they will still endlessly burn in hell after a few years of hell on earth?

The simple fact is that all orphans and widows are very near and dear to the heart of the Father. He has no intention of rejecting them or sending them to hell. Obviously, His greatest desire is that we alleviate suffering by demonstrating His Fatherly heart toward them by feeding them, defending them, and caring for their needs as an extension of "God's love with skin on." Perhaps we will come to recognize our common condition. Because of sin and separation from our true Father (and each other), we have all been orphaned and hung out to dry. Yet we will all be found—adopted back into the family as sons and daughters—every last one. "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:18).

I feel so much happier knowing that all those destitute who we are unable to reach now will someday be given a front row seats to provision, protection, and happiness. Every tear will be wiped away, and every want will be filled. Can you imagine the happy heart of the longing Abba when He brings all of His estranged children home from the gutters?

Blind, Deaf, Lame, And Sick

When Jesus went about doing His public ministry, He was known for healing *all* of the sick people who came to Him. One fine Sabbath day, He got up to do the reading in the synagogue before the people, quoting from Isaiah out of the Septuagint Greek Scriptures:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He anointed me to announce good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the ones being broken in heart; to proclaim a release to captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; ...to comfort all the ones mourning” (Is. 61:1-2, Septuagint).

After Jesus quoted this, he sat down, and told the crowd, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

At first read, one might think that Jesus was saying He came for those who are physically lame, blind, and deaf. It is true that Jesus healed many physical ailments of the people, but their physical ailments were not ultimately their problem. Those He healed would eventually get sick again and die, so a physical healing was not all that impressive in the grand scheme. What Jesus declared was much deeper—He came to bring permanent healing to those who are spiritually sick. This is why He first told the paralytic that his sins were forgiven before healing his physical condition (Matt. 9:2). He healed the enduring spiritual condition first, and next gave temporary relief to the mortal, physical condition, to demonstrate His legitimate power.

Notice that the text in Isaiah is not a half-hearted or timid invitation. Jesus came to declare Good News to those who are “poor in spirit.” He came to proclaim a release to the captives of sin and death. He came to give recovery of sight to those who are spiritually blind and cannot see truth. He came to unstop the ears of those who cannot hear or perceive the truth (Is. 35:5). Are any left out of that equation? Yes, all people fit these descriptions, but not all people see themselves as sick, broken, lame, blind, and deaf—particularly not many “church people.” It’s easy as Christians to see ourselves as somewhat healthy and whole (or holier-than-thou), and above deception. I have certainly fallen prey to such false ideals. Jesus resisted these kinds of proud people in His day.

A large part of Jesus’s mission in God’s plan for the ages is bringing all people to an understanding of our connectedness as a loving family in the plan and purposes of God. We are awakening to the value of humanity on a level playing field where no one is more special than the next when it comes to the need for and promise of our total spiritual healing:

The Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and

sinner?” And Jesus answered and said to them, “It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:30-32).

If you think about it, the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes were the equivalent of those prominent church leaders, teachers, and theologians today who think they are more worthy than the rest of us to study and interpret Scriptures, taking pride or credit in their knowledge, spirituality, infallibility, or position. The same are convinced that they are above falling into deception, yet many of today’s spiritual leaders proliferate mass injustice through lies they believe about God’s character. Jesus did not come to call these kinds of people to hold positions of leadership in His Kingdom. The ultimate truth is that many of these kinds of people will at some point have their eyes opened to their spiritual poverty, and they will finally and fully realize their need as well as the fact that the Kingdom of God has no ego-based social stratification. Jesus made it clear that God actually takes away what little sight these kinds of people think they have:

Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.”

Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, “We are not blind too, are we?”

Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains” (John 9:39-41).

God searches the horizon for the child who recognizes his impoverished state and need of a Father’s Love. He will never, never turn such a person away. In Jesus’s day, it was easy to find these types of people from among the physically weak and sick, because they were already humbled and broken by society. Before the end of *The Story*, I believe all people will be awakened to their deep lack and absolute need of this Love encounter, from resistant atheists to prideful religious leaders.

I see the mission of Jesus as two-fold—healing those now who are aware of their incompleteness, and later revealing to those who thought they were “well” how to recognize their lack so that He might also extend healing to them. One of my favorite accounts of Jesus’s tender welcome toward weakness is found in Luke 7:

Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner."

And Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to say to you. ...A moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. So which of them will love him more?"

Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more."

And [Jesus] said to him, "You have judged correctly." Turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:37-47).

In the end, it always comes down to love, and God's love never fails for the weak or broken of heart and spirit.

CHAPTER TEN

LOVE NEVER FAILS WITH ENEMIES

“Am I not destroying my enemies when I make friends of them?”
–Abraham Lincoln

Is it really possible, as I was always taught in church, that a hypocrisy-hating God could actually expect better behaviors from me than He does from Himself?

“Never pay back evil for evil to anyone; be merciful; bless those who curse you; do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good; love your enemies, and do good to those who hate you...”*

Hmmmm. God asks me to forgive my enemies, to be kind and merciful to them, and to overcome evil with good, yet He’s ultimately *not* going to forgive His enemies, to be kind or merciful to them, or to overcome evil with good? How absurd! If we are actually supposed to imitate this kind of god, shouldn’t we turn our backs on our enemies, damn them, and then build torture chambers for them?

Romans 5 says that God showed His love for us *while* we were still sinners and that we were reconciled *while* we were still His enemies. Why would this not be true for everybody? Why should we who have been overcome by mercy be considered any more worthy, special, or privileged than someone who hasn’t *yet* been overcome by it? In *Love Wins*, Rob Bell tackles the rationale of this kind of god:

Millions have been taught that if they don’t believe, if they don’t accept in the right way, that is, the way the person telling them the Gospel does, and they were hit by a car and died later that same day, God would have no choice but to punish them forever in conscious torment in hell. God would, in essence, become a fundamentally different being to them in that moment of death...a loving heavenly Father who will go to extraordinary lengths to have a relationship

* Rom. 12:17; Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27–28; Luke 6:35–36; Rom. 12:21.

with them would, in the blink of an eye, become a cruel, mean, vicious tormenter who would ensure that they had no escape from an endless future of agony. ...Something is wrong with your God, if your God is loving one second and cruel the next.²⁷

It's pretty easy to see why people would reject such a "loving God." Just like any good parent experiences at times from one or more of their children, people reject our heavenly Parent over half-truths, distortions, or outright lies they believe about His character or intentions. They don't see their Father for who He really is because certain truths have been hidden from view, distorted by outside influences, or presented through jaded lenses. They do not understand God's intent of good for them because they are taught that even God has His limits and conditions on love.

Based on the above scenarios, is it any wonder why God has acquired so many enemies? Yet Jesus instructed His followers follow in the footsteps of their Father, forgiving their enemies as many times as necessary, or "seventy times seven." Seven is the Hebrew number for completion. Jesus taught that the way to forgive enemies is to do it like our Father—completely and perfectly. Could God then turn around and not do the same? Could you respect a God who told us to have no limits on our forgiveness, yet limited His own capacity to forgive? Wouldn't this then make imperfect humans more forgiving than God Himself?

In his final breath, Jesus cried out, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:33-34). Who is Jesus asking His Father to forgive? His *enemies*—the ones who had just rejected Him, condemned Him, cursed Him, abused Him, and nailed Him to a tree. Why on earth would He be asking God to forgive them at a time like this unless, #1: He genuinely desired it, and #2: He intended for His request to be granted? He wouldn't possibly be asking forgiveness for people He was planning to condemn to hell forever. Besides, wasn't it these very people He hid truth from during His public ministry? How could He hold their blindness against them now? According to Paul, "*For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all*" (Rom. 11:15, 25-32).

What about Hitler?

Whenever I tell someone I no longer believe in hell and that I now believe in the ultimate salvation of all people, one of the first things they

undoubtedly ask me is, “*What about Hitler?*” For some reason, Hitler appears to be the poster child for the necessity of the doctrine of hell.

How can we be the ones to decide that Hitler is too evil or too corrupt to save and reform? I am convinced that until you live in someone else’s shoes—which is *never*—you cannot make a true judgment about them.

In addition to not knowing the kind of formative beliefs Hitler acquired at home, we do not know the cultural, religious, and social pressures that affected his life experiences and education. For example, popular religious and scientific views during Hitler Germany revolved around the powerful legend of a special, ancient race of people (Aryans) who were superior to all other “races” in intelligence and physical strength. The Germans wholeheartedly believed they were descendants of this race and that it was necessary and good to the future success of their country (and the world) to eradicate the weak among them, lest they contaminate the gene pool. In addition, Hitler took power in Germany at a most opportune time, on the heels of the Black Plague and following several decades of political, social, and economic instability. The people of his day were desperate for a strong leader who would alleviate the dire state of their impoverished nation (and empty stomachs).

In addition, European Jews had been hated, uprooted, and sequestered into slums throughout the centuries, often under the blessing and direction of the Church, both Catholic and Protestant. The sentiment many held at the time was that you were doing God a favor to mistreat and even to eradicate Jews. Perhaps that is the real reason Hitler had so much support and cooperation in his quest—it was a popular opinion of the day. For every Jew he destroyed, perhaps Hitler felt he purged the world of one more “Christ-killer” and political dissident.

History has proven that it is human nature, whether in governments or religions, to justify the means to an end (killing) in the name of ridding the world of evil. Yet what did Jesus teach? He told Peter to put his sword away; evil is overcome with good, not violence.

Even in light of his colossal offenses, I can’t imagine that anyone who has had an authentic grace-encounter themselves would truly want Hitler to burn in a torture chamber for millions of years for crimes he committed over a few years of his earthly life—especially if you can possibly entertain the idea that every one of His victims are ultimately to be restored with healing and happiness. And if they are to be restored, would the

knowledge of Hitler's endless punishment ultimately satisfy any of his victims? Or do you think they might be more satisfied if he were to be transformed into a remorseful, loving, serving person, and reintroduced to them as a caring friend and brother?

If we're going to point the finger at Hitler for his part in the Holocaust, we'd better include Martin Luther, one of the revered fathers of the Protestant Reformation and hence, the modern Church. Though he lived a few hundred years before Hitler, Luther no doubt had a significant influence on Hitler's thinking and persecution of the Jews:

...Luther's other major works on the Jews was his 60,000-word treatise [*On the Jews and Their Lies*]...published in 1543, three years before his death. Luther argued that the Jews were no longer the chosen people but "the devil's people." He referred to them with violent, vile language. Luther advocated setting synagogues on fire, destroying Jewish prayer books, forbidding rabbis from preaching, seizing Jews' property and money, and smashing up their homes, so that these "poisonous envenomed worms" would be forced into labor or expelled "for all time." ...Luther's words, "We are at fault in not slaying them," amounted to a sanction for murder.²⁸

In the Church of England Newspaper on August 4, 1944, William Ralph Inge, a retired Dean of London's St. Paul's Cathedral, wrote:

"If we wish to find a scapegoat on whose shoulders we may lay the miseries which Germany has brought upon the world...I am more and more convinced that the worst evil genius of that country is not Hitler or Bismarck or Frederick the Great, but Martin Luther..."²⁹

Ultimate Atonement

In light of the worst-case scenarios—people like Hitler—is it possible that they have been appointed roles in *The Story* for the very purpose of demonstrating to us the limitlessness of God's patience and love? Consider Romans 9:

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate my power in you, and that my name* might be

* In Jewish culture throughout history, one's name represents their character.

proclaimed throughout the whole earth.” So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires (vs. 15-18).

Jesus provided the ultimate atonement (at-one-ment), once for all, regardless of offenses. The modern definition of atonement is:

A repair done for the sake of a damaged relationship; compensation for a wrong; reparation for an offense or injury.

I believe this atonement will be fully manifested some day when offenders “put on Christ,” (Rom. 13:14), wholeheartedly desiring to repair damages they’ve caused, restoring relationships with God and people.

I used to think that future judgment was going to be some kind of heavy-handed external Divine Court, but I have come to realize that nobody ever had a change of heart or felt remorse through external coercion or punishment. I believe true judgment changes us from the inside, our own hearts convicting us with life-changing realizations about how we have treated others. This is exactly what drives prodigals home.

