

Big Questions About
GOD

**Contrasting the
Earliest Christian Theology
With High Federal Calvinist Theology
&
Why It Matters**



THE ANÁSTASIS CENTER
FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION & MINISTRY

Mako A. Nagasawa

*Big Questions About God:
Contrasting the Earliest Christian Theology with High Federal Calvinist Theology
& Why It Matters*

Revision 2.7

Copyright © April 2014 by Mako A. Nagasawa. All rights reserved.

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®,
copyright © 1960,1962,1963,1968,1971,1972,1973,1975,1977,1995
by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Table of Contents

Introduction: Knowing God and Making Him Known	4
Question: Who Caused This Mess?	6
Question: Jesus Saves... But Who? From What?	9
Question: Can a Loving God Have a Hell?	13
Question: What About People Who Died Before Jesus or Before Hearing About Him?	17
Question: Did God Predestine Some People to Hell?	21
Question: Why Does God Want Me to Worship Him?	24
Question: What's My Motivation to Obey Jesus' Teaching?	26
Question: How Does God the Father Feel Towards Me?	33
Question: Should We Use Retributive or Restorative Justice in the Criminal Justice System?	35
Question: Should Our Economic System Prioritize the Principle of Meritocratic-Retributive or Restorative Justice?	38

Introduction: Knowing God and Making Him Known

Why This Particular Theological Comparison?

There are a few reasons for making this comparison between the earliest Christian theology (which is still held by the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions, along with some Protestants) and Reformed theology, which generally looks to John Calvin, with some exceptions.¹ First, it highlights my own personal journey theologically. I was drawn to Calvinist theology initially, in my early 20's, because it tried to place doctrine and teaching in an orderly and consistent way. But the places of disorder and inconsistency troubled me. Chance encounters with early church scholars were intriguing and ultimately, very helpful. I seek to show why.

Second, on a related note, most Protestants look back at church history as if it is worth very little. In Protestant circles, there is a popular tendency to see the history of Christianity in five points: (1) Jesus, (2) Paul, (3) the canonization of the New Testament, (4) the rediscovery of the Bible by Martin Luther and John Calvin, and (5) ourselves. We are generally ignorant of, for example, Irenaeus, Athanasius, the origin of the Nicene Creed, Maximus Confessor, and John of Damascus.

Third, I met non-Christian students who are not satisfied by the answers they have heard from Christians shaped by the Calvinist tradition on questions about hell, predestination, the importance of Jesus, the character of God, the motivations for spiritual growth, and so on. I also meet people who have turned away (or are about to do so) from Jesus and the church because of deep concerns about Calvinist doctrine. I also meet people who have little understanding of theology as a formal discipline, who want to grow in love for Jesus as sincerely as they can. To all these people and more, I would like to offer them the theological tradition I have found most helpful for my own growth emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. Many others have found it helpful, too.

Theology is like a Map

C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* likens theology to a map. When you travel, or offer directions, you want a map that is as faithful to the reality as possible. After all, if you have a bad map, you could get lost or drive right off a cliff. Good maps have been worked and reworked by many over the years. If you just relied on your own experience, then that's really limited; how much of the world can you experience yourself? You need to rely on other people's experience as well.

Some say that theology is just a bunch of words that we argue about. Lewis says that, on the one hand, that is correct: A map is not the reality itself but only verbal expressions attempting to describe the reality. We worship and relate to *God*. And God cannot be reduced to words on a page. But, on the other hand, some statements are better at describing reality than others. Those statements have real value that will help us take a journey with God, into the activity and presence of God Himself.

Theology is like a Puzzle

When you put together a jigsaw puzzle, you know that moving one piece around means that you will have to move a few other pieces around. Theology is the same way. Like a jigsaw puzzle, Christian theology is a disciplined way of thinking where placing one piece will have repercussions on all other pieces. We will see how the pieces fit together as we go.

¹ Evangelical Calvinism, or Scottish Presbyterianism, exemplified by Karl Barth and T.F. Torrance, to whom I am greatly indebted, holds itself distinct from high federal Calvinism. See Myk Habets and Bobby Grow, *Evangelical Calvinism: Essays Resourcing the Continuing Reformation of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012). Understanding the debate about who is the proper heir of John Calvin is very worthwhile. Bobby Grow maintains a blog at: <https://growrag.wordpress.com/>.

How to Use This Booklet

Each section of this booklet starts off with a practical, relevant question. This is to help ‘prime the pump’ and get you thinking. Feel free to pause and discuss those questions if you are part of a group discussion, or just briefly reflect on how you would answer those questions. Then, read the Scripture(s) listed. Think about how you have heard those Scriptures interpreted, and how you are reading it today.

On the next page of each section, there will be a comparison of views. I list early church theologians in the left hand column. I list high federal Calvinist theologians in the right hand column. Compare and contrast the quotations, as the interpretations of the Scripture(s), or attempts to answer the practical question(s).

For more information, or help leading a group discussion, continue reading. Most sections have notes for leaders facilitating a discussion. Of course, you can read through the notes yourself if you are doing some self-study.

Please note that the quotes are thoroughly footnoted. At any time, double check the references if you’d like to see the context from which these quotations come. Please also note that there are some denominational and campus ministry organizations’ doctrinal statements cited. Consider what this would mean for how evangelism, spiritual formation, social justice, etc. would be done in an actual church or campus ministry organization.

Question: Who Caused This Mess?

Relevance – Questions for Discussion

- There's a lot of evil in the world; at whom should we be mad?
- If God caused human evil at the beginning, doesn't that mean He could do it again in the future, to accomplish something else? Can we trust this God?
- Is God the source of human evil? Is God partly evil?
- When we try to heal human evil, are we fighting God? Why not be fatalistic and give up?

Scripture and the Interpreters

- 'Through one man [i.e. Adam] sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned' (Romans 5:12)

<p>Humans Caused Evil by Abusing Free Will: Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (130 – 202 AD)</p> <p>‘God made man a <i>free [agent]</i> from the beginning, possessing his own power, even as he does his own soul, to obey the behests of God voluntarily, and <i>not by compulsion of God</i>. For there is <i>no coercion</i> with God, but a good will [towards us] is present with Him continually. And therefore does He give good counsel to all. And in man, as well as in angels, He has placed the power of choice (for angels are rational beings), so that those who had yielded obedience might justly possess what is good, given indeed by God, but preserved by themselves...</p> <p>For <i>it is in man’s power to disobey God</i>, and to forfeit what is good... If then it were not in our power to do or not to do these things, what reason had the apostle, and much more the Lord Himself, to give us counsel to do some things, and to abstain from others? But because man is possessed of <i>free will</i> from the beginning, and God is possessed of free will, in whose likeness man was created, advice is always given to him to keep fast the good, which thing is done by means of obedience to God.’²</p>	<p>God Caused Evil Through Humans: John Calvin (1509 – 1564)</p> <p>‘God <i>not only foresaw</i> the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his posterity; but also <i>at his own pleasure arranged it</i>.’³</p> <p>‘Nothing is more absurd than to think anything at all is done but by the ordination of God....Every action and motion of every creature is <i>so governed</i> by the hidden counsel of God, that nothing can come to pass, but what was ordained by Him....The wills of men are <i>so governed by the will of God</i>, that they are carried on straight to the mark which He has fore-ordained.’⁴</p> <p>‘But if He did not will it, we could not do it. I admit this... I concede more – that thieves and murderers, and other evil-doers, <i>are instruments of Divine Providence</i>, being employed by the Lord himself to execute the Judgments which he has resolved to inflict. But I deny that this forms any excuse for their misdeeds.’⁵</p> <p>‘God does not merely passively permit such things by standing by and not stopping them. Rather, <i>he actively wills them</i> by ordaining them and then bringing them about, yet without himself thereby becoming the author of sin.’⁶</p>
--	---

² Irenaeus (130 – 200 AD), *Against Heresies*, book 4, chapter 37, paragraphs 1 – 4, see the whole chapter; cf. 4.4.3; 4.39; 5:37

³ John Calvin, *Institutes*, book 3, ch.23, section 7. I am aware of attempts to ‘nuance’ or ‘balance’ these statements, of course. At the very least, however, the question is whether Christians should feel the need to defend these statements in any sense.

⁴ *Ibid*, book 1, ch.16, section 3

⁵ *Ibid*, book 1, ch.17, section 5

⁶ John Piper and Justin Taylor, editors, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL: 2006), p.35, footnote 7

More Discussion Questions

1. Consider the following assessment of theology from a historical perspective, from church historian Jaroslav Pelikan:

‘It was the widespread belief of [the classical and Eastern] Christian theologians that Islam represented an out-and-out determinism. They saw in it the teaching that “God does whatever he wishes, and he is the cause of everything, both good and evil.” Christians made him the cause only of good, Muslims the cause of evil as well. This meant, of course, that God must also be “the cause of sin” according to the teachings of “the godless Mohammed.” From its beginnings, Christian anti-Muslim polemic denounced this as a notion that made God unjust. But God... could not be either an unjust judge or the author of evil... The implication of the Muslim position was that, since there were some who were not saved, God either did not want to save them or was not able to save them. Both possibilities were blasphemous in Christian eyes. The Christian alternative to such determinism was to assert the universal salvific will of God, but also to assert free will and responsibility in man.’⁷

2. If you wonder when Christian theology changed, the first main culprit is William of Ockham (1285 – 1347 AD), a Franciscan scholar born in Ockham near London. He is famous for contributing to philosophy ‘Ockham’s Razor’ – the idea that the simplest explanation should be considered the right one. He argued that the simplest explanation for all the things we observe in nature and history is the result of a God who is pure omnipotence, not governed by a Trinitarian nature of love. Philosopher R.J. Snell writes:

‘The main of scholasticism asserts that God is omnipotent but also rational, that is to say that God creates everything, and is entirely free in exercising the choice and the means to create, but that God is limited by his essence. Thus, a distinction is made between God’s absolute power (*potentia absoluta*) and God’s ordered and limited power (*potentia ordinata*) in which God cannot exercise absolute freedom but is limited by God’s own goodness and essence. God creates, then, because he is good, and what is good diffuses and communicates itself. Ockham, however, resists such a solution because it limits the power of God; if God is constrained by an essence or idea it is not simply the case that God has chosen to limit his *potentia absoluta* by an ordered choice, but rather that God’s *potentia absoluta* is not absolute at all and is limited by definition. Instead, Ockham accepts as a matter of faith that God is utterly omnipotent and utterly free and is not limited by anything, not even his own essence. God is free to do anything that is not self-contradictory, as Ockham writes: “I prove this first by the article of faith ‘I believe in God the Father almighty’, which I understand in the following sense: Anything is to be attributed to the divine power, when it does not contain a manifest contradiction.”’

