

# Hell as the Love of God

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# Defining Heaven: Self-Centered Rewards?



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# Defining Hell: Self-Centered Fears?



# Defining Hell: Self-Centered Fears?



# The Problem

- You can't start with yourself and your current desires
- Your desires are messed up
- God is actually trying to fix your desires

# Hell

- ‘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...

# Hell

- '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...



# Hell

- ‘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...

# Hell

- ‘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

# Really? What's the Evidence?

- Scripture
- Church History

# Hell: What It's Like

- Throw them into the **furnace of fire**; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:42)
- Throw him into the **outer darkness**; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 22:13)
- Throw out the worthless slave into the **outer darkness**; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 25:30)

# Hell: What It's Like

- <sup>20:12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>Then death and Hades were thrown into the **lake of fire**. This is the second death, the **lake of fire**. <sup>15</sup>And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the **lake of fire**. (Revelation 20:12 – 15)

# Hell: What It's Like

- <sup>14:9</sup> Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, 'If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, <sup>10</sup> he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with **fire and brimstone** in the presence of the holy angels and **in the presence of the Lamb**. (Revelation 14:9 – 10)

# Hell: What It's Like

- Hell: fiery or dark?
- Either 'fire' and/or 'darkness' must be *literary*, not literal
- This is true also for the name 'Jesus' being written on our foreheads in the new heavens/earth

# New Heaven/Earth: What It's Like

- <sup>22:1</sup> Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of [Jesus], <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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; <sup>4</sup> they will see His face, and **His name will be on their foreheads.** <sup>5</sup> 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.



# Hell: Why It's Like That

- Fire is used to separate impure metals from precious metals (e.g. refiner's fire)
- Fire is symbolic in Scripture of God's *refining* judgment (Dt.4:24; 5:24 – 25; Ps.21:9; 29:7; 50:3; Isa.29:6; 30:27 and 30; Neh.9:12; Heb 12:29)

# Hell: Why It's Like That

- What is God refining out of us?
  - The corruption in human nature
  - Through Jesus' new humanity and his Spirit
  - With our willing partnership

# Hell: Why It's Like That

- For example, in Israel's Temple sacrifices, some animals were consumed with fire
  - That symbolized God consuming the corrupted part of us
  - It was like a circumcision, cutting something away

# Hell: Why It's Like That

- Before you ask the question, 'What is hell like?' you must ask the question, 'What does sin do to us?'
  - Sin makes your experience of the love of God a burning torment (Romans 12:17 – 21)
  - Sin is your attempt to negate the true self God created and loves (John 18 – 19)
    - Simon Peter: 'I am not'
    - Pontius Pilate: 'What is truth?'
    - Jewish leaders: 'We have no king but Caesar'

# Hell: Why It's Like That

- ‘For one and the same God [who blesses those who believe] inflicts blindness upon those who do not believe, but who set Him at naught; just as the sun, which is a creature of His, [blinds] those who, by reason of any weakness of the eyes cannot behold his light; but to those who believe in Him and follow Him, He grants a fuller and greater illumination of mind.’
  - Irenaeus of Lyon, 2nd century (*Against Heresies* 4.29.1; cf. 4.39.1 – 4)

# Hell: Why It's Like That

- ‘...the sun, by one and the same power of its heat, melts wax indeed, but dries up and hardens mud not that its power operates one way upon mud, and in another way upon wax; but that the qualities of mud and wax are different, although according to nature they are one thing, both being from the earth.’
  - Origen of Alexandria, 3<sup>rd</sup> century (*De Principiis*, book 3, chapter 1 ‘On the Freedom of the Will’, paragraph 11)

# Hell: Why It's Like That

- 'God is good, dispassionate, and immutable...Thus to say that God turns away from the wicked is like saying that the sun hides itself from the blind.'
- Anthony the Great, 3<sup>rd</sup> century, Egyptian monk and founder of monasticism (*Philokalia*, Vol.1: On the Character of Men, 150)

