

Heaven and Hell and the Justice of God

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Introduction: Gardening, Interrupted

This past summer (of 2005), many dreams came true for my wife Ming and me. We saw our household's influence in our neighborhood expand. After five years of living in our neighborhood, which is a lower-income, higher crime area, we saw God open up so many opportunities we couldn't even take them all: We started a monthly neighborhood meeting, a monthly crime watch meeting, a weekly women's bible study, a weekly youth bible study, a weekly family games night, a weekly family movie night, a weekly African dance and drums class. We helped a non-profit organization get a \$15,000 grant to get musical equipment and a brand new video projector to in the community center across the street. My wife got a \$20,000 grant to build a community garden, which helped us pay young people in our neighborhood to work on the garden. As a result, we got closer to many people. But we had one incident that was a real bummer. One day, two of the young men, brothers, who were interns working on the community garden, came into our house, ostensibly to use the bathroom. When they left, one of them had taken a \$90 check written out to us. We discovered that the check was missing after they left. Now it's not a lot of money, but it felt significant because we had trusted them, because they were working for us and giving them an opportunity, and most importantly because they were young men and still had hope. If they started down a path of bad choices, who knows where that would end? And would they be open to hearing from God?

Unfortunately, or fortunately for them, they signed one of their names on the check with phone number and address. After we asked the bank for a copy of the stolen check, we compared signatures to other signatures they had signed; they were exactly alike. So we *knew* it was at least one of them. My wife and I prayed about how to respond to these two young men. We decided that we would not call the police or the bank. But we would not hire them again to work in the garden until they paid us back. And then we confronted both of them. Both of them denied it. Then they accused each other. So I said, 'You see, this is what sin does – you stole from us, but now you're lying and accusing each other. That's the kind of life that I don't want you to live. Over time, it becomes harder and harder to live a clean life because you get sucked into these habits and patterns. You're still young; you've still got a good chance; so you'd better give your lives to Jesus and let him transform you!!' We said, 'Look, we still want to be friends, but we won't hire you until you give up this charade. You have to want this. You have to want a better relationship with us – which is good for you because we're trying to help – and you have to want what we want for this neighborhood.'

God's Garden, Interrupted

The reason I tell you that story is because there are parallels to heaven and hell. Jesus is restoring humanity to a garden home, and He is at work in the world to give evidence that there is a garden paradise yet to come that He wants people to enjoy. We can either cooperate with Him, and want the things that He wants, or we can get in His way by insisting on going our own way. And our posture towards that effort will determine whether we live in that garden with Jesus, or not.

If you're not a Christian, you may be interested in this because you've watched movies like 'The Exorcism of Emily Rose' and it's got you mildly interested in these kinds of questions. Maybe for some of you, this is the first time you've ever really thought about it. For others of you, you have thought about it but the subject has bothered you for years. For some of you, you've heard myths and oversimplifications about heaven and hell, like 'Heaven is a place where you can eat and not get fat, so why not be there?' So I think as I talk about this subject, I think you might be surprised.

There are philosophical reasons to believe in heaven and hell, that it satisfies a sense of cosmic justice. In fact, many people in other countries who have experienced enormous amounts of oppression and injustice say that they find the idea of heaven and hell completely rational. After all, it satisfies a sense of longing that we know we have for something greater, a perfect world, and some kind of consequence for good and evil. But it raises other questions. Is hell a prison system, that God keeps people in against their will? If that's the case, and people in hell want to be with God and God doesn't let them into where He is, then what can we say about God's character? Is that kind of God interested in love and reconciliation? You

could kind of understand hell being a purgatory, so if you have a little brother that really needs a time out and even a big spanking, then hell is God's time out and big spanking. But why would God keep them in there eternally? Who really deserves that? Maybe Hitler. But who else? It makes God seem arbitrary, and not actually who He says He is, since He says that He is love and that He hates for anyone to experience death or be lost. How can we understand the justice of God?

Outline

Let me tell you what I'm going to say tonight, in a brief outline. Here's something you might not expect. First, I'm going to describe, to the best of my ability, what heaven is like and what it is not like. Second, I'm going to describe what hell is like and what it is not like. Third, I'm going to talk about how we get to either one of those places. Fourth, I'm going to talk about the major questions you have to ask if you're going to think about heaven and hell.

