



QUENCHED

What Everyone (Especially Christians) Should Know About Hell...



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For those who instill fear...

For those who are afraid...

And for the God whose perfect love is the greatest remedy...

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Introduction

In 2007, a friend challenged my devotion to one of Christianity's most widely-held doctrines. He asked me to reconsider my position on the doctrine of Hell. His challenge led me to research Hades, Gehenna, Tartarus, and Sheol (the Greek and Hebrew words that have been translated to read "Hell" in our Bibles).

I initially intended to prove to my friend that there was indeed a Hell, and that God would really send non-Christians to suffer there for eternity. Instead, my research led me to ask questions that I had never asked, to wonder things that I had never dared to wonder, and to draw conclusions that were far outside the bounds of orthodoxy.

At first, I kept my findings to myself. I was afraid that my church would force me to leave my position in leadership if they learned of how my beliefs had evolved. (I ended up leaving on my own without ever sharing my beliefs about the afterlife with anyone at the church.)

My "Hell" findings remained housed in my heart and mind until 2010 when I launched an anonymous blog called "Jesus Was A Heretic, Too". I wanted to make peace with the Christianity that didn't seem to have a place for me anymore, and for reasons that I don't quite understand, I felt that the blogosphere would be a good place to do it.

Through the magic of Google, my blog posts about Hell were discovered and suddenly-- I had an "audience". I organized the posts about Hell into a series called "One Hell of a Lie," changed the name on the blog to my own (thereby jettisoning my anonymity) and began to write boldly about the theological questions that most of us are afraid to ask.

Nowadays, the blog is called the "Diary of a Christian Universagnosticistal". I write about theology and religious pluralism, and I've found a welcoming spiritual space in expressions of Unitarian Universalism.

This book is mostly a compilation of the posts about Hell and Satan that started it all. (Chapters one and two were written specifically for this book. The other five chapters are versions of older blog posts. They have been expanded for clarity and edited to read more formally than their bloggy predecessors.)

This book began with one conversation and took shape through a series of many others. I hope it's a conversation starter for you as well-- a conversation starter that will help you and those around you to rethink your assumptions about God, Jesus, theology and the afterlife.

Enjoy.

1 *One Hell of a Question*

“I just don’t believe it, Crystal-- and frankly, I can’t believe that *you* believe it.”

My friend Charles and I had been on the phone for more than an hour. He was a former Christian turned agnostic who was skeptical of organized religion in general. I was a lay minister who enjoyed apologetics. We were talking about the afterlife when the subject of Hell emerged.

“I have daughters. They screw up all the time, but I would never harm my daughters-- let alone incinerate them. Never. How can someone claim to love you and then torture you? Is this God’s only recourse for correction?”

I was extremely frustrated. “Charles, if we break the law in our city, we go to jail. How can we accept the consequences of our actions in this life without acknowledging that there will be consequences in the afterlife?”

Nothing I said mattered to him. I couldn’t quote enough scripture to convince him that Hell was real, or justified, or God’s will. We had reached a stalemate.

“I bet if you searched hard enough, you’d find the controlling, sadistic puppet master at the root of this *Hell* thing. And I bet you he’s human—just like you and me.” Charles was the king of sarcasm. I could hear the smirk in his voice, but I was not amused. I couldn’t believe his pridefulness.

We had talked about scripture and theology, morality and reason, sin and justice. I was tired of defending my beliefs... tired of trying to explain God’s plan to balance the scales in this world and in the next. I was ready to throw in the towel. I needed some sleep.

“It’s eleven o’clock,” I said with exhaustion. “I’m going to bed.” We hung up. I prayed for him and climbed into bed, but I didn’t get any sleep that night. Despite my inability to agree with his arguments, I couldn’t escape a few powerful things about Charles’ position-- things that could not be easily dismissed.

For instance, I had never heard God described in the way that Charles talked about him. A torturer? I thought about this for hours...

"Am I worshiping a torturer?" I would silently think those words before quickly pushing them out of my mind. "The devil is the author of lies," I said to myself in response to that thought. "God is love and this *torture* thing is a lie designed to turn me away from God's truth."

I wrestled with this all night, but my internal dialogue didn't satisfy the tension I felt in my gut. I suddenly understood how Charles could have trouble reconciling those two radically different depictions of God. His struggle resonated with me because I was having the same problem for the first time in all of my years as a Christian. "Does this make sense?" I continued to think about the *lover vs. torturer* question, but with no answer.

In the weeks after our discussion, there were several questions about Hell that plagued my mind. For instance, Charles pointed out that Jesus told the disciples to forgive their trespassers as many times as necessary in the interest of maintaining those relationships¹-- but the traditional Hell doctrine seemed to depict a God whose forgiveness was both limited and conditional.

Charles also asked me why the Bible didn't talk more about "unsaved" children or the fates of adults who lacked the mental capacity to believe in Christian doctrine. "If eternal torture awaits the unsaved," Charles inquired, "then why didn't God talk more clearly about his plan for those who lack the intellectual capacity to choose the right religion?... And if a woman were to approach me yelling 'Help! My husband is demanding, and he hurts me when I don't obey him,' I would tell her to leave as quickly as possible... but your religion says the same of God while telling people to run toward him. Why?"

Suddenly, I boldly wondered: *Is a God who threatens eternal punishment for temporal disobedience any different than an abusive husband? Am I wrong for telling people to run toward my depiction of God? Is this theology harmful?* These were things that I'd never considered before, but I lacked the answers I so desperately wanted. And the questions didn't stop. I would never have admitted it to Charles at the time, but I suddenly had more questions than answers.

For instance, I believed that the only guaranteed road out of Hell was the Protestant Evangelical way. This involved repentance of sin and asking for Jesus Christ's free gift of salvation. I also believed that Jesus could return to rapture the Church at any time-- however, I also knew that only around 7% of the world's inhabitants were Protestant Evangelicals. (That's roughly 550 million people.) I wondered if God would really destroy more than 90% of the world's population in the twinkling of an eye.²

Furthermore, I wondered what had become of the non-Christians who died in generations past—a seemingly infinite number of people! Had God destroyed them, too?

I thought about the places in the world where people are sentenced to death for converting to Christianity. Would God burn people eternally for what they were afraid to believe? Would God burn the infidel mother who refused to convert because she feared for her own life or for the lives of her children? Wouldn't an all-knowing, merciful God be more understanding than this?

And what about people who live in the far corners of the earth and have not heard the Gospel? Romans 1:20 seemed to be the only verse that alluded to salvation for them. Why wouldn't God give clearer instructions for a world with a population that he knew would outnumber his chosen few? Wouldn't God want us to understand his will? Wouldn't he want us to represent him well with clear answers about who would be tortured eternally and who would not?

Overwhelmed with uncertainty about these matters, I decided to test the waters with my friend Monica over dinner one night.

"Do you ever think about Hell? I mean—really think about what the Bible says about it?" She laughed and playfully rolled her eyes. "No. I'm going to heaven. I don't need to think about Hell." (Yes. She really said that.)

I responded: "I've been thinking about it. I want to know more, but I don't know where to start digging for information." Suddenly, I had her attention. I whispered sheepishly, "Monica, I used to be sure about this stuff, but now I think I should get a better handle on it. There are things I once believed I knew, but I am not so certain of anymore." She was the first and only person that I had told about my uncertainty. I was embarrassed to admit that I was having such doubts.