As you contemplate those who have significantly hurt you in your lifetime, ask yourself which would be more satisfying to you—knowing these offenders were put away for endless, torturous punishment, or knowing that they will become remorseful for their actions, genuinely desiring to do whatever it takes to amend their wrongs? In his book, *The Inescapable Love of God*, Thomas Talbott says:

Contrary to popular belief, the OT principle of retaliatory justice—“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”—was never instituted for the purpose of justifying harsh punishment for serious crimes, something that no one at the time would have questioned; instead, it was instituted for the purpose of eliminating excessive punishment, such as capital punishment in exchange for a tooth. ...*Given the [scriptural] principle of equal retaliation (lex talionis), for what sort of crime might everlasting torment be a just retaliation?* ...How could any finite being, limited in power and knowledge and wisdom, subject to deception and blindness, ever do anything that would deserve such punishment by way of a just recompense?³⁰

The point of the Levitical Law was to satisfy the demands of justice for the offended AND to restore the offender to society, not to cast them out. Doesn’t this sound more in line with a just and loving God?

What's Good for Paul is also Good for Hitler

In considering whether God will redeem (buy back) all people from death, the consequence of Adam, I think it's difficult for most people to get past two obstacles. First, that everyone is redeemable and second, that it's possible for someone to have the opportunity to believe in Christ after rejecting Him (knowingly or unknowingly) during this lifetime. Let's explore both of these obstacles.

First, *is there something redeemable in every person?* Is the worst offender or criminal worth saving? Could any good come out of the Hitlers, the Kim Jong-Ils, the Saddam Husseins, the Bundys or, closer to home, the heartless boss, abusive family member, or total jerk living next door?

We need look no further for the answers than to our own apostle Paul.

"I, who formerly was a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor, was shown mercy, because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. ...Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am foremost. But therefore was I shown mercy, that in me, Jesus Christ should display all His patience as a pattern of those who will be believing on Him for age-abiding life" (1 Tim. 1:12-16, MLT).

Paul was not looking for a coming to Jesus experience. His "conversion" was not because he was seeking, worthy, good, or even a good bet. It was because God picked the seemingly most hopeless case—the Hitler of his day—to reveal that within everyone lays an ungerminated good seed, ready to be quickened by a life-giving encounter with Love. If Paul, the self-righteous, ignorant, unbelieving, blasphemous, murderous, self-acclaimed "chief of sinners," should qualify to be overpowered by an illuminating grace that led him to repentance, why should Hitler not qualify? Who would fail to qualify?

This is not just a nice little story with an inconsequential happy ending. This is *our story*. What is good for Paul and Hitler is also good for you, and me, and everyone who ever wandered in darkness, searching for anything and everything but God. Everyone is infinitely valuable and ultimately redeemable to God, no matter how seemingly hopeless.

This brings us to the next major obstacle people encounter. Can people really get another chance to believe after rejecting God in this lifetime?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LOVE NEVER FAILS FOR ANY...OR ALL

“The only victory love can enjoy is the day when
its offer of love is answered by the return of love.

The only possible final triumph
is a universe loved by God and in love with God.”

–William Barclay

I’m positively stumped whenever I share the awesome news of God’s plan to save everybody with my Christian friends and some of them, without even stopping to consider a few of my valid points, or to question the process that led me to this belief, or to take any time whatsoever to look into the possibilities, respond with, “I’m sad for you, Julie.”

Maybe they are genuinely sad because they believe I have gone astray and am now leading others astray. Some have suggested I’m going to be guilty of sending people to hell and others have said I will also end up there. It’s really hard to get upset about going to a place you’re 200% sure doesn’t exist. There are many others who respond with, “That’s depressing news.” Huh? God saving everyone is *depressing*? Sort of makes you wonder why these people would make any attempt at evangelism.

After sharing my beliefs about God’s fool-proof salvation plan on my blog, I once had a reader respond with, “That kind of teaching is unpalatable and at odds with the image of a loving God.”

I’ve had to think long and hard about why anyone could possibly feel this way and the only thing I can come up with is this: If hell is not true and God is going to save everybody, then these people feel that they are no longer “special.”

Perhaps that kind of God would seem unfair and “unloving” to them because He does not ultimately reject total, “undeserving sinners,” regardless of the many factors involved. Perhaps these people also feel that their “decision” to follow Jesus would be cheapened. They have been raised in church under the impression that they are more deserving of a place in “heaven” than all those sinners and unbelievers, especially since

they “chose Jesus now,” which resulted in many sacrifices, good works, and proper behaviors throughout their lives to go along with that decision. Should they stop long enough to consider the possibility of everyone being included as equally special, they might feel depressed that their “free will decision” was seemingly all for naught. Apparently, the grace or undeserved favor that they have professed all their lives is not really all that free or favorable when it comes to certain others. In essence, their sadness for me must really be sadness for themselves.

If they are sad, I am even more sad that these people are not willing to consider the possibility that their God is more unconditionally loving and more victorious over His creation than they have ever heard about or given Him credit for. They do not want to entertain the thought that God might one day awaken the dormant seed in every person to the full beauty, clarity, and purity of His irresistible love for them. They do not want to allow for the possibility that each person is on a different timetable in being drawn into a relationship with God, perhaps most not seeing this reality come to fruition during this lifetime.

On her blog, *Written Not With Ink*, my friend Barb Riley encapsulated beautifully the individual process of awakening to Love and Light:

Whenever I need to wake up my daughter in the morning, all I have to do is crack open her blinds, allowing the tiniest ray of sunshine to peek into her bedroom, and voila`...she's wide awake, ready to seize the day. Then there's my son. I can fully raise his blinds, pull back his curtains, and turn on his bedroom light, but even after all that, he is totally unaffected by his brightened surroundings.

How is it that he is so opposite from my daughter, yet created by the same set of parents? Could it be that God made him that way? If so, do you suppose there's any merit in comparing his physical limitation (unresponsiveness to light) to what the Bible teaches about understanding one's spiritual limitations?

In John 6:44, Jesus says this to His disciples, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws them.” The first time I read that, I remember thinking, *well, that's not fair; what if the Father doesn't draw someone? Does that mean there's nothing anyone can do?*

...The good news is—and this is truly Good News—just a few chapters later, Jesus then says, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to Myself” (John 12:32). How beautiful is this three-letter word: *ALL*! Someday, the verse “Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45) will be true for all.³¹

Only One Chance?

I have asked people the question, “Where in the Bible does it say that this lifetime is the only opportunity we get to be saved?” To which they usually respond with Hebrews 9:27, “It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.” This is certainly the verse I was also taught to interpret as such and use in my years of evangelism training, but if you examine the verse more closely, does it really say anything about having only one chance to be saved? All men are appointed to die, fact established. Yes, there will be some kind of Judgment—the Bible seems to indicate that it will last for a whole age. But where in this verse is the one-chance-or-you’re-damned-forever teaching? I’m pretty sure people make the mental leap because they assume the Judgment is a “you’re in or you’re out” event, based on faulty theology.

I was always taught in church that Jesus paid my debt of going to hell. If Jesus paid my debt, and that debt was *eternal* punishment, wouldn’t that mean that Jesus had to go to hell *eternally*, in my place? How come, then, the only thing that happened to Him is that *He died*? Without a doubt, He overcame death at the cross, but the fact is, He didn’t exactly remove the consequence of sin. I still have to die. What He did do is take on death with me and declare victory over it, making a way of deliverance so that I could be brought to life again.

Paul referred to Jesus as the “second Adam.” The second Adam came, not to take away the consequence of first Adam’s sin (death), but to reverse the effects of sin and death by conquering their permanence. Through Jesus, all the offspring of Adam (all people) will be raised again to imperishable life. Now that I understand that people are not limited to believing in Christ in this mortal lifetime, and that Jesus came to conquer death, not hell, other once-confusing verses now come under new light, such as 1 Cor. 15:22-23: “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order...”

Does Everyone Really Get A Fair Chance Now?

If you are like me, perhaps you have wondered how everyone on earth could possibly have had the same fair opportunity to hear about and believe in Jesus before they die. If you haven't asked that question, perhaps it's because you've had a pretty fair chance to hear and have disregarded the fact that most of the rest of the world hasn't. When you really think about it, Evangelical Christianity promotes a scenario that one's opportunity to be saved is most directly related to the geographic location of where they were born. Your opportunity to believe in Jesus is really most strongly correlated to the hemisphere, country, family, and religion you had the good fortune of being born into.

Once again, we see "special club" mentality in action. It's sure great if you're born into *The Club*, but "it sucks to be you" if you're one of the billions who weren't. Most of us should be a little uncomfortable with the realization that through the centuries Christianity has primarily been a "white man's religion." A large majority of the world who has historically not heard about Christ are Asian, African, and Indian. We've tried to soften the blow by saying that God has been fair because He somehow revealed Himself to these people, but if that's truly the case, why have we been sending missionaries? And what about people living in all the centuries before missionaries?

Most Christians would probably object to comparing Christianity to a club membership, stating that anyone can join. But can anyone really join if they don't know the club exists, or would most people even want to join if they haven't been conditioned from birth to play by the rules, such as "join this club or burn forever in hell?"

If you're still not convinced that there are some big problems with our traditional salvation theology, contrast your life and upbringing to those who are mentally, physically, or psychologically handicapped, or severe addicts who are powerless to break out of their cycles of addiction, or other poverty-stricken people scrounging to survive, or children who are physically abused or abandoned by parents, or anyone who is spiritually abused by "Christian" parents or churches. And what do we do with all those millions of people who lived before Jesus? Are they going to be faulted for "rejecting" Him? How about the billions who have been raised devout followers of their religions and that's all they've ever known?

As soon as I suggest that most people have not had a fair chance to hear and believe the Gospel, I often hear verses like Romans 1:20 quoted, whereby people are supposedly “without excuse” for not believing. But wait a minute. If you read this passage *in context* and especially in a more literal rendering (*vs. 18–25*), you find quite a different message (shortened):

For God’s anger is being revealed from heaven on all the irreverence and injustice of *people who are unjustly suppressing the truth*, because that which is known of God *is apparent among them*, for God makes it apparent it to them...[these] people are without excuse. *The ones knowing God...were made vain in their reasonings and darkened is their unintelligent heart.* (Rom. 1:18–25, MLT).

The people referred to in this passage were those who already knew God. It says nothing about all people everywhere inherently knowing about God, but rather that those who did were not faithful with the information – it is *these people* who are without excuse.

Set Up for Failure

Too many people try to divorce God’s love from His justice. Sure, He demands and requires justice. But tell me, how could torturing someone endlessly, even for the most grievous behaviors over the course of eighty years, be considered equitable? Paul plainly states in Romans 11:32: “For God has shut up *all* in disobedience so that He may show mercy to *all*.” Apparently, the same “all” who have been locked up in disobedience, apparently with no choice about it, will be shown mercy. Perfect justice demands a loving, restorative remedy for all sin because we were all created inherently flawed. Mankind was basically “set up” for utter failure, perhaps in order to learn what can be learned no other way.

Many churches today teach that the fall of Adam and Eve was basically “Plan B.” Adam and Eve, they say, were created perfect, were intended to stay perfect, and God was merely doing “damage control” by setting in motion a solution for their unexpected sin. But if Plan B is even possible, and God did not fully plan out and expect what went down in the Garden ahead of time, and if God threw His hands up helplessly because of man’s “free will,” what’s to keep His creation from necessitating a Plan C, or a

Plan D? If God really must work around the “free will” of humans, what’s to keep man from messing up the plan continuously?

Thankfully, Adam and Eve did not mess up Plan A. The fall *was* Plan A all along. Yes, Adam and Eve were created to fall. There’s a God-made law in the Torah that sums up Plan A, whereby God takes responsibility for the fallen state of His own creation: “If a man digs a pit and does not cover it over, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit shall make restitution” (Ex. 21:33–34). In his book, *Free Will*, Stephen Jones explains:

God is both the owner of the pit and the owner of the ox (Adam). First, God dug a pit, because He created an opportunity for Adam to sin. ...That made God legally liable by His own law and created a ‘tension’ that demanded a resolution. ...The fact is that God knew the end from the beginning. He was not taken by surprise. He dug that pit and left it uncovered because He had a plan, and the plan called for man to fall. *By God’s own liability laws, then, He is responsible.* So what did God do about it? He sent His only begotten Son who was lifted up on the cross in order to drag all men to Himself (John 12:32). ...The ox is now His.³²

Does All Really Mean ALL?

I know from experience that as soon as a person suggests that all people are going to be saved, the sure-of-themselves theologian types swoop in and say, “Well, you know, ‘all’ doesn’t really mean *ALL*.” Then they mention verses where all didn’t mean everybody on earth, but perhaps all people of a certain group or kind. That’s great, and I agree that there are times that all can mean a limited number of people in context. There are, however, several verses that are, by design, constructed in such a way that even the skeptics cannot credibly deny that *all means ALL*:

“So then as through one transgression there resulted *condemnation to all men*, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted *justification of life to all men*” (Romans 5:18).