‘If this interpretation is correct, it is perfectly understandable why God would be rejected, for God is no longer even desirable, and it is understandable why God is rejected with such vengeance by a Voltaire or a Nietzsche. Ockham creates an idol that threatens the welfare of humanity, and it is quite apparent why humanity will then attempt the destruction of this idol.’⁸

3. What questions does this leave you with? Keep them in mind as you explore the Scriptures ahead.

⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, volume 2: The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600 – 1700)* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p.234 – 5.

⁸ R.J. Snell, ‘Overcoming Omnipotence: The Crisis of Divine Freedom in Ockham and Descartes’, *Quodlibet Journal*: Vol.5, Number 1, January 2003; <http://www.quodlibet.net/articles/snell-freedom.shtml>; quoting William Ockham, *Philosophical Writings*, translated by Philotheus Boehner (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1990), p.26. Greek Orthodox philosopher Christos Yannaras also criticizes William of Ockham for moving Western theology and morality away from truly Trinitarian Christian thought; see his books *The Freedom of Morality* and *The Meaning of Reality*. See also the lecture by David Bentley Hart, *Nihilism and Freedom*, available on my website: [http://www.newhumanityinstitute.org/pdf-articles/David Bentley Hart Nihilism & Freedom.mp3](http://www.newhumanityinstitute.org/pdf-articles/David_Bentley_Hart_Nihilism_&_Freedom.mp3).

Question: Jesus Saves ... But Who? And From What?

Relevance – Questions for Discussion

- Why does everyone need to come to Jesus?
- What problem was Jesus solving? And for whom?
- Can you say to your non-Christian friend, ‘I know God loves *you*’? And, ‘I know Jesus died and rose for *you*’?

Scripture and the Interpreters

The following Scriptures highlight the central aspect of Christian theology, called ‘the atonement.’

God’s Desire to Save Everyone

- ‘Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked... For I have no pleasure in the death of *anyone* who dies. Therefore, repent and live.’ (Ezekiel 18:23, 32 – 33)
- ‘God our Savior...desires *all men* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.’ (1 Timothy 2:3 – 4)
- ‘The Lord is patient towards you, not wishing for *any* to perish but for *all* to come to repentance.’ (2 Peter 3:9)

Jesus Died to Save... Everyone?

- ‘He himself is the propitiation for our sins, and *not for ours only* but also *for those of the whole world*.’ (1 John 2:2).
- ‘*False teachers* were...denying the Master who bought *them*.’ (2 Peter 2:1).
- ‘The living God... is the Savior of *all men*, especially of believers’ (1 Timothy 4:10)... ‘bringing salvation to *all men*.’ (Titus 2:11)

From What Problem?

- ‘For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh [of Israel], God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, *He condemned sin in the flesh* [of Jesus]’ (Romans 8:3)

<p>Medical Framework (Earliest Tradition):</p> <p>Jesus Died to Kill the Disease in His Human Nature and Rose to Give Us His New Humanity</p> <p>Jesus was both doctor and patient. He acquired <i>our damaged human nature</i> when he was conceived. He fought against the <i>corruption of sin</i> in his own body, killing it at his death. In his resurrection, he raised his human nature cleansed, healed, and perfected in union with his divine nature. He now shares his new humanity with us by his Spirit, with no limitations from his side.</p> <p>‘Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent <i>corruption</i>, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun men came under the power of the <i>corruption</i>...No, repentance could not meet the case...Once man was in existence, and...demanded to be <i>healed</i>, it followed as a matter of course that the Healer and Savior should align Himself with those things that existed already, in order <i>to heal the existing evil</i>. For that reason, therefore, He was made man, and used the body as His human instrument.’⁹</p> <p>‘<i>Man, who had sin in himself</i>... was liable to death. For it behooved <i>Him who was to destroy sin</i>, and redeem man under the power of death, that <i>He should Himself be made that very same thing which he was, that is, man</i>; who had been drawn by sin into bondage, but was held by death, so that <i>sin should be destroyed by man</i>, and man should go forth from death... Thus, then, was the Word of God made man... God recapitulated <i>in Himself</i> the ancient formation of man, that <i>He might kill sin</i>, deprive death of its power, and vivify man...’¹⁰</p>	<p>Legal Framework (The Majority Protestant View):</p> <p>Jesus Died to Satisfy Divine Justice and Rose to Prove God Accepted His Sacrifice</p> <p>‘He lived a sinless life and voluntarily atoned for the sins of men by dying on the cross as their substitute, thus <i>satisfying divine justice</i> and accomplishing salvation for all who trust in Him alone.’¹¹</p> <p>‘God is both loving and just, and needed to resolve this conflict of attributes. He could not love us and forgive our sins without satisfying His justice. Therefore, Jesus took ‘on himself the <i>punishment</i> for the sins of all those who would ever turn from their sin and trust in him... He rose again from the dead, <i>showing that God accepted Christ’s sacrifice</i> and that <i>God’s wrath against us</i> had been <i>exhausted</i>.’¹²</p> <p>‘Sin against an infinite being demands an <i>infinite punishment in hell</i>. In a few hours, Jesus suffered and <i>exhausted the infinite punishment</i> that impenitent people cannot exhaust even after an eternity in hell. He could do this because, in His deity as the Son of God, He is an infinite being... On the cross He suffered the full wrath of God that is poured out in hell... the hopelessness of losing the gaze of His Father’s blessing and the torment of experiencing God’s wrath for the sins of His people.’¹³</p> <p>‘The Reformed position is that Christ died for the purpose of actually and certainly saving <i>the elect</i>, and the <i>elect only</i>... they are the only ones whom God has determined to save... It should also be noted that the doctrine that Christ died for the purpose of saving all men, logically leads to absolute universalism, that is, to the doctrine that all men are actually saved.’¹⁴</p>
--	---

⁹ Athanasius (296 – 373 AD), *On the Incarnation*, chapter 2, paragraph 7 and chapter 7, paragraph 44, emphasis mine

¹⁰ Irenaeus (130 – 200 AD), *Against Heresies*, book 3, chapter 18, paragraph 7, emphasis mine; see also 2.12.4; 3.18.1; 5.1.3; also called the recapitulation theory of the atonement based on Ephesians 1:9 – 10; and called the classical Christus Victor or physical theory of atonement

¹¹ *Cru Statement of Faith*, point 3; *Harvard College Faith and Action Constitution*, Article III, 1, point b (following parent organization Christian Union, point 3). Harvard University Fellowship is a ministry of the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) and stands on the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which says, ‘The Lord Jesus, by His perfect obedience, and sacrifice of Himself, which He through the eternal Spirit, once offered up unto God, *has fully satisfied the justice of His Father*; and purchased, not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, *for those whom the Father has given unto Him*.’ (*Westminster Confession*, chapter 8, paragraph 5)

¹² Mark Dever, Reformed pastor, 9Marks, <http://www.9marks.org/what-are-the-9marks/the-gospel>, emphasis mine

¹³ R.C. Sproul, *Christ’s Descent into Hell*, <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/christs-descent-into-hell/> last accessed December 10, 2013. Note that John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 2, chapter 16, paragraph 10 believed that Jesus descended into hell *after his death*: ‘If Christ had died only a bodily death, it would have been ineffectual. No — it was expedient at the same time for him to undergo the severity of God’s vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgment. For this reason, he must also grapple hand to hand with the armies of hell and the dread of everlasting death... No wonder, then, if he is said to have descended into hell, for he suffered the death that, God in his wrath had inflicted upon the wicked!’

More Discussion Questions

1. How does the wrath of a surgeon (against the cancer in your body) compare to the wrath of a courtroom judge (against you)? What's the difference? Which view of wrath more naturally fits the Scriptures?
2. Does God care more about the next world than He does about this one? How would each framework answer that?
3. Is God trying to undo all human evil? Is He complicit in human evil? Or is He even causing it? How would each framework answer that? Recall the answers given to question #1, above: 'Who caused this mess?'
4. Does it matter which framework came first?
 - a. The medical framework was the uniform view of the united church for 1000+ years, including Catholic Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274 AD)¹⁵ and the entire Eastern Orthodox Church.
 - b. Anselm of Canterbury (1033 – 1109 AD) used the 'satisfy divine honor' theory. In Anselm's theory, Jesus satisfied God's honor, which contributed to the idea that Jesus stored up a 'treasury of merit' others could access. Anselm could therefore leave the question of the scope of the atonement open, and genuinely open to human free will to choose Jesus.
 - c. John Calvin (1509 – 1564 AD) used the 'satisfy divine justice' theory. Unlike Anselm's theology where Jesus satisfied God's honor in a personal way, giving others access, person by person, to his achievement, Calvin's theology positioned Jesus against God's retributive justice in a categorical way, on behalf of the elect, all at once. This left no logical place for genuine human free will.
5. Do you understand why the legal framework (called 'penal substitution') results logically in the idea that Jesus died only for the elect?
 - a. If God poured out *all* His wrath for people onto Jesus, in a legal-penal sense, then He would have no wrath leftover. If that were true: (1) there would be no hell (perhaps only a purgatory of sorts); (2) we would not need to actually believe in Jesus; and (3) human evil wouldn't be so bad because you could just 'accept the consequences' from God, like a child accepting a time out.
 - b. But if some people will be in hell, God must not have poured out His entire wrath on Jesus at the cross. Therefore, Jesus must have died only for some people, not all. For example, a much respected evangelical Reformed theologian named J.I. Packer said, 'The... texts alleged to prove that Christ died for persons who will not be saved... cannot... be held to teach any such thing... So far from magnifying the love and grace of God, this claim dishonors both it and him, for it reduces God's love to an impotent wish and turns the whole economy of 'saving' grace, so-called ('saving' is really a misnomer on this view), into a monumental divine failure. Also, so far from magnifying the merit and worth of

¹⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology, Part Three: The Person and Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Banner of Truth, 1949), 'The Offices of Christ,' 6.B.2; Berkhof is not including Karl Barth, T.F. Torrance, et al. in his definition of 'Reformed'

¹⁵ See Catholic theologians Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (London: T&T Clark, 1993) and Eleonore Stump, 'Atonement According to Aquinas' in Michael C. Rea (editor), *Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology, Volume 1: Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), ch.13

Christ's death, it cheapens it, for it makes Christ die in vain... You cannot have it both ways: an atonement of universal extent is a depreciated atonement.¹⁶

6. Which framework better explains the Scriptures above? What other Scriptures come to mind as relevant? What questions does this discussion leave you with?

