

HOW CAN A LOVING GOD SEND PEOPLE TO HELL?

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Over the years I have been increasingly troubled by the doctrine of Hell. As my love for God and my neighbor increased, the horror at the thought of many of those I love suffering eternal punishment had increased with it. I was shocked at how nonchalantly my fellow Christians accepted that the majority of the world was going to Hell. How could they believe this and not be deeply broken and grieved over it? I found the fact that they were not disturbed to be deeply disturbing. Not only did I hear people casually justifying the hypothetical person burning in torment with callous references to freewill (*“they had their chance to decide”*), or responding out of fear that God is being challenged in his justice with all sorts of completely awful unchristlike theories in much the same way as Job's friends did with him: *“Well sure God is love, but enough is enough!”* or *“Wouldn't you be mad too?”* ad nauseum. But worse, I even heard people make light-hearted jokes about a subject that in my estimation is about as funny as the holocaust, or gang rape:

“Well I may have to work with Bob at my office, but thank the Lord, at least I won't have to spend eternity with him!” (chuckle, chuckle).

This reminded me of how police frequently make morbid and dehumanizing jokes about crime victims to cope with the shock. Understandable, but jokes like this made me feel sick. Where was the love for the lost? For the outsider? This kind of matter-of-fact resignation among Christians is a far more powerful deterrent to evangelism and the kindling of a heart for the lost than Universalism ever was. Even a Universalist (I come from the background of an Evangelical Christian not a Unitarian Universalist in case you were wondering) can see lostness and suffering around them and therefore still have reason to reach out to people with the hope of the Cross, and introduce them to a personal healing relationship with God. But a person who comfortably has distanced themselves from the lost world, who closes their eyes to the world around them can not and does not.

This response of denial starts off subtly: like most of us they see that evangelistic actions rarely result in the salvation of very many. They try to tell their friends, their loved ones, about the love of God only to be met with a stone wall of rejection. They feel the urgency, and they experience the frustration. It all seems fruitless. So rather than sinking into disillusionment, they deny the problem altogether. They isolate themselves from the realities around them, surrounding themselves with their comfortable “Christian” culture.

Basically it boils down to this: We see that the world is lost, and there are all sorts of struggles and hurts around us. When we try to reach out to people, to bring them the good news it seems ineffectual, falling on deaf ears. This is hard to face because it looks as if God is powerless to save us, like good is losing the battle. This conclusion, taken to its logical extreme means hopelessness, nihilism, and despair. So rather than facing this, we close our eyes to the problem altogether, and to the hurting world around us.

This response is very human and understandable, but it is a response based on fear rather than love. It is a decidedly unchristlike response - dangerous, and even hypocritical. It is the purpose of this paper to

present an alternative view that ends neither in denial of the problem nor despair over the dilemma, but in biblical hope.

In looking for an answer, there is nothing to be gained from picking and choosing the parts of the Bible that suit us and tossing out the rest. If we expect to find an answer then we need to look to God for that answer, and we need to be realistic, theologically sound, and thoroughly biblical. In this paper I would like to take a look at what the Bible tells us about the nature of who God is, and who we are, and then with this background to take a new look at Hell through that paradigm. In so doing I hope to find a biblical and livable approach to dealing with the problem of Hell.

THE NATURE OF JUSTICE (WHO GOD IS)

At a cursory reading it can seem like the Old Testament and the New Testament present two contradictory views of God: a God of wrath and justice in the Old, and a God of mercy and love in the New. As a consequence, our response to the Old Testament is often either to throw it out as obsolete, (basically reading Psalms and ignoring the rest), or - in the more common approach - to synthesize it into a compromise of mercy and justice: two attributes apparently conflicting but co-existing with each other. This approach is what I like to call the Loophole Theology. I'm sure you've heard it before: "*God sent his Son to die on the cross because God needed a sacrifice and was bound to the law..*" In this view God is primarily a God of justice and holiness, but saw that the Law was not really working. But then He had this great idea of how he could get around the whole legal problem with a trick: the cross! In this compromised theology love and mercy were additions to God's character, and the cross was an afterthought rather than God's original plan from the very beginning.