If we are going to say that the “all” who will be justified into life through Jesus are not really *all*, then we are going to have to admit that the condemnation brought about by Adam’s sin does not affect everybody either (see also Rom. 11:32).

In Romans 14:11 we read, “Every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” It’s crazy to think that anyone would bow in submission and legitimate praise to God under coercion on his or her way to everlasting torment. Philippians 2:11 says, “every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” Scriptures say repeatedly that everyone who confesses Jesus as Lord is saved (Rom. 10:9 & 1 Cor. 12:3). Also, Jesus made a special point to tell the Pharisees that false confessions or lip service were of no regard or use to God (Matt. 15:8).

Even in modern Jewish tradition, there is recognition of this all-encompassing salvation. In *The Secret Life of God*, Rabbi David Aaron states:

Ultimate redemption must be universal—reaching the entire world. Therefore, the finale of this great “love story” is the coming of the Messiah, who will negotiate world peace and inspire universal love. Then the awareness of the mysterious divine oneness and the ecstasy of love will embrace and fill all. “Then the knowledge of God will fill the earth as the waters fill the seas” (Isaiah 11:9).³³

Without these and other invaluable historic perspectives on Scripture, the true meaning of Christ’s Gospel became changed, ignored, squelched, distorted, persecuted, and eventually all but lost. Those who stood in agreement with the scope of God’s unlimited mercy were silenced.

But today, mainly via the Internet, the true implication of the Gospel is being revived and liberated to bring the magic and beauty of God’s plan back into circulation worldwide. In his book, *Velvet Elvis*, Rob Bell says:

The Bible paints a much larger picture of salvation. It describes all of creation being restored. The author of Ephesians writes that all things will be brought together under Jesus. Salvation is the entire universe being brought back into harmony with its maker. We can join a movement that is as wide and deep and big as the universe itself.³⁴

Why Evangelize?

Some people have suggested that if my understanding of the Gospel is true, and everyone is going to be saved anyhow, then what’s the point of sharing it? On his blog, Jacob Beaver offers his perspective:

There have been claims that if there is a possibility that God is indeed the Savior of everyone (1 Tim. 4:10), then there is no need for

missionaries or sharing the Gospel with others. ...There is always a need for good news. ...I will gladly share with anyone the Good News of Jesus Christ—that God loves them just as they are, and that there is nothing they can do to change that. I will gladly tell someone living in hell that they don’t have to live that way anymore and that there is hope. I share my faith now more than I ever have in my life. The [real] Gospel honestly excites me and I want others to know the Good News of Jesus. It’s liberating and the best thing I have ever heard.³⁵

Can We Really Love Without Love Supreme?

Awhile back, a friend expressed frustrations about her local church. She admitted that, in the many years she’s been attending, she has not seen the membership grow in unity one bit. She feels as if there is a huge barrier, keeping people from moving forward in their relationship with God and with each other. Her next words said it all:

“For some reason, it seems we don’t know how to love.”

All I could think about was the monster god image we have built a whole religion and mega-church industry around. For centuries we’ve sent out missionaries, indoctrinating the entire world with our distortions and misrepresentations—however ignorant we have been of them.

Until we understand that love really will conquer all, that love could not possibly fail (1 Cor. 13:8), that mercy will triumph over judgment (James 2:13), and that every single person who has ever lived is a unique, infinitely valued expression of the true Father (and will someday reflect it), we will never truly know what it is to love as our Father loves. But when we do finally get it, we will realize that all of His children are worth keeping. Every single person we meet will become deeply valued to us, and we will realize the great accountability we have in the way we treat them, knowing that they will be a part of our future.

Perhaps the thought has crossed your mind, as it did mine when I began to discover these things, “Is this a new teaching? And if not, why have I never heard any of this before now?” You would expect any credible, true teaching of the Scriptures to have a long and deep history, right? Now it’s time to take a look and see what we can dig up in the musty old archives of our Christian heritage.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TRACING GOSPEL HISTORY

The Internet, with its unlimited access to information old and new, is quite possibly the most magnificently brilliant plan of God in our times. It used to be suggested that human knowledge doubled every century; today it is suggested that it doubles every few months and is still picking up steam. In short, knowledge is increasing exponentially.

Fortunately, the availability of information is no longer restricted to a powerful few, while the rest of us sit in idle dependence. Nearly anyone can access enough information to learn as much as the next guy about anything, if the desire is present. In this case, you and I now have the ability to research ancient writings, books, and language aids that not very long ago were only available in a few obscure libraries and even rare collections. As this information has become available to the masses of inquisitive, open-minded people, many are discovering the wonderful truth that the Gospel actually meant “good news” in every sense of the word to the majority of earliest Christians.

In the full version of *Raising Hell*, you’ll find several pages in this chapter containing quotes by well known Church Leaders and Christians throughout history who believed and taught Universal Reconciliation from its earliest inception. I found it quite surprising how much evidence exists in writings and recorded public speeches, which before the days of the Internet, had largely been suppressed from modern public view.

Here are a few in more recent names that you might recognize: the Anabaptists, William Law, Sir Isaac Newton, Victor Hugo, Anne Bronte, Lord and Lady Byron, Robert and Elizabeth Browning, George Washington, Florence Nightingale, Abraham Lincoln, Hans Christian Anderson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, George MacDonald, Hannah Hurnard (*Hinds’ Feet on High Places*), William Barclay, and Andrew Murray. You should be able to Google any of these people as I did, and find sites that offer some of their universal quotes, writings, or other teachings.

One of my favorite writers of the early 20th century is Hannah Whitall Smith. Though I’d read her biography and some of her works, I had no idea she believed in Universal Reconciliation until a couple years ago. In

fact, she penned a book about her journey to belief in God's plan to save all called, *The Unselfishness of God*. I've sat in sermons where pastors unsuspectingly quote from this "heretical" book, because unconscionable editors who republished her works in recent decades took out three entire chapters chronicling her main point: the dawn of her inclusive beliefs. Here are some stirring thoughts randomly selected out of the climactic, final (deleted) chapter entitled, "The Unselfishness of God" (duh!):

I have always felt that this time my real discovery of the unselfishness of God began. Up to then, while I had rejoiced in the salvation for myself that I had discovered, I had been secretly beset from time to time with a torturing feeling that, after all, it was rather a selfish salvation, both for Him and for me. How could a good God enjoy Himself in heaven, knowing all the while that a large proportion of the beings He had Himself created were doomed to eternal misery, unless He were a selfish God?

I had known that the Bible said that He was a God of love, and I had supposed that it must be true, but always there had been at the bottom of my mind this secret feeling that His love could not stand the test of comparison with the ideal of love in my own heart. I knew that, poor and imperfect as my love must be, I could never have enjoyed myself in heaven while one of my children, no matter how naughty, was shut out. That [God] could and did enjoy Himself, while countless thousands of His children were shut out, seemed to me a failure in the most essential element of love. So that, grateful as I had felt for the blessings of forgiveness and of a sure and certain hope of heaven for myself, I still had often felt as if, after all, the God I worshiped was a selfish God, who cared more for His own comfort and His own glory than He did for the poor suffering beings He had made.

But now I began to see that the wideness of God's love was far beyond any wideness that I could even conceive of; and that if I took all the unselfish love of every mother's heart the whole world over, and piled it all together, and multiplied it by millions, I would still only get a faint idea of the unselfishness of God.

Every doubting question was answered, and I was filled with an illimitable delight in the thought of having been created by such an

unselfish God. Our Creator, by the laws of common morality, is compelled to take proper care of the creatures He has created, and must be held responsible for their well being. I saw that God was good—not religiously good only—but really and actually good in the truest sense of the word, and that a good Creator was of course bound to make everything go right with the creatures He had created.

My own feelings as a mother, which had heretofore seemed to war with what I had believed of God, now came into perfect harmony. ...Most of my ideas of the love and goodness of God have come from my own experience as a mother, because I could not conceive that God would create me with a greater capacity for unselfishness and self-sacrifice than He possessed Himself...

Since I had this insight of the mother-heart of God, I have never been able to feel the slightest anxiety for any of His children; and by His children I do not mean only the good ones, but I mean the bad ones just as much. I had, in short, such an overwhelming revelation of the intrinsic and inherent goodness and unselfishness of God that nothing since has been able to shake it.

Still to this day, the one thing which I find it very hard to tolerate, is any thing which libels the character of God. Nothing else matters like this, for all our salvation depends wholly and entirely upon what God is; and unless He can be proved to be absolutely good, and absolutely unselfish, and absolutely just, our case is absolutely hopeless. God is our salvation, and, if He fails us, in even the slightest degree, we have nowhere else to turn.*

My Own Story

When I read those words, everything in my mother's heart, mind, and spirit resonated with Hannah's. Believing in the vile superstition of hell has jaded my life and my perception of God for too many years. How many millions in this world have also been injured beyond repair in this lifetime because of the false view of God thrust upon them?

* To read the three awesomely inspiring chapters edited out of Hannah's original book, go to: www.tentmaker.org/books/unselfishness-of-god.htm.

In my trips to developing countries like Haiti and India, I was once critical about the seeming ridiculousness of many of their religious superstitions, thinking I was above that kind of deception and ignorance. These days, I realize that I was perhaps worse off (and in some ways even more deceived) than they, for I believed and declared lies about the character of God while believing and professing that I was somehow above error. I have lived in the same bondage to fear as any other world religion, the same superstitions, the same blind traditions of men, and I called it *truth*.

So how did we get so far off, ending up on such a major “calf path”? Perhaps as the result of Roman persecution against anything Jewish, Christianity veered off course from the teachings of those who were first entrusted with meaningful, yet obscure symbolism interwoven throughout their own history and Scriptures. But it’s not too late to get back on track. It’s time to put on some new glasses and take a look at the Scriptures like you’ve never seen them before.

Part 3

Scripture Through
Ancient Lenses

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ETERNITY VS. AGES

Throughout previous chapters I have mentioned the non-existence of the concept of eternity in Scripture. This chapter is crucial to our understanding of the false teaching of a place of eternal torment or even everlasting separation from God, without reducing the implications of our future life with God.

Why then did translators go awry and begin inserting the concept of eternity into the Scriptures? Earlier we learned that the Hebrew word, *olam* (Strong's #5956), actually means something like, "behind the horizon" or "concealed from view," and simply does not mean or imply eternal. It has been frequently mistranslated as *everlasting* and *eternal* throughout the OT, though most literal translations and the Interlinear render *olam* as "age."

So now let's turn to the Greek word frequently translated *eternal*, *forever*, or *everlasting* in the NT. *Aion* is a noun that actually translates as "eon," or the more common modern English equivalent, "age" (Strong's #165), and is one of the most mistranslated words in the Bible.

Like its English counterpart, "age," the word *aion* is defined as "a period of time with a beginning and an end." Yet, in addition to being correctly translated as age, this simple word has also been translated into a crazy array of misleading (wrong!) words and concepts such as: ancient time, beginning of time, world, world without end, eternal, eternity, ever, forever, forevermore, long ago, never, old, and time, to name a few.

Though Strong's Concordance makes no mention of it, some of the various words *aion* is translated into already have their own Greek word, such as *world* (*kosmos*), *time* (*chronos*), *beginning* (*arche*), and *end* (*telos*). The adjective form, *aionios*, most literally means, "pertaining to an age."

For your entertainment, I have taken a screen capture of the noun, *aion*, from an online Lexicon at <http://biblestudytools.com>, circling the particular contradictory definitions to which I wish to draw your attention. As you can see, Strong's lists the definition of *aion* as both a "period of time" and "forever."

Aion



Share this

The KJV New Testament Greek Lexicon

Strong's Number: 165

Original Word

αἰών

Word Origin

from the same as (104)


Transliterated Word

Aion

TDNT Entry

1:197,31

Phonetic Spelling

ah-ee-ohn' 

Parts of Speech

Noun Masculine

Definition

for ever, an unbroken age, perpetuity of time, eternity

the worlds, universe

period of time, age

King James Word Usage - Total: 128

ever 71, world 38, never + (3364) +&version=kjv 519 + 3588 6,

evermore 4, age 2, eternal 2, miscellaneous 5

The use of the word *aion* for such a variety of words, phrases, and concepts should raise a major red flag. The ancient Koine Greek language of the NT was much more methodical and consistent than later languages. Greek words also typically have more precise meanings. For instance, Greek has at least three words for *love*: brotherly love (*phileo*), romantic love (*eros*), and unconditional parental love (*agape*). Regardless, the words *aion* and *aionios* each have one primary meaning and should always be translated *age* or *pertaining to an age*, respectively. While many Bible students or theologians will defend the gamut of translation liberties taken of these two words, there are many prominent, respected Bible scholars today who argue for a more consistent and literal translation.*

While I understand the need for translating the Bible so that it is more relevant to modern readers, the fact of the matter is that *aion* and *aionios* are not words that change with time or context. This can be verified by comparing an Interlinear Bible or literal translation—where both words are always translated accurately and consistently—to any modern translation. Suddenly, verses that once conveyed absolute, eternal destruction now can be viewed in a new light.