Heaven

Now there are a lot of misconceptions about what heaven is. Sometimes I feel like heaven is just presented as a place where you can eat and not get fat. I mean, who wouldn't want to go to a place like that? Or, it's a place where there's nothing to do except sing songs or listen to angels sing songs. Sounds boring, who would want to go there? Or, it's a place where souls just float around.

None of those things are actually true about heaven. What is heaven? First of all, heaven is a concrete, physical garden. Think about Lothlorien or Rivendell in *The Lord of the Rings*. Let me read a passage here from Revelation: ^{22:1} Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of [Jesus], ² in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. ³ There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of [Jesus] will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; ⁴ they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever.

Heaven will be a physical place, because of the Jewish view that God made the creation good. In contrast with many other belief systems where the physical body and the physical world is bad, Jewish and Christian believers believe that the world will be physically resurrected. And because God is Life by definition, the way He created life in the beginning will continue in a new and fresh way. When God resurrected Jesus, He demonstrated His commitment to one day resurrecting all of His creation into a new state of being physically. Therefore we will not be souls floating around. We will have new physical bodies to live in a new physical, recreated world.

Because it's physical, Heaven will be a growing place. In fact, it'll be a Garden of some sort. The people who live in heaven will be gardeners. We will have things to do. We will be responsible to bring forth life, because God is the One who brings forth life, He allows us to share in that. In fact, heaven will be a healing place. The passage says that people and things will be healed. There will be no more tears. It's a place of healing. Heaven is a relational place: That we all relate to Jesus as King. And we will love one another as a royal family because of Jesus' ethic of love. It's like the Garden of Eden where the original Adam was a king of sorts, but actually better. It is a new creation, a new garden, where Jesus is now king. That's why Jesus sits on a throne. Twice the throne of Jesus is mentioned in this passage. And from the throne flows water. Why? Because water is the source of life, and life flows from the throne of Jesus.

Now when we read a passage like this, it's hard to know what is literal and what is a literary reference to a previous part of the biblical story. Does it literally mean that everyone in heaven has the name 'Jesus' written on their foreheads? Maybe. But it does refer literarily to other places in the Bible where to have a name written on yourself means that you have that name continually on your mind. Or is it that when we see each other we'll see Jesus? The central fact of heaven is that it's all centered around Jesus. Logically speaking, you can't just take your own idea of what heaven is like, and then see Jesus as the gatekeeper to that. If you like ice cream, for instance, you might want heaven to be a place where you can eat lots of ice cream. Then you see Jesus as the gatekeeper to what you really want. But that's backwards. We know very little about what heaven will actually be like. We really know Jesus first, and then from knowing him,

we can deduce certain things about heaven because Jesus will characterize it. You can't go the other way around, because that's a self-centered way of defining heaven. What are the implications of Jesus being on the throne? I'll come back to that in a minute.

Hell

But second, I want to talk about hell. What is hell like? Here is a passage from the Bible that refers to it. Notice it doesn't spend much time actually trying to describe it. Revelation 20:12 And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. 13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. 14 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Now again, you have to study carefully to understand what is literal and what is a literary reference. What seems clear is that hell is a physical place, and the people in it are also physical. They too will be resurrected physically. Will hell necessarily have fire? I don't know, because elsewhere Jesus calls it a region of outer darkness (Matthew's Gospel). Can hell be both fiery and totally dark? It doesn't seem like it, because fire gives off light, so it is not utter darkness, unless this is a different type of fire. Either fire or darkness or both might be symbolic language: darkness is the opposite of light, the goodness of God and the creation life He gives, so darkness is an uncreation; fire is symbolic in Scripture of God's judgment. 'Lake of fire' might be literally a large valley that is always burning, or a valley that has a top surface of fire, so it appears to be a lake of fire. But it could be that the 'lake of fire' is simply a region that is under God's judgment.

But God doesn't give up loving them, either. Even though He allows people to turn away from Him, He continues to love even those who reject Him. That's why people are not simply extinguished and snuffed out. Their destruction is eternal, but here's the important thing: They are destroying themselves. It's not so much that God 'puts' people into hell, but that hell is a condition of being that people have rejected Jesus so deeply that they continue to reject Jesus even while he is loving them. And they continue to try to remove themselves from the love of God. So for them, God in His love for them has become torment and torture to them. I'll describe that more in just a minute.