I call this theory "compromised" because in compromising mercy and justice with each other it misunderstands that biblically the two are not in conflict at all, and thus it fundamentally misrepresents the nature of these two vital attributes of God's character. *There was no change in God's character or values from the Old Testament to the New, and there is no conflict between justice and mercy.* The heroes of the Old Testament, just like in the New Testament, are not honored by God because of flawless righteousness, but because of their faith - because of their hearts. Paul tells us in Romans that Abraham foresaw the resurrection of Christ when he reasoned that God could raise his son Isaac from the dead. Although he had no Bible to read, he saw deeply into the character of who God was. Like Abraham David was far from a model of legalistic virtue, but he had more insight into God's forgiveness, love, mercy, and compassion than many of us do today even though he had no New Testament to read. And God praised them for it. Faith has always been at the center of God's plan for our lives. God has always been a God searching for a relationship with us, rather than sacrifice and rituals. Teaching us to love with our hearts, not just obeying laws. The New Testament is not a contradiction of the Old but a progressive revelation where in Christ we see God portrayed more clearly than ever before. Abraham and David saw ahead to Christ, they saw the true character of God - and God called them great and set them up as examples to all of us. What is important now under the New Testament was important then under the Old Covenant. The rules of who God is have not changed, they have just been clarified.

Jesus teaches us in the Sermon on the Mount that the balance between the Old and New Testaments - between the Law and Grace - is not one of integration or even of combination but of *transformation*. He did not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill it. He did not come to replace the Law, or even to

combine or add to it, but to fulfill it - to transform it.

It is like a seed that grows into a flower - it is completely transformed. You would never guess looking at a seed that it would become a rose or a tomato or an oak tree, it is a radical transformation. But this is the fulfillment of what that seed was made to be. Christ is the fulfillment of the Law, radically transforming it. When he changed "an eye for an eye" into "turn the other cheek" he turned the whole thing up-side down (or I should say right-side up). He fulfilled it perfectly in himself just as he does in our own lives, not destroying who we are but transforming us into who we were meant to be. In Christ, in the message of the New Testament, the Law sprouts and blooms into Grace, and justice grows into love where it finds its fulfillment.

In the New Testament we see clearly what David and Abraham foresaw and longed after: that justice and love are not in conflict with one another, rather that *true justice can only be found within love*. Paul tells us that justice and the Law apart from Grace can only produce death. Punishment hardens our hearts. The Law has power to restrain us outwardly but none to transform us inwardly. God's Grace however does. It means reformation and healing. This is what true justice really is - restoring what was lost, making things right again, being new again. Justice is the result of God's mercy and grace not a contradiction to it.

John summed it up when he wrote "God is love." He didn't say "God is love, but..." because you don't need to add anything to it. Love properly understood in the person of Christ is all you need. Justice is an *outgrowth* of God's love, so is holiness, so is wrath. In Isaiah God said "*In my anger I turned my face from you for an instant, but my loving kindness endures forever*" biblically, wrath is conditional, love is eternal and absolute. If you look at the pathos in the prophesies of the Old Testament, you will see a God very similar to a mother who screams when her child runs into the street. She chases it, grabs it, and yells "*Don't you ever do that again!*" Then when the child begins to cry she holds it in her arms and says "*I thought I was going to lose you, I love you so much!*" The mother's anger is there only because she loves her child so deeply. God's wrath is the result of his love for us, not a contradiction to it.

God is love. I can't state that strongly enough. When we make statements like "*God cannot leave sin unpunished*" as a justification for people going to Hell we do not accurately reflect God's true heart and character. A more biblical description would be "*God is not willing that any should perish - regardless of the personal cost to himself*" God is not so concerned with questions of guilt and deserving and justice as he is concerned with you. When God died for you on the Cross he was basically saying "*I don't care about whose fault it is, I just want you back!*"

Don't get me wrong. Sin and lostness are very real. Love is not blind. I am definitely not saying that sin does not matter. It cost God his life to save us. Without God's salvation we are all separated from God and lost, headed on a collision course with Hell. Hell is the natural consequence (like gravity) of our life without God, it is what life looks like separated from love, from life, from hope. Hell is looking our own lostness straight in the face. Just like we have glimpses of what Heaven will be like through our experiences of God's salvation here, we also have glimpses of what Hell will be like through the lostness and despair and hopelessness around us. Hell is the very definition of lostness, of the absence of God. Hell is evil, destruction, and Godlessness in its most final and extreme form. God won't send us there, we're already on our way. God's job is to stop us.

JUSTICE VS. MERCY

When I say that God is not concerned with assigning guilt, but with restoring lives, I by no means wish to imply that we are innocent or that sin is not harmful. When you adopt an orphan, they don't come freshly scrubbed with good table manners like in the musical *Oliver*. They might steal from your purse, they might be sexually active at 8 years old. They come with the scars of the environment they have grown up in. Victims are victimized. They are not cute and innocent, because when the little orphan boy was sinned against, this victimization results inevitably in his sinning against another. This process was brilliantly illustrated long before Freud came on the scene by Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables*. The book tells the story of Jean Valjean who was imprisoned for stealing a loaf of bread, and in the penal system of pre-revolutionary France, was criminalized:

Jean Valjean entered the galleys sobbing and trembling; he left hardened. He entered in despair; he left sullen. What had happened within his soul?