* See the compilation at the end of this book.

Can *Aion* Ever Mean Eternity?

If *aion* could possibly mean eternity, what does its plural form, “aions” mean? Can eternity be plural? In some passages *aion* is used in the singular form, while in other passages it is used in the plural form:

Ephesians 1:21: “not only in this age (*aion*) but also in the one to come...”

Ephesians 2:7: “...the ages (*aions*) to come...”

Try substituting “eternity” in the passages above and it’s easy to see why it shouldn’t be done. Think about it. Can one word possibly mean both a finite period of time *and* outside of time or infinite? Let’s continue to look at more examples.

If *Aion* Means Forever...

Bible translators pick and choose how to translate *aion*, depending on the theological bias they are trying to preserve in any given passage. NASB translates the noun *aion* as “forever” or “forever and ever” (adverbs) forty-seven out of about 100 occurrences in the NT. KJV translates it that way seventy-one times out of 100. If they had consistently translated this one word 100/100 times, the following verses would have read as such:

Matt. 13:39: “...the harvest is the end of the forever (*aion*)”

1 Cor. 2:7: “...before the forevers (*aions*)...”

Gal. 1:4: “...He might rescue us from the present evil forever (*aion*).”

Eph. 2:7: “...so that in the forevers (*aions*) to come...”

BUT...if *aion* means simply “age,” and if you understand that the current Story we’re living in unfolds in time, then you can scrupulously translate *aion* consistently 100% of the time, discovering that the Bible makes a lot more sense the way it was actually written—without all the necessary “damage control” for preserving the “eternal torment” agenda.

Eonian God

One of the first questions people usually ask at this point is, “How can eonian not mean eternal since it’s an adjective used to describe God?”

Does the fact that God is described as “eonian” negate His everlasting (or outside of time) quality? Absolutely not! This use of words by the original writers is merely describing one of God’s many attributes as being

the “God of the ages,” reigning supreme over His time-bound plan. 1 Timothy 1:17 is the *only* verse that uses this adjective in relation to God. Most modern versions render something like this: “Now to the King *eternal*, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory *forever and ever*.” But check out *Young’s Literal* (or any other literal version):

...and to the King of the ages, the incorruptible, invisible, only wise God, [is] honour and glory — to the ages of the ages! Amen (YLT).

This verse isn’t addressing God’s enduring quality, but it is speaking directly about His reign over the ages. As to what the Hebrews understood about the duration of God, I don’t think He had to explain to anyone. That would have been like referring to “cold ice” or a “wet shower.”

Eonian Life

The next legitimate question people raise comes from verses like Matt. 25:46: “These will go away into eternal (eonian) punishment, but the righteous into eternal (eonian) life.” If Jesus is speaking of “eternal life,” He must therefore also be referring to “eternal punishment.”

Here is what they are missing; “*eonian life*” is *not eternal life*. It means coming into life (relationship with Jesus) in the age in which you are living and continuing through the remaining ages. For instance, as a believer in Christ, I am currently enjoying life pertaining to this age. When the next age arrives, I will be enjoying life pertaining to that age. Eonian life, then, is not so much about a time that begins after we die, but more about a quality and vitality of life *right now*, lived in fellowship with God through His Son. Consider the following more literal translation: “I am saying to you, the one believing in me is having eonian life” (John 6:47, MLT).

Jesus came to give us life right now—not just later. People’s lives are markedly improved when they believe, understand, and live the true Gospel message.

The Scriptures do not provide detail as to what happens after the Story of the ages is complete, when all prodigals have been reconciled to their true Father, but we do know that all forms of death will have been destroyed and God will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). Perhaps at that point, a brand new story will commence. As for now, what about *this* story? What is the purpose of the ages—does the Bible give us any clues?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JEWISH PURPOSE OF THE AGES

What is the purpose of these ages referred to in the Bible? Though nobody knows for sure what comes after this lifetime, I favor the Jewish take. The way they piece together themes out of the rich symbolism of their culture and history opens our minds to the possibilities of a much bigger story than most of us ever hear in church. Though the Jewish traditions have been largely dismissed or forgotten in recent centuries, I now present a brief overview from the full version of *Raising Hell*, which consists of several more chapters on the subject.

The obvious confusion of most Bible translators (and their diverse translations), theologians, pastors, and all the resulting denominational doctrines has resulted in disjointed views of the Bible and ill-understood passages. For one such example, I didn't know of a more confusing, enigmatic Biblical author than Paul—until I was finally offered a more authentic translation and interpretation of his message. Despite supposed “evidence” to the contrary, Paul offers what seems to be a consistently clear view of God's ultimate plan and purpose for all of His creation:

Eph. 1:9-10: “...He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed...the summing up of all in Christ—in the heavens and on the earth...” (MLT).

Col. 1:20: “...and through [Jesus] to reconcile all to Himself” (MLT).

At the heart of it, I believe the purpose of the ages is for a loving Father to reveal Himself to His estranged, prodigal children through experience. In order to do so, He brought forth a firstborn Son out of Himself, and out of that Son He is bringing forth the rest of His family—all people—who will become coheirs of His inheritance (Rom. 8:17), partaking in His divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), and living in perfect fellowship with Him in the coming ages and beyond (Eph. 2:7). Paul and the prophets declare that the firstborn Son is the pattern or type of what we are all to become, and then continues on through each person as they are awakened in their “season of ripening,” until God's Kingdom fills the earth (Is. 11:9, Hab. 2:14). Paul also offers a more information in 1 Cor. 15:22-28, tying into the *Story*

where people, having been given “hearts of flesh for their hearts of stone” (Ez. 36:26), will finally have awakened to their connectedness to God and others, and all will be as One.

Many people question why there is so much evil and suffering in the world if God has such “kind intentions” toward us. But how could we truly discover who our Father is unless we experience a portion of *The Story* that demonstrates what He is not? And how can we make an accurate judgment of whether it is a good story until we have “read” it through to the finish? Our lives now are merely one sentence! By the time we have read the last chapter, I believe we will overwhelmingly agree that the hardships of this mortal lifetime made for a glorious climax and conclusion of a Good Story. And as we journey toward knowing our Father, perhaps we find that this is the only way we can individually and collectively learn how to love, how to recognize and reject unlove for all its hurtful emptiness, and how to live like true children of the Most High.

Throughout Israel’s history, all of their festivals declared parts of this great Story. For example, Jubilee was a great time of celebration every 49th year (Lev. 25:8–13). All debts were cancelled, slaves went free, and people were restored to their families and to their own land that they may have had to sell off because of debt or misfortune. Jubilee was not just a fun idea of liberation for the people of Bible times. Early Jews believed it portrayed a prophetic picture of a future reality and celebration for all mankind when every kind of debt—to God or man—has been satisfied once and for all. Slaves of sin have been freed forever. Everyone has been fully reunited to their loved ones and families. What a time of rejoicing! In his book, *The Law of Jubilee*, Stephen Jones says:

Even as Jesus Christ is the central Person of all history, the law of Jubilee is the most fundamental law of all creation. The law of Jubilee is the basis of forgiveness and grace. It is the purpose and goal of the law itself. It compels a climax of earth history and a full end of the dominion of darkness and sin.³⁶

According to the Law of Jubilee, a time is coming when all that has been broken and lost is recovered and restored, all “debts” cancelled, and all “slaves (to the Law) and criminals” are set free. It is a time when God finally makes His permanent, tangible home (tabernacles) with all people.

Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them... (see Rev. 21:1-3).

“Going to heaven” isn’t really about leaving earth, but about bringing heaven here. Earth is where God makes His home perceivably and intimately among all people. But if we’re not going off into the “heavenly cosmos” on some permanent vacation, what might the coming ages look like? What are they really about and what might we expect?

Hebrew Covenants & Harvests

There’s a well-known East Indian fable about seven blind mice who come to a large object in their path. It’s so immense that they decide to split up, explore it, and come back to report their observations in hopes that they can determine together what it is. Each mouse sets off with high hopes of solving the mystery, yet when the first six return, each offers a different perception of the nature of the object: a great cliff; a spear; a rope; a pillar; a fan; and a giant snake.

The seventh mouse, lagging behind and somewhat baffled since none of those things are remotely close to the same thing, ventures out with plans to explore more methodically. After a thorough examination, he comes back to report that all the others are mistaken; the object is actually *an elephant*. Each of the other mice only explored a small portion and, being blind, they incorrectly interpreted only a small portion of evidence.

Over time, Christian theology has become like those six blind mice in approaching Scripture. This explains the often times vast chasm between Bible versions and the teachings of theologians, denominations, and churches. What is the nature of the blindness in modern orthodoxy?

When approaching the Scriptures, the way we begin to see more clearly is by pursuing a view through the big picture lenses of early Hebrew culture, thought, and intent. Without it, we cannot possibly make sense of the scriptural foundation, concepts, themes, and prophetic significance. The suppression and rejection of this crucial information in the early centuries after Christ unraveled the Church’s ability to interpret and understand the Bible correctly. Certainly modern effort is being made by many toward understanding and unlocking the mysteries of the OT, but for most of Church history, several key concepts have been seriously

neglected, three of which are central in understanding God's plan to redeem and restore all of His creation—namely *the Jewish Feasts, Covenants, and Harvests*. As mentioned, the full version of *Raising Hell* explores these topics more in depth, but here are a couple crucial concepts.

The Abrahamic Covenant

A *covenant* is a formal, binding agreement between two or more parties for the performance or completion of some action. Although there are many different covenants in the OT, one is especially foundational to grasping the restoration of all people—the *Abrahamic Covenant*.

When God made this Covenant with Abraham, He signed it for both parties (Gen. 15) because it was a *unilateral, unconditional Covenant*, meaning that its fulfillment was not contingent upon the actions or agreement of both parties. In this case, the fulfillment was only conditional upon God keeping His promise to Abraham. In Genesis 12:1–3 we read the terms of the Covenant that through Abraham's physical seed or lineage would come the long-awaited Anointed One (Jesus) and the ensuing spiritual fulfillment of the promise whereby, "*all the families of the earth will be blessed.*" How could this be possible unless Jesus (The "Second Adam") reversed the effects of any kind of curse* for all physical offspring of the First Adam? It would be otherwise impossible to take God at His word that all families for all time could benefit from this Covenant.

So then, the *Abrahamic Covenant* is an unconditional covenant that results in salvation (healing from all forms of death) and restoration of all people through Christ's victory (Is. 25:8, 1 Cor. 15:54–55, Rev. 20:13–14).

Citizenship in the Kingdom

Jesus spoke frequently to the Jews about what it takes to enter into or be cast out of the Kingdom, but this had nothing to do with "going to heaven or hell." The contingency for getting into His Kingdom rested on *obedience* and *fair treatment of others* (a.k.a. "*works*"), *not belief*. In other words, this was about citizenship in His expanding Kingdom—both now and later—which meant being in right relationship with God and people.

* Despite the seeming, curses are temporary, Gen. 8:21, Zech. 8:13, and Gal. 3:13 where Jesus "became a curse for us." Jesus is not still under a curse.

Jesus spoke on occasion about being shut out of the Wedding, cast into “outer darkness” where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Contrary to popular teaching, “weeping and gnashing of teeth” from a Hebrew perspective is not hell, but a place “on the outside looking in,” for a time of the necessary inner reflection that leads to longing and transformation. *Outer darkness* is a figurative description of living outside the light of the city—the New Jerusalem—away from the felt or experiential presence of the Lamb. Bible teacher Chuck Missler says:

...The “outer darkness” is defined by several prominent scholars, including Kenneth Wuest, Dr. Spiros Zodhiates, Erwin Lutzer, and Charles Stanley, not as “hell,” but as “the darkness outside.” ...[not] like the Catholics use of the term “purgatory,” but a place of restoration, renewal and re-instruction in the ways of the Lord.³⁷

The Great Harvests

Have you ever noticed the prolific agricultural terms in the Bible? There’s a significant reason that goes far beyond a nice little farming theme. Consider many of the frequently used terms: farmer, planting, seed, soil, field, crop, produce, harvest, season, barley, wheat, grapes, vineyard, and winepress.