How We Get There from Here

The next major question is 'How do we get there from here?' And I suspect that, practically speaking, you're wondering, 'In theory, if heaven and hell exist, how do we avoid hell and get to heaven?' Well, another misconception is that heaven and hell are the places where you get what you deserve. So some people would again say that hell is so bad that no one deserves it. Why would someone be punished forever for things they had done? Hitler maybe. But most people – how about a year or two in hell, and then they're done? The problem with that objection is that heaven and hell are not rewards and punishments for things you do. I'll focus on hell, since that's probably what you have the most questions about. How does a person get into the state of being where the love of God is torment? It's when we become addicted to something that is no longer possible in the truth of God's love.

ILLUSTRATION: When I was a junior in high school, I was like this: I loved a false self. I discovered this when I went with some Christian friends on a spring break trip to Mexico. I thought that we'd build buildings like Habitat for Humanity does. Instead, we played with kids and told them Bible stories. I didn't like kids back then. And I didn't like this trip. First of all, I wasn't a Christian, and we were telling kids Bible stories. I felt kind of awkward. Second, the poverty that I saw really disturbed me and made me think. Third, I felt like no one really understood what I was going through. I was a competitive swimmer taking a week off out of the competitive season. No one does that! Fourth, the kids didn't even appreciate it. I would have felt a little better if they understood that I was a serious athlete and scholar – because that's what my school awards told me about myself – and that I had a bright future – I wanted to play water polo for Stanford and was working hard towards that goal. I wanted those kids to appreciate me for who I thought I was. But all they asked was, 'Are you coming back tomorrow? Are you coming back tomorrow?' Those kids loved the real me. I loved a façade that I had created. And it struck me that God's

love was kind of like that. Not as simplistic as a child's, but He loves the true me: insecure, filled with longing and hope and frustration and needs to be loved, and in fact needing to be filled by the Spirit of Jesus. But I loved the false me. So God's love was torment.

ILLUSTRATION: C.S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce* describes this. In this fictitious story, there is a bus that goes from hell to heaven, so people in hell can see heaven. But the strange thing is that people from hell reject heaven and return to hell. One such person is a man who was an actor in his earthly life. He's in hell. When he gets to heaven, he meets his ex-wife. They hadn't parted well, but she's happy to see him. Now he carries around a tall mannequin of a very debonair, handsome gentleman sporting a sharp tuxedo. He carries this thing around, and wants everyone to relate to the mannequin as if it were him. He himself is short, ugly man. But the way he thinks of himself and the way he would like other people to relate to him is as if he were tall, debonair, and handsome. He's furious that no one does. His wife ignores the mannequin and keeps speaking to the real him. But he insists that the real him is this mannequin. He loves a false self. So the love of God in heaven, which can only deal with the truth, is torment.

PRINCIPLE: Why do we get to the place where we deceive ourselves so much? It's because our choices. We participate in shaping our own humanity. Physiologically, that is true. If you're a man (I'm not sure how this works out for women) and you take cocaine, play lots of video games, or watch pornography, the same pathways in your brain get stimulated. Then your body produces more testosterone, which causes the hemispheres of your brain to become more separated. That hurts your capacity for deeper emotional life. That means you'll be drawn into the same fantasies as before, and more strongly so. So you have the same desires for love, and meaning, and relationship, but you have these addictions to falsehoods that never satisfy you. I think 'addiction' is a good way of understanding what happens in hell. It's having an addiction that cannot be met because the thing you're addicted to simply cannot exist in the truth of God's presence, because God only deals in reality.