¹⁶ J.I. Packer, 'An Introduction to John Owen's The Death of Death in the Death of Christ', reprinted in J.I. Packer and Mark Dever, *In My Place Condemned He Stood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), p.126. See also R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2nd edition, 2000) for another example of a theologian who explains the verses above as referring to 'limited atonement' because of the legal framework.

Question: Can a Loving God Have a Hell?

Relevance – Questions for Discussion

- What is hell? How can a loving God have a hell?
- Why is hell eternal?
- What is ‘fire’ in Scripture?

Scripture and the Interpreters

- ‘For you were afraid because of the *fire* and did not go up the mountain’ (Deuteronomy 5:5). ‘So I turned and came down from the mountain while the mountain was burning with *fire*, and the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands.’ (Deuteronomy 9:15)
- ‘For He is like a *refiner’s fire* and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness.’ (Malachi 3:2 – 3)
- ‘[Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and *fire*.’ (Matthew 3:11)
- ‘So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will throw them into the *furnace of fire*; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ (Matthew 13:49 – 50)
- ‘When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place... And there appeared to them *tongues as of fire* distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 2:1 – 4)
- ‘Our God is a consuming *fire*’ (Hebrews 12:29)
- ‘He will be tormented with *fire and brimstone... in the presence of the Lamb*. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.’ (Revelation 14:10 – 11)
- ‘And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the *lake of fire*.’ (Revelation 20:15)

**The Medical Framework:
Hell is Addiction Treatment for Resistant Addicts**

Fire represents God's purifying love. Those who welcome purification experience Jesus with joy. Those who resist experience Jesus with loathing. Hell is a state of being in which God's purifying love is like an addiction treatment center by people who resist treatment and deny their addiction. They want to escape from God eternally; God in His love does not let them.

Hell and God's character: Since God is Triune, He is love, and everything He does towards us must be an expression of His love, including hell.

Hell is God's purifying love: 'In eternity God supplies good things to all because He is the source of good things gushing forth goodness to all... sinners desire sin though they do not have the material means to sin... they are punished without any consolation. For what is hell but the deprivation of that which is exceedingly desired by someone? Therefore, according to the analogy of desire, whoever desires God rejoices and whoever desires sin is punished.'¹⁷

'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... 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.'¹⁸ 'The Eastern Orthodox church teaches that heaven and hell are being in God's presence which is being with God and seeing God, and that there is no such place as where God is not, *nor is hell taught in the East as separation from God.* One expression of the Eastern teaching is that...*God's presence...is punishment and paradise depending on the person's spiritual state in that presence.*'¹⁹

**The Legal Framework:
Hell is Prison Torture for Remorseful Offenders**

Fire represents God's retributive justice. It is purely destructive and for the infliction of pain. Fire is torment against people's body and personhood, for their sinful actions. In this framework, hell is a prison system like our modern prison system, with torment. People want to escape from this prison and this torment, and be with God. But God keeps them in.

Hell and God's character: God is a conflict of attributes (mercy vs. justice, love vs. holiness). Jesus expresses God's mercy and love towards some people. Hell expresses God's justice and holiness towards others.

Hell is God's punitive-retributive justice: 'Sin against an infinite being demands an *infinite punishment in hell.*'²⁰ 'As language cannot describe the severity of the *divine vengeance on the reprobate... His indignation* is like a raging fire, by whose touch all things are devoured and annihilated. ...the Lord will thus publicly manifest *His anger...inflamed with dire indignation against them,* and armed for their destruction...'²¹ 'There will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery... You will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all... All that we can possibly say about it, gives but a very feeble, faint representation of it; it is inexpressible and inconceivable: For who knows the power of *God's anger?*'²²

Heaven and Hell show two opposing characteristics of God: '[Judgment] day is for the manifestation of the glory of His mercy, in the eternal salvation of the elect; and *of His justice, in the damnation of the reprobate,* who are wicked and disobedient... the wicked who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power.'²³

¹⁷ John of Damascus (c.675 – 740), *Against the Manichaeans* 94.1569, 1573

¹⁸ Michael Himes, S.J., *Doing the Truth in Love: Conversations about Faith, Love, and Service* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), p.14 – 15.

¹⁹ Wikipedia article, "Christian Views on Hell"; accessed April 23, 2014

²⁰ R.C. Sproul, *Christ's Descent into Hell*, <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/christs-descent-into-hell/?gclid=CPIHsZjVprsCFTNp7AodbEgAXA> last accessed December 10, 2013

²¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 3, chapter 25, paragraph 12

²² Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, given July 8, 1741

²³ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 33, paragraph 2

**The Medical Framework:
Hell is Addiction Treatment for Resistant
Addicts**

Example: Ambrose of Milan (c.340 – 397 AD)

God's wrath targets the corruption of sin: 'And Isaiah shows that the Holy Spirit is not only Light but also Fire, saying: And the light of Israel shall be for a fire. [Isaiah 10:17] So the prophets called Him a burning Fire, because in those three points we see more intensely the majesty of the Godhead; since to sanctify is of the Godhead, to illuminate is the property of fire and light, and the Godhead is wont to be pointed out or seen in the appearance of fire: For our God is a consuming Fire, as Moses said. [Deuteronomy 4:24] For he himself saw the fire in the bush, and had heard God when the voice from the flame of fire came to him saying: I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. [Exodus 3:6] The voice came from the fire, and the voice was in the bush, and the fire did no harm. For the bush was burning but was not consumed, because *in that mystery the Lord was showing that He would come to illuminate the thorns of our body, and not to consume those who were in misery, but to alleviate their misery;* Who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, that He might give grace and destroy sin. [Matthew 3:11] So in the symbol of fire God keeps His intention... What, then, is that fire? Not certainly one made up of common twigs, or roaring with the burning of the reeds of the woods, but *that fire which improves good deeds like gold, and consumes sins like stubble.* This is undoubtedly the Holy Spirit, Who is called both the fire and light of the countenance of God... And as there is a light of the divine countenance, so, too, does fire shine forth from the countenance of God, for it is written: "A fire shall burn in His sight." For the grace of the day of judgment shines beforehand, that forgiveness may follow to reward the service of the saints.'²⁴

**The Legal Framework:
Hell is Prison Torture for Remorseful
Offenders**

Example: Jonathan Edwards (1703 – 1758 AD)

God's wrath targets the person: 'The God that holds you over the Pit of Hell, much as one holds a Spider, or some loathsome Insect, over the Fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his Wrath towards you burns like Fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the Fire; he is of purer Eyes than to bear to have you in his Sight; you are ten thousand Times so abominable in his Eyes as the most hateful venomous Serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn Rebel did his Prince: and yet 'tis nothing but his Hand that holds you from falling into the Fire every Moment.'²⁵

That side of God's character has no restraint: 'God has laid himself under no Obligation by any Promises to keep any natural Man out of Hell one Moment.'²⁶

Contrast Ambrose's use of the burning bush motif with Jonathan Edwards' use of it: 'When the great and angry God hath risen up and executed his awful Vengeance on the poor Sinner; and the Wretch is actually suffering the infinite Weight and Power of his Indignation, then will God call upon the whole Universe to behold that awful Majesty, and mighty Power that is to be seen in it. Isai. 33. 12, 13, 14. And the People shall be as the burning of Lime, *as Thorns cut up shall they be burnt in the Fire.*'²⁷

²⁴ Ambrose of Milan, *On the Holy Spirit*, book 1, chapter 14, paragraphs 164 – 165, 169 – 170

²⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, 'By the meer pleasure of God,' section 10

²⁶ Ibid, 'Application,' introduction

²⁷ Ibid, 'Application,' section 3

More Discussion Questions

1. How does each view of hell match with the corresponding views of Jesus' act on the cross?
2. If you need an emotional understanding of hell, picture these, below. Does this explain why hell might be the love of God, yet be torment, and eternal:
 - a. A person you are totally repelled by, who is madly in love with you, stalking you, saying, 'I love you. You were meant for me. I am for you.'
 - b. A surgeon with scalpel in hand intent on operating on you, who is convinced you have a cancer that he can remove, while you firmly believe you are fine.
 - c. A counselor who wants to counsel you for an addiction, while you firmly believe your desires are healthy and legitimate.
 - d. A patronizing authority figure who says, 'I forgive you; just admit you're wrong; I'll accept your apology!' while you are convinced you are being falsely accused and have not done the wrong.
3. If you wonder who else understood hell this way, consider some of these sources. Notice that theologians from diverse parts of the church are represented. What questions do these quotations raise:
 - a. Irenaeus of Lyon, 2nd century: '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.*'²⁸ 'If, however, thou wilt not believe in Him, and wilt flee from His hands, the cause of imperfection shall be in thee who didst not obey, but not in Him who called [thee]... Nor does the light fail because of those who have blinded themselves; but while it remains the same as ever, those who are [thus] blinded are involved in darkness through their own fault. *The light does never enslave any one by necessity...*'²⁹
 - b. Origen of Alexandria, 3rd century: '*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.'³⁰
 - c. Antony the Great of Egypt, 3rd and 4th centuries (above) and probably by extension, Athanasius, 4th century, who wrote an appreciative biography of Antony called *Life of Antony*. '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.*'³¹
 - d. Ambrose of Milan, 4th century: see above quotation
 - e. Augustine of Hippo, 5th century: '*Every inordinate affection is its own punishment.*'³²
 - f. Maximus the Confessor of Constantinople, 7th century: '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.'³³
 - g. John of Damascus, 7th and 8th centuries: see above