Monica looked me in the eyes and said with a steady tone, "Crystal, you should avoid the temptation to try and discredit God's Word with humanistic reason. Remember: The Bible says that God confounds the wise."

God confounds the wise. I had used that verse of scripture in conversations with others—even with Charles. I realized that I had used it in the past to discourage others from wrestling between faith and reason. I had always told people to side with faith— often against my own best judgment. And I had always sided with faith myself. Had I done myself a disservice?

I decided to pull out my study tools and try to piece together an understanding of the afterlife, but I found that I still needed more information. I found that my studies were limited because every commentary I owned, every resource I consulted, and every voice I listened to at the time already agreed with my previous points of view. This was not by accident—over the years I had made it a habit to dismiss arguments that did not fit my own preconceived notions about God and doctrine. I believed that any exploration outside my realm of beliefs was only acceptable when done for the purpose of apologetics. Intellectual exploration was fine, as long as it led back to square one... back to the orthodoxy of my tradition. It became clear to me that I had been trapped in an echo chamber. For the first time in my life, I saw this as a problem.

Climbing Outside the Box

After a great deal of reflection, I remembered that the scriptures teach us to love God with our hearts, souls, and *minds*³. Intellectual love is grounded in curiosity and promotes an ever-expanding realm of knowledge. We are taught to seek God continuously, to ask for wisdom with a sense of expectation⁴, and to knock relentlessly⁵ at the door of the Wise One. Most astoundingly, we are told to worship God in spirit and in *truth*⁶. We are told to desire truth because God desires truth, and that God *is* Truth. Seeking God and seeking truth are not sins. The intellectual pursuit of truth is the will of God for humankind.

When I realized that God expects humankind to explore, I became curious about his will for that exploration. What would God expect me to do if I ever learned an uncomfortable truth? And beyond God's expectations, I wondered: What would the interpersonal consequences of such a study be? Would I be blackballed for asking too many questions? Could I be ostracized for reaching the wrong conclusions?

Those thoughts were too uncomfortable to entertain, but I knew that I wanted to know more about what I was teaching the children in my Sunday school classes and the homeless men and women on the street. I needed to prepare myself for future conversations about eternal damnation. It was my responsibility to know more.

With great curiosity, I decided to pursue the study of Hell. I decided that if I could not find sufficient evidence to discredit my belief in Hell, then I would continue to accept Christianity's traditional teachings about the afterlife. But if I found good reason to reconsider my position, then I would do so. I knew that God was tough enough to withstand my questions—so I decided that I was going to ask them boldly, without holding back.

In the months that followed, I began to research the afterlife for myself. I hope you'll let down your guard for a short while and review the information with curiosity and objectivity.

2 *Finding the Beginning*

In the world of commerce, the chain of production begins with an idea, which leads to an invention, which leads to manufacturing, marketing, and eventually the marketplace. This process culminates when the consumer purchases the product. The purchaser is known as the *end user*, or the person who uses the product at the end of the production cycle.

As end users, most of us aren't as interested in the process of production as we should be. We don't usually know how our shoes were manufactured or where the materials for our car seats originated. We simply enjoy the benefits of the products we use.

However, there is a growing segment of end users who are researching the origins of the products they buy. Those who undertake such research will tell you that it isn't enough to buy products that have been wrapped in recyclable materials by the manufacturer. They want to dig deeper to find out if the animals involved were treated humanely and if the company's employees were treated well. They may even want to know if the manufacturer's suppliers used recyclable materials. These end users reach deep beyond the surface (or the wrapping) to make sure their choices meet the gold (or green) standard.

Like the world of commerce, the Christian religion is mostly a culture of *end users*. We enjoy the many beautiful elements of our faith, but are usually unaware of their origins. The average church member is unaware of how the Bible came into existence. We don't typically know the names of the church fathers (or what a church father is), or the difference between a Sadducee and a Pharisee. We don't usually know where our doctrines came from, or who was involved in deciding what would be orthodox and what would be considered heresy.

As religious end users, we read our Bibles through the lenses of our own modern Western experiences and cultures, instead of reading them through a first-century Eastern lens. We are interested in what our faith means to us *now* and what it will mean for us in the future.

I am proposing that we must reach beyond our modern doctrines about Hell to find out how they came into being. We must take a trip to Christianity's manufacturing plant and

examine the machines therein. In doing so, we must step out of the role of the end user and step into the role of the supplier's examination crew. We will examine the earliest components of the "Hell" concept and reconstruct them again. This will help us to decide if our current understanding of Hell is contextually accurate.

Journey to a Foreign Land

Like most Christians, I originally began my study of Hell by examining first century Jewish theology. I did this for two reasons:

First, I assumed that everything I needed to know could be found between the two covers of my Bible. My worldview didn't offer space for an ancient narrative that began outside my tradition.

Second, I believed the first century Jewish Christians passed their beliefs about Hell on to the early Church, and that the early Church passed their beliefs on to the Catholic Church. The Protestant Church, from my former understanding, carried on most of the beliefs held by the Catholic Church—and the modern Protestant Church to which I once belonged had carried on the tradition as well. However, during my research, I discovered that although the early Church is a good place to start, its resources only offer a shallow exploration of the topic.

Afterlife theories involving underworlds (or "Hells" as we currently understand them) actually predate Jewish thought, which means that a more thorough study requires us to ask where the first century Jews got *their* ideas. When we ask this question, we find that we cannot discuss first century Jewish thought without exploring the afterlife beliefs of the Israelites in the Hebrew Bible. (Judaism and the religion of ancient Israel were somewhat different.)

I further realized that in order to discuss Ancient Israel's views of the afterlife, I needed to explore the culture in which their beliefs were born. Theologians have long recognized that the Israelites did not exist in isolation, and that they were not always dominant players in their historical settings. They were a culture within a culture. They lived in real places with real people, and were subject to real cultural influences. Those places were Mesopotamia and Egypt; two ancient power centers with theocratic governments and deep-seated religious beliefs that are of great importance to the history of Israel.

The religious stories of Babylon and Egypt were so powerful and so culturally important that the Israelites crafted similar tales rival their neighbors. For instance, scholars have long marveled at an ancient myth in which a god created light on the first day, the "firmament" on the second day, the soil on the third day, followed by the heavenly bodies and humankind before resting at the end of his exploits. However, those scholars aren't reading the Bible.

They're reading the ancient Babylonian myth of the Enuma Elish which was written long before Genesis.

Throughout modern history, people have also studied the story of a worldwide flood sent by a deity to destroy everyone except one righteous man, a few other humans, and his meticulously-crafted boat. This man employed birds as messengers to tell him when the flood was over. However, the man in this story was not Noah. He was a mythological character named Ut-Napishtim, and his story is believed by many to predate the Noah story.

Additional parallels have been drawn between the Law of Moses and ancient Mesopotamia's Code of Hammurabi. Equally-striking resemblances exist between the Ten Commandments and a small section found in Egypt's Book of the Dead.

Israel has a long history of co-opting local ideas into its own understanding of the world. This should not be understood in a negative light. It is merely a part of what it means to live in a thriving culture. Just as globalization has changed what it means to be a citizen of the world in the modern era, culture-mixing was unavoidable in their world as well.