Most Bible teachers and pastors pick up on the fact that, in all His talk on growing, pruning (sometimes mistranslated as “punishing”), and harvesting, Jesus actually meant people, but most fail to dig deep enough to understand these references properly. The following anecdote illustrates what happens when the Christian-doctrine-forming-committee meets Bible agricultural references without the correct lenses. See if you recognize any particular doctrinal positions developing in this analogy:

There were two farmers, each who owned sizable cherry orchards. When the time came for the harvest, they each went into their own orchards to gather the fruit of their labors.

The first farmer took a few small baskets, placed them under some of the trees, and waited while all the cherries that freely wished to do so fell or jumped into the baskets. It was an unprecedented miracle indeed, and such a small percentage was actually able to do that. But it surely was impressive! So he took his few cherries and went home and

made one nice little cherry pie. The rest of the cherries fell to the ground and rotted or got eaten by worms and birds.

The second farmer took his baskets to his cherry orchard and looked for all the best cherries—the reddest, plumpest, ripest, sweetest, and free of blemishes or bug holes—only the very best of the crop would do. He took all that he deemed select-worthy and filled his basket up enough so that when he got home, his wife also was able to make a nice cherry pie for him and was also able to put up several gallons in the freezer for the winter. The rest of this farmer’s cherries that didn’t get picked fell to the ground and rotted or got eaten by worms and birds.

Perhaps you were able to identify the two predominant views of modern Christianity (Arminianism and Calvinism) in how God utilizes His own crops. In fact, the greatest percentage of Christians believe like the first farmer—man is saved by his own free will—yet as you can see by the near-impossible odds, it should produce the smallest crop. The Bible makes it clear that people, like any crop, are completely unable to make the smallest step toward their own harvest. “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him...” (John 6:44).

From all we’ve explored in Scriptures and in regard to the heart and character of God, there’s yet another alternative that makes the most sense.

A third farmer went out to his orchard and saw that the first cherries were just ripening. So he went out and picked all that were ready. He continued picking daily, as long as there were still cherries to pick, putting them up for winter when he got them home. He canned them, dried them, froze them, gave them to friends and relatives, and he even ate lots of them immediately.

Finally, when he had picked every last cherry and safely stored them, he went back and saw many more lying on the ground underneath the trees. Some of them were too ripe, too soft, or too bug-eaten to be any good for conventional uses. But as any good farmer would do, he thought about what might be done to salvage the rest. It was such a short growing season, after all. So he gathered them up—every last one—and put them into a winepress where he made the sweetest, tastiest wine in the land. Not one cherry was wasted.

In Hebrew culture, there were three primary crops grown, harvested, and celebrated by Israel throughout their history—barley in early spring, wheat in late spring and summer, and grapes put through the winepress at the end of summer. In the mind of a Jew, all three of these crops correspond to types of people in their varying stages of belief (ripening) in God's plan of ages. For now, let's consider the grape harvest. After the grapes were brought in and pressed, the Israelites celebrated the last Feast of the season, the *Feast of Ingathering or Tabernacles* (also called "*Sukkot*" or "*Booths*"):

Sukkot was agricultural in origin. This is evident from the biblical name, *The Feast of Ingathering*... "At the end of the year when you gather in your labors out of the field..." (Ex. 23:16); "...after you have gathered in from your threshing-floor (wheat) and from your winepress (grapes)..." (Deut. 16:13). It was a thanksgiving for the fruit harvest.³⁸

Here we have the final Feast of the year, symbolizing the celebration of the ingathering of all types of people—even the tough, fleshy grapes!

I think Scriptures suggest that the grape harvest and process is reserved primarily for *Pharisee-types*, not "the world," or those who did not know any better. Pharisee types are knowledgeable zealots, perhaps religious people (even today) who are "called out" to belief in God, yet who are prideful, loveless, judgmental, unjust, ignoring the needs of the poor, and full of hypocrisy. If you study out the NT, especially Jesus's interaction with them, these people's fate appears to be temporary "eonian" judgment in a *purifying and symbolic process* called, "lake of fire."

We could certainly make an argument that those people of the world (unbelievers) who have intentionally harmed others—the Pharaohs, Hitlers, and Bin Ladens—would also find themselves in need of the "fires of purification." But only God knows what or how heavy their sentence will be since it appears that these people did not have a choice about the evil they committed in their role in *The Story* (Ex. 9:12; Rom. 9:22; 2 Tim. 2:20)—unlike those who were offered the truth and inwardly knew better.

It is certainly worth entertaining the notion that the winepress produces the most desired part of the crop; the contrast of a hateful, bitter person turned into a delightful, "sweet" person. Who wouldn't want to celebrate that?

Papia, one of the Church leaders of the second century, mentioned an oral tradition he allegedly received from the apostle John, regarding what Jesus taught about his expanding Kingdom on earth:

The days are coming when vines will come forth, each with ten thousand boughs; and on a single bough will be ten thousand branches. And indeed, on a single branch will be ten thousand shoots and on every shoot ten thousand clusters; and in every cluster will be ten thousand grapes, and every grape, when pressed, will yield twenty-five measures of wine. And when any of the saints grabs hold of a cluster, another [cluster] will cry out, “I am better, take me, bless the Lord through me” (quoted by Eusebius, Church History, 3.39.1, Fragment 1, 3).

Good Fruit is Coming

There’s a story of a man who wanted his four sons to learn not to judge things too quickly, so he sent one each season on a quest to go and observe a certain tree located a distance from home. When they had all gone and returned, he called them together to describe what they had seen. As you would expect, they were all in disagreement.

The first son said that the tree looked dead for it was ugly, bent, and barren. The second son said it was covered with green buds and full of promise. The third son said it was laden with such fragrant blossoms that it was the most beautiful tree he’d ever seen. The last son reported that the tree was laden with ripe fruit, full of life and fulfillment!

The man then explained to his sons that they were all right, because they had each seen only one season in the tree’s life. He told them that you can’t judge a tree—or a person—by only one season. The essence of who they are—where they’ve come from, what they’re learning in the process, and the resulting success, pleasure, joy, and love resulting from that life—can only be measured at the end...when all its seasons are complete.

For most people who have ever lived, their growing season has either not begun, or it’s only in the budding stages. But at some future point in time, everyone will have had the opportunity to yield a bountiful crop!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WHAT GOD WANTS, GOD GETS

For years, my husband was moderately frustrated with certain tenets of Christianity and the Bible. Since he spent most of his life as a sweet, compliant missionary kid, I don't think he would have readily admitted this out loud to very many people. But while we were dating, I remember him expressing to me that he struggled at a deep level with the character of God, as portrayed by his lifelong version of faith. When I asked him why, our conversation went something like this.

"When it comes to belief, I feel like we humans are really just puppets."

"What do you mean? Don't we have a choice to love God or not?"

"That's just it. I didn't even ask to be here yet I have to make a choice. And if I choose wrong...or don't choose at all, I'll forever be punished. And while it's great for me, since I happened to be born into a family that taught me about Jesus, what about all those billions of people who have never heard about Him? Or what about those who did hear but, out of no fault of their own, couldn't connect the dots to 'make a decision' for Him? They didn't ask to be here either, especially not in the condition they were born into, and now they're going to be penalized *forever* for not believing? Where's the love and mercy in that?"

As I look back, I believe God was planting seeds of doubt in my husband's heart to receive a truer revelation at a later time. Through the years of our marriage since, he has been the one to question things that didn't add up long before I did. In fact, I used to shoot down many of his honest questions with pat evangelical platitudes. But now I see that God initiated the process so that someday we would both be ready to search for more solid answers than the ones we'd been offered all our lives.

A Perception Overhaul

Nothing has impacted our lives with a sense of peace like the discovery of God's ALL-powerful, boundless, intentional, fully benevolent plan for His creation. Throughout my own previous belief system, I proclaimed

God was ‘mighty to save,’ like many a worship song trills throughout church rafters, but come to find out, it was merely half-hearted lip service. God was all-powerful *until* we all got to the problem of evil and the obstacle of human will. In that old belief system, these two forces usurped God’s ultimate power, will, and control over His creation. No wonder I was insecure and stressed out all the time. In the subconscious recesses of my mind, evil was winning the war. The hardness of the human heart and the power of free will were more prevailing and determinate than God’s loving heart and will. Creation was spinning out of control and all God could do, I subconsciously surmised, was to stand back with His hands tied, putting out fires and hoping He could subdue enough of them to salvage something before the end. Then at last, He could contain the rest of all that evil in hell, after saving a precious few.

Now how could I—or *why would I*—trust my existence or future into the hands of a god like that? Such a god (and his world) was not safe! Such theology only bred serious control issues of trying to assure a good outcome of everyone’s lives around me while also attempting to chart my own destiny. This prevalent view of God in today’s mainstream Church logically leads to the conclusion that He is either too mean or too weak to get what He wants, what He plans, and what He firmly wills.

What does God want? He’s made it clear throughout Scripture:

God wills that none perish (2 Peter 3:9, KJV). God wills all people to be saved (1 Tim. 2:3–4, KJV). God wills that NOT ONE anywhere, anytime would be lost (John 3:35; 6:39, KJV). God wills that His Kingdom fill the earth, and that His will be done by all (Matt. 6:10; Dan. 2:35). God has declared that every knee will bow to Him, and every tongue will confess Him as Lord and give Him praise (Is. 45:23, Rom. 14:11, Phil. 2:10).

I think it’s silly to suggest, as the skeptic would have you believe, that this praise is coerced or that people would actually praise God on their way to hell. Praise is *joyfully felt* worship and adoration. False worship is nothing more than hypocrisy, something God rejects (Mark 7:6–7). God only accepts true worship and praise overflowing from changed hearts.

What About Free Will?

In my opinion, one of the most damaging and senseless doctrines of the modern Church—after hell—is that of unlimited “free will.” You will not

find one ounce of support scripturally that people have “free will” in the way it’s taught today. Free will implies that man can freely choose and alter his own destiny and that of others, even against the will, desire, and plan of God. This notion is about as possible as that of a two-year-old electing himself as President and setting up office. A two-year-old isn’t even capable of knowing what his needs are, let alone the needs and best interest of a country. And even the President, who should have the most “free will” of anyone based on position, has very little control over the country or the world affairs (or often times even himself or his family).

Think about it, if free will truly exists the way much of Christianity teaches it, then we have big problems on our hands. Other than what we have already mentioned of tying God’s hands, it would also mean that people actually have the ability to ruin the ultimate destiny of others.

I fully agree that man does have a will and the ability to act on it. I also agree that the behaviors of others certainly affect us and can even appear for a season to have hindered our good. It’s the “free” I take issue with. In order for people to be judged fairly in a world of genuine free will, a level playing field would be imperative for all humanity. In other words, we could not be judged fairly unless we all had the same available choices.

For instance, did you choose your nationality, gender, personality, skin color, genes, birth date and place, family, or parents? Isn’t your supposed free will influenced by your culture, peers, religious affiliation, health, education, experiences, and life circumstances? Do people choose to get cancer, get hit by a drunk driver, scrounge in starvation and poverty, get abused by parents, die before they get to live, or even to be born? Does an orphan choose to be abandoned and mistreated by everyone, only to die without ever experiencing love, comfort, contentment, or hearing the name of Jesus? Does a happy, well-adjusted person who has no immediate unmet needs choose to grow up in a loving, nurturing family? Free will is nothing more than an illusion. There is no *free* in free will. Even the reason that we love God is completely outside of ourselves. His love is the first cause from which our love springs, upon our realization.

We love Him, *because* He first loved us (1 John 4:19, KJV).

In church circles where people are claiming they “chose Jesus” or “came to Christ” (presumably of their own free will), the Scriptures paint a different picture. “You did not choose Me, but I chose you” (John 15:16).

Our real first choice actually begins *after* our eyes have been opened and our heart has received a deposit of belief through an encounter with Jesus.

Because of the Creator's determined plan that trumps the will of the inferior creature, even the bad intentions and behaviors of others will most certainly be limited and worked out for our good. Sovereign will is one of the most comforting realizations I've ever had. If good hasn't resulted yet, it's only because the Story hasn't played out long enough.

One of my favorite biblical examples is OT Joseph. Sold against his "free will" by his ill-intentioned, murderous brothers, Joseph, the special son of his father headed into Egypt in chains of slavery. Goodbye childhood dreams. Goodbye goals and plans. And that was just the beginning of a long line of people who had it out for him, even though he did nothing to deserve their treacherous treatment. Many years later, after watching how his life unfolded, what was Joseph's response to those times when his life was seemingly ruined at the hands of others?

As for you [my brothers], you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people's lives (Gen. 50:20).