ILLUSTRATION: I think people who claimed to be Christians but were really racists will be confronted by their addiction when they meet the real Jesus. In 1966, Robert Kennedy undertook a tour of South Africa in which he championed the cause of the anti-Apartheid movement. His tour gained international praise at a time when few politicians dared to entangle themselves in the politics of South Africa. Kennedy spoke out against the oppression of the native population. He was welcomed by the black population as though a visiting head of state. In an interview with LOOK Magazine he said: "At the University of Natal in Durban, I was told the church to which most of the white population belongs teaches apartheid as a moral necessity. A questioner declared that few churches allow black Africans to pray with the white because the Bible says that is the way it should be, because God created Negroes to serve. "But suppose God is black", I replied. "What if we go to Heaven and we, all our lives, have treated the Negro as an inferior, and God is there, and we look up and He is not white? What then is our response?" There was no answer. Only silence." (*Ripple of Hope in the Land of Apartheid: Robert Kennedy in South Africa*, June 1966)

ILLUSTRATION: And how will that be? If you're someone whose bottom line was your own sexuality; you just wanted to conduct yourself however you want, you want to date and maybe marry whoever you want, and that was what you wanted bottom line. You didn't really want Jesus, you saw Jesus as limiting you. You never made the effort to see if a spiritual desire was the deeper reality behind the sexual desire. The desire to be one with someone else, completely, can only be met by Jesus. But because you never tried that, you'll get what you want. You'll get to be with people who also never gave their own sexualities to Jesus. Imagine what that's like. And you will always be haunted by the voice of Jesus calling out to you to surrender yourself to him in love. You will be burning with desire, continually drinking and consuming, yet never satisfied. Yet in your skewed perception, you will become more and more resentful and determined that his way is wrong. You will become more consumed by your own desires. Is that what you want?

ILLUSTRATION: Let's take another, more personal, example. Let's say that this person here [take a person in audience], bottom line wants power. That's the bottom line for you. So you see Jesus as an obstacle to your accomplishments. God says, go ahead. Now in this life, here's where that desire for power will take you. Let's say that BC isn't even that challenging for you, so you go on to one of the top Ph.D. programs in the country. But when you get there, you're totally challenged by being around people who are

just as smart and, in fact, smarter than you. And it is hard! You're not special anymore. You really have to work! Let's say that you get a stress-related ulcer. But hey, that's what power costs, and that's it's like to get what you want. You get your Ph.D. And then let's say that you work for a technology company on the leading edge of your field. Bottom line: you want to accomplish something innovative. But what's it like to be on the leading edge? When I was at Intel, I saw my friend Todd work long hours on 3 major projects and each time, the Marketing Department came and said that that's not what the customers wanted anymore. Or, people would work feverishly on a computer chip only to get done and then start working on the next computer chip that's supposed to beat the one you just did. It's tough, but you stay in it. Why would you stay in this? Because you want power. That's just the cost, and one day you'll achieve what you're really after, right? Let's say that after a lifetime of this, you die still wanting power. You stand before Jesus. Jesus will ask you, 'Do you want me? I gave you multiple opportunities to give your life to me, and to let me satisfy you.' And you'll say, 'No. I wanted a nice car. I wanted to eat out whenever and wherever I wanted to. I wanted to make myself comfortable. In fact, you were the impediment to me getting what I really wanted because you called me to be loving and generous and dependent on you. Jesus, you prevented me from getting what I want. I really wanted power, to be my own person, and not your lackey, your servant.' Jesus will say, 'That's true, and I am still requiring you to give that up. But there's more. You still want power. You still want money. You still want fame. You still want to try to be your own person. You're not speaking in the past tense; you're speaking in the present tense. This is not just who you were, it's who you are. After living for so long like that, you're not showing any sign of changing now. You're even more bitter with me now than you were before. So I'll let you keep pursuing what you want to pursue. And for all eternity you will do two things. (1) First, you will compete with all the other people who want the same thing you do. You will devour each other. And second, (2) you will hear the sound of my voice calling you in love. But you will feel like I'm a stalker, a nosy neighbor at your window, always trying to get in, never leaving you alone.'

PRINCIPLE: Hell will be like that. What they want will be denied them, absolutely and utterly, because God in His truth cannot tolerate any lies or addictions. So for people in hell, the love of Jesus is torment and torture. It's not just what might be going on among people. The most serious thing is what's going on with God. People in hell love a false self, they worship a false god, and they will still want what is false even though it is utterly denied them. The only reality that will be available is God's reality.