The Israelites' tendency to borrow existing myths about creation to build their own cultural identity shows us that they had real questions that stretched beyond their scientific capabilities. Much like us, the Israelites were curious about the issues that impacted their society, their families and their religions. This curiosity would have, of course, extended to their uncertainties about what happens to humans when we die. It was the Israelites' desire to understand the unknown and their urge to make sense of death that inspired their earliest theological explanations for the afterlife.

The Ancient Underworld

Contrary to popular Christian belief, the Israelites did not believe in any concept of "Hell" as we understand it today. They believed in a place called Sheol. The word *Sheol* means "the unseen place" or "place of the dead." This belief persists in many expressions of contemporary Judaism. Many Jews believe that each person (whether Jew or gentile) will undergo a purification in Sheol for 11 to 12 months (or less in some cases). After purification, souls are sent to live in eternity with the Creator. There have never been (and still aren't any) flames, devils, demons, or other ungodly spirits present in *Sheol* or the "place of the dead."

According to an article on Aish.com, Sheol isn't and wasn't a place of eternal punishment because "the Almighty's justice [would not be] served by punishing someone forever." God's justice would have been finite and appropriate, not overbearing and treacherous. One suggestion was that a punishment might've require the offender to stand in

the presence of God's unfiltered holiness and experience shame or embarrassment that we cannot fathom in the natural realm.⁷

Hades: The Man & The Myth

The concept of a torturous, demon-governed "underworld" was not popularized until around 400 years after the institution of the Jewish Law when Homer's myths about a god named Hades began to circulate. Hades, according to the ancient Greeks, was the "god of the underworld" and the brother of Zeus. His underground realm was named after him and was widely believed to be where souls went after death.⁸ Hades often fought with another god named Thebes who wished to free tortured souls from Hades' eternal captivity. Similar myths about a man named Tartarus began to circulate in 400 BCE. Tartarus also ran a scary underground abode for tortured souls, and yes... he named it Tartarus... after himself⁹.

It is important to note that the Jewish people maintained their beliefs about shadowy Sheol through the fourth century when Alexander the Great conquered Palestine. After the conquest, the Greek and Jewish societies merged into something called Hellenistic Judaism, a union that would last for 600 years. Although the Jews continued their minimal beliefs about the afterlife, Christianity (born in that Hellenistic society) did not. Christianity emerged in a society that was heavily influenced by Judaism and Greek myth.

The Jews and Hellenists split in around 200 CE¹⁰, but the influence of Hellenism on their world is evident in the Bible to this day. For instance, the influence of Greek mythology is can be seen in 2 Peter 2:4 which is where Paul talks about God sending angels to a gloomy "Hell". The word used for Hell translates to "Tartarus" in Greek. Appearances of the word "Hades" are found in the New Testament, and can easily be attributed to the Hellenistic influence that would have existed when those biblical documents were written. Coincidentally, the words Sheol and Gehenna were also translated to "Hell" in the Bible. (We'll review all of those verses in chapter three).

Life Imitates Dante's Art

Hell became a thing of immense interest and terror in the 14th century when an Italian poet weaved a wildly imaginative tale called *The Divine Comedy*. Divided into three parts, Dante's epic story took the reader on a guided tour through the morbidly frightening annals of Hell, purgatory, and paradise (labeled *the Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* respectively). Filled with blood, fear, and gore, the tale's "Inferno" seemed to have it all— unforgettable imagery, sinners begging for mercy, and yes, an eternal oven with flames blaring.

The printing press had not yet been invented, so copies of the actual book were rare. People heard versions of the story, but were unlikely and unable to compare Dante's ideas

about Hell to the Jewish writings about Sheol for themselves. Over time, myth and religion again became inextricably intertwined leaving the church with morbid stories about the many “levels” of Hell and the various kinds of torture that exist there.

Around 200 years after the release of Dante’s inferno, the Protestant Reformation gave birth to a principle called Sola Scriptura (or “scripture alone”). Christians insisted on allowing their existing canon of the Bible to “interpret itself,” meaning that they didn’t want to use external sources to help them understand the Bible. They felt that Jesus alone could guide the Church through their interpretations of the scriptures.

In the 17th century, the King James Version became the translation of choice. The problem, however, was that the KJV Bible used the word “Hell” in place of “Hades,” “Gehenna,” “Tartarus,” and “Sheol,” making it literally impossible to know exactly what the writers meant, which references were literal, and which were figures of speech. The “Sola Scriptura” reformers were literally comparing one mistranslated word to another, compounding confusion, and developing faulty doctrines.

With that, an eternally fiery, extremely complex invention called Hell had infiltrated the Christian faith. This occurred despite ancient Israelite/Jewish teachings about Sheol and certainly without regard for what God may have thought about eternal torture. In many ways, we had built our first spiritual Frankenstein, and no one would fully understand the impact of our errors for many years to come.

For most Christians who believe in Hell, its complicated doctrinal history is not a convincing enough to read it as “myth”. I understand this. For most of us, theology is literally a life-or-death matter, and tradition cannot be easily dismissed. From that perspective, history is no match for the Bible interpretations that have been passed down to us by our predecessors. If you’re among those who are unconvinced, please don’t dismiss what you’ve read thus far. I will use the next three chapters of this book to expound upon the contextual meanings of the “Hell” verses. In doing so, I hope to renew your perspective on the concept of Hell. Open your mind and prepare to travel with me to Hades, Tartarus, Sheol and Gehenna.

3 *"Hades" In Context*



What do you see when you look at this picture? If you're close to the image, you'll see Albert Einstein, but from around 15 feet away, you'll see Marilyn Monroe.

I've decided to use this fun (and spooky) picture to demonstrate how our perspectives on the "Hell" verses have changed since they were first communicated nearly two thousand years ago. Jesus' audience was much closer to him spatially and culturally than you or I, and would have understood Him in a dramatically different way than any Western audience. Yes, the New Testament Jews would have had a visceral reaction to the original Greek words that are now translated as "Hell," but for reasons much different than the average Christian might.

I would like to use the next few pages of this book to change your perspective on several of the Hell-references in the Bible by revising your understanding of certain words and by challenging the expectations with which you approach the New Testament. My hope is that you will begin to read about "Hell" through the lens of the ancient Jews, and not that of the 21st century Christian church. With any luck, the "Hell" verses will begin to look as much like eternal torture to you as Albert Einstein looks like Marilyn Monroe.

Jesus, the Jews, and Hades

The word "Hell" appears 54 times in the Bible— 31 times in the Hebrew Bible and 23 times in the New Testament. The Hebrew Bible's references translate to "Sheol" which is the "place of the dead." As explained in chapter two, Sheol is and has always been understood by Jews as the soul's temporary place of purification before spending eternity with its maker. There are no demons, devils, or flames there. There are dozens of Hebrew Bible scriptures that

praise God for allowing our souls to emerge to his presence after descending to the depths of Sheol. (Many of these references can be found in the book of Psalms.)