# Hell: Why It's Like That

- ‘God is the sun of justice, as it is written, who shines rays of goodness on simply everyone. The soul develops according to its free will into either wax because of its love for God or into mud because of its love for matter. Thus just as by nature the mud is dried out by the sun and the wax is automatically softened, so also every soul which loves matter and the world and has fixed its mind far from God is hardened as mud according to its free will and by itself advances to its perdition, as did Pharaoh. However, every soul which loves God is softened as wax, and receiving divine impressions and characters it becomes the dwelling place of God in the Spirit.’
  - Maximus Confessor, 7<sup>th</sup> cent, *Chapters on Knowledge*, par.12



# Hell: Why It's Like That

- ‘The sorrow which takes hold of the heart which has sinned against love, is more piercing than any other pain. It is not right to say that the sinners in hell are deprived of the love of God...But love acts in two different ways, as suffering in the reprovéd, and as joy in the blessed.’
  - Isaac the Syrian, 8<sup>th</sup> century (Cited in Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p.234; and Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p.181 – 82)

# Hell: Why It's Like That

- 'Hell is in heaven and heaven is in hell. But the angels see only the light, and devils only the darkness.'
  - Jakob Boehme (1575 – 1624)

# Hell: Why It's Like That

- Who believes this?
  - The earliest Christians
  - The entire Eastern Orthodox church
  - C.S. Lewis (Anglican), *The Great Divorce*
  - Karl Barth (Reformed), *Church Dogmatics*
  - Hans Urs von Balthazar (Catholic)
  - T.F. Torrance (Reformed), *Atonement*
  - Donald Bloesch (Reformed), *The Last Things*

# Hell: Why It's Like That

The dove descending breaks the air  
With flame of incandescent terror  
Of which the tongues declare  
The one discharge from sin and error.  
The only hope, or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre-  
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

# Hell: Why It's Like That

Who then devised the torment? Love.

Love is the unfamiliar Name

Behind the hands that wove

The intolerable shirt of flame

Which human power cannot remove.

We only live, only suspire

Consumed by either fire or fire.

- T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

# Two Views of Hell

## Legal: Prison Sentence

- God's wrath – like a judge
- God hates you, punishes you by throwing you into a prison or torture chamber
- You desire to be with God, but He says no
- Hell is against your desires
- Hell is infinite justice

## Medical: Addiction Treatment

- God's wrath – like a surgeon
- God hates the 'cancer' in you, denies your addiction, demands you let him perform the surgery
- You desire to be without God, but He says no
- Hell is your desires
- Hell is infinite love

# Two Views of Hell

## Legal: Prison Sentence

- Scriptures Emphasized: What it's like
- **Fire** (Matthew, Rev.20)
- **Outer darkness** (Matthew)

## Medical: Addiction Treatment

- Scriptures Emphasized: Why it's like that
- **Jesus is healing human nature** (Mt.15:18 – 20; Dt.30:6; Jer.31:31 – 34; Ezk.36:26 – 36; Ps.51:9 – 10)
- **God's wrath is against the corruption in us, the source of our sin** (Rom.1:18; 7:14 – 8:4)
- **Sin is addiction and self-destruction** (Jn.18 – 19; Rom.1:21 – 32; Jer.2:19)

# Really! Here's the Evidence

- Scripture
- Church History



# Hell: Is There an Urgency?

- *Apathetic Dawdler*: I actually like what you're saying here, because I feel like there's not a rush for me to come to Jesus!
- *Me*: What do you mean?
- *Apathetic Dawdler*: I mean that you're not threatening me with hell. Other Christians would try to make me feel scared that I could die on my car ride home, and then I'd be in hell because I didn't accept Jesus right here, right now. So you make it sound like I have a lot of time.

# Hell: Is There an Urgency?

- *Me:* Well, I think there is still a real urgency to looking into Jesus now. Do you think you can live a self-centered life, and then when you're old and on your deathbed, you can accept Jesus?
- *Apathetic Dawdler:* Exactly!
- *Me:* But what makes you think you will become the type of person who will want to give your life to Jesus later, if all you want now is more time to yourself?
- *Apathetic Dawdler:* What? Why? Won't it be easy?