EXPOSITION: There are other passages that indirectly confirm this idea. On at least two occasions, Jesus told the parable of the king who gave his three servants different levels of money while he took an important trip (Mt.25:14 – 30; Lk.19:11 – 27). During that absence, the first and second servants doubled the money they were given. The third servant, however, did not even do the simple thing of putting the money in the bank and earning interest on it for his master. His explanation was, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed.' There is an element of truth in the third servant's perception of the master. The master is indeed someone who reaps where he does not sow and gathers where he scattered no seed, precisely because he entrusts the privilege of reaping and scattering to his servants; it is a *privilege*. But this third servant views it as grossly unfair and rejects the privilege of partnering with his master in this way. Thus, his perception of the master is a twisted parody of reality. He thinks of the master as hard and exacting. For those who view God as hard and exacting, they will continue to do so, even though from God's perspective, He is simply calling out to them in love for continued partnership.

Father Michael Himes, a Jesuit professor at Boston College, writes:

Of course, the question of punishment, i.e. of hell and damnation will arise in many people's minds, and quite rightly. But damnation does not mean that God ceases to love the one damned. If that were true, then the sinner would be more powerful than God, since the sinner would have the power to make God, who is love, *agape*, something less than God. No, God's love is constant, unchanging and perfect. Damnation means that the sinner refuses finally and absolutely to accept being loved and to love in response. The damned may not love God, but God continues to love the damned. After all, the love of God is what holds us in existence. If God does not love you, you're not damned. You simply aren't. What supports our existence and holds us in being is God's love. We exist by the fact that God gives God's self to us at every moment. Therefore, of course, God

loves the damned. God loves everything that exists just because it exists. Indeed, that is what makes it exist: God loves it into being.

Let me give you an image which comes from Gregory of Nyssa at the end of the fourth century. The difference between heaven and hell is described in this story he tells: Picture yourself walking out on a bright sunny day with healthy eyes. You will experience the sunlight as something wonderful and pleasant and beneficent. Now, picture yourself walking out on exactly the same bright sunny day, but with a diseased eye. You will now experience the sunlight as something terrible and painful and awful, something to shy away from. Well, the sun didn't change. You did.

That is the point about heaven and hell. Heaven and hell are exactly the same thing: the love of God. If you have always wanted the love of God, congratulations, you got heaven. If you don't want the love of God, too bad, you are stuck for all eternity. God remains God. God makes the sun shine on the just and the unjust, the rain fall on the good and the wicked. If you don't want rain or sun, too bad, you are still going to get them. The question is not that God changes in response to us. It is that we are judged by our response to the absoluteness of God's self gift. (Michael Himes, S.J., *Doing the Truth in Love*, p.14 – 15)

PRINCIPLE: And Emile Durkheim said, 'To pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness.' But Jesus still sees the true self God created, and he can only interact with reality. He will either ignore your façade or be angry with it. So for that person, it will feel like torture. And they will spend eternity in eternal self-destruction. They love a false self that they invent: someone independent and freewheeling, or moral and upright on their own strength, or someone who is absolutely important and central to someone else's life. But God loves the self He created and loves. So God gives them existence because He loves them. Hell is God's refusal to let go. And He will constantly call to the people in hell to turn back to Him and love Him, but they won't.

EXPOSITION: You might say, but wait! In the Revelation 20 passage we just read, there is the phrase 'according to their deeds.' Isn't that saying Jesus weighs your deeds and sees if they are good enough? So aren't heaven and hell a reward and punishment for what we did? I don't think so. That's not what it is. Jesus looks at your deeds, yes, but he'll look through them and ask, 'Well, what does this tell me about your heart? What did you really want in life?' Because your deeds show what you pursued, what you followed, what you wanted. Jesus will look at your deeds and say, 'Well, what did you do in life, because that's what you'll get to do for all of Eternity. It's not what you deserve. It's what you want.'

EXPOSITION: In John's Gospel, we see that the ultimate result of rejecting Jesus is self-negation. In John 18 – 19, sin is expressed in terms of self-negation. Jesus, when he was arrested, boldly stated his identity and said three times, 'I am' (John 18:5, 6, 8). But Simon Peter, Pilate, and the Jews negate their own identity. Simon Peter, while trying to follow Jesus into the courtyard of the trial, was confronted by people who suspected him of being a follower of Jesus, and he said three times, 'I am not' (John 18:17, 25, and implicitly in v.27). Pilate, when Jesus was standing right in front of him, should have cared about truth in legal proceedings, but said in abdication, 'What is truth?' (John 19:38) The Jews, who cried out at every Passover that they had no king but God, said, 'We have no king but Caesar' (John 19:16). I believe this pattern of self-negation is at the heart of sin and therefore represents what will happen to those in hell.