What's interesting is that the word *Sheol* does not appear anywhere in the New Testament. This is because of the influence of Hellenism on Jews' language. The word "Sheol" was replaced with "Hades" in the minds and writings of first century Jews, as obviously shown in the following two comparisons from Young's Literal Translation:

COMPARISON #1

Original Hebrew Bible:

-For Thou dost not leave my soul to Sheol, Nor givest thy saintly one to see corruption.
(Psalm 16:10, KJV)

After Hellenistic Influence:

-Jesus' soul was not left to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. (Acts 2:31, KJV)

-Thou wilt not leave my soul to Hades, nor wilt Thou give Thy Kind One to see corruption.
(Acts 2:27, KJV)

You may have noticed that in this comparison, the New Testament writer has changed the word **Sheol** to **Hades**. This is more than merely a choice of wording. The spread of Hellenism, (of Greek thought and myth), had so pervaded the culture that it impacted the way people understood the underworld. For Christians, the concept of the afterlife had morphed from a dark void (Sheol) into a place governed by the Greek god Hades. The same shift is evident in the following verses:

COMPARISON #2

Original Hebrew Bible:

-Where thy plague, O death? Where thy destruction, O Sheol? (Hosea 13:14, YLT)

After Hellenistic Influence:

-Where, O Death, thy sting? Where, O Hades, thy victory?' (1 Cor. 15:55, YLT)

Exploring the Words of Jesus

In addition to its use in the Epistles, the word "Hades" is also used four times in the Gospels-- but again, I believe that we have misunderstood their intended meanings. (Note: Jesus probably didn't even actually say the word "Hades" as he is widely known to have spoken Aramaic and not Greek. But I won't go there today.) Let's explore the ideas about Hades as spoken by Jesus

in those four Gospel verses. First, we will examine two duplicate verses in Matthew and Luke which both say:

*“And you people of Capernaum, will you be honored in heaven? No, you will go down **to the place of the dead** (Greek: Hades). For if the miracles I did for you had been done in wicked Sodom, it would still be here today.” (Matt. 11:23, Luke 10:15, NLT)*

Some people believe that Jesus was telling all of Capernaum that they were going to be thrown into Hell after death. Others read this verse as a prophetic utterance about the future of an area that now lies in ruins. Regardless of what you may believe, there are three logical reasons why this verse isn't about a fiery, eternal judgment on Capernaum:

First, Jesus did more miracles in Capernaum than anywhere else in the Gospels. This means that despite His overall disappointment with that town, there had to be a few believers there. If Jesus destroyed all of Capernaum, wouldn't that also destroy the people who believed? And if he destroyed believers along with nonbelievers, would that jibe with Christianity's current beliefs about "personal" salvation? What does this mean for our current understanding of justice? Does it make sense when compared to what is currently taught about being personally "saved?"

Second, Jesus' words about Capernaum were consistent with what the Jews already believed and feared about Sheol. He told them that they would go down to the place of the dead, not into a place wrought with molten hellfire. This was a pronouncement of impending judgment-- or a threat that they would be cast into the world of the unknown, and the Jews fully understood what he meant.

Third, our minds are conditioned to add images to this verse that simply aren't there. Many Christians mentally insert a load of "end times" theology complete with infernos, smoke and judgment on the "unrepentant Jews" when reading the Capernaum judgment verses. A responsible, contextual reading of these words requires us to refrain from doing so. These verses, if they are to be taken literally at all, are about Sheol, and not modern Christianity's theological Hell. Let's examine another verse...

“And Jesus answering said to him, `Happy art thou, Simon Bar-Jona, because flesh and blood did not reveal [it] to thee, but my Father who is in the heavens. `And I also say to thee, that thou art a rock, and upon this rock I will build my assembly, and [the] gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:17-18, KJV)

Up until now, there is nothing to indicate that Hades (Sheol) is a fiery place with an army of demons and devils. I would argue that we imagine those things because we have been conditioned to believe that we are in a battle with a fiery underworld. We are taught from an early age that there are demonic soldiers behind a gate at the core of the Earth who wish to prevail against or conquer Christendom. This verse plays well into our preconceived (and incorrect) notions about Hell, particularly because we've never been encouraged to rethink it.

It's important to note that there are versions of the Bible which more accurately say: *"And the gates of Hades will not prove stronger than it."* This is a very different meaning; one that says the gates to the realm of death will not be as strong as the Church.

This makes perfect sense in light of the other statements made about Jesus and the Church throughout the New Testament. A verse about the "gates of Hell" failing to "prevail" against Jesus and His church make perfect sense when considered in light of the theological assertion that Jesus has "defeated death"¹¹ and in relation to the widely-accepted hope that Christians will follow in his footsteps. The phrase "will not prevail" is a figure of speech, meant to communicate a level of strength-- not a truth about an army behind a gate in a place called Hell. Jesus was communicating that the Church would be stronger than death—not that an army at the core of Earth is scheming to destroy Christianity.

Lazarus and the Rich Man

"In Hell (Hades), where he was in torment, [the rich man] looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side." (Luke 16:23)¹²

There are several problems with reading the verses about Lazarus and the Rich Man as a literal depiction of Hell. First, this story is a *parable*. Parables are folk tales, not historical accounts. This means that Lazarus and the rich man are fictional characters who have a fictional experience that is meant to communicate a greater lesson. Despite our knowledge of what a parable is, we've historically read several parts of the Lazarus story as literal truth when such an interpretation is not warranted. We don't read any of Jesus' other parables as partially literal, so why do we fluctuate between literal and non-literal interpretations when reading this one? The answer lies in our lack of understanding about Hades and our desire to apply Hell's imagery to stories about the underworld.

We must remember that according to the Jewish understanding of the afterlife that was shared by Jesus and his hearers, virtually all of humankind will progress to Sheol, which is why both the rich and poor man went to the "grave" or unseen place upon death. The Jews would have understood this theme in the story.

If we interpret this parable as a trip to the Christian Hell instead of Sheol, then we must assume that people will be sent to a fiery judgment for simply being poor. (After all, poor, sick Lazarus seems totally blameless in the parable. Why was he sent to Hell?) We would also have to assume that the righteous will be able to watch their loved ones burn in torment from just a few feet away, as indicated in verse 26. This isn't consistent with any of Christianity's other teachings about Heaven or Hell, as they all depict Heaven as a place far from the location of the burning underworld. The gulf could be read as a metaphor designed to illustrate the difficulty involved in making the mental leap from their current practices to Jesus' teachings. The gulf depicts an ideological divide, but not a landscape characteristic in a literal geographical place.

Lazarus & The Rich Man In Context

A more logical explanation for the Lazarus parable is rooted in Jesus' highly inflammatory teachings about social and economic matters. Consider this:

The Lazarus parable is in the **same chapter** as another parable about an unscrupulous employee who "squandered his manager's property." (Luke 16:1-9) In Luke 16 **between** the parable about the unscrupulous employee and the parable about Lazarus are the following words: *"Whoever is faithful in very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God. (Luke 16:10-15)*

When Luke's 16th chapter is read in its entirety, we find that the two parables have been coupled to reveal a much greater lesson, and that the lesson is not about the afterlife. The two parables are trying to teach us something about *this* life. For instance, the rich man asked for Lazarus to come and cool his tongue. He needed Lazarus, a poor man covered in sores, to help him-- but he would never have helped Lazarus prior to his change in position. This exchange supports Jesus' repeated message, which according to this very chapter, was often directed at "the Pharisees who were lovers of money".

There are also several very important underlying societal messages to consider when reading this parable. Written at a time when the Early Church was still struggling to lay claim to the faith of historical Israel, the writers were attempting to one-up their Jewish rivals. They

achieved this in their society by writing a Gospel that depicts several elaborate Divine welcomes for gentiles who embrace the message of Jesus. The writer(s) of Luke penned the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man to illustrate that the gentiles would assume a place of favor with God. This parable was communicating their view that the gentiles would accept Jesus and lead the Kingdom, and that the Jews would become dependent on the gentiles if they didn't repent.