²⁸ Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies*, book 4, chapter 29, paragraph 1

²⁹ Ibid, book 4, chapter 39, paragraph 3

³⁰ Origen of Alexandria, *De Principiis*, book 3, chapter 1 'On the Freedom of the Will', paragraph 11

³¹ Anthony the Great, 3rd to 4th centuries, Egyptian monk and founder of monasticism, *Philokalia*, Vol.1: On the Character of Men, 150

³² Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, book 1, paragraph 19

³³ Maximus Confessor, 7th century, monk at Constantinople, *Chapters on Knowledge*, par.12; see quotes from other church fathers below

- h. Isaac the Syrian, 8th century: “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.*”³⁴
- i. The entire Eastern Orthodox Church today (above)
- j. Catholics: J.R.R. Tolkien, e.g. Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*; Karl Rahner; Yves Congar; Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger; Michael Himes, S.J., *Doing the Truth in Love*
- k. Anglicans: C.S. Lewis: ‘Hell is a state of mind...And every state of mind, left to itself, every shutting up of the creature within the dungeon of its own mind – is, in the end, Hell. But Heaven is not a state of mind. Heaven is reality itself. All that is fully real is Heavenly. For all that can be shaken will be shaken and only the unshakable remains.’³⁵ Hell is sulking, the spoiled child who would rather miss its play and its supper than say it was sorry and be friends; Hell is self-inflicted pain, like revenge, injured merit, self-respect, tragic greatness, and proper pride. The sensualist comes to Hell by craving a sensation even though the pleasure becomes less and less; ‘he prefers to joy the mere fondling of unappeasable lust and would not have it taken from him. He’d fight to the death to keep it. He’d like well to be able to scratch; but even where he can scratch no more he’d rather itch than scratch.’³⁶ Also, T.S. Eliot:

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.
 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*

- l. Reformed: Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*; T.F. Torrance, *Atonement*; Donald Bloesch, *The Last Things*
 - m. Methodist: Roberta Bondi, *Out of the Green Tiled Bathroom*; Thomas Oden, *Systematic Theology Volume 3: Life in the Spirit*
 - n. Pentecostal: Cherith Fee Nordling; John Crowder
4. What other passages of Scripture do you want to study and discuss?³⁷

³⁴ Isaac the Syrian, cited by Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p.234; and Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p.181 – 82

³⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, p.68

³⁶ *Ibid*, p.70; cf. *The Last Battle*, chapters 13 – 15

³⁷ For more information and biblical exposition, see my papers *Hell as Fire and Darkness: Remembrance of Sinai as Covenant Rejection in Matthew’s Gospel* and *Hell as the Love of God* found on this page: <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/gods-goodness-fire>

**Question:
What About People Who Died Before Jesus,
or Before Hearing About Him?**

Relevance – Questions for Discussion

- Did people who died before Jesus automatically go to hell?
- Do people who never heard about Jesus automatically go to hell?
- Is God fair to each person?

Scripture and the Interpreters

- ‘For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison... For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God.’ (1 Peter 3:18 – 19; 4:6)

**Self-Judgment,
With Final Choice Still to Come**

Those who died: ‘...while Christ was able to preach to all those who were alive at the time of his appearing and those who believed in him were blessed, so too he was able to liberate those in hell who believed and acknowledged him, by his descent there. However, the souls of those who practiced idolatry and outrageous ungodliness, as well as those who were blinded by fleshly lusts, did not have the power to see him, and they were not delivered.’ (regarding 1 Peter 3:18 – 20 and 4:6).³⁸

Those who haven’t heard: ‘For it was not merely for those who believed on Him in the time of Tiberius Caesar that Christ came, nor did the Father exercise His providence for the men only who are now alive, but *for all men altogether*, who from the beginning, according to their capacity, in their generation have both feared and loved God, and practised justice and piety towards their neighbours, *and have earnestly desired to see Christ, and to hear His voice*. Wherefore He shall, at His second coming, first rouse from their sleep all persons of this description, and shall raise them up, as well as the rest who shall be judged, and give them a place in His kingdom.’³⁹

‘A great number of Eastern authors perceived Christ’s descent into Hades as an event of universal significance, and some extended its saving actions not only to past generations but also to all those who followed. The idea that all the dead received the opportunity to be saved is quite widespread among Eastern Christian writers, and it was only in the West where some authors labeled it heretical.’⁴⁰

**God’s Judgment Immediately,
Based on Explicit Belief in This Life**

‘At physical death the believer enters immediately into eternal, conscious fellowship with the Lord and awaits the resurrection of his body to everlasting glory and blessing. The unbeliever enters immediately into eternal, conscious separation from the Lord and awaits the resurrection of his body to everlasting judgment and condemnation.’⁴¹

‘The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Beside these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledges none.’⁴²

³⁸ Cyril of Alexandria (376 – 444 AD) comments on 1 Peter 3 (Gerald Bray, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, Vol. XI, James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000) p.107 – 108; see Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274 AD), *Summa Theologica*, Question 52 Christ’s Descent Into Hell, Article 6 testifies to the persistence of this early understanding

³⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 4, chapter 22, paragraph 2

⁴⁰ Archbishop Hilarion Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell: The Descent Into Hades from an Orthodox Perspective* (New York, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009), p.205

⁴¹ *Cru Statement of Faith*, points 14 and 15; *Harvard College Faith and Action Constitution*, Article III, 1, point h.

⁴² *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 32, paragraph 1

Question: Did God Predestine Some People to Hell?

Relevance – Questions for Discussion

- Does God have a dark side? An evil side?
- Does God need to do evil in order to show us goodness by contrast?

Scripture and the Interpreters

- ‘So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?’ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory...’
(Romans 9:18 – 23)

No He Did Not	Yes He Did
<p><i>On Romans 9 – 11:</i> This hardening of hearts was <i>temporary</i> and not eternal in duration, was <i>God’s cooperation with human choices</i> and not His own unilateral action, and was <i>to accomplish two specific historical purposes</i> and not for eternally damning people. Paul in Romans 9 – 11 is explaining why he has a missionary heart to both Jews and Gentiles (Rom.9:1 – 6 and 11:28 – 36); his point to the mostly Gentile church in Rome is that they need to keep reaching out to Jewish non-Christians. He explains two hardenings. First, God hardened Pharaoh’s heart in response to Pharaoh hardening his own heart five times (Ex.7:14 – 9:7; Rom.9:14 – 24). God did this to set the stage for the passover and exodus, freeing Israel from bondage to slavery. Second, centuries later, God hardened the hearts of the Jewish leaders in response to their own rejection of Jesus (Rom.11:7 – 12). He did this to set the stage for Jesus’ death and resurrection, freeing Jesus from bondage to the corruption within human nature. Even though God cooperated with the Jewish leaders in their rejection of Jesus does not mean that God rejected Israel. <i>Hence, the hardening was temporary and for a very limited historical purpose. To ascribe this phrase to a unilateral decision by God about people’s eternal destinies is unfounded.</i>⁴³</p> <p>Similarly, when Paul uses the terms ‘the elect’ or ‘the chosen,’ he is referring to God’s human partners <i>in history</i>, who represent God <i>by inviting others to join them</i>. God started with Israel as a ‘chosen people,’ but this ‘chosenness’ intensified to the tribe of Judah, and then the house of David. God at last named Jesus as ‘His chosen <i>One</i>’ (Mt.12:16; Lk.9:35), and Paul calls Jesus the ‘climax’ (<i>telos</i>) of Israel’s covenant (Rom.10:4). Jesus was the chosen <i>One</i> to invite all others to become chosen people <i>in him</i>. Thus, as above, <i>to read the terms ‘elect’ or ‘chosen’ people as if God elected or chose others to damnation is unfounded.</i>⁴⁴</p> <p>Notice the early Christian theologians held to human free will and defined the ‘hardening of heart’ around it, as the Eastern Orthodox do today⁴⁵:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Offer to Him thy heart in a <i>soft and tractable state</i>, and preserve the form in which the Creator has fashioned thee, having moisture in thyself, <i>lest, by becoming hardened</i>, thou lose the impressions of 	<p><i>On Romans 9 – 11:</i> ‘How is God made more glorious by ruling a world or creating a world in which people by His permission, or His design – however you want to describe it – will wind up in hell justly? The closest thing I know to an answer is in Romans 9:22 – 23. Paul says there that God aimed to display His wrath and His power. <i>His goal is that the full range of His perfections be known.</i> I think this is the ultimate goal of the universe. God created the universe so that the full range of His perfections – <i>including wrath and power and judgment and justice</i> – will be displayed. To do that, there is a dark backdrop of the history of redemption called the fall and sin. The acts of grace and the acts of mercy and the experience of salvation shine the more brightly against the backdrop of the fall and of sin. Two effects happen that glorify God. One is that His grace, which is the apex of His glory, shines more brightly because it is against the backdrop of judgment and of sin. And we, the undeserving beneficiaries of this election and redemption are moved to a more exquisite joy and gratitude for our salvation <i>because we’ve seen all the lostness of people who are no worse than we were and we no better than them. We should be in hell as well and our gratitude will be intensified.</i> So at least those two senses are the answer to his question. How does God get glory? His grace and mercy shine more brightly against the darker backdrop of sin and judgment and wrath. <i>Our worship and our experience of that grace intensifies and deepens because we see we don’t deserve to be where we are.</i>’⁴⁹</p> <p>“Many professing a desire to defend the Deity from an invidious charge admit the doctrine of election, but deny that any one is reprobated.... This they do ignorantly and childishly since there could be no election without its opposite reprobation. God is said to set apart those whom he adopts for salvation. It were most absurd to say, that he admits others fortuitously, or that they by their industry acquire what election alone</p>

⁴³ See N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), ch.13

⁴⁴ See T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p.52

⁴⁵ See the common Statement, ‘Christ ‘In Us’ and Christ ‘For Us’ in Lutheran and Orthodox Theology’ issued by the Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue in North America, in: Meyerdorff and Tobias, *Salvation in Christ*, p.26 – 27; quoted by Bishop Timothy Kallistos Ware, *How Are We Saved? The Understanding of Salvation in the Orthodox Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Life and Light Publishing, 1996), p.28