So where does man's will end and the sovereign will of God begin? Just how much power does man have to seize control over his own life or the lives of others? From a Hebrew perspective, each person has been given a measure of power on this earth to impact or effect change on their environment and the lives of others. Though mistakenly referred to as "one's free will," it is actually more like "one's fenced yard."

In a very simplistic explanation, think of it like this. God is a landowner, but He needs people to tend it, so He doles out allotments or parcels of His land. To one person he gives a tiny little garden plot for growing a few veggies (think of a person with little influence or control over their environment). Another gets a couple acres and can cultivate crops and build a house. But then another gets a 500-acre orchard with ten different kinds of fruit to cultivate for profit, and dozens of workers to supervise (think a governing official or the pastor of a large church). As you can see, each of these has a quite different amount of God-given control and influence over their environment.

To each land tenant, God imparts a different set of instructions on how He wants it taken care of, giving each tenant a *limited* choice of complying

with the requests or not. But in no way can the tenant venture off his God-assigned parcel to take over other land. He or she is confined to take care of the plot (dominion) that has been given. This dominion will affect those in close proximity or under the “employment” of the landowner, but it cannot go one step beyond. Consider the following:

Matt. 25:14–15: “For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own servants and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents (the big orchard), to another, two (couple of acres), and to another, one (small garden plot), *each according to his own power*;^{*} and he went on his journey” (MLT).

This is a very simple overview of a foundational Hebrew teaching of Scripture. In *The Story*, each person is given a predetermined scope of dominion or influence with which they either reveal the glory of God in a positive way, or they provide the contrast in a negative way. Either way, they can reach no further than their allotted influence.

Pharaoh was granted the power to impact millions of lives in a negative way, but so was Moses in a positive way. Both of them operated under the sovereign control of God to accomplish a part of His plan that will ultimately work to the good of all, not the damnation of most. Though everything written in this part of *The Story* is not good, God promises that everything will work together for good eventually. This is the whole point of Romans 9:14–24. Paul points out that God is truly fair, even with Pharaoh types, because He will ultimately have mercy on those who are intentionally put in roles as adversaries, acting out evil by design for a temporary purpose. Remember, you can’t have a hero in the story without a villain. Paul also makes it clear in his letters that God will not be unjust about it—the “vessels of dishonor” will also be saved.[†] The “vessels of honor” only receive their awakening ahead of the rest.

The most important point to glean from all of this is that God is not sleeping, tied up, caught off guard, or incapacitated in the face of evil. He has taken responsibility for evil as a *temporary tool* for a greater good and He is completely sovereign over it. Evil will not reign victorious in the end.

^{*} Though most versions render this word “ability,” the Greek word is “*dunamis*” which literally means *strength* or *power*.

[†] Rom. 5:18, 8:32, 11:15, 14:10–12; 1 Cor. 3:15, 15:22–23, 15:54; 2 Cor. 5:14–19; Gal. 3:8; Eph. 1:9–11; Phil. 2:9–11; Col. 1:15–20; 1 Tim. 2:3–6, 4:9–11; Titus 2:11; Heb. 2:8.

If you still believe in God damning most of His creatures forever, the plethora of sovereignty verses throughout the Bible rather paint Him as a power-hungry monster instead of a loving, sovereign God who is in the process of overcoming evil with good. This necessitates modern teachers ignoring so many verses where God takes credit for everything, both good and bad. They don't have a satisfying answer for how God could possibly be good while hiding truth from the very people He's going to hold responsible and send to hell.

However, if you believe in God reconciling all people by the end of the ages, as presented in Scripture, then these verses suddenly bring great illumination and comfort in knowing that *nothing* happens outside of God's ultimate plan of good for all His creation. There is nothing my kids, my family, my enemies, my friends, I, or anyone else can do that is not part of God's overarching plan for the good of them and for me. Let the comfort of this wash over you in that, every intention, allowance, and act of God is completely good in His final chapter, and that you and I can let go and let God run the universe without living in fear or insecurity.

All in God

I mentioned earlier that in ancient Jewish teachings, all people are considered to be "divine sparks out of the Fire (God)," inherently bearing His spiritual DNA. Just as trillions of cells make up and express a human body, each and every person ever born reveals a tiny aspect of God's being and nature. In the Jewish teaching still evident in Scripture, everything is out of God, and God fills everything: "One God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all" (Eph. 4:6).

When you realize that God fills everything and nothing is outside of Him, suddenly life around you becomes less dangerous, more hopeful, promising, and beautiful. The skies look bluer, the trees look greener, every single person you meet is more valued—even the filth and pollution is less oppressive, and darkness is less suffocating.

Thank goodness I don't have to try to play God anymore. I can completely trust Him with my kids, my marriage, my finances, my health, and my future. I can simply trust Him in all things because His unchangeable plan has already determined that everything will work out in the end. In other words: if it hasn't worked out yet, it's not the end.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LAZARUS AND THE RICH MAN

One of the questions that's likely been niggling at you while reading this book is, "*What about Lazarus and the rich man?*" After first inquiring about Hitler, this is usually one of the next objections people raise while trying to dismantle (or defend) the notion of hell. In fact, this parable is the Bible passage most often used by pastors and other proponents to prove that Jesus taught of hell. Just like everyone else, I've always heard that this is a literal story about a man who traded heaven for hell over his love of riches, and yet there is nothing in the story to indicate his rejection of Jesus. Supposedly, it's a picture of some rich man down in hell, suffering unending torments, while Lazarus and Abraham are in paradise looking on at his suffering and unable to do anything about it.

There are actually several significant points in this Luke 16 passage that completely and utterly disprove that this is a literal account of someone down in the eternal fiery flames of hell.

The Story is a Parable

Let's consider a few elements that make this story what it is—a *parable* with symbolic meaning.

1. *It's included with other parables.* This story (Luke 16:19-31) falls immediately after six consecutive *parables* and contains the same theme as the one just before it—unfaithful stewardship. Repetition of an underlying theme or message is a normal pattern for grouped parables, just as we saw earlier from Luke 15 in the three consecutive parables describing the fates for the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son.

Also, it seems obvious to me that the "voice" is that of storytelling. "*Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day....*" It could have just as easily begun, "*Once upon a time...*" Also, notice that the previous parable started much the same way, "*There was a rich man who had a manager...*"

2. *It was a crowd; hence it was a parable.* Jesus is clearly speaking to a crowd here (Pharisees, sinners, tax collectors, and disciples), and the NT

writers make the point: “All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and *He did not speak to them without a parable*” (Matt. 13:34).

3. *According to Jesus, neither Abraham nor Lazarus could be “in heaven.”* In John 3:13, Jesus said, “No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.” Jesus squarely shoots down any chance that anyone has gone into the heavenly realm yet.

4. *It contains significant historical elements.* As we’ve covered, the Jews had never been presented with the notion of hell or everlasting torment before. However, if we put on some Hebrew lenses, suddenly this passage is loaded with references to historical concepts that the Jewish people were quite familiar with—it would have made sense to them as a parable:

The rich man: He’s dressed in purple and fine linen, and has five brothers. Throughout Scripture, purple and linen are signs of royalty and priesthood. This description fits the Jews who are descendants of Judah. In Genesis 49:8–12, Jacob gives his blessing to his twelve sons, and he names Judah as the *ruler* over all twelve tribes, the son designated to receive all the promises bestowed to Abraham. As a result, the Jews (Judahites) were rich in prophetic promises, having received firsthand ruling authority and Torah from God. And can you guess how many full brothers (sons of Leah) Judah had? Five!*

Lazarus: I used to think that the Lazarus in this story was perhaps the same Lazarus from the NT, but it never quite made sense because nothing about this story is connected to the description of the Lazarus that Jesus hung out with and raised from the dead—not to mention Lazarus was no longer dead. Plus, how many of the crowds do you think knew the NT Lazarus enough that he would make it into a crowd-teasing parable by name? Then who was *this* Lazarus?

The name *Lazarus* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew name, Eliezer, and...what a coincidence! There just so happened to be an Eliezer who was the faithful financial manager and servant of Abraham’s household in the OT (Gen. 15:2). Wow, what are the chances that Jesus would bring up both Abraham and an Eliezer in the same parable—unless He was speaking about *thee Abraham* and *thee Eliezer*, prominent figures of the OT, in order to speak to the Jews from out of the well-known traditions of their own history?

* Genesis 30:20.

Eating crumbs: Lazarus was depicted as eating the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Do you really think a person could survive on crumbs...or might this convey something else? In another passage, Jesus portrayed the Gentiles eating the crumbs under the rich banqueting table of the Jews (Mark 7:24-30). In context, this meant getting the meager leftovers of the teachings of God from the Jews. Well guess what? Abraham's servant Eliezer was a Gentile! Already, quite a different story comes into view.

The rich man called Abraham his "father" three times. Abraham really was a patriarch or earthly father of the Jews, as he was the great grandfather of Judah. Abraham, in turn, calls the rich man "my son."

Hades. The rich man and Lazarus both die. Note that NIV and KJV are the only two versions falsely reporting that the rich man goes to *hell*, while all the other versions correctly render it Hades or the place of the dead. Lazarus is then said to have gone "into Abraham's bosom." Just what is meant by Abraham's bosom? From an entry on Wikipedia:

The phrase "Bosom of Abraham" refers to the place of comfort in Sheol (Greek: Hades) where the Jews said the righteous dead awaited Judgment Day. The word found in the Greek text for "bosom" is *kolpos*, meaning "lap." This relates to the Second Temple period practice of reclining and eating meals in proximity to other guests, the closest of whom physically was said to lie on the bosom of the host. It was also considered by the Jews of old to be a mark of special honor and favor for one to be allowed to lie in the bosom of the master of the feast (John 13:23), and it is by this illustration that they pictured the next world. They conceived of the reward of the righteous dead as a sharing in a banquet given by Abraham, "the father of the faithful" (Matthew 8:11), and of the highest form of that reward as lying in "Abraham's Bosom." ...Abraham Geiger suggested that the *parable of Lazarus* in Luke 16 preserved a Jewish legend and that *Lazarus represented Abraham's servant Eliezer*...³⁹

Conversations Between Heaven and Hell?

If Abraham and Lazarus were in heaven and the rich man was in hell, one must conclude that the redeemed will be in close proximity and communication with those in hell and that those in paradise will be

watching the tortured, agonized faces of their loved ones as they writhe in unrelenting pain. Can you imagine the joy and happiness the saints will have while viewing those nearby in agony for all eternity? Perhaps, if this parable were taken literally and with a modern Christian flair, you would get to see your unsaved father, mother, sister, brother, child, or spouse experiencing the reality of an eternal fire without any relief in sight, while you bask in the comforts, relaxation, and happiness of Abraham's bosom.

And what does the rich man ask of Lazarus? It's not to drag him out of the fire, but simply to take a drop of cold water and put on his tongue. Now, if the rich man were in a place like the imagined hell, a drop of water wouldn't do a bit of good for him. The water, if literal, would turn into steam before it even felt wet. And have you ever asked yourself how a fire could burn somebody endlessly, without consuming them?

I can only speculate what the drop of water means, but possibly the rich man (unbelieving Jews of Jesus's day) are depicted as asking the faithful, believing Gentiles for just a taste of the satisfying reward they missed out on—a temporal time of special relationship with God, drinking in the Living Water for which they had waited for and thirsted for so long.

Judah: Heir of Abraham

The parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man seems to expound on the parable before it about an unfaithful steward of an estate who had mishandled his master's money (Luke 16:1-13). Using the relationship between Abraham and his faithful household steward, this parable was told to further illustrate the rewards for proper stewardship as well as consequences for unfaithful stewardship of a master's household. It was specifically aimed at the Jews of Jesus's day. Consider Genesis 15:2-4:

Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and *the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? ...Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.*" Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir" (Genesis 15:2-4).

Since Abraham and Sarah had no son of their own, he figured that Eliezer would be the one to inherit his estate. So what was the big deal?

Abraham was the Bill Gates of his day! And there's no doubt that Eliezer knew he was in line for the big bucks, property, livestock, and the like. Not only that, I'm sure Abraham and Eliezer were both well aware of the spiritual blessing on Abraham, to bless all families of the earth through a lineage of the future Christ child. So what happens? Abe and Sarah have a baby just when they're about ready to move into the local nursing home, but that's not all. Abraham gives Eliezer an assignment that will result in his own disinheritance, and Eliezer faithfully and precisely carries out the orders of Abraham, regardless of his own personal loss.

Without going into too much detail, Eliezer's faithfulness to Abraham was in finding a wife for Isaac, which disinherits Eliezer because Isaac will have his own offspring. As a result, Eliezer received none of Abraham's estate; it was given to Isaac and his future family. That inheritance included wealth, prestige, power, kingship, priesthood, and the land of Canaan as an "everlasting" (age-enduring) possession. Thus, the parable refers to Eliezer (Lazarus) as a "beggar" who possessed nothing of earthly value, waiting to be fed from Judah's table.