You may be wondering, "The rich man mentioned *flames*. Why would he mention 'fire' if this isn't about Hell?" Again, please remember that this is a parable, and that parables involve symbolic language. Fire is used figuratively throughout the Bible and would have carried great symbolic meaning for Jesus' hearers. Fire, according to the Hebrew Bible (the only Bible Jesus' hearers would have known) is designed to refine and purify. For instance, there are dozens of references to God's desire to purge the *dross* or *impurities* from his people through the use of fire during this life... BibleGateway.com says that dross is the "*Impurities removed from molten metal during refining. In a spiritual sense, wicked people [e.g. kings, etc.] whom God removes in judgment, and also impurities in believers which are removed by discipline and trials.*"¹³ You can easily read the Bible's references to dross in the King James Version of your Bible.

Who among us believes that God will literally burn us during this lifetime? Hopefully not one. The parabolic reference to fire in the Lazarus story is also a figure of speech.

And finally, Jesus' closing statement in this parable was that the five brothers wouldn't believe the truth about his identity or the true nature of the Kingdom, even if a miraculous resurrection was involved. To whose resurrection do you believe Jesus was referring?

So as we can see, the verses in the Gospels that use the word "Hades" are meant to describe the place of the dead or "Sheol"—and not a fiery torture chamber. They offer powerful metaphor, and were used as such.

Next, we'll go to the place where the worm doesn't die and the fire isn't quenched. You guessed it— we're going to a misunderstood place called Gehenna which is said to be filled with hellfire. Come with me to the next chapter.

4 *The Unquenchable Fire*

In the previous two chapters, I've written about the history of Hell and the historical context of the New Testament's references to Hades. I've also discussed how the earliest Jews would have understood those concepts.

However, there are still two very important questions that have not yet been answered:

1. What about the verses that clearly mention fire? What do they mean?
2. What about the worm that doesn't die? How can that happen without a fiery torture chamber?

To answer these questions, we must grasp the history of a place called Gehenna as understood by the Bible's ancient Jews. (The word "Hell" in these verses actually translates to "Gehenna" in Greek.) Gehenna means "Valley of Hinnom." This valley was and is still a real place that is named after an idol worshiper named Hinnom who sacrificed children to a god named Molech. Please read this important commentary¹⁴ on Gehenna:

We first find Hinnom in Joshua 15:8 and 18:16, where... the righteous King Josiah "defiled Topheth in the valley of the children of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter to pass through the fire to Molech..." Topheth was a word meaning literally, "a place of burning." Idolatrous King Ahaz burnt incense and his children in the fire there, as did idolatrous King Manasseh in 2 Chronicles 28:3 and 2 Chronicles 33:6...

Jeremiah prophesied calamity coming upon the idolatrous Jews there, calling it the valley of slaughter, because God was going to slaughter the Jews there, using Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. Jeremiah [also] prophesied destruction coming upon the idolatrous Jews of his day. [See Jer. 7:32 and 19:2-6; Notice the mention of Topheth, "the place of burning," again.]

Isaiah also spoke of Topheth when he warned the pro-Egypt party among the Jews... From these passages we can see that, to the Jews, the valley of Hinnom, or Topheth, from which the New Testament concept of Gehenna arose, came to mean a place of burning, a valley of slaughter, and a place of calamitous fiery judgment... (Isa. 30:33)

The Jews so abhorred the place after these horrible sacrifices had been abolished by king Josiah (2 Kings 23:10), that they cast into it not only all manner of refuse, but even the dead bodies of animals and of unburied criminals who had been executed. And since fires were always needed to consume the dead bodies, that the air might not become tainted by the putrefaction, it came to pass that the place was called Gehenna.

More simply explained: According to the Hebrew Bible, there were people who used to sacrifice children in a real place called Topheth. The Jews began to practice similar idolatry, so God responded by threatening to destroy the nation of Israel through Nebuchadnezzar, war, famine and other earthly means– but NEVER with eternal torment in the afterlife. This goes back to the idea that a just God would not impose an eternal punishment for a finite crime.

Gehenna became a trash heap on which the Jews would throw old refuse, human waste, dead animals, and criminals unworthy of burial. The stench and history of this place was so profound in the first century that people had to kindle an “eternal” or “everlasting” fire there to control the sickening odor. It was a place where worms (or maggots), bugs, and disease were always everywhere, thus making it the place where the “worm didn’t die.” The word “Gehenna” became synonymous with defilement. Jesus’ audience had this perspective when he spoke the following words...

If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into Hell (Gehenna). And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into Hell (Gehenna). (Matt. 5:29-30; Matt. 18-9, Mark 9:43, 9:45, 9:47, NIV)

A literal reading of this passage would require us to believe that God wants people who can’t stop stealing to cut off their own hands, or that God expects people who can’t stop lustfully looking at others to gouge out their own eyes if they wish to avoid eternal hellfire. However, a contextual understanding of these verses offers a better interpretation.

Jesus was using imagery that would have been both evocative and inflammatory among the Jews of His day. He was telling the religious people of His time that their unrighteousness, their failure to love one another and others, and their inability to discern the arrival of God’s

Kingdom had rendered them useless. He basically called them *walking trash*. His religious hearers would have heard his words as a tremendous insult because he was saying that they were breathing, useless, garbage. Does this explain why the Early Christian movement made so many Jewish leaders angry? They were producing texts which said that the Jewish people had rendered themselves so unfit for God's family that they risked the worst fate possible– a criminal's BURIAL on a trash heap.

The writers of the Gehenna texts were telling the religious elite that they could avoid total disgrace by casting their collectively useless "body parts" into the trash. (Think about the "body" of Christ and its relationship to religion as we know it. Now imagine if I were to tell you to cast the religion of the Christian Body onto a burning trash heap.) Jesus' words were parabolic, but powerful– and they were meant to be taken seriously, not literally.

More Verses About Gehenna

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of Hell (or son of Gehenna) as you are." (Matthew 23:15)

The "son of Hell" reference is NOT about the devil. (There will be a chapter about Satan later in the book.) When read contextually, this verse seems to be about idolatry. Please think back to our discussion of Molech, Topheth, and the Hebrew Bible references to fire from a moment ago. The issue there was with idolatry. Jesus was telling the religious leaders that they were spawning a generation of people who idolized the law.

I say to you, that every one who is angry at his brother without cause, shall be in danger of the judgment, and whoever may say to his brother, Empty fellow! shall be in danger of the sanhedrin, and whoever may say, (Raca) Rebel! shall be in danger of the Gehenna of the fire. (Matthew 5:22, YLT)

Jesus was NOT teaching the disciples that they would go to a fiery torture chamber for calling someone a rebel or a fool! Note the three punishments here: an earthly punishment (judgment), an earthly punishment again (sanhedrin), and an unholy sinner's burial in a neighborhood trash heap (Gehenna). These punishments had nothing to do with a "great white throne". Jesus was showing his hearers that a lack of unity would make them useless, and because of their actions, the world would one day judge their faith harshly. Amazingly, our lack of unity has made this passage more prophetic than anyone in His generation could have ever imagined. Let's go on to the next verse...

Serpents! brood of vipers! How may ye escape from the judgment of the Gehenna? (Matthew 23:33, YLT)

The judgment of the Gehenna is found in the Hebrew Bible (again, I ask that you hearken back to the commentary about Topheth and Molech). Jesus' hearers' understanding of judgment had nothing to do with an eternally fiery torture chamber called Hell and there is no reason to assume that He was introducing a new theological afterlife concept.