<p>His fingers... for the moist clay which is in thee is hidden [there] by the workmanship of God... But <i>if thou, being obstinately hardened, dost reject the operation of His skill...</i> thou hast at once lost both His workmanship and life.⁴⁶</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘The sun, by one and the same power of its heat, <i>melts wax indeed, but dries up and hardens mud</i> 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. In this way, then, <i>one and the same working upon the part of God...made manifest the hardness of Pharaoh, which he had conceived in the intensity of his wickedness but exhibited the obedience of those other Egyptians who were intermingled with the Israelites, and who are recorded to have quitted Egypt at the same time with the Hebrews.</i>⁴⁷ • ‘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 <i>hardened as mud according to its free will</i> and by itself advances to its perdition, as did Pharaoh. However, every soul which loves God is <i>softened as wax</i>, and receiving divine impressions and characters it becomes the dwelling place of God in the Spirit.’⁴⁸ 	<p>confers on a few. <i>Those, therefore, whom God passes by he reprobates, and that for no other cause but because he is pleased to exclude them from the inheritance which he predestines to his children.</i>⁵⁰</p>
---	---

⁴⁹ John Piper, *How Does it Glorify God to Predestine People to Hell?*, March 21, 2013; <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/ask-pastor-john/how-does-it-glorify-god-to-predestine-people-to-hell>

⁴⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 4, chapter 22, paragraph 2

⁴⁷ Origen, *De Principiis*, book 3, chapter 1 ‘On the Freedom of the Will’, paragraph 11

⁴⁸ Maximus Confessor, *Selected Writings, Chapters on Knowledge*, paragraph 12 (Mahweh, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), p.130.

⁵⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 3, chapter 23

Question:
Why Does God Want Me to Worship Him?

Relevance – Questions for Discussion

- Is God merely the ultimate narcissist who wants to be first in everyone's life?

Scripture and the Interpreters

- '...to the praise of the glory of His grace' (Ephesians 1:6, 7, 14)
- 'The glory which You [Father] have given me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent me, and loved them, even as You have loved me.' (John 17:22 – 23)

To Share in His Love and Become More Loving

‘The chief end of humanity is *to love God forever*, which will inevitably birth the glorification of God.’⁵¹

God wants us to share in His own other-centered life and love: ‘In glory-of-God models, however framed,... God’s chief end is to glorify himself and to be glorified by others. *But this...is self-love, consumption, narcissism.* In John’s Gospel, on the other hand, one finds in the relationship of the Father and Son what [Eastern Orthodox theologian Timothy] Ware calls “an unceasing movement of mutual love,” the love of persons... And so it is that *the Christian God is not an Absolute individual in isolation, but a community of persons in selfless, abiding communion. Thus, the supreme glory each of the divine persons receives in the joyful communion of love is the fruit of each person’s loving purpose, not the focal pursuit...* By grounding his arguments in God’s glory-seeking, Piper’s arguments fail to offer an adequately God-modeled account of the affections. He thus leaves readers open to the inadequacies of hedonism’s self-centering motive that sustains pleasure as an end in itself. By not recognizing *love as the focus* and glory as the fruit of the Trinitarian life, Piper’s arguments ultimately, and ironically, fail to be sufficiently free from the duty-based models he seeks to leave behind.’⁵²

‘For this is the glory of man, to continue and remain permanently in God’s service. Wherefore also did the Lord say to His disciples, ‘Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you;’ [Jn.15:16] indicating that they did not glorify Him when they followed Him; but that, in following the Son of God, they were glorified by Him. And again, ‘I will, that where I am, there they also may be, that they may behold My glory;’ [Jn.17:24]... desiring that His disciples should share in His glory... we do participate in the glory of the Lord, who has both formed us, and prepared us for this, that, when we are with Him, we may partake of His glory.’⁵³

To Give Him Glory

‘Man’s chief end is *to glorify God*, and to enjoy Him forever.’⁵⁴

We therefore exist to glorify God and give him thanks and praise: ‘Through all eternity God the Father has beheld the image of his own glory perfectly represented in the person of his Son. Therefore one of the best ways to think about God’s infinite enjoyment of his own glory is to think of it as the delight he has in his Son who is the perfect reflection of that glory (see Jn.17:24 – 26)... *As God the Father contemplates the image of his own glory in the person of his Son, he is infinitely happy.*’⁵⁵

‘*God is love precisely because he relentlessly pursues the praises of his name in the hearts of his people...* What could God give us to enjoy that would prove him most loving? There is only one possible answer: himself! If he withholds himself from our contemplation and companionship, no matter what else he gives us, he is not loving...’⁵⁶

⁵¹ Paul Louis Metzger, ‘The Halfway House of Hedonism: Potential and Problems in John Piper’s Desiring God’, *CRUX: A Quarterly Journal of Christian Thought and Opinion Published by Regent College*, Winter 2005/Vol.41, No.4, p.21

⁵² Ibid, p.23, 25

⁵³ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* book 4, chapter 14, paragraph 1

⁵⁴ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*

⁵⁵ John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1986), 1st edition, p.33

⁵⁶ Ibid, p.36

Question: What's My Motivation to Obey Jesus' Teaching?

Relevance – Questions for Discussion

- Why would I actually obey Jesus?
- What is the appropriate heart-level motivation for actually living out my belief?
- How does the Christian God seek to shape my emotional life?

Scripture and the Interpreters

- What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of his resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin. (Romans 6:1 – 7)

Participation in God’s Healing Love for Us, Identity-Obligation to Be Our True Selves

In the New Testament, thankfulness is a command in itself but never a motivation for further obedience.

Jesus shared in our fallen human nature that we might share in his healed human nature. ‘When we ask what the precise nature of this vicarious activity of Christ was, we find Nicene theologians... refer[ring] to not any *external* transaction between God and mankind carried out by Christ, but to what took place *within* the union of divine and human natures in the incarnate Son of God.’⁵⁷ He killed the corruption in his human nature (the ‘old self’), rose with a new, cleansed humanity, and *calls us to die and rise with him by his Spirit*, so we might share in his victory over sin and become the people God always intended us to be. Why not sin? So we can be who we truly are.

Jesus’ teaching functions for us like a healthy diet. Yes, there are rules for nutrition. But the goal of eating healthy is not to follow the rules. The rules enable more health, capacity, and life.

Gratitude for God’s Love, Debt-Obligation to Give God Glory

‘[In] articulating that message the Reformed have characteristically focused upon some of its most mysterious, wonderful and “awful” aspects: the utterly “unconditioned” but also “invincible” character of the divine “election” to salvation; the terrible “judgment” of God upon those who will not trust that gracious election; “sin” as not merely a misuse of a freedom still available but as a kind of hereditary defect, a “pre-volitional malady” of the will inclining it to evil incurable by any humanly devised therapy; the blood of the pure victim “appeasing” the holy anger of God, or juridically interpreted, the suffering of the just “penalty” by the substitute victim making it possible for God “legally” to acquit guilty sinners; the life of a Christian as one of utter “self-abandonment” *grounded in overwhelming gratitude for God’s forgiveness in Christ*, striving to be “totally” at the disposal of God—these are among the most salient themes that have given Reformed theology, in all its varieties, its characteristic shape.’⁵⁸

⁵⁷ T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 1983), p.168, emphasis mine; cf. Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (London: T&T Clark, 1993)

⁵⁸ George H. Kehm, ‘What Is Reformed Theology?’, *Panorama* [Pittsburgh Theological Seminary] 22, no. 1 (Fall 1981): 22, 7, quoted in Stephen D. Crocco, ‘Whose Calvin? Which Calvinism? John Calvin and the Development of Twentieth-Century American Theology’ edited by Thomas J. Davis, *John Calvin’s American Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.168, italics mine

More Discussion Questions

1. If someone were to ask me why I love my wife, I could offer various reasons, and each one would promote a particular view of our relationship:

Reason	Expected Outcome	Focus On
Because other people are watching	Outside the relationship	Self and approval of others
Because I have to	None	Some standard, law, or principle that defines what I have to do in marriage.
Because of what I get from her in return	Inside the relationship and Extrinsic to me (something I get after I love her)	What she gives me, but it sounds utilitarian and conditional.
Because I owe her a debt	Extrinsic	What she's given me. This is oriented on the past. It doesn't sound that honoring. If this debt is paid off, is my commitment over?
Because I'm thankful that she loves me	Extrinsic	Quality of our relationship. It's better than above; it's more honoring, but still conditional, perhaps.
Because I'm learning to be a loving person. It's good for me	Intrinsic (something I get when I love her)	Me and my own process of growth. Is unconditional, but seems a little lopsided because her uniqueness is not mentioned. Couldn't I get this from anyone? What makes her unique and special?
Because I delight in who she is and I receive so much from who she is	Intrinsic	Me and Her. Very honoring because it reflects feeling and sincerity rooted in who she is vs. simply what she does for me or what I get.
Because I have somehow changed because of her. She is connected to my heart, to me, and loving her is now a part of who I am.	Intrinsic	Me transformed in Us. Out of all the reasons, I think this one reflects the most permanence and the deepest impact she makes on me. It is now impossible for me to talk about "me" without talking about her.

As we go down this table, the more honored my wife and our marriage becomes. Likewise, if someone were to ask me why I love Jesus and why I serve him, I could offer various reasons, and each one would promote a particular view of our relationship. I am not saying that only one is right and the others are all wrong. Rather, I believe that the bottom four options are the most desirable, in that order:

Reason to Love Jesus	Expected Outcome	Focus On
Because other people are watching	Outside the relationship	Self and approval of others in church
Because I'll be punished if I don't	Avoidance of a negative outcome	Self and negative aspects
Because I have to	None	Some standard, law, or principle that defines what I have to do.
Because of what I get from him in return	Inside the relationship and Extrinsic to me (something I get after I love him)	What he gives me, but it sounds utilitarian and conditional.
Because I owe him a debt	Extrinsic	What he's given me. This is oriented on the past. It doesn't sound that honoring. If this debt is paid off, is my commitment over?
Because I'm thankful that he	Extrinsic	Quality of our relationship. It's better

loves me		than above; it's more honoring, but still conditional, perhaps.
Because I'm learning to be a loving person. It's good for me	Intrinsic (something I get when I love him)	Me and my own process of growth. Is unconditional, but seems a little lopsided because his uniqueness is not mentioned. Couldn't I get this from anyone? What makes him unique and special?
Because I delight in who he is and I receive so much from who he is	Intrinsic	Me and Him. Very honoring because it reflects feeling and sincerity rooted in who he is vs. simply what he does for me or what I get.
Because I have somehow changed because of him. He is connected to my heart, to me, and loving him is now a part of who I am.	Intrinsic	Me transformed in Us. Out of all the reasons, I think this one reflects the most permanence and the deepest impact he makes on me. It is now impossible for me to talk about "me" without talking about Jesus.