Punishment of this kind, in which pitilessness and brutality dominates, is to transform gradually by a slow numbing process, a man into an animal. Jean Valjean's repeated obstinate attempts to escape are enough to prove the strange effect of the law on a human soul.

Jean Valjean had repeated these attempts, so completely useless and foolish, when the opportunity arose without a moments thought of the trials already undergone. He escaped impetuously, like a wolf on seeing his cage door open. Instinct said "go!," reason said "stay!" but before so mighty a temptation, reason disappeared, and only instinct remained. The beast alone was reacting. When he was recaptured the new punishment inflicted upon him only made him fiercer.

He was sentenced to five years for theft. Because of repeated escape attempts, his total time served was 19 years. In prison the law mercilessly crushed Jean Valjean, and as with the majority of convicts, it resulted in him feeling unjustly treated. He felt that he was wronged by society, that he was owed.

As motives, he had habitual indignation, bitterness, a deep sense of injury, a reaction even against the good, the innocent, and the upright, in the unlikely event that he encountered them. The beginning and end of all his thoughts was hatred of human law; that hatred which, if not checked in its growth by some providential event, becomes in time a hatred of society, then hatred of the human race, then hatred of creation, revealing itself by a vague, incessant desire to injure some living being, no matter who. So the passport was right in describing Jean Valjean as "*a very dangerous man.*"

Because of this passport, after he is released from prison he is rejected from every inn and hostel in town. This only fuels his feelings of rejection and injustice. He finally is taken in by a priest, who to Valjean's shock treats him with dignity and respect. The priest invites him to dine with him, and then prepares a bed for him in his house. And in the middle of the night Jean Valjean awakes, steals the silver cutlery they had eaten with, and runs. The next morning he is apprehended by three gendarmes and is brought before the priest, who turns out to be the bishop:

"Ah there you are!" he said looking at Jean Valjean, "I'm glad to see you. But I gave you the candles sticks too, which are silver like the rest and would bring 200 francs. Why didn't you take them along with your cutlery?"

Jean Valjean opened his eyes and looked at the bishop with an expression no human tongue could describe.

“Monseigneur,” said the brigadier, “then what this man said was true? We met him. He was acting like a fugitive, and we arrested him in order to find out. He had this silver.”

“And he told you,” interrupted the bishop, with a smile “that it had been given to him by a good old priest at whose house he had slept. I see it all. And you brought him back here? It's all a mistake.”

“If that's so,” said the brigadier “we can let him go.”

“Please do,” replied the bishop.

The gendarmes released Jean Valjean, who shrank back.

“Is it true you're letting me go?” he muttered, as if talking in his sleep.

“Yes! You can go. Don't you understand?” said a gendarme.

“My friend,” said the bishop, “before you go away, here are your candlesticks; take them.”

He went to the mantelpiece, took the two candlesticks and handed them to Jean Valjean. Jean Valjean was trembling all over. He took the candlesticks distractedly, with a bewildered expression.

“Now,” said the bishop, “go in peace. By the way, my friend, when you come in you needn't come through the garden. You can always come and go by the front door. It is only closed with a latch, day and night.”

Then turning to the gendarmes he said “messieurs, you may go.” The gendarmes left.

Jean Valjean felt like a man about to faint. The bishop approached him, and said in a low voice,

“Do not forget, ever, that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man.”

Jean Valjean, who had no recollection of any such promise, stood dumbfounded. The bishop had stressed these words as he spoke them. He continued solemnly,

“Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God!”

Jean Valjean left the city like a man escaping. He was torn in two. What the bishop had done was the most formidable assault that he had ever endured. He had lived by the law - an eye for an eye, and the bishop had come and touched his heart of stone with love. This was worlds apart from anything he had ever experienced. He saw the love that the bishop had showed him and it hurt his soul, like a bright light hurts the eyes. This light contrasted and illuminated the blackness that had become his heart, and for the first time in 19 years, he wept.

There was no longer a middle course for him. If thereafter he did not become the best of men, he would be the worst. He must, so to speak, climb higher than the bishop, or sink lower than the convict; if he wanted to become good, he must become an angel; if he wanted to remain evil, he must become a monster.

He was forced to decide to either let this love in and break down all the defenses he had built - complete surrender; or to harden his heart so completely that there would be nothing left. He had been

a victim, and this had robbed him of his innocence. He had been sinned against, and as a result he had sinned. When he was confronted with the law the result was not that he saw his guilt, but that he condemned his accusers and hardened his heart. Grace, when it entered his life, shattered his defenses. In its light he saw what he had become, he understood his guilt through the eyes of love, and it led him to repentance, healing, and a new life. Jean Valjean was born again that night.