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in Hell (Gehenna). (Matt. 10:28, Luke 12:5, YLT)

People who believe in Hell tend to cite this verse often. However, when read in context, this verse is very different from the historical Judeo-Christian interpretation. When Matthew 10 is read in its entirety, we find that Jesus was giving His disciples a pep talk before sending them out as evangelists. He was telling them not to be afraid of the perceptions or actions of others, and that they should preach the establishment of God's Kingdom with love and conviction.

Jesus was NOT using this time of encouragement to introduce a new theological concept called "eternal torment," nor was He emotionally blackmailing His followers into "doing His will." After all, both Jesus (a Jew) and His listeners already believed in Sheol, which is where the soul would be cleansed and regenerated before going to meet its maker. There was no need for a new "revelation" about the afterlife.

Despite our knowledge about the origin of Hell, the nature of Hades/Sheol, and the figurative way in which Jesus communicated, it's still hard for us to read this verse without mentally inserting the context about eternal hellfire because the words "destroy," "body," "soul," and "Hell" carry such strong connotations for us as Christians. Yet, the truth is that Jesus was, again, warning against the kind of complacency that would lead to worthlessness in God's Kingdom. He was inviting the disciples to do ministry differently than the Pharisees would. "Don't be afraid of what they can do to you. Rather, be afraid of becoming worthless like them," Jesus was saying.

Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth

We have now discussed most of New Testament references to Hell. However, no exploration of Hell would be complete without a discussion of the references to "weeping and gnashing of teeth" which appear five times in the Gospels. The following translations of those verses are all found in the King James Version of the Bible:

But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matthew 8:12

Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness, there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matthew 22:13

And shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matthew 24:51

And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matthew 25:30

There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out. Luke 13:28

When I read these verses without the preconceived hellfire imagery, it's amazing to me that we ever connected them to the afterlife. The first one on the list is found in the Gospel of Matthew, which is where Jesus tells His hearers that there will come a time when some spiritual people will dwell in the Kingdom of Heaven while others look into it like a fishbowl from afar. The onlookers will weep and gnash their teeth. Of course, we know that the Kingdom of which Jesus spoke is here on Earth now, not in the afterlife. (You'll note that Jesus used the phrases *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Kingdom of God* interchangeably when talking about "gnashing of teeth," as evidenced in Luke 13:28. This follows the consistent pattern of His references to an Earthly Kingdom, and not a Kingdom that would be founded in a distant afterlife.)

So, what are we to understand from the references about teeth gnashing in outer darkness? And why will there be "weeping" if Hell isn't involved?

Well, most people don't know this, but the word "gnash" actually appears NINE other times in scripture. Surprisingly, not one of those other occurrences is about an eternal afterlife in a fiery place called Hell. The other verses are written about people who were so angry that they would grind their teeth at others. Imagine someone so mad at his adversary that he begins to growl, spit, and show his teeth like a dog—angry enough to literally bite another human being. Sound crazy? Well, it happened in the book of Acts when Steven was stoned. He told his adversaries that they had resisted the Holy Spirit, and "when they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him."¹⁵

When read in context, the "gnashing of teeth" verses in the Gospels follow a common theme. Jesus told the religious people of his day that their hard-heartedness would eventually exclude them from the very kingdom they'd been awaiting. They would realize their mistake, and among them there would be regret (weeping) and anger (gnashing of teeth).

The outer darkness is literally a place without light, without the Messiah, without the Light of the World for Whom they'd been waiting. There's no fire in these verses, no molten lave and no eternal torture chamber. Imagine that.

5 *Could it be... Hmmm... Satan?*

One Saturday night, I was engaged in a chat on Twitter about the unfortunate shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson, Arizona. The conversation began with the questions that everyone had been asking... "Why would someone do such a thing? Was it politically motivated? Were there warning signs?" But the discussion soon changed, and I found myself conversing with someone who argued that *evil* was to blame for the shooting.

The word *evil*, according to the gentleman with whom I was speaking and nearly every other Christian I know, is meant to describe the origin of humanity's worst qualities. It's believed to emanate from a living devil and his demons. Evil is the core of our wickedness... it prompts sin itself... According to most Christians, evil is so powerful that Jesus had to be crucified to overthrow its reign.

Given the number of tragedies that are ascribed to evil, I think we should critically examine the concepts of the "devil" and "evil" as we currently understand them. After all, most of the people who talk about evil tend to do so from a perspective that is only informed by one religious philosophy.

It's easy to find sermons stating that the "devil" is the "root of sin and evil," but usually impossible to find a preacher who will explain that the "Satan" we now know is actually based on a dualistic theory involving a relatively benign figure that predates Christian and Jewish theology. We must understand that the epic battle between God and his "arch nemesis" has taken shape over thousands of years, and is still morphing today.

A devil-like character had a pretty good run in Greek mythology as Hades/Tartarus, and in the Zoroastrian religion as Angra Mainyu. In early Israel, this character was simply an "it," known as "the satan" or "the accuser." The Jewish people believed that both good and evil came from God. (Please see Isaiah 45:7; For the record, many Jewish people still believe this.) In their eyes, God was all-powerful and could not be out-manuevered by a mere "accuser."

It wasn't until centuries after the institution of Judaism that Christians embraced and popularized the concept of Satan as the evil "god of the underworld". As discussed in chapters one and two, this belief probably resulted from the interpolation of the Hades myth into Christianity during the Hellenistic period.

Historical context is a powerful thing. We now understand that the ancient Jews and Christians used myth and metaphor to understand their world. Because I understand this, I find it extremely difficult to blame an ever-evolving character named Satan, or the so-called "evil forces" that emanate from his mythologized unseen abode when tragedies happen. Frankly, I think it's insulting to tell a grieving family that an "accuser" whom neither you nor I can see is to blame for the loss of a child, or for an illness, or for the woes of the world.

It's hard for us to examine the God-and-Satan story without shrouding it in layers of Christian doctrine and legend because that's all we know. Our use of the "Satan" character has made it easy for us to skirt our own responsibility. When we say "The devil made him do it," we assign blame to a force that we cannot hold accountable, and to a being that no society has ever fully understood. Blaming the devil is often an excuse to wait for God to fix things... a pattern that has caused religious people to crumble into complacency.

Blaming a cosmic enemy takes the problem out of our hands and moves the power to fix the issue beyond our reach. When we say, "evil" is the cause, we don't realize that we are simply tossing the issue into a catch-all pot for the things that we label "wicked" when we don't have any other explanation. I think we should be embarrassed when we do this, particularly at a time in history when we have so many resources.

What happened in Arizona is heartbreaking. Human suffering is a difficult issue for us to fully understand. (I live with a chronic illness, so I know this first hand.) It's hard for me to understand why suffering exists in our world, and there are countless theories (both religious and secular) for how we might overcome it- but I think it's unhelpful to blame "the devil." We need to take responsibility for the world we live in... even if it means leaving the old familiar "devil" behind.

There are better ways to look at evil in our world. For instance, some Jewish people believe that "evil" exists so that you and I can overcome it. They base their belief on the Genesis creation account, and say that when God rested on the sixth day, he expected humankind to pick up where he left off and move forward to establish peace. It is from this perspective that Rabbi Benjamin Blech wrote that "the evil in the world only points up the work we still have to

do. Evil is a manifestation of a world that is still incomplete, waiting for man to do his part and finish the job."