What do you think of the options for spiritual motivation listed here?

2. To my Japanese-American ears, preaching from the legal framework (the penal substitution theory characteristic of the Reformed tradition) makes God sound like an Asian parent. God seemed to say something very similar to my parents: 'Don't you know how much I sacrificed for you???' It was a powerful motivator for me, but one that left me feeling very ill at ease. In Asian-America, debt-forgiveness becomes debt-obligation and leads to feelings of guilt and heaviness. But somehow, in Protestant White America, debt-forgiveness sounds like good news and leads to a feeling of freedom. Why do you think that is?
3. Where in the New Testament is 'gratitude' or 'debt-obligation' actually used as a motivator for Christians? For a fuller reflection on this question, see <https://newhumanityinstitute.wordpress.com/2015/10/12/interpreting-jesus-and-atonement-practical-issue-9-is-god-an-asian-parent-what-language-of-motivation-does-god-use/>.
 - a. When I was younger, I was asked to teach from Romans 6:1 – 11, which speaks of our dying and rising with Jesus. I felt quite unsure how to teach it, because my way of motivating myself did not draw on this 'union with Christ' teaching. Instead, I was locked into a penal substitution framework where 'Jesus died instead of me.' It was a psychological motivation in response to an event external to me. But here, Paul was telling me about an identity motivation because of an event internal to me: 'I died and rose with Jesus,' because 'Jesus died *ahead* of me, not *instead* of me.' I then studied how Jesus and the New Testament writers sought to motivate their audiences. The question may be stated this way: When a pastor, preacher, or friend speaks to another Christian, and tries to exhort and encourage said Christian to grow in Christ and not sin, what motivational language should they use? Should they say, 'Jesus died instead of you to take the wrath of God, therefore you ought to...' as in penal substitution? Or should they say, 'You have died and risen with Christ, therefore you are now different' as in union with Christ? Who died and when? How important is gratitude as an explicit psychological state?
 - b. Skim over places where Paul uses 'identity in Christ' and not 'gratitude' or 'debt-forgiveness' or 'debt-obligation' as a motivation for more obedience. Pick one of those major sections and make note of how Paul motivates his audience:
 - a. Romans 6:1 – 23
 - b. Ephesians 1:1 – 2:10; 4:1 – 6; 6:10 – 20
 - c. Colossians 1:15 – 20; 2:1 – 3:4
 - d. 2 Corinthians 4:1 – 5:21
 - e. Galatians 2:20; 4:1 – 20
4. Does the New Testament use 'indebtedness' or financial language? When Jesus refers to sums of money as an analogy for sins being forgiven, he always uses it in a cheeky way with someone who

is comparing the relative value of people (Lk.7:35 – 50; Mt.18:21 – 35). Jesus' point is that people cannot be compared to amounts, and sin cannot actually be quantified as a debt. When you read those passages, do you agree?

5. What about Jesus paying a price for us? 1 Corinthians 6:20.
 - a. When Paul says, 'You have been bought with a price,' (1 Cor.6:20), he does not construct the gratitude motivation. Instead, he connects it to Jesus' claims of ownership, deliverance, and cleansing. Through his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, he has 'paid a price' like a doctor who acquires his patients' disease so he can perfect the antibodies in himself, but not like an innocent victim in a courtroom who takes the penalty intended for others. As evidence of this, notice that Paul uses a Jewish exodus-tabernacle motif. Jesus is the Passover lamb (5:7 – 8) who has delivered human nature from slavery to sin, so he makes a claim on us as a new Adam (15:21 – 28, 45) giving us life from within himself in a new way. This is why Paul can reason from Jesus' personal body to his corporate body: Jesus cleansed his personal, individual body first so he can also cleanse his corporate body (1 Cor.5:7 – 8), and we must participate in that. This holds true throughout in Paul's reasoning in 1 Cor.5 – 6. In effect, Jesus paid the price to cleanse his human nature and make a claim on humanity as a whole, and then cleanse our human nature by his Spirit so as to make us a new holy Temple (1 Cor.6:19 – 20).
 - b. The phrase 'purchased with his own blood' in Acts 20:28 might be construed to be a 'penal substitution' text where his life paid a penalty demanded by God, but the phrase can be understood in a medical framework as well, where it would refer to Jesus' struggle to conquer the disease in his initially fallen human nature. In this sense, the blood of Jesus is a cleansing, healing agent. That corresponds with the blood of sacrificial animals in the Old Testament being for cleansing, as God was acting like a dialysis machine in the sanctuary, receiving Israel's impurity and giving back purity in the form of uncorrupted animal blood, so they could remain on the land.⁵⁹ A similar argument would apply to Ephesians 1:6 – 8 and Romans 3:21 – 26.
6. What about Jesus taking on a curse for us?
 - a. Paul's statement, 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'' (Gal.3:13) should not be taken in a legal-penal sense.
 - b. The earliest Christian writer to explain the curse language, Justin Martyr, says: 'For the whole human race will be found to be under a curse. For it is written in the law of Moses, 'Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them.' [Dt.27:26] And no one has accurately done all, nor will you venture to deny this; but some more and some less than others have observed the ordinances enjoined. *But if those who are under this law appear to be under a curse for not having observed all the requirements, how much more shall all the nations appear to be under a curse who practise idolatry, who seduce youths, and commit other crimes?*'⁶⁰ Justin was saying that the Jews and the Gentiles were *already under the curse and participating in it*. They were suffering the results of their own disobedience and separation from God: for Gentiles, it was idol-worship, seduction of youth, and other crimes; for Israel, it was signaled by ongoing exile, with the accompanying knowledge that they broke the very law of Moses that they wanted to uphold, etc. Hence Justin, right before he says that 'the whole human race will be found to be under a curse,' says in chapter 94 how the curse on Israel is best understood: Justin makes a parallel between the incident of Israel in the wilderness being bitten by venomous snakes, and the Adam and Eve in the garden being bitten by 'fangs of the serpent.'⁶¹ Justin's reason for making that parallel is that he sees that human beings committing 'wicked deeds, idolatries, and other unrighteous acts' *is itself the curse*. The curse is not a legal-penal consequence that

⁵⁹ See my engagement with Pentateuch scholars in *The Sacrificial System and Atonement in the Pentateuch* found here:

<https://www.anastasiscenter.org/bible-torah> and broken out into blog posts here: <https://newhumanityinstitute.wordpress.com/atonement-foundations/>

⁶⁰ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, chapter 95

⁶¹ Ibid, chapter 94

comes from God in response to these things. The curse is itself the spiritual alienation from God and the moral failure that results. Hence, as Justin understood it, Jesus did not deflect the curse from Israel or the world. Instead, he *participated* in it with us even though he was innocent. Jesus forged a way through the curse of corrupted human nature on our behalf through his death and resurrection, so we could follow him through it. He therefore associated and identified himself with corrupted human beings on the tree of the wooden cross, triggering the identification of cursedness from Deuteronomy 21:22 – 23. He identified his humanity itself as being under a curse. Justin does not suggest that Jesus took some unique punishment from God. So the basic logic of penal substitution is undercut here at the start. Thus, the response of ‘gratitude’ or ‘debt-obligation’ is undercut as well. The rest of Galatians is, appropriately, about Jesus’ healing of human nature in the rest of us by his Spirit, outside of the framework of the Sinai Law covenant (see especially Gal.4:1 – 7, 19; 5:16 – 26; 6:7 – 8, 13 – 16).

- c. The second major writer to use the ‘curse’ language is Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons. Refuting the gnostic view that ‘Christ’ was a separate being from ‘Jesus,’ and that the incarnation was not truly the union of divine and human natures in one person, Irenaeus says: It is plain, then, that Paul knew no other Christ besides Him alone, who both suffered, and was buried, and rose again, *who was also born, and whom he speaks of as man*. For after remarking, ‘But if Christ be preached, that He rose from the dead’ [1 Cor.15:12], he continues, rendering the reason of *His incarnation*, ‘For since by man came death, by man [came] also the resurrection of the dead.’ And everywhere, when [referring to] the passion of our Lord, and *to His human nature*, and His subjection to death, he employs the name of Christ, as in that passage: ‘Destroy not him with your meat for whom Christ died’ [Rom.14:15]. And again: ‘But now, in Christ, you who sometimes were far off are made near by the blood of Christ’ [Eph.2:13]. And again: ‘Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, *being made a curse for us*: for it is written, ‘Cursed is every one that hangs upon a tree’ [Gal.3:13; Dt.21:23]. And again: ‘And through your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died’ [1 Cor.8:11], indicating that the impassible Christ did not descend upon Jesus, but that He Himself, because He was Jesus Christ, suffered for us; He, who lay in the tomb, and rose again, who descended and ascended,— the Son of God having been made the Son *of man*, as the very name itself does declare.’⁶²
- d. Athanasius of Alexandria, writing in 370 AD, roughly two hundred years after Justin and Irenaeus, would go one step further in his explicit written exposition and theological reasoning. For Athanasius, if Jesus shared in the curse upon all humanity, as designated clearly by the manner of death he endured, then his sharing in the curse must have begun prior to his death. But when? Athanasius answers that by explicitly uniting Galatians 3:13 with *John 1:14*. For Athanasius, ‘becoming a curse’ is a synonym for ‘becoming flesh.’⁶³ Athanasius thus offers that the root cause of humanity’s cursedness was the underlying corruption of human nature. I will discuss Athanasius below as well.
- e. Ambrose of Milan (circa 340 – 397 AD), in his *Exposition on the Christian Faith*, explains Galatians 3:13 by referring to Philippians 2:5 – 11, which is also about Jesus’ incarnation. Immediately after quoting Galatians, Ambrose writes of the incarnation, ‘Cursed He was, for He bore our curses; in subjection, also, for He took upon Him our subjection, but in the assumption of the form of a servant, not in the glory of God; so that while he makes Himself a partaker of our weakness in the flesh, He makes us partakers of the divine Nature in His power.’⁶⁴ Among the curses we experience as fallen human beings is ‘our weakness in the flesh,’ which recalls Paul’s assessment in Romans 8:3 that the Sinai Law could not accomplish its goal through Israel because it was weakened by the flesh. Weakened flesh is not simply mortal flesh, but morally rebellious flesh.