Jean Valjean wept for a long time. He shed hot tears, he wept bitterly, more powerless than a woman, more terrified than a child.

While he wept, the light grew brighter and brighter in his mind - an extraordinary light, a light at once entrancing and terrible. His past life, his first offense, his long expiation, his exterior degradation, his interior hardening, his release made sweet by so many schemes of vengeance, what had happened to him at the bishop's - all this returned and appeared to him clearly, but in a light he had never seen before. He could see his life, and it seemed horrible; his soul, and it seemed frightful. There was, however, a gentler light shining on that life and soul. It seemed to him that he was looking at Satan by the light of Paradise.

That night, Jean Valjean was seen kneeling in prayer, on the pavement in the dark, before the door of the bishop.

In Jean Valjean's story we see the contrast between the Law and Grace. We see how vital it is to understand guilt in the context of grace rather than through the eyes of the Law. It is the difference between life and death.

So how can we understand justice through the eyes of grace? A good starting point is to realize that the commonly held wisdom that God's justice is different than ours is simply not true. God has ingrained us with a fundamental understanding of justice. C.S. Lewis once said that we live in *"a universe that contains much that is obviously bad and apparently meaningless, but containing creatures like ourselves who know that it is bad and meaningless."*

What he was getting at is that the only reason we recognize injustice at all, is that we have been made with an God-inherited need for justice, just like God has given all of us an inborn need for love and meaning. When you are outraged at injustice, when you ask "why!" these are primarily God's questions inside of you. The real question is: *Why did God want me to ask this question? If this is from God, then how can I channel this outrage positively working together with love rather than against Him?*

Our reactions to these questions - to want revenge, or to run away from God - may be misplaced, but the fundamental understanding and need for a world where things are right and whole and just is not in conflict with God, but *from* God.

The fundamental problem with the traditional doctrine of Hell is that it creates a conflict between what we understand to be God's version of justice and ours. What I am proposing is that the Bible paints no such conflict. What you understand as justice, God does too. Judgment day will not be unfair and tyrannical, but governed by love. It's true that love is not wimpy or soft, but what many of us have been taught as "biblical justice" was in fact merely legalistic and primitive and not a reflection of what real Godly justice is. God is not merely the highest being in the universe - He is the height. He *is* love. He *is* justice. It is not possible for us to develop a higher concept of justice or love than God already

embodies. Without God *there is no love, there is no justice*. Everything you understand about what these two things mean, you have because God has revealed these truths to you, because he has planted these things in your heart. The conflict between our understanding of justice and God's is simply not there. Still it seems that it is by what we read in the Bible. We will be going over many of these things now, trying to make sense of them throughout the rest of this paper, but we now have a starting point: *God is love, God is just*. These are theological absolutes. Anything that calls these two things into question is either wrong, or we have misunderstood it.

EVANGELISM WITH FEAR

There was a church play circulating through youth-rallies a while back that epitomized much of our beliefs about evangelism that we take for granted on a grassroots level. It was your basic fear-motivated what-if-they-died-tomorrow youth play. Like just about everything made for and by teenagers it was very extreme, heavy handed, and black & white. The basic storyline, repeated several times in different configurations was the following:

Deb the Christian teenie: Want to go to church with me?

Cindy the non-Christian teenie: No thanks.

(BAM! Cindy is run over by a truck. The scene changes to Hell, complete with sound effects, red light bulbs, and the screams of the damned.)

Devil: ha ha ha!

Cindy: If I had only known!

Non-descript Jesus figure: spreads his arms in a “oops, what can I do?” gesture.

Being asked casually to church was Cindy's one chance to choose her eternal destiny. Deciding to go to the movies, or do her homework instead justifies her death and eternal torment with a schadenfreude Satan and a helpless Christ. Evangelism motivated by fear, and motivating with fear. Love God or else. There is so much of the impoverished theology that we have come to believe reflected in this awful little play that it is hard to even know where to begin. Although great effort was made to make this play horrifying, the response of most of the Christians in the audience was matter-of-fact and casual. On the bus ride home people were joking and enjoying themselves. All except for one girl who was reduced to tears. The others wanted to comfort her but really couldn't understand what was the matter. She was not crying because she was moved, but because she was grieved at how cold hearted it all seemed. It was not justice that was presented but primitive tyrannical vengeance.