The rabbi's words resonate with me. While I do believe that evil exists, I believe that it's a product of the human heart. After learning what I now know about Hell and Satan, I cannot bring myself to blame a Zoroastrian-Greek-mythologized-Judeo-morphus character named Satan. We have been entrusted with the responsibility to fix our world and its ills. We have been empowered by God to bring peace and love (or the Kingdom of God) to this world, and that empowerment continues from generation to generation...

Power to God's People

"Behold, I give unto you power... even power over the enemy..." I often mull over Luke 10:19 and wonder if Christians truly understand how much power we wield in the world—specifically of the psychological and sociological varieties. In my private moments of reflection, I wonder to myself: Do we truly understand that we have the power to rethink our understanding of Satan, or that the Satan character only has the power we've given to him throughout the years? Is there any interest among mainstream Christians in the degree to which an afterlife theology involving torture may be harmful?

I've been particularly attentive to how Christianity understands its power as I've watched the debate surrounding Hell unfold over the past few years. One side consists of Christians who are desperate to be rescued from the stigma attached to traditional teachings about Hell and Satan. On the other side are those who wish to cling unyieldingly to Christianity's traditional understandings of the afterlife. For traditionalists, any deviation from orthodoxy is heresy and therefore not worthy of exploration.

Lost in the debate are millions of ordinary people. We don't ask them how they interpret our simplistic, under-researched depictions of the battle between good vs. evil on Sunday mornings. And because we don't ask, we don't typically learn that some of them have been abused by a father in this life, and cannot bear the thought of worshiping a parent-figure who might someday torture them in hellfire... We don't know that some are people who have escaped demanding, abusive spouses and can't fathom "loving" a cosmic "bridegroom" who will hurt them if they don't get their choice of religion just right. We don't realize that in a world fraught with war and calamity, a theology about a fight between a violent God and his evil nemesis is simply not very compelling.

We also don't consider that some of the people who scoff at our doctrines about Hell and the devil are parents who *haven't* had abusive relationships, but after learning what it

means to protect their own kids at all costs, are mortified at the thought of a violent “all-loving God” who would destroy his own children along with the “most evil demon in the universe”. What can be said for a God who would throw his own children into a vat of molten lava along with the most evil being ever created? Like my friend Charles, many non-Christians look at the “God” we present and see a sadomasochist with an unquenchable temper... a cosmic taskmaster who demands that we believe and behave perfectly... a hothead lacking foresight who plans to destroy the majority of his own unwitting creation. We can’t fathom that some people really are repulsed by the theology we’ve built around a bloodthirsty sadist named Yahweh and his horned opponent—and shockingly, many of us can’t understand why people decide that they’d rather have no god at all.

We don’t understand the positions of anti-theists who walk away from all expressions of religion because of theologies such as Hell, and we don’t seem to have compassion for them. We simply tell them that they must convert to our ancient understanding of the world or bear the consequences of their “disobedience”—either at the hand of our God or at the whim of Satan... None of that “grace” stuff we like to give lip-service to. No thought for what it has meant to live the lives they’ve lived, or survive the experiences they’ve survived. Just our application of a one-dimensional theology.

And this, for me, is where we lose touch with the importance of this debate. We forget that this issue is not just about buildings, programs, and televangelists. It’s not even about the theologians who shaped our understanding of God so long ago. It’s about how we still fail to understand the power of religion in the lives of people, the power religion has over the way we view the world, and how religion informs the picture of justice we paint for our own children. This is about a faith that has lost touch with what it means to be the empowered Church... a body of capable believers, theologians, mystics, and practitioners with the resources to really research the history of the afterlife and the underworld and its implications for Christianity... We forget that we are a people empowered to draw new conclusions as the Spirit so enlightens us.

We need to think about what it means to be the empowered faithful. And we need to embrace what it means to be a “faith seeking understanding”... Even if it challenges our traditional understandings of evil, Satan and the afterlife.

6 *Why It's Hard to Let Go of Hell*

In 2004, Gallup asked Americans of all backgrounds if they believed in Hell. They found that despite the ongoing secularization of our society, the number of people who believed that God would punish people in the afterlife had risen significantly. In 1997, only 56% of those surveyed said that they believed in Hell, but in 2004 the total number of people (both religious and non-religious) who believed in it totaled 70%.

The internal numbers are very interesting. As one might expect, 92% of regular churchgoers said that they believed in Hell when asked in 2004. However, the poll shockingly revealed that 50% of people who rarely or never attended church said that they also believed in Hell.¹⁶

When I first reviewed these statistics, several questions came to mind. I wondered how the torture chamber doctrine could be believable to people who are obviously not traditionally religious. Has the traditional understanding of Hell so pervaded our culture that we have come to blindly accept it as truth? Is there something about Hell that is appealing to humankind?

As I thought about these questions, I remembered a famous scene in a movie called *A Time to Kill*. In the movie, a man named Carl Lee Hailey (played by Samuel L. Jackson) was on trial for killing two men who raped his 10 year-old daughter before leaving her for dead. During a heated cross examination, the prosecuting attorney asked Hailey if he believed that a man who raped and left a child for dead should be allowed to go free. In other words, he was asking Hailey if he believed that the two men he had killed (both of whom had previously been acquitted by a biased jury) deserved to die—and if that's why he had chosen to take the law into his own hands.

In a fit of excited rage, Hailey famously responded: “Yes, they deserved to die, and I hope they burn in Hell!”

In *A Time to Kill*, the prosecutor asked the million dollar question: “What do they deserve?” Hailey’s proposed sentence for the two men is no less than what you or I may have prescribed: Death and Hell. No sentence carries greater punishment.

Jackson’s outburst goes to the core of what every human being desires: Justice. “An eye for an eye,” we still demand in some parts of the world. “One day in jail for every dollar,” we insist in some judiciary systems. “A life for a life,” many have argued in defense of the death penalty.

Yet, moral infringements are more difficult for us to prosecute, particularly in Western society. Our ability to balance the scales is often beyond our reach-- and in a world where men rape little girls and leave them for dead... In a world where men murder thousands in acts of terrorism... where the power-hungry commit genocide against religious groups with whom they disagree... where the greedy, while in pursuit of profit, allow the hungry to starve... In a world of fair and unfair, weak and strong, peace and unrest, fear, famine, and man-made calamity, we desperately hope that God will someday balance the scales once and for all. It makes sense to us that God would do this. After all, God is like us, isn’t he?

Hard Questions. Complex Answers.

What causes us to believe that God is as obsessed with our brand of justice as we are? What prompts us to hope, as Carl Lee Hailey did, for an eternal system of retribution? Why do so many Christians continue to believe in Hell after learning that there is no fiery torture chamber in the Bible? (I did for years.) And why do non-religious people believe in Hell when they can choose to believe otherwise? I would argue that there are five answers to these questions, if not more:

1. We’re unable to imagine a system of divine justice that doesn’t involve torture because it is now ingrained into our concept of the afterlife. hellfire has been a central doctrine of Christianity for many generations. It is so embedded in our minds that we can’t fathom and rarely ponder how God would carry out justice without it.