A Great Gulf

The parable says that a "great chasm" separated Abraham and Eliezer from the Rich Man (Luke 16:26). What was this chasm? The Greek word suggests a deep ravine or valley, perhaps with cliffs on each side. Its two sides were also "afar off" from each other (verse 23) and from the description in the text, it was impassable. In his article, "The Real Meaning of Lazarus and the Rich Man," Ernest Martin gives his thoughts in understanding what this chasm referred to in Jewish minds of Jesus's day:

In all other occasions of its grammatical use in the New Testament, the word "pass" was used to denote a passage over water. ... Let us now look at such a chasm from a Palestinian point of view. In that environment there is only one possible identification for the "great gulf" ...this would be the Great Rift Valley... This fault line is the greatest and longest visible chasm on earth. And what a spectacular sight it is! As one looks over the chasm he sees impressive cliffs on each side, a desert in its wastelands, and the River Jordan meandering in the center.

Identifying the chasm of the parable with the Jordan rift unfolds a beautiful symbolic story well recognized in contemporary Jewish allegorical narratives of the time. In the center of this “gulf” was the River Jordan. It divided the original land of promise given to Abraham from ordinary Gentile lands. The west side of Jordan represented the area that the Bible considered the original Holy Land. ...When the Israelites finally entered the chasm of the Jordan and crossed the river, they then considered themselves in the Holy Land—the land promised to Abraham and his seed!⁴⁰

Crossing the Jordan was a symbol for death throughout Scripture, and entering the land of Canaan was a symbol of special rewards for the faithful, overcoming few in this lifetime (more details in the unabridged version). This parable appears to be a warning to the Jews in Jesus’s day of missing out on these rewards—which they believed was theirs by inheritance—due to bad stewardship of their spiritual blessings. For whatever reason, they did not share their vast knowledge of the truth with the “poor in spirit” Gentiles, but forced them to live on a diet of crumbs. On the contrary, Eliezer is now depicted as enjoying the future comforts in Abraham’s bosom, because he remained faithful with everything entrusted to him. Here is the final appraisal according to Ernest Martin:

The only Gospel to carry the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man was Luke who was the companion of Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. It showed a specific message that Gentiles could now inherit the promises to Abraham, provided they were faithful as Eliezer had been. Yet Paul did not want the Gentiles to be conceited in their new relationship with God.

“Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid.” Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fullness?” One of these days, “all Israel shall be saved” (vs. 26). God will show mercy on the natural sons of Abraham as He has on faithful Gentile stewards.⁴¹

Now that we’ve unpacked an overview of the truer meaning of the parable of Lazarus, there’s one more major error we need to clear up in our quest to shed light on the salvation of all. I’m pretty confident that learning this new perspective will do your soul some good!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

REDEFINING THE SOUL

Ever notice all the talk about *the soul* in church?

“Your soul is in danger of eternal hellfire!”

“Believe in Jesus or you will lose your soul...”

There’s an intangible, inexplicable sense about this word in modern Christian teachings. When asked, most Christians will hem haw, trying to explain the soul as something like this: “A person is both body and soul. The body is the physical flesh-and-blood temporary ‘shell.’ The soul is the nonmaterial, intangible, immortal aspect. At death the soul leaves the body, and lives on consciously forever in either heaven or hell.”

I’m making the case here and now that we’ve been dead wrong. This is another critical Bible word that has been way misinterpreted to mean something it does not, taking on a soul of its own, so to speak. The result is that many a soul has been lost in wrong conclusions (not hell, thankfully)!

What is a Soul?

Translators have made an utter mess of the Greek and Hebrew words for *soul*, and as a result, have contributed to the huge distortion of this once simple word. The Hebrew and Greek words for *soul* are *nephesh* and *psuche* respectively, both nouns, yet this one little word has been unbelievably mistranslated as a myriad of other words. Here are but a few of many (taken directly from a Bible Concordance): *life, death, corpse, heart, endure, myself, desire, greedy, hunger, heartily, perfume, slave, strength, fish, thirst, throat, mind, suspense, thing – oh yes, and soul*. You’ll notice that within the list of words, each of which have radically different meanings, are verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and even pronouns (translation no-nos!).

What is the reason for such sloppy translation? *Nephesh* and *psuche* are translated correctly in all the passages where translators wish to associate some kind of immortal, intangible sense of the word, conveying a person’s capacity for “everlasting destruction.” However, passages that would shed light on the true nature of the soul are mistranslated and

masked with an assortment of misleading words. Let's bring some clarity to the definition of soul using real Scripture:

Gen. 2:7: And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man *became* a living soul (nephesh) (KJV).

1 Cor. 15:45: So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, *became* a living soul (psuche). The last Adam became a life-giving spirit."

According to the Scriptures, you do not *have* a soul. You *are* a living soul. Your soul is the sum total of you—your body, mind, will, and emotions. No one part of it can be separated from the rest or it is no longer you. You were brought to life as a living soul. Any living creature—man or beast—that has *breath and blood* is called a *soul* in Scriptures. For instance, in Genesis 1:20 and 24, where God creates the sea and land animals, the Hebrew text reads, "Then God said, 'Let the waters teem with swarms of *living souls*...Let the earth bring forth *living souls* after their kind.'"

When such mistranslating happens in the *very first chapter of the Bible*, twisting such an important concept, it should make aware of how many other significant things we read that have gotten us off track.

When Translators Lost Their Souls

The truthful meaning of *soul* has been almost completely concealed in modern Bibles. Consider the word translators most often substitute in place of soul (when not utilizing an agenda), and that is *life*. Hebrew and Greek each have a specific word for *life* (chayay and zoe, respectively), so there was no need to "improve on" or interpret the original intent of the writers of Scripture. In fact, there are many verses where both of these words occur together, showing that they are not interchangeable.

Now, using the word *life* in and of itself is not so bad or far off of the true meaning of soul, but the problem is the way *nephesh* and *psuche* have been deliberately mistranslated, misleading people to think that the soul is some immortal, intangible part of us that can be damned forever. Whenever a passage is about something that carries a negative connotation, such as being lost or destroyed, translators correctly use the word *soul*. Whenever a passage conveys mortal existence or carries a positive or neutral connotation, they swap soul for the word *life*.

While there are hundreds of examples we might choose to demonstrate this translator phenomenon, here's an excellent example from Matthew 16:25-26: "For whoever wishes to save his *life* (soul) will lose it; but whoever loses his *life* (soul) for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and *forfeits* his *soul*? Or what will a man give in exchange for his *soul*?" Psuche is used by NT writers *four* times here, not two! We are told to intentionally lose (give up) our soul here in the Greek text, but this would not be good for Sunday morning theology. Also, the word chosen by translators, "forfeits," is a completely blatant, biased (aggravating) mistranslation. It is Strong's #2210, *zemioo*, and should be "does damage to" or "suffers loss to."*

Here's one more: "...just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His *life* (soul) a ransom for many"† (Matt. 20:28). Did you know that *Jesus gave His soul for you*? This would impossible if the soul is somehow immortal and only dies when it is eternally damned.

How Greek Mythology Influenced *Soul*

Hopefully by now you see how important it is to scrutinize verses and concepts you have always taken for granted. You don't have to be a pastor or have an MDiv to do so. Perhaps now you're still wondering where the teaching of the "immortal soul" came from, if not from the Bible. In his book, *The Subversion of Christianity*, French author Jacques Ellul explains:

A familiar example of the mutation to which revelation was actually subjected is its contamination by the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul. In Jewish thought death is total. There is no immortal soul, no division of body and soul. Paul's thinking is Jewish in this regard. ...The soul is as mortal as the body. But there is a resurrection. Out of the nothingness that human life becomes, God creates anew the being that was dead. Greek philosophy, however, introduces among theologians the idea of the immortal soul. The belief was widespread in popular religion and it was integrated into Christianity. But it is a total perversion. ...All Christian thinking is led

* See Strong's definition for *zemioo*: studylight.org/isb/view.cgi?number=2210.

† 1 Tim. 2:5-6: "...Jesus gave Himself as a ransom for ALL."

astray by this initial mutation that comes through Greek philosophy and Near Eastern cults.⁴²

Historian and archeologist, Keith Stump, provides additional insight:

The idea of an “immortal soul” predates the founding of today’s major religions. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus (5 B.C.) tells us in his *History* that the ancient Egyptians were the first to teach that the soul of man is separable from the body. *The immortal soul concept was a necessary companion doctrine to the doctrine of the terrible torments of parts of Hades or hell. Such fearsome teachings, some philosophers thought, were necessary to scare the masses into being good citizens.*

Throughout the centuries of professing Christianity, innumerable sermons have been preached and countless pamphlets written purporting to prove the soul’s immortality. Upon careful and open-minded examination, they are all found to be riddled with surprising error. ...The doctrine of the immortal soul is built on a foundation of biblical mistranslations, false premises, and sloppy scholarship. ...When the false doctrine of the immortal soul is toppled, along with it falls the equally pagan and false concept of heaven and hell—one of the cornerstones of traditional Christianity!⁴³

Every Soul Must Die

God declared that *every soul* must die (Gen. 9:4-5). In reality, this is the curse of Adam, not torturous, eternal separation from God. Adam literally brought the death of soul, or the death of every living, breathing, warm-blooded person (and animal), and symbolically the death of every old nature that is not “crucified with Christ” into a new nature aligned with the purpose and will of God. And when you understand this, it is easy to see that the gift Jesus brought to all mankind is life back from the dead through resurrection—physically later and spiritually now. Once so muddled and misleading, now a simple, beautiful truth.

Now I’d like to share some of my recent reflections with you—my own personal take on *The Story*. Through some unexpected life parallels, I feel like I’ve come to see a glimpse of the heavenly Parent’s heart. These thoughts, however humanly flawed, have continued to favorably transform my view of God and life.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

LEAVING THE CALF PATH FOR GOOD

“Jesus is as narrow as himself and as wide as the universe. He is as exclusive as himself and as inclusive as containing every single particle of creation.” –Rob Bell in *Love Wins*

Why in the world would God write *The Story* this way? If what I’ve proposed is true, why would God let hell take center stage, allowing His character to be smeared and most of His children to be deceived and estranged for more than 1,500 years? Why not plainly make us all aware of His true character—how He fully intends to find and bring home every lost sheep safely on His shoulders? Though I don’t fully understand the scope of it yet myself, I believe God gave me a little bit of insight into this mystery through my friend, “Abigail.”

I met Abigail on a support website for parents of high conflict divorce. She’s a very loving, devoted mom who would fearlessly fight off a clan of ferocious grizzly bears for her children. But from the day she got divorced, Abigail’s ex-husband, knowing how deeply she loves her kids, decided the best way to hurt Abigail would be to use the kids as weapons of warfare. And the best way to do that was to alienate them from her. He did this by telling them lies about her (directly or indirectly), keeping them away from her as much as possible with fun diversions and distractions, and setting her up to look bad in no-win situations, so that her kids often began doubting her character and intentions. After awhile, Abigail realized, as many parents do, that her kids had become the rope in a game of tug-of-war. Only this did not feel anything like a game. It was the most painful experience she could ever imagine and often times she felt like her heart had been ripped to shreds.

Abigail tried not to “play the game” and tried in every way to nurture a loving relationship with her children, but deliberate character assassination over a long period of time with naïve, defenseless children proved very effective. After a few years of this kind of conflict, the lies began to win out and her kids gradually became alienated from her until

there was hardly anything left of the natural mother-child bond. There is actually a term for this type of high conflict divorce in counseling circles, where one parent can't control his or her anger and involves the children in the resulting hate campaign. It's called, "Parental Alienation Syndrome."

As the children got a little older, Abigail distinctly received direction from God, telling her to "drop her end of the rope." This would normally make no sense to a devoted mother, but the direction came to Abigail very clearly through a passage in the Bible where she believed God explained *why* He wanted her to do such a counter-intuitive thing.

In 1 Kings 3:16-28, there's a story about two mothers who each had babies. In the night, one mother accidentally rolled on top of her baby and killed him. When she figured out what had happened, she tried to steal the other mother's baby. The two women came before King Solomon, fighting over the living baby, asking him to decide to which woman the living baby belonged. Wisely, he pulled out his sword and said each mother could take home half of the remaining baby, after he cut it in two. The real mother instantly, with no thought of her own impending loss, offered to let the other mother raise it so that the child could be kept whole and alive.