# Hell: Is There an Urgency?

- *Me*: No. Because self-centeredness is addicting. The brokenness in your human nature will become addicted to self-centeredness, self-flattery, self-justifying, self-indulgence, self-importance, and so on. So if that is how you are training your human nature to respond to Jesus, when you meet him, you will probably look at all eternity stretched out in front of you and say, 'Jesus, what's the rush? You've got lots of time in this eternity. How about 10,000 more years of freedom for me, and then I'll accept you?'
- *Apathetic Dawdler*: Say, that's right! I'm going to use that with him. See, there is no rush. [smiles]

# Hell: Is There an Urgency?

- *Me*: There is a rush, actually. Not a rush because your life might be cut short by a car crash, but a rush because you are shaping your own human nature and your own desires to become more and more sinful.
- *Apathetic Dawdler*: Why is that?
- *Me*: Imagine that you're an alcoholic. And that one day you stand before Jesus and say, 'I'd like alcohol.' Jesus will say, 'I don't have alcohol here for you. But because I love you, I am offering you a human nature that is healed of alcoholism and responsive instead to God the Father. Do you want to receive it?' If you're addicted to alcohol, what will you answer?

# Hell: Is There an Urgency?

- *Apathetic Dawdler*: That's a good question. If I'm an addict, I would probably say, 'I don't want what you have. Give me what *I* want.'
- *Me*: Absolutely. So what's your addiction?
- *Apathetic Dawdler*: What?
- *Me*: I think you are already pretty addicted to your own self-centeredness. And Jesus will say, 'I'm not here to let you be self-centered. Because I love you, I am offering you a human nature that is healed of self-centeredness and responsive to God the Father. Do you want to receive it?'

# Hell: Is There an Urgency?

- *Apathetic Dawdler:* Wait a minute. You're saying Jesus only gives us a healed human nature? I thought he gives us a reward for just believing in him.
- *Me:* As if heaven is a place you can eat ice cream and not get fat? Or a place where you'll get whatever you want right now?
- *Apathetic Dawdler:* Right!

# Hell: Is There an Urgency?

- *Me*: That's not it at all. That would make Jesus just a middleman to something else people really want, which is not him, but ice cream instead. The problem is that we don't desire the right things. So heaven cannot be what we currently want, raised to the nth degree. Neither is hell what we currently hate, raised to the nth degree. Heaven and hell are not defined by *us*. They are defined by *Jesus*. Jesus is giving us good desires from his own self. He shares his human nature, and his desires. Heaven is the state of receiving him for those of us who want him. Hell is the state of being around him when you don't want to be, of him denying what you want, and then chasing you when you want him to stop.

# Hell: Is There an Urgency?

- *Apathetic Dawdler:* What if we don't want what *he* wants?
- *Me:* Well, then for all eternity, he will never give up on calling you out, calling you to give up your addictions and your very self, and calling you to him. He'll be a stalker to you, saying, 'Hey, I love you. You were made for me. Give up whatever else you want. I am here for you.'
- *Apathetic Dawdler:* Yeah, that does sound stalker-ish.
- *Me:* That, my friend, is hell. It's being chased around forever by this Jesus who loves you, and can change you, but you don't want him because you're addicted to something else. Then, every step he takes towards you will just push you further and further away. Except that you can't hide. You can't escape from him.



# Hell: Is There an Urgency?

- *Apathetic Dawdler*: Dude, that sounds terrible.
- *Me*: Well, it would be if you believe that you are fine, and that you've basically got everything you need.
- *Apathetic Dawdler*: This is complicated. So you're saying that I actually can't trust myself completely.
- *Me*: That's right. You can't trust yourself completely because you're not okay. The longer you let your desires go on your own, the harder it might be for you to give your life to Jesus. And one day, it might be too late. We are all not just human beings, but human *becomings*.
- *Apathetic Dawdler*: So you think I'm headed for hell, too?

# Hell: Is There an Urgency?

- *Me*: I think you are *becoming* someone who would experience the love of Jesus as hell, because you're so apathetic, and Jesus wants you to be as loving as he is.
- *Apathetic Dawdler*: [silence]
- *Me*: Don't you look back on your life and see how apathy, lack of love, has hurt other people in your life? Hurt you? The question is whether you want to be in touch with the God of love. Maybe you'd like to read a short and surprisingly fun book by C.S. Lewis about why people in hell want to stay there (it's called *The Great Divorce*), and talk about it with me?