⁶² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.18.3

⁶³ Athanasius, *Letter 59 to Epictetus of Corinth* 8

⁶⁴ Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Christian Faith* 5.178

- f. John Chrysostom (circa 347 – 407 AD) in his *Commentary on Galatians* focuses on the death of Christ alone *without* discussion of the incarnation.⁶⁵ However, in his *Homilies on John's Gospel* 1:14, he does immediately refer us to Galatians 3:13, saying, 'It was fallen indeed, our nature had fallen an incurable fall, and needed only that mighty Hand. There was no possibility of raising it again, had not He who fashioned it at first stretched forth to it His Hand, and stamped it anew with His Image, by the regeneration of water and the Spirit.'⁶⁶
 - g. This appears to be the standard patristic and Nicene interpretation of Galatians 3:13.
7. Is 'gratitude' or 'debt-obligation' for Jesus' sacrifice to be used with non-Christians in evangelism?
- a. Luke does not use that language in Acts. There, Luke places all his weight on Jesus' resurrection or fulfilled prophecy (Acts 13:13 – 42; 14:14 – 17; 17:22 – 31; 22:1 – 21; 23:1 – 12; 24:10 – 21; 26:1 – 23). Luke, interestingly, has Paul completely stressing the resurrection (Acts 17:18, 31 – 32), and not mentioning the cross at all. Occasionally Paul in Acts argues from creation (Acts 4:8 – 12, 24 – 30; 14:14 – 17; 17:22 – 31). And when Peter or Paul refer to the cross, or the tree, or simply execution (Acts 2:23; 5:30; 10:39; 13:28 – 29), they treat it as historical detail but the resounding weight falls on Jesus' resurrection. They do not appear to have intended to cultivate 'gratitude' or 'debt-obligation' in their audiences.
 - b. Some claim that Paul preached 'the cross' alone based on his letters to the Corinthians (1 Cor.1:17 – 25) and Galatians (Gal.3:1), thus arguing for the legal-penal framework where Jesus sacrificially absorbed some punishment from the Father. But in those letters, Paul shows that he consistently integrated the significance of Jesus' death in with his resurrection and its meaning of 'new creation/new humanity' (1 Cor.15:17 – 23; 2 Cor.5:14 – 15; Gal.1:1, 16; 2:20; 4:4 – 5, 19; 6:15), which is precisely what penal substitution finds difficult to integrate. In penal substitution, the resurrection is simply 'proof' that God accepted Jesus' death as atoning. But the New Testament actually regards Jesus' resurrection as intrinsically accomplishing our salvation from sin (Rom.4:25; 6:1 – 11; 1 Cor.15:17).
 - c. Is there anyone in the New Testament who clearly used the legal framework (penal substitution theory of atonement) to actually do evangelism? If not, should we?

⁶⁵ John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Galatians* 3.10 – 14

⁶⁶ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John's Gospel* 1:14, although he seems to limit the meaning of 'curse' to the penalty of death for sinning under the Sinaitic covenant; see also *Homily 13* from *Homilies on Romans* 8:3 – 4,

**Question:
How Does God the Father Feel Towards Me?**

Relevance – Questions for Discussion

- If God the Father only accepts me through Jesus the Son, does the Father really love me?
- As I love Jesus, do I need to be afraid of the Father, and hide from the Father behind Jesus' back?

Scripture and the Interpreters

- 'And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet [Jesus] has now reconciled you in his fleshly body through death, in order to present you before him holy and blameless and beyond reproach – *if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel.*' (Colossians 1:21 – 23)

God is a Father Who Loves All First, and Then Offers Surgery

‘The New Testament speaks...not in the detached forensic categories that have developed in the Latin west, Roman or Protestant, but in terms of the intimacy of the Father-Son relation, in which the Son submits himself to the Father’s judgement [against the corruption in his fallen humanity] and is answered through the Father’s good pleasure – see here the supreme importance of John McLeod Campbell and his great book *The Nature of the Atonement*, in which *he rightly warned us against thinking of atonement in purely penal terms, for we cannot think of Christ being punished by the Father in our place* and the New Testaman nowhere uses the word *kolazo*, punish, of the relation between the Father and the Son.’⁶⁷ God’s love is directed at our personhood; His wrath is directed, like a surgeon, against the disease of sin in our body. Therefore, we can fully say that God’s wrath fully serves His love and is an aspect of His love. Hence, there is no question about the Father’s disposition towards each of us: it is healing love. *The Father’s love for each person comes logically prior to Jesus’ death and resurrection and therefore makes Jesus available to all. Finally, then, there is no need to fear notions of ‘the elect’ or ‘whether I am included within the limited scope of the atonement’ which only produces anxiety.* One need only fall back upon the Father’s love for all, which is seen in Jesus.

God is a Courtroom Judge First, and Then Father to Some

‘But there is here an existential and pastoral difficulty, if not a theological one. The righteousness that God loves is, after all, an alien righteousness. God loves His righteous Son, but that might leave me wondering, Does God love me? Since I’m not completely righteous, does God receive me completely? Calvin wants to say yes, but because the thing that God loves seems somewhat detachable from me, he leaves the question. This is not a hypothetical problem; *assurance has been a long-standing problem in Reformed piety.* One way to address this would be to make more room than Calvin does here for God’s pity. Out of pity, God responds to the groans of His sinful people (Judges 2:18). He has compassion on rebels, and intervenes to deliver them from their own self-destruction. He loves them because they are His creatures; He loves them as His chosen people. Out of His compassion, He completely receives those who are incompletely righteous. *The Father’s compassion is founded on Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the sinner’s union with Him.* By emphasizing pity, though, it is clear that God loves me even in the midst of my misery.’⁶⁸

⁶⁷ I am making use of the argument by T.F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.72 while maintaining the distinction between our personhood and our disease of sin that Torrance sometimes does not.

⁶⁸ Peter J. Leithart, ‘Loving Sinners’, *First Things*, April 1, 2013; <http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/leithart/2013/04/loving-sinners>

Question:
**Should We Use Retributive or Restorative Justice
In the Criminal Justice System?**

Relevance – Questions for Discussion

- If God wants to punish lawbreakers, does that shape how we treat lawbreakers? If He doles out retributive justice on the one hand, and mercy on the other, then is retributive justice the highest principle of justice?

Scripture and the Interpreters

- ‘If men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she gives birth prematurely, yet there is no injury, *he shall surely be fined as the woman’s husband may demand of him, and he shall pay as the judges decide.* But if there is any further injury, then you shall appoint as a penalty life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise. If a man strikes the eye of his male or female slave, and destroys it, he shall let him go free on account of his eye. And if he knocks out a tooth of his male or female slave, he shall let him go free on account of his tooth. If an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall surely be stoned and its flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall go unpunished. If, however, an ox was previously in the habit of goring and its owner has been warned, yet he does not confine it and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned and its owner also shall be put to death. *If a ransom is demanded of him, then he shall give for the redemption of his life whatever is demanded of him.*’ (Exodus 21:22 – 30)
- ‘At the end of every seven years you shall grant a remission of debts.’ (Deuteronomy 15:1)

Restorative Justice	Meritocratic-Retributive Justice
<p>On criminal justice: ‘And so, our prisons are overflowing. Why? <i>Because our theological framework has told us that justice can only be satisfied when someone has been properly and fully punished, instead of telling us that justice is most fully satisfied when a life has been restored.</i> The justice we seek in society today all gets traced back to how we view the justice of the cross. The fact that our prison system has now become defacto mental institutions for individuals who are ill reveals that we are focused on justice as punishment, not justice as restoration and healing.’⁶⁹</p> <p>‘Restorative justice emerged in the 1970s as a way to bring peace to troubled relationships and communities by setting conditions that would promote mediated dialogue between offenders and victims. As the movement gathered momentum in the 1980s and 1990s, its usefulness was extended beyond criminal cases to more complex social settings. Various models of restorative justice creatively built on earlier nonwestern practices of peacemaking and post-conflict reconciliation... Most famously, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission employed its own unique blend of Christian and African social anthropologies, symbolized in its use of the Bantu word “ubuntu,” in an attempt to bring peace and healing to a nation that had been torn apart by centuries of racial oppression.’⁷⁰</p>	<p>On criminal justice: ‘<i>Wherever Calvinism spread, punitive sentencing follows...</i> The perennial power of this theology lies in its acute targeting and insistence upon guilt, and its provision of a complete remedy.’⁷¹</p> <p>‘[Reformed theologian] Thomas Jenkyn, writing in 1831 [says]...The universe... must be viewed as a public commonwealth. God is the public head and chief member... In its government every wrong and every sin is treated, not as a private offence, but as a <i>public injury</i>, to be publicly answered, whether in punishment or pardon. <i>God deals with us on the principle of public justice</i>, that justice which a government exercises to preserve the public good and the public honour of the whole community. Sin is a public injury to God and the universe. <i>It is not in the nature of mercy, nor does it become its character, to forgive such a public wrong without an expression of its abhorrence of the crime.</i>’⁷²</p> <p>‘In the early history of the United States, many colonial leaders were focused on the prospect of establishing a society ‘governed by the word of God’... For colonial authorities, sin and crime were indistinguishable... the widespread [high federal Calvinist] belief that grace is granted individually, rather than being present everywhere and in everyone, cultivates the attitude that some people are other. The categorization of some persons as superior and others as inferior... seems logical when certain individuals are considered to be ontologically</p>