EXPOSITION: In the Bible, how does God respond to people who reject Him? In Romans 1, Paul describes a temporary expression of God's wrath (Romans 1:18). He says three times in Romans 1:21 – 32 that God 'gives them [i.e. people] over' to their own choices, and they reap the consequences. Because God is life itself, when people turn away from Him, things experience death a little. In the Bible, whenever people spurn God and turn away from Him, God gives us what we want. What's so unfair about that? So when Adam and Eve essentially say, 'Forget God, we'll take the fruit and do what He told us not to because we want to be Gods in our own right,' God says, 'Ok,' and He withdrew His presence. And then things started to die. In Israel's history, after God rescued them out of Egypt and brought them to a mountain, He said, 'Come up to meet me on the mountain.' (Exodus 19) The Israelites said, 'No, we don't want You that close,' so God said, 'Ok.' And instead of meeting with them face to face, He withdrew His presence and said, 'I will not meet with you face to face. I will only be among you in the special tent called

the Tabernacle.’ And Israel suffered from being distant from God. But now, God has entered into human form as Jesus. He’s entered humanity itself, making Jesus the only place God and humanity are fully together, *so humanity has nowhere to hide anymore*. Jesus is humanity’s destiny and purpose. Anyone who rejects Jesus is trying to reject God’s ultimate purpose, which is union with Himself.

EXPOSITION: Later in Romans, Paul gives instructions to Christians on how to love their enemies. This passage is really important. ^{Romans 12:17} Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. ¹⁹ Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. ²⁰ But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing so you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Paul is concatenating Proverbs 20:22, 24:29, and 25:21. The point here is that God will take vengeance on those who do violence to the Christians, but that vengeance will be precisely *by God working in and through the Christians showing love to the aggressors*. Love given in response to hate will feel like burning coals on one’s head. That means that ‘the wrath of God’ is also the love of God. Paul is not saying, ‘Christians cannot do evil, but God can.’ Instead, God’s love is also God’s wrath if a person attempts to refuse it.

EXPOSITION: Paul says in his second letter to the Thessalonians, ‘These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord [Jesus] and from the glory of His power.’ (2 Th.1:9) But even though He allows people to turn away from Him, He continues to love even those who reject Him. That’s why people are not simply extinguished and snuffed out. Their destruction is eternal and ongoing, but here’s the important thing: They are destroying themselves. It’s not so much that God ‘puts’ people into hell, but that hell is a condition of being that people have rejected Jesus so deeply that they continue to reject Jesus even while he is loving them. Even though they run from Jesus all the time, they will still hear his voice, sense his call, and know that he is chasing them. They will know that in the depth of their being, God has laid hold of them, made a claim on them, and refuses to let go or give them up to blissful non-existence. But to them, it will not feel like love. It will feel like the raging jealousy of a jilted lover.

ILLUSTRATION: I’m going to belabor this point because I want to make sure you understand it. The scary thing is that people in hell will keep rejecting Jesus. Let’s say you or someone you know wants to be the center of attention for someone else. What that means is that you never learned to be loved by Jesus, and you never surrendered your self-centeredness to him in order to be genuinely loving towards others. You saw Jesus as a silly hindrance to the more important goal of being important to someone else. You’ll keep making that decision. So you’ll ultimately be with people who are just the same way, and you will be locked in eternal combat with them. Each of you will try to get something from the others. But everyone will be too empty and selfish to give anything. And at the same time, Jesus will be calling you to make him the center of your life, not your false picture of yourself. But you will look at heaven and laugh at Jesus; you’ll be glad that you’re not with him because you’re so bitter at him for asking you to give that up. You’ll be bitter at him because you’ll think he’s the one thwarting you. And all the while, you will live in a false hope that is forever frustrated. You will never be satisfied. You will burn with unquenched desire. The choice to turn to Jesus will be ever before you, and freely offered, but the hearts of people in hell are locked from the inside. You will refuse to let Jesus in.