In our justice-heavy theology that I earlier referred to as “Loophole Theology” the Gospel message runs something like this:

You have at some time in your life stolen an apple or lied to someone. Just in case you didn't Adam has done this for you, and you are now found guilty. Besides, it is impossible to keep the law, and so you must be guilty. Because of this, God, who is a pedantic legalist, is

going to torture you in Hell forever. But wait, I have good news! Hey why are you walking away? Come back! What if you die tomorrow?

This of course sounds ludicrous because it is. We are not separated from God because we have done something wrong once, but because our whole lives are lived with ourselves as the center rather than God. Hell, lostness, hardness of heart, and hurt are the consequences of trying to meet our needs outside of God. This does not mean that God punishes us when we don't come to him, but rather that when we try to find love in a bottle, or in any other lie we choose, this is dysfunctional and only hurts and reduces us. Following God is not a matter of keeping a set of rules that are impossible to uphold, but of living our lives dependent on Him. We were made to live this way in relationship with God, needing Him. We cannot and should not function any other way. When we try to, we fail because we are misusing these things. God's reaction to our waywardness is not that of a government worker obsessed with rules, he is Christ breaking rules on the Sabbath to help someone imprisoned and oppressed by the world. He is Christ being down-right rude and aggressive defending an outcast from the religiously arrogant. Passionate, involved, dying a messy death. He is not a gentleman concerned with form and proper behavior, he is a lover.

It is said that God cannot be where sin is. But we see in Christ that this is *exactly* where he was. He walks through the streets, filled with death and loneliness, and kneels beside the empty faces. It is sin that cannot be where God is. It is our dysfunction, our hypocrisy and hurt that can't remain when we are with Him.

As a result of this wrong picture of God's justice and character that we have been taught, we tend to develop a schizophrenic approach to evangelism. In our experience with God, He is loving. Overwhelmingly loving in fact. When we expect him to react harshly he often surprises us with tenderness and forgiveness. David talked about this a lot in the Psalms. Paul said "It is your kindness that leads us to repentance." This unconditional love of God sends us to our knees. It breaks us. But although we experience this with God ourselves, when we tell non-Christians about God we present a God who cannot leave sin unpunished, who loves justice, who seems by our description to be unfair and hateful. We try to scare the Hell out of people, rather than believing that God meant it when He said that it is kindness that leads us to repentance.

Out of fear and urgency we try to help God out a bit, and speed up the process by playing the Holy Spirit. But fear is always a bad motivation. Love is patient. Love always hopes, always waits, always trusts, always believes, and though it's hard to take - love hurries for no one. We are not the Holy Spirit. Salvation is God's responsibility, ours is to love. Evangelism rushing ahead of, and outside the context of love, is a polluted and ineffectual Gospel. We cloth the naked, we heal the sick, we love those around us, not as a bait for salvation, but simply because it is good, because it is loving. Contrary to popular opinion, the ends do not justify the means - the means determine the end. The means of manipulation, condemnation, or dishonesty will reap what they have sown, regardless of the end in mind. Do not focus on the end result, but on the right means, and the right result will follow. Our means is love, and this is never a waste of time.

THE NATURE OF SIN (WHO WE ARE)

Another aspect that the play brings out is our belief that the decision for Christ is entirely a simple

rational choice. God gives you one chance to repent, or maybe two if you are really lucky, and then the 18-wheeler comes and BAM! When Peter asked Jesus how many chances he should give his neighbor and suggested seven as a very generous number, Jesus said 7 times 70 would be more like it! In other words: don't count at all. But even more than a question of generosity, the main flaw of this is that it places an unhealthy overemphasis on the rational, on choice. It ignores crucial biblical teachings about what sin does to us and who we are. This is what we will look at next.

God doesn't want any marionettes. I'm sure you've heard this sentence a hundred times. It is based on the doctrine of freewill as proposed by Arminius and popularized most recently by C.S. Lewis and is a very important aspect to understanding who we are in relation to God. It is however only a small part of what the Bible has to say about this, and taken carte blanche without the other biblical elements involved paints an unrealistic and unbiblical picture of our world. Biblically there are three elements at work simultaneously:

- our freewill,
- plus God's influence in our lives,
- sin's enslaving and blinding us.

So the Biblical picture looks something like “God woos us through his Holy Spirit to choose ourselves what is right and come out of our blindness.” To say that there is zero maliciousness involved, or zero choice is plainly overstating the case. But to put such an emphasis on freewill like we do is equally wrong. The true biblical picture is a complicated mixture, but the prominent analogies are of blindness, lostness, and sickness, not of free choice.

The Bible does not speak directly of freewill, but of freedom. God is not willing for the sake of “respecting our freewill” to watch idly as we become slaves to sin. No responsible parent would be. “Freedom” to sin results in slavery. Indulgence results in dissatisfaction. Sin produces hardness, blindness, and pitifulness.