⁶⁹ Benjamin L. Corey, ‘Justice Broken: How a Poor Theology of the Cross Created America’s Broken Justice System’, *Formerly Fundie: The Official Blog Post of Benjamin L. Corey*, January 27, 2014; <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/formerlyfundie/broken-justice/> last accessed April 21, 2014; see also Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990); Timothy J. Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance: Crime, Vengeance, and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.140; Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), p.60; John Braithwaite and Heather Strang, eds., *Restorative Justice and Civil Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); John Braithwaite and Heather Strang, eds., *Restorative Justice and Family Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2002); Timothy J. Gorringer, ‘Atonement’ edited by Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p.367 – 369; Dennis Sullivan and Larry L. Tiff, eds., *The Handbook of Restorative Justice: A Global Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2006), Gerry Johnstone and Daniel W. Van Ness, eds., *Handbook of Restorative Justice* (Devon, UK: Willan Publishing, 2006); Elizabeth Beck, Sarah Britto, and Arlene Andrews, *In the Shadow of Death: Restorative Justice and Death Row Families* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Stephen J. Pope, *Restorative Justice as a Prophetic Path to Peace* (CTSA Proceedings 65 (2010)), p.19 – 34; Derek Flood, *Healing the Gospel: A Radical Vision for Grace, Justice, and the Cross* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012)

⁷⁰ Stephen J. Pope, *Restorative Justice as a Prophetic Path to Peace* (CTSA Proceedings 65 (2010)), p.19

⁷¹ Timothy J. Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance: Crime, Vengeance, and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.140; see also John Milbank, ‘The New Evangelicals: Are “New Evangelicals” a New Phenomenon or Reversion to Type?’, *The Immanent Frame* blog, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2013/01/18/are-new-evangelicals-a-new-phenomenon-or-a-reversion-to-type/> accessed Feb 13, 2013; Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), p.220 – 221 and also Max Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1976), p.157; J.I. Packer in his introduction to *In My Place Condemned He Stood* writes, ‘Penal substitution, therefore will not be focused properly til it is recognised that God’s redemptive love must not be conceived – misconceived, rather – as somehow trumping and displacing God’s retributive justice, as if the Creator-Judge simply decided to let bygones be bygones. The measure of God’s holy love for us is that “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” and that “he ... did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all!”’ (Rom 5:8; 8:32 ESV)

More Discussion Questions

1. Jewish Law is often characterized as strictly retributive: an eye for an eye. The principle of proportionality for bodily harm does establish a limit. But notice that Jewish Law allows for victims to have greater say in what they need from the offender (Exodus 21:30). In this light, how does Jewish Law fit the paradigm of ‘restorative justice’?
2. When an offender owes something to a victim beyond what they could pay right away, they might have to work off a debt (see also Exodus 22:1 – 14 for crimes of theft). How does the Jewish Law handle debt?
3. Evaluate: If penal substitution is the correct atonement theory, then the highest form of justice within the character of God is retributive-meritocratic justice. The reason is that penal substitution offers, as the reason behind Jesus’ atonement, the idea that God must deal out retribution to sinners, either upon them in hell directly, or upon Jesus as a substitute for them instead. If retributive-meritocratic justice is the highest form of justice in God’s character, then rewarding good behavior and punishing the bad is the highest form of justice that we can maintain in human relations. Appreciating God in a penal substitution framework seems to depend, psychologically and socially, on a human experience of ‘tough parenting,’ ‘getting what you deserve,’ ‘meritocracy’ and ‘working hard,’ ‘getting tough on crime,’ and ‘law and punishment.’ Interestingly enough, those who seem most concerned that people have a spiritual experience of God’s grace – defined primarily as judicial forgiveness – also seem most concerned that people have a socio-political experience of law and merit. I believe this is why there is a conceptual and emotional link between believing in penal substitution and being politically on the right (although I do think that there is a way for Christians to participate in the ‘right’ and ‘left’ but with specifically Christian postures).
4. If God is satisfied when He pours out His wrath on the guilty, should we be satisfied with that? Or if God trying to undo restore every person, and help them reject their own evil, how does that impact the way we think about incarceration? For a comparison of retributive vs. restorative justice, see: <https://newhumanityinstitute.wordpress.com/2015/09/09/interpreting-jesus-and-atonement-practical-issue-6-is-retributive-justice-the-highest-form-of-justice-does-atonement-theology-impact-our-framework-for-criminal-justice/>.
5. To see how a restorative justice paradigm would play out in relation to the ‘war on drugs’ and mass incarceration, see the study and action curriculum drawn from Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* and Dominique Gilliard’s book *Rethinking Incarceration: Advocating for Justice that Restores*. They can be found here: <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/study-action-guides>.

⁷² Timothy J. Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance: Crime, Vengeance, and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.198 – 199

⁷³ Kaia Stern, *Voices from American Prisons: Faith, Education, and Healing* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), p.43 – 44

Question:
**Should Our Economic System Prioritize the Principle of
Meritocratic-Retributive or Restorative Justice?**

Relevance – Questions for Discussion

- If God is looking for ‘merit’ in some sense, does that mean that our society should be a meritocracy? Should we be against social welfare ideas?
- If God predestines some people for hell, would we have universal human dignity? Can we advocate for universal human dignity if God doesn’t?

Scripture and the Interpreters

- ‘You shall thus consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim a release through the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, and each of you shall return to his own property, and each of you shall return to his family... The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me... If a fellow countryman of yours becomes so poor he has to sell part of his property... if he has not found sufficient means to get it back for himself, then... at the jubilee it shall revert, that he may return to his property.’ (Leviticus 25:10, 23 – 28)
- ‘Now in case a countryman of yours becomes poor and his means with regard to you falter, then you are to sustain him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you. Do not take usurious interest from him, but revere your God, that your countryman may live with you. You shall not give him your silver at interest, nor your food for gain. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.’ (Leviticus 25:35 – 38)
- ‘At the end of every seven years you shall grant a remission of debts.’ (Deuteronomy 15:1)

Restorative Justice

Pope Francis writes, ‘Just as the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say “thou shalt not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills... Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? This is a case of inequality. Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape... *In this context, some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system.*’⁷⁴

Meritocratic-Retributive Justice

On economic relations: High federal Calvinist theologian Wayne Grudem affirms the Bible’s concern for the poor as a matter of personal or church charity but critiques government attempts at alleviating poverty: ‘The Bible clearly takes the side of individual ownership of property. My conclusion is that the estate tax should be permanently repealed.’⁷⁵ *Grudem believes that God gave people the unlimited right to pass on economic inheritance to their children (citing Pr.19:14; Num.27:8 – 11) and that government should not interfere with that (he cites Ezk.46:18).* He believes government should encourage businesses. He believes taxes should be as low as possible for all individuals, and lower than 20% for corporations. He comments on capital gains taxes, income tax rates, and eschews a higher tax rate on the rich.

⁷⁴ Pope Francis I, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2014, chapter 2, part 1, paragraphs 53 – 54

⁷⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), p.309; for another perspective from the Reformed camp, see Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2010).

More Discussion Questions

1. Penal substitutionary atonement is sometimes thought of us owing God a debt, and Jesus paying it instead of us. This would seem to make God a debt-collector, not really a debt-forgiver. Considering the Old Testament passages above, does God seem like a debt-collector?
2. It is not always straightforward what principles to take from Israel's early life without also looking at Jesus. At the very least, we see how God was shaping Israel by reminding them of what the garden of Eden might have been like (Israel lived in a garden land like Adam and Eve once did; each person's portion of the garden was given by inheritance; etc.). Jesus proclaimed that his reign was 'the favorable year of the Lord' (Lk.4:19, quoting Isa.61:2), which is connected to this 'jubilee year' principle of Leviticus 25. Jesus taught his people to forgive 'debts' (literal and metaphorical) constantly (Mt.5:42; 6:12; 18:21 – 35; Lk.7:36 – 50; 11:4; 16:1 – 13). In Israel's calendar, God pressed a reset button so the Israelites could return to their family's land every fiftieth year, and be free from debt every seventh year. What kind of relationship between people and land (which is both a form of wealth and the opportunity to work) is envisioned here? What kind of relationships between person to person? And what if we allowed children and grandchildren to inherit *all* the advantages and disadvantages their ancestors could pass down to them, as Wayne Grudem suggests?⁷⁶
3. Why would God be opposed to interest rate lending? Note that this principle is repeated constantly in the Old Testament (Ex.22:26 – 27; Lev.25:35 – 38; Dt.23:19; Ps.15:5; Pr.28:7 – 9; Isa.58:6; Hab.2:6 – 7; Ezk.18:10 – 18; 22:12; Neh.5:1 – 15). Jesus seems to assume it when he refers to giving (e.g. Mt.5:42) and forgiving debt (see above). And the church understood it to be so for a millennium and a half.⁷⁷ Why is interest rate lending seen as exploitative? What kind of relationships are we to have instead?
4. Typically, in classes on economics, we are told that the three factors of production are land, labor, and capital. The secular assumption tends to be that land and labor are reducible to capital. This seems to be why we undervalue both land and labor, and get environmental and human/labor rights problems. What is God's vision for relationship between people in an economic sense, and between people and land?
5. Can God serve as the foundation for the human dignity of each person? If He does not really want to redeem each person, can we say that? And if He does not actually love everyone, then can God serve as the moral basis for His own command to us, to love everyone, especially in regards to economic needs?

⁷⁶ See my critique of Grudem in <https://newhumanityinstitute.wordpress.com/2015/09/14/interpreting-jesus-and-atonement-practical-issue-7-atonement-gods-character-and-economic-justice-a-critique-of-wayne-grudem/>.

⁷⁷ See my critique of Tim Keller's book *Generous Justice* in the blog post in the link below <https://newhumanityinstitute.wordpress.com/2015/09/22/interpreting-jesus-and-atonement-practical-issue-8-atonement-gods-character-and-economic-justice-a-critique-of-tim-keller/> as I do not think Keller decisively refutes Grudem because he shares the meritocratic-retributive logic of penal substitution. See Paul Mills, *The Great Financial Crisis*, from the Jubilee Center for a critique of debt and interest rate lending: <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/the-great-financial-crisis-a-biblical-diagnosis-by-paul-mills/>.