ILLUSTRATION: For some of you, or for some people you know, you will see Jesus in heaven and say, ‘I really just wanted to put myself first. No one else did that for me when I was growing up, so I didn’t want to put you first in my life. I wanted to take charge. I’m apathetic about everything else because I’m first.’ Jesus will say, that’s what you wanted, and that is what you continue to want. He wants you to put him first. But you want to be first, and you’re still bitter about the fact that Jesus is opposed to that. So you sealed your fate. What can he do? Except leave you to do what you want, along with all the other people who also want to put themselves first.’ Imagine what that’s like. Oxford professor C.S. Lewis (The Great Divorce) envisioned hell as a suburb that keeps on getting bigger and bigger because people keep moving farther and farther away from each other. The gates of hell are locked from the inside.

How we experience God and His love for us in Jesus depends on *our posture*. The Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition views it this way, and I think it makes much more sense. Again, God does not hate

people in hell. He continues to love them with His brutally honest, piercing and transformative love, *and that is what makes it hell to them.*

The Central Questions

Let me flesh out the fourth portion of our time together, though. What are the major questions that result from understanding heaven and hell?

First, the objections that some people put up don't stand. Is God unfair or unloving or unjust by having hell? No. Hell is not the infinite justice of God. It is his infinite love, truthful and ruthlessly relentless love.

Secondly, God ultimately gives us what we *want*. It's not about whether we're morally good enough. Heaven and hell are not primarily rewards and punishments. They are simply extensions of what's happening in our hearts right now. They are what we want. The reward for following Jesus is...Jesus! It's not ice cream. In the same way, the consequence of sin is...the sin. It's terrible.

But if we don't come to Jesus, what happens to all our desires? For a while, we become very good at satisfying our desires on our own in our own self-centered ways. But then it starts happening. We start to not like interruptions and uncertainty. We don't like it when other people ask us to be flexible, or to give up something. We hate not getting our way. We start to become rigid about how life must be for us. And by the time we're old, our self-centeredness rules us. We become addicted to something that is an illusion. And we view God as the one who denies us the thing to which we are addicted. That is hell.

And that's why I would encourage you to investigate Jesus now, while you're young. Do you ever notice that when a person gets old, it's really hard for them to change? That's because as you get older, your choices have shaped you. You become more and more yourself. If you're grumpy and cranky as old people, it probably means that you started to become grumpy and cranky as young people – it's just that they had more ways of hiding it when they were younger. Or they had ways of making it funny. If they are arrogant and self-centered when they're old, it probably means that they started to become arrogant and self-centered when they were young; it's just that they had ways of working with it or making it funny. As you get older, you show who you are. It's the same thing that happens with your desires. The way you deal with your desires, over time, becomes rigid. It comes to the point where it seems like you can no longer control yourself. So heaven and hell are simply places where you get what you want, and that starts now.

If you think that you can just 'choose Jesus right before you die,' you are totally self-deceived. That's not even a sincere, genuine seeking of truth. The issue is that you will eventually become a person who will not choose Jesus. You're already choosing against him in favor of other things. And just like the two brothers who stole from my wife and me, it becomes harder and harder to choose out of those things and step into the light.

Some of you may be starting to see yourself more clearly now. You may even call yourself a Christian now, but let's forget about labels and what you think you can label yourself in order to not be reflective. Let's talk about what's in your heart. What do you want? Is it Jesus and what he is doing in the world? The central fact of heaven is the throne of Jesus right smack in the middle. The garden and all the good stuff is only the result of that. Do you want Jesus to be lord, absolutely with no ifs ands or buts? Or do you really want something else? Ask yourself not, 'What are the physical qualities of heaven and do I like them?' because of course you'd answer yes. Ask yourself, 'What are the relational qualities of heaven and do I like them?' Do you like the idea of Jesus being king? Who is Jesus? And do you want him? That is the central question.

If you have friends and family who do not know Jesus, we have to pray for them. We've got to allow Jesus to love them through us. Because the stakes are high and because Jesus wants them. College is a critical time in people's lives, and we have to bring Jesus to people on this campus because time is short. And we cannot downplay Jesus being on the throne. Jesus is not our little advisor, or a life insurance policy that we keep in our back pocket. He approaches people as king, and he wants to dethrone us from our own little

thrones because that's the only way he can heal us of our self-centeredness. Remember, the central fact of heaven is that Jesus is on the throne. Everything else is just details.