Evil, when properly understood, is stupid, unattractive, and unfulfilling. It's a lie not a legitimate choice. Evil is wrong in nature not just in consequence. Therefore no one can make a free intelligent choice for evil - let alone Hell - only a blinded, warped one. God needs to heal our blindness and apathy. The New Testament's perspective on freewill is that we are created to be free but through sin lose our freedom. The irony of the statement that “God does not want any marionettes,” which is frequently used to explain why God allows people to go to Hell, is that when we sin we are marionettes.

It is true that God does not want us to be marionettes and that he respects us and our freewill, but what He wants is to free us so we can be responsible for our lives.

What is unbiblical about the traditional freewill doctrine is that it places an overemphasis on the rational. Rather than freedom being the opposite of slavery (self-enslavement being a very irrational thing), “freewill” is presented as our choice for God in a theoretical neutral intellectual vacuum. This kind of thinking results in an impersonal “hit-and-run evangelism” of unsolicited information. We hand them a tract, rattle off some prepared speech of apologetics, and think since they've “had a chance to hear the Gospel” that our work is done. The problem is, they probably didn't hear a word we said.

People, (and that includes us), can only internalize what they are ready to. You can't answer people's questions until they are asking them, and you can't solve their "problem" unless they see that there is one, and are seeking a solution. Evangelism isn't just a question of information - as if a mass-mailing advertising campaign could fulfill the Great Commission(!)

It is not an informational need that we have, but an emotional one. The ultimate problem of sin is our unwillingness to accept salvation. We are afraid to make ourselves dependent and needy, to admit that we are blind and sick and naked. It threatens our self-dignity. We know dependency on "things" (whether cult membership, or cocaine, or success, or romance, or a multitude of other human crutches) does effect our dignity. It smothers and enslaves us. What we don't realize is that dependency on God fulfills and expands us. Our fear comes from wrongly assuming that dependency on God is the same as dependency on these things. In fact, it's the opposite. Dependency on God actually makes us truly secure and independent. Secure, because we find our place with God. Independent because we are freed from imbalanced dependencies, and are free again to enjoy all these things (success, romance, and uh, probably not the cocaine...) in their proper healthy place in our lives. Thus with God we can have dependency with dignity.

Peoples fundamental refusal of help - the fear of dependency - is the central hurdle of evangelism. It also raises the question "what makes us this way?" Why are we so stupid and blind that we refuse help? It seems to be something deep within our nature, so are we basically good, (as most people would say) or basically evil (as most Christians would say)? The Bible's answer is: both. Paul writes in Romans 7:14-25 of his longing apart from Christ to do good, but inability because of sin enslaving him (cf. especially verse 17 "no longer me doing it," and v. 18 "nothing good in me, that is in my sinful nature"). Basically we were created for good - to function best and be ultimately fulfilled in a relationship with God, but it is very easy for us to choose the wide obvious road of immediate temporary superficial gratification. The more we do choose it, the more it becomes our nature. Sin leading to more slavery, and blindness, and hardness of heart. Following God leading to the opposite, or in other words, leading to more of who we were intended to be.

Jesus when describing sinners uses terms like "blind, naked, lost sheep, sick." All non-condemning descriptions of weakness and victims rather than of deliberate maliciousness. The New Testament does not see sinners as the Hollywood version of broad shouldered villain with glowing red eyes and a deep voice, or of the fun party-happy care-free sinner, but of a lonely dirty pitiful heroin addict hoveled up in a corner. These accusatory condemning terms like "snakes and vipers," or "son of hell" are reserved in the New Testament for self-righteous Pharisees who claim they are independently blameless or Christians who know the truth but deny the Holy Spirit and lead others astray.

We have seen a New Testament picture of God valuing mercy over legal values, and sin biblically portrayed as sickness rather than maliciousness. We begin to see a picture of God emerge that is not rule and Law obsessed but as loving, involved, and generous, and ourselves as more lost than evil. Our dilemma is real, and it is deadly, but it is categorically different from the traditional one of a judging God and of a people choosing our destiny in a rational vacuum. We will use this New Testament perspective of who we are and who God is to approach the problem of Hell.

WHAT ABOUT THE BUDDHISTS?

Now we turn our focus to Jesus and His claims to be the only way to God. This statement is often times a stumbling block to sensitive people who ask “What about people in other religions? What about people who have never heard? What about people who live good lives but were raised in a totally different culture?” The basic question is: How can a just God limit himself to one specific cultural expression or world religion? The answer is simple: He doesn't. We as Christians do not believe that Christianity is the truth, we believe that Christ is the truth. Christianity is our human-made cultural imperfect attempt to follow Him. As E. Stanley Jones wrote:

I do not conceive of the gospel of Christ as a religion at all. Jesus was not coming to set one religion over against another. He came to set the gospel over against human need, whether that need be in the Jewish faith, in the Gentile religions, or among Jesus' own followers. For religions are man's search for God; the Gospel is God's search for man.