Abigail believed her message from this story was that it is the real mother who is willing to let her most precious children go in order that they might be kept whole in such a divisive situation. The fighting over her kids needed to stop. No longer should they be put in the middle, forced to choose between parents or forced to spend time with her, even though it was her "right." But also the message to Abigail was that letting go would not be the end of the story. In His time and in His way, the good King would return the intact, living children back to their rightful mother, just as King Solomon had done in the end of the story.

It was probably one of the hardest things she'd ever been asked to do in her life. But along the way, Abigail had learned that God could be trusted with that which was most precious to her. God loved her children more than she, and only He knew the end from the beginning. Courageously, Abigail dropped her end of the rope and let her babies go.

Instead of getting easier, it got harder. Her ex capitalized on the situation and she saw them less and less until they withdrew almost completely out of her life. Abigail knew that she could "make" her children come to her legally, but she also knew that ultimately, this would

not win their hearts to her. If anything, it would alienate them further as they perceived (with help) that she was trying to control them. The only thing she could do is *invite them*, over and over, waiting for her children to awaken to and accept her love. Someday when they did come around, it would be because her real character won out, leading the children to desire a relationship with their mom out of a response to her love, not out of duty or force.

Whether we realize it or not, Abigail's story is really our story.

As children of God, we have experienced this cosmic game of tug-of-war going on between "two homes." In one home, there's the vindictive, deceitful "father-spirit of this world," who would like nothing more than to alienate the children from the healthy, devoted, loving Father. This hate campaign is waged through lies, distractions, distortions, and diversions, framing the heavenly Parent to look bad as much as possible through character assassination tactics. Ultimately the children are made to believe that the heavenly Parent doesn't really want to be with them—that *He would throw away most of His children forever*.

The heavenly Parent, in all His wisdom, drops the rope.

It looks questionable.

It's totally counter-intuitive.

But this is not to the end of abandoning His children; it's for a much higher purpose. He knows that when you drop the rope in tug-of-war, the enemy falls down. The one who lies and alienates eventually loses. You see, God owns the playground, so in dropping the rope, nothing is ever really lost. On the contrary, everything is to be gained. Though there may be the appearance of a loss or defeat in allowing the alienation and the deception to go on for a time, it's a temporary letting go for a greater good.

God knows that in order for His children to come out of the fight whole, we need be to set free within our God-given bounds—free to discover the lies and their source, free to explore both sides of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, free to come to the end of the rebellious and wandering behaviors we have adopted from the lying parent, and free to respond to the *invitation* of relationship. He wants us to come to Him out of desire and longing, not duty and coercion. He wants us to love Him freely and, in the likeness of our real Father, to love all His children. This might be the closest we come to "free will," but it is never to the end of choosing destruction, but learning to choose love.

True love cannot be instructed, forced, or manipulated, but only invited, experienced, and nurtured. It's the only way that a true father-child relationship can thrive. Ultimately, "love" born of duty fails (which isn't really love), whereas love born of desire thrives and blooms.

And therein lies at least a little part of this *Story*. It is a great invitation, and a great homecoming, happily-ever-after Love Story between Father and Child.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

But the father said to his servants, "Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found." And they began to celebrate (Luke 15:20-24).

This is no quick or easy journey for any of us. Not only do we have a fallen nature with all its insecurities and distortions from our life history and circumstances to contend with, but the lying, slanderous parent often times masquerades as the "an angel of light" in the form of "Disney dad."

In Revelation 12:9, we read that part of the lying parent's job description is deceiving "the whole world." None of this makes sense unless you understand *The Story*, and the necessity of the villain to call forth and shine light on the absolute saving, healing, benevolent, valiant nature of the hero.

How does the lying parent successfully work most of his lies to dupe mankind? Revelation 13:6 tells us that satan—the adversarial spirit—works especially through the other children still trapped in the oppositional home who have adopted the attitudes and behaviors of the lying parent, giving them authority to blaspheme God's name and character.

With a lot of help, namely from those who promote the doctrine of hell, mankind's perception of the character of God has nearly been hamstrung throughout the centuries, whereby He has been painted as a power hungry, vengeful, unforgiving, hypocritical, task master. It is not unlike the power-crazed little old man behind the curtain in the Wizard of Oz,

who uses scare tactics to get everybody to do what He wants, when all along he has no real power to do much of anything.

Since the days of the establishment of Israel about 3,500 years ago, the satanic, adversarial spirit has largely used those who have been called out to belief in this mortal lifetime to do the his dirty work in the smearing campaign. It's easy to point the finger at all the verses condemning Pharisees and apostate Israelites, but those people were only a blueprint of the rest of us who have largely followed the same pattern of behavior ever since, blaspheming God's character to the peoples of all nations. It was a brilliant plan, really—using those who thought they were above deception to be the primary vehicles of such. Was God sleeping when this happened?

No. It was written this way.

It is a lesson with a happily ever after for everyone.

It's a Divine Story where no one can take credit for being smarter, more important, or better than another, and where there is no loser.

My Story is Now His Story

In the spring of 2009 a very special opportunity took place. My Mom had battled cancer for six years and though I didn't know it yet, she was in her final two months of life just about the time I had learned and was finally able to share these truths with her. When I first told her, she got the most memorable, hopeful gleam in her eye and said, "*Are you sure?*"

At the forefront of Mom's mind throughout her last days was my brother, a wayward child who, according to conservative Christian teaching, is going straight to hell. She hadn't spoken to him in ten years (he didn't even know she was sick), and it cut her deeply to think she would never ever see him again—never tell him how much she loved him with all the ocean of a mother's love. But now, for the first time since the discovery of her cancer, she had reason to hope again.

When I went through her things after her death, I found a pair of my brother's toddler clothes stashed in one of her top drawers where she probably looked at them frequently. This is what a loving parent does. This is the undying, unceasing, unconditional love that originates from a heavenly Parent's heart.

Something amazing happened to my Mom after she learned the truth. I never heard her talk about her faith to others, especially to her friends. I

know that some of her friends were heavy on her heart as she faced her death, thinking she would never see them again. She probably felt a burden about making sure they didn't go to hell, but she wasn't the confrontational type and didn't want to corner them either. Based on their bad experience with certain Christians, some of her friends didn't want religion shoved down their throats, so she'd spent many years simply serving them and loving them by example.

After I shared the true Gospel with Mom, she was so consumed by the joy of it that she began sharing it with most everyone around her—her hospice nurse, her cleaning lady, and yes, even her friends. You see, that's the effect that the true Gospel—the *irresistible Gospel*—has on people. You can't wait to tell people about a love so powerful, so complete, and so pure that it offers value, hope, and purpose to every human being, with no strings attached.

The last morning of my Mom's earthly life, I was sitting by her bedside, holding her hand, and reading verses to her about God's ultimate, victorious love for *all* His children. In the middle of 1 Corinthians 15—a passage that had become her favorite—about the ultimate conquering of the grave, the resurrection from the dead, and God becoming “all in all,” my Mom took her last, very peaceful breath. It was a beautiful, holy, heavenly-orchestrated moment. One day, all men and women of all time will stand before their Father in adoration, declaring their love and devotion to the God of love who had a plan all along to save them as His beloved children. In that day, He will freely live among us, and I believe we will be captivated forever with absolute, magical joy.

It's ironic that I once felt sorry for all those deceived people “out there,” believing I had somehow escaped deception and that I was lucky enough to be raised in “the truth.” I now realize that I was as deceived as anyone, if not moreso. What is a bit sad and humiliating is how many people in my life I must have pushed away with my spiritual pride, treating them like they were the ones who were deceived.

These days, I know that nobody has “arrived” at ultimate truth, because truth is a consistently deepening journey—an unveiling process during our entire lives—not a dogma or stagnant destination. It's a process that requires living by faith (discovery), not sight (doctrines). To be on the right path you have to be willing to admit that you don't have a lot of the answers, but you are willing to follow the Spirit in a living, progressing,

dancing, dynamic relationship. To do this, I believe it is necessary untether oneself from the surety of confining doctrines, dogmas, marginalizing orthodoxy, restrictive institutions, and the traditions of men, which all stagnate and ultimately “build one’s house upon sand.”

Today I have made the journey back to the faith of my daughter—the simple faith of a child. With what I’ve experienced of God’s love on this liberating, joyful journey, I could never go back to the old calf paths. What the true Gospel has done for me is impossible to quantify, but for the first time in my life, I feel truly reborn. For the first time ever, I feel like a salesman who believes in my own products. There are no words to describe the utter happiness and purpose that has been unleashed inside me. As I see people in my everyday life now—at the grocery store, at work, on TV, at school—more than ever I see people who have unlimited value because they are all children of God, my brothers and sisters.

This is the kind of Gospel—where no one is a throw away—that breeds life, and joy, and continuous wonder. This Gospel births a sincere, deep love for people, and the excitement to share the truly unconditional love of God with everyone. It is so gratifying to know that every single kind word or deed offered will someday result in the growing of a seedling or the bearing of fruit from a person created in the image of God. No effort will ever be wasted or insignificant. The joy and energy this realization has brought into my life is positively captivating.

In the midst of the questions in the dark of night, “*Why this way?*” These words echo song-like in my heart. “This is the way to the greatest joy for all.”

And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. ...Behold, I am making *all things* new. ...Write, for these words are faithful and true.”

...The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost (Rev. 21:3-5; 22:17).

RESOURCES

Verses Proclaiming God Will Save All: There are perhaps hundreds of verses proclaiming God's plan to save all, but here are just a few of my favorites.

Gen. 12:3; 2 Sam. 14:14; Ps. 22:27-29, 65:2, 86:9; Is. 25:6-8, 45:22-23; Lam. 3:31-32; Hos. 14:4; Zeph. 3:8-9; Lk. 2:10, 9:55-56, 23:34; Jn. 12:32, 12:47, 17:2; Acts 3:20-21; Rom. 5:6, 18-20, 11:32-36, 14:11; 1 Cor. 3:11-15, 13:8, 15:22-28; 2 Cor. 5:18-19; Eph. 4:5-6; Col. 1:15-20, 3:11; 1 Tim. 2:5-6; Heb. 8:11-12; James 2:13; 1 Jn. 2:2; Rev. 5:13; 15:4

Further Reading and Study

- *Scripture4all.org* (*Greek & Hebrew Interlinear Bible*). Read more exact word-for-word translation of Scripture.
- *Strong's Dictionary*. This tool can give a fuller meaning to words: htmlbible.com/sacrednamebiblecom/kjvstrongs/STRINDEX.htm.
- *Greek Septuagint Bible Online* (*can be ordered in hard copy*): septuagint-interlinear-greek-bible.com. The Bible version quoted by the NT authors.
- *Tentmaker.org*. This is a great resource site for debunking hell from just about every angle and from many different writers.
- *The Inescapable Love of God*, Thomas Talbott (1999). Download an excerpt from ThomasTalbott.com. Available on Amazon.
- *The Jerome Conspiracy*, Michael Wood (2008). Available on Amazon.
- *Hope Beyond Hell: The Righteous Purpose of God's Judgment*, Gerry Beauchemin (2007). Available on Amazon.
- *At the End of the Ages: The Abolition of Hell*, Bob Evely (2002). Available on Amazon.
- *Christian Universalism: God's Good News For All People*, Eric Stetson (2008). Available on Amazon.
- *Spiritual Terrorism: Spiritual Abuse from the Womb to the Tomb*, Boyd Purcell (2008). Available on Amazon.

Read expanded resources in the full version of Raising Hell!

ENDNOTES

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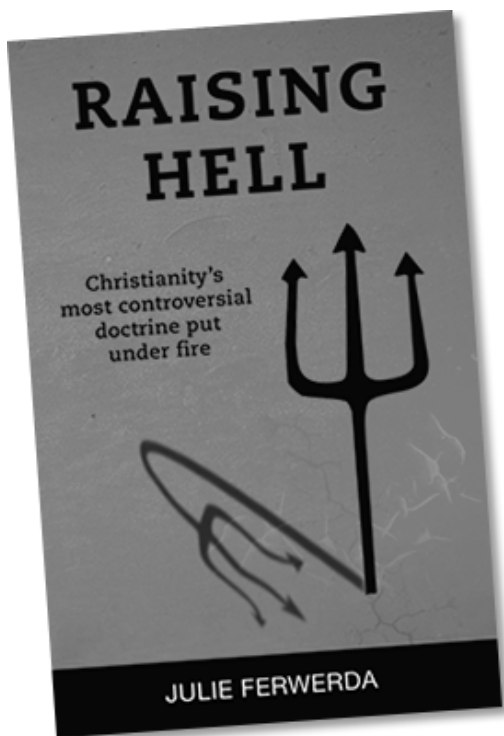
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