Summarize chart

From: External Punishment	To: Internal Self-Destruction
Hell as a concept starts from self and culture – what is punishment like (e.g. prison system)?	Hell as a concept starts from Jesus – what is Jesus like? What is it mean to be human like him?
Punishment comes externally, upon you <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Objects you like are denied you (ice cream) • Objects you hate are thrust on you (needles) 	Punishment comes internally, from within you <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You dislike Jesus and all else • You are addicted to what is now impossible
It is against your will	It is with your will, and your will is the problem
You desire escape and relief	You desire love of your own construction – never ending desire that is never satisfied
Hell is God's infinite justice	Hell is trying to remove yourself from God's infinite love
<p>People will emphasize Scriptures about external descriptions of hell</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revelation 20:10 And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever...¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. • Matthew's description of 'outer darkness with weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 	<p>Scriptures emphasized are the 'human heart' passages and 'God's way of relating' passages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Romans 1:24 Therefore God gave them over...²⁶ For this reason God gave them over...²⁸ And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over... • Jeremiah 2:19 'Your own wickedness will correct you, and your apostasies will reprove you; know therefore and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the LORD your God, and the dread of Me is not in you,' declares the Lord GOD of hosts. • Romans 12:17 Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.¹⁹ Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord.²⁰ But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing so you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

What one step are you going to take this week to increase your desire for Jesus, if you say you're a Christian, or for truth if you're not? When you exercise, you develop your capacity for more exercise. When you eat healthy, you develop a taste for healthy food, so you can eat more. So what one thing are you going to do this week to increase your desire for Jesus and your capacity to choose him, or your desire for truth and your capacity to choose truth?

APPENDIX A:

Having this understanding means that we can see God more clearly. In western culture, we are used to thinking of God like this:

God

Love some

Hate others

But what I'm saying is that God is not two different things. God is one thing. He is love. Like this:

God

Love all in truth, in Jesus

How we experience God and His love for us in Jesus depends on our posture. The Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition views it this way, and I think it makes much more sense. Again, God does not hate people in hell. He continues to love them with His brutally honest, piercing and transformative love, and that is what makes it hell to them.

On February 11, 2008, comedian Stephen Colbert had Stanford psychologist Dr. Philip Zimbardo on his show, and they talked about heaven and hell. <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report/videos/149094/february-11-2008/philip-zimbardo>. Starting from 3 minutes and 25 seconds on that clip, here is their dialogue:

Zimbardo: Why did the devil make Adam and Eve eat the apple?

Colbert: Because he disobeyed the authority of God. He was non-conformist, doing his own thing, letting it all hang out, did not want to serve the ultimate authority like you say he shouldn't. I'm sorry, the title of your book turns the argument on its head.

Zimbardo: Oh no no no no no no no no

Colbert: Oh yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes

Zimbardo: Lucifer is God's favorite angel –

Colbert: Until he disobeys

Zimbardo: But why does he disobey? Because God says, "I have just created this perfect creature, Adam, and everybody has to obey him." And Lucifer says, "Wait a minute. He's a mortal. Mortals are corruptible. We're angels. I refuse. And that's disobedience to authority. So the reason Lucifer, as the devil, seduced Adam is to say 'God, I'm right and you're wrong. This guy is corruptible. He's not somebody we should respect. He is just an ordinary mortal.'"

Colbert: But in that case, Lucifer was right

Zimbardo: Lucifer was right and God was wrong. If God was into reconciliation, He would have said, "I made a mistake." Ok. God created hell. Paradoxically, it was God who created hell as a place for Lucifer and the fallen angels. And had He not created hell, then evil would not exist. So you would not have the sense...

Colbert: Evil exists because of the disobedience of Satan. God gave Satan, the angels, and man free will. Satan used his free will and abused it by not obeying authority. Hell was created by Satan's disobedience to

God and his purposeful removal from God's love, which is what hell is: removing yourself from God's love. You send yourself to hell. God does not send you there.

Zimbardo: Obviously, you learned well in Sunday School.

Colbert: I teach Sunday School, mother****er!

Hilarious. I agree so much with Colbert there. The only thing I would change is to say that hell is God's love. But otherwise, I wholeheartedly agree.