I know when I say that it sounds presumptuous, for a religion was built up around Jesus, man-made and fallible. True, but the gospel confronts that man-made and fallible system with the same demand and offer as it does the other religions. We do not preach the system built up around Jesus, we preach to the system just as we would preach to any other human need. Our message is not the system but the savior. He is the Gospel. He did not come to bring the good news, he is the good news. We therefore bring him to East and West and say: You do not have to take our interpretation of Christ except as you find it helpful in forming your own. Go straight to the gospels and discover Jesus anew; and if you show us a better interpretation, we shall sit at your feet.

In order to then understand why Jesus is the only way to God, it is vital to understand why it is that we cannot earn God's love. The statement “You can't earn God's love” is about as widespread as the “marionettes” one. This is often portrayed as an insurmountable goal that you can never live up to, but for which God still (seemingly unfairly) holds you accountable for.

In the New Testament's paradigm of God as father it is still true that you cannot earn his love, but the reason is that earning love in a family setting is absurd. A parent doesn't love a child because they “deserve” it. You don't love your daughter because she does well in school. Worth or value in the context of a family is intrinsic. As part of God's family you were created valuable, and don't need to “earn” God's love. In fact, there's absolutely nothing you can say or do to make God love you more. Not even Jesus “earned” God's love. He was the only one who could have (theoretically in a legal system of earning and deserving), but love is not something that you earn at all.

Nearly all major forms of religion, whether Esoteric, Buddhist, Catholic - whatever you want, tend to focus on our own accomplishments, our own striving to reach God, to become good. This a noble and worthy goal. But it is not enough. This is not because our acts of virtue are not valuable, or because we are not capable of love apart from God's Grace. When Jesus met the rich young man who told him he had kept all of he commandments, the Bible does not tell us that Jesus devalued this, but that “He looked at him and loved him.” We should never devalue peoples striving for good, but rejoice when we encounter it. The problem though is that no matter how much good we do, we cannot renew our hearts, we cannot bridge the distance between us and God. When we try to reach God ourselves based on performance, regardless of which method or religion we choose, we will fall short. When God reaches

down to us in Christ though, the paradigm is no longer one of legalism and earning, but of the lost son, of adoption - of family.

The difference between these two paradigms is illustrated well in an incident where the religious Pharisees had brought a woman to Jesus whom they had caught in adultery. They said to him *“The Law says to stone her to death. What do you say?”* He answered *“He who is without sin should throw the first stone at her”* one by one they left, until Jesus was alone with the woman. You have to imagine how this woman must have felt corralled by the angry mob of self-righteous men, thrown at Jesus' feet, expecting at any second the first stone to fly, expecting to be condemned and killed. Completely helpless and hopeless. Then Jesus said to her *“Woman where are they? Has no one condemned you?”* she answered him *“no one”* and then Jesus said *“Then neither do I. Go and leave your life of sin.”*

The Pharisees who had based their righteousness on their own effort had only themselves as their self-defense and had to walk away one by one in shame. The woman had God incarnate as her defender. The difference is profound. One is us reaching for God, the other is God reaching for us. Maybe we shouldn't say that Christ is the only way to God (which might imply that the system built around Christ - a belief or a technique - is the only right one) but rather that Christ is the only way from God. When God reaches out his hand, that's what it looks like. The reason Jesus is the only way to God is because Jesus is God.

THE HOPE OF THE CROSS

We have seen that a great number of the theological wisdom nuggets that we take for granted are either wrong, or taken so completely out of context that they are wrong:

- “God doesn't want any marionettes” - used to justify an imbalanced overemphasis on rational choice rather than God's desire to free us for responsibility
- “The Holy Spirit is a gentleman” - used to justify pedantic legalism and a callousness to suffering, rather than a statement about God respecting us
- “You can't earn God's love” - used inappropriately in a family system, missing the whole point of what love is about
- “God can't be where there is sin” - as if God were a prude
- “They had their chance to decide” - as if God doesn't care about us, as long as His actions are justified
- “God is love, but...” - as if you need to add to Grace

The central problem with all of these is that they are primarily interpreted from a legal perspective rather than a perspective of Grace. Because of this bias we place an overemphasis on the rational and freewill, taking its legitimate importance way out of proportion and distorting our view of ourselves and sin in our lives. We create an unbalanced view of the character and nature of God, making him small hearted and limited by rules, rather than radically loving and life changing. This paradigm of legalism clouds how we read the New Testament, taking true things and distorting them, as evidenced by the list above which shows how impoverished our theology has become. David and Abraham were heroes of the Old Testament because they saw beyond what was written and recognized the true

character and nature of God. They saw with New Testament eyes - we do the opposite. Although we have way more progressive revelation of who God is, although we have Jesus, we interpret it all from an Old Testament perspective - through the eyes of the Law, and we miss the point.

The cross was a scandal because it demonstrated God's love, his involvement, his willingness to do anything to save us, to give everything to save us. It demonstrated his ability to shock and surprise us, to break all the rules, to jump out of the corner we had painted him into. We like to make everything into a rule, a pattern so we can feel like we have everything in our control. We look at the cross through our legal eyes and make it into a law: Accept Jesus, go to Heaven; reject him, go to Hell. But the cross is not a law, rather it radically demonstrates the character of who God is. We need to quit distorting our vision by looking at everything with our law spectacles and throw them on the floor and step on the glass! The Cross is extraordinarily radical, a scandal, and we reduce it to a pocket-sized principle. A rule we can pin on our refrigerator door.

The cross shows us how serious our problem is - it cost the almighty God of the universe his life to save us. It shows how much God loves us - the pain, the sacrifice that he is willing to endure to save us. And finally it shows God's ability to completely surprise us, to do the impossible, the unthinkable. This is the hope of the cross.

In the gospel of Luke Jesus tells a parable about a rich man and Lazarus:

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell [lit. Hades], where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, "Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire."

But Abraham replied, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us."

He answered, "Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment."

Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them." "No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."

He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

You have to hear the irony in this. Jesus tells us that there is an insurmountable separation that no one can cross, but then Jesus does just that, going into death and Hades leading out prisoners with him (see 1st Peter 3:19). He says further that there is no point in sending someone to warn people even though Jesus spends a good part of his life doing just that. Then in the ultimate irony He says that it won't help

even if someone rises from the dead even though that is what he came to earth to do in the first place! The moral of the story for us here is that the answer to the disciples question "How can anyone be saved?" is "With man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible." The problem of Hell, of our blindness and lostness is as impossible as putting a camel through the eye of a needle, Jesus tells us. But the cross demonstrates that God has no problem with impossibilities.

When Jesus said "It is finished" we should never estimate God's ability and power to surprise us, to do what seems impossible. The cross gives us reason to have hope against all hope based on who God is. Not based on the Law or even on promises and doctrines, but on God's character. We don't place our faith and trust in a rule, we place it in a person, in God. We need to have the same faith as Abraham and David, with the New Testament this should not be hard, but we need to constantly remember that the promises are not meant to be taken as rules and laws, but to show us the character of who God is. As Paul said to the Ephesians "God is able to do immeasurably more than we dare ask or imagine."

CONCLUSIONS

We have seen very good evidence to give us hope for a lost world. Now we need to think about how we should respond to this. What matters is how these doctrines effect how we perceive God, and how we represent him to others. It is vital to a healthy relationship that we view God as being just, loving, and in control. People get so enflamed about the issue of Hell because of just that - what it implies about who God is. How has a traditional doctrine of Hell effected how we present the Gospel? How has it motivated our response to God? It is often said that without the threat of Hell that no one will repent, and no one will evangelize. I would propose that the opposite is true. If you come to God because you are afraid of going to Hell, or if you evangelize out of a fear of Hell, then your motivation is based on fear and not love, And that is wrong. Fear of punishment is a selfish motivation, and if that is your motivation you need to change it. We do not love God or our neighbor because of what we can get out of it - maximizing our self-interest. We love because it is right. Period. If you find that you no longer love God, or your neighbor after the weight of a motivation of guilt and fear are lifted from over your head, then I would question whether you ever really loved them at all.

When some Universalists say that sin has no consequences - that it is not enslaving us and destroying us - this is absurdly naive. But it is just as absurd to champion justice in the name of God when he has shown us that he wants mercy, reconciliation, and Grace. The irony is that we defend the doctrine of Hell because of justice even though justice is the problem with Hell. Hell is not just, God is just. Hell is evil. Hell is not a good thing, it is a bad thing, just like sin. Hell is what God fights against, not for. We should fight with God, not against him. What Victor Hugo wrote in the introduction of his brilliant novel *Les Misérables* epitomizes for me what it means to have Christ's heart for the lost:

"A society that tolerates misery, a religion that tolerates Hell, a humanity that tolerates war, is to me an inferior one. With all of the strength of my being I want to destroy this human depravation. I damn the slavery, I chase away the misery, I heal the sickness, I brighten the darkness, I hate the hatred. "