2. We’ve projected our imperfectly violent and vengeful nature onto God and are unable to believe that his ways may truly be unlike our own (Isaiah 55:8-9). It’s difficult for us to imagine that God would not avenge the causes we champion. In fact, we’ve come to view God as a divine comrade who will balance the scales while we look on with pride.

3. We have become so entangled in this doctrine that we cannot let it go without enduring profound embarrassment. Most Christians are embarrassed and befuddled when confronted with famous Bible-related blunders or its numerous internal contradictions. We are further embarrassed when asked why the Church so mercilessly persecuted Galileo, why our Bible sanctions slavery and genocide, or about the famous blunder associated with NASA & The Missing Day. Admitting that Hell isn't real would be a blow to the Church that most believers are unwilling to endure.

4. We lack the language and theological understanding to discuss other Biblical views of the afterlife. If we remove Hell from the equation, we are left with a major hole in our afterlife narrative—a hole of “unknowing” as it were-- and Christianity has prided itself for centuries on having all of the answers. There's very little power in saying, “I don't know,” particularly when people count on us to have the big answers about where their loved ones have gone after death. We're afraid of demonstrating a lack of preparedness when questions about the afterlife are posed.

5. An afterlife without a dramatic punishment for the wicked would seem anticlimactic after so many years of suffering. We've all heard the phrase, “There's a special place in Hell for that guy.” Many Christians hope for heaven, and seem to hope for a day of justice as well—even if it involves eternal hellfire. We have been taught that this kind of “hope” is natural and acceptable, and don't consider the implications of this desire.

Despite our fears, we are responsible for telling people the truth. Hades and Sheol are not a fiery torture chamber. Gehenna's fire was quenched long ago. The outer darkness where men weep and gnash their teeth is not located in a fiery underworld.

The truth is not a threat to Christianity, but our ignorance is. Remember, we perish not in fire, but because we lack knowledge. The Bible teaches that. (Hosea 4:6)

7 *The Uncharted Way Forward*

In the past six chapters, we've learned that the concept of Hell as most Christians understand it does not appear in the Bible. Yes, the word "Hell" is there, but when those words are translated and understood in context, we see that they have nothing to do with an eternal torture chamber.

This newly-acquired knowledge isn't as liberating for many Christians as one might imagine. When "Hell" disappears, a whole host of other problems arise. Most of us begin to entertain a new barrage of questions: "What about sin? Does God carry out correction or punishment for bad behavior? What's the point of salvation? What's the point of Christianity? Why do we need a heaven if there is no Hell? Where will the most abominable among us go when their lives are over? What will happen to our faith if we collectively begin to deny one of its most central tenets?"

I wrestled with the same questions for a long time when I first began to rethink Hell. Then, one day I felt the tug of God in my heart saying: "Shouldn't you be more worried about the consequences of teaching a lie?" In an instant, I understood that while I didn't have the answers to my personal "barrage of questions," I still had a responsibility to tell people what I knew-- even if it meant that I would become a theological loner (which I am). Even if it meant that no church would ever invite me to speak to its congregation (which many of them won't). Even if it meant that I'd have to defend myself 1,000 times a year to people who won't listen to an alternative perspective (which I do).

I also realized that a responsible exploration of Hell within our faith could be a good thing and not a catastrophic end to Christianity. Without "Hell," humans suddenly become free to concentrate on matters impacting the Kingdom of God, which is here among us (although rarely seen and understood) today. Without Hell, we become free to serve God because we love

him, and not because we are afraid of him. Without Hell, we have no need for discourse about who is “in” or “out”; we are free to work together in unity because the denominational squabbles become less important.

With so many new freedoms to enjoy without Hell, we should be more than willing to cut our attachment to the lie. Hell doesn't make Christianity complete or powerful– and it doesn't glorify God. We don't need to threaten others with torture. We need to approach them with divine possibilities: the possibility that there really is a God, the possibility that God's presence is real and not imagined, the possibility that there really is a purpose to our existence here on earth. The possibility that the Way of Jesus really is worth following and can be done in unity. These possibilities could empower our ministries and our imaginations long after Hell's removal from our church doctrines, but we must first have the courage to hold the crucial Bible studies and discussions that will open the lines of communication.

The Minister's New Clothes

There was once a powerful man who loved clothes. One day, two charlatans waltzed into the man's kingdom promising him more of what he idolized the most: clothing and power. “We'll make you a new wardrobe with the finest invisible thread– so fine that only an intelligent man fit for your position will be able to see them.”

The emperor couldn't refuse the offer and hastily invested in a closet full of invisible duds. When asked by the charlatans what he thought of the invisible clothes they were making for him, he was afraid to tell the truth: that he didn't see any clothes... that he knew there were no clothes. You see, to admit that he didn't see the clothes would mean that he wasn't “an intelligent man fit for his position”.

Instead of telling the truth and risking humiliation (or possible dethronement in favor of someone who could see the clothes) the emperor convinced himself that the clothes were real. He wore his invisible outfit into town where the citizenry played along in fear and utter confusion. It was a small child who finally told the truth. He shouted in front of the entire town: “The emperor isn't wearing any clothes!” And then the jig was up.

There are many pastors who face the emperor's dilemma. They feel that their good reputations hinge on their willingness to affirm the real-ness of a place called Hell. They love God, love serving their parishes, and are very afraid of what espousing a known heresy could mean for them: unemployment... ostracism... problems in their relationships... and maybe a life filled with questions about the nature of eternity. Our ministers are trapped between what's

real and what's comfortable... what's needed and what's expedient... what's right and what's popular.

Their worries don't end there. For instance, what if their congregations decide to accept the alternative view of Hell? Will the promise of a fire-free afterlife impact their members' desires to live "holy" lifestyles? Will their parishioners stop tithing if there's no consequence to encourage them? Will people stop coming to church? Will people stop joining the congregation altogether? What will happen to the Christian institution?

Like the townspeople in the story who didn't speak up about the truth, the Christian Kingdom's informed citizenry is another important player in the "Hell" dilemma. Those of us who know about the history of Hell rarely share it with others, and we don't hold our ministers accountable to the truth. We bind our preachers to doctrine instead of the Divine. We've created a religious environment much like that of the time of Jesus and the Pharisees: one that reveres faulty tradition over truth, and control over peace.

This cycle forces our clergy to wear the "invisible clothes" despite their theological training, their knowledge of Christian/pagan history, and despite the still small voice of God which tells them: "Unlike the idol worshippers— burning my sons and daughters in the fire has never entered my mind." (Jer. 7:31)

We don't have to do this anymore. We can liberate the emperor and the Kingdom by living in truth. We can start by telling the truth about Hell to people when they ask— even if the outcome is difficult for us. We can trade the narrative of the abusive divine parent for the story of a God who chastens us lovingly. We can trade in the spiritual rhetoric of control and fear for the story of a loving God who stays awake to watch us sleep, who has numbered the hairs on our heads, and who saves our tears in a bottle. (Ps. 121:4, Matt 10:30, Ps 56:8, Prov. 3:12)

Beloved friends: The emperor's clothes weren't real. Neither is Hell. May we all learn to live in peace with the truth.

¹ Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. (Matthew 18:21-23, NRS)

² There were more than 6.8 billion people in the world in May of 2010 when this section of the book was written. In mid-2007, there were around 2.2 billion Christians in the world. At that time, it was estimated that this number represented around 33% of the world's population. The Christian faith is comprised of around 1.5 billion baptized Catholics. That's around 22% of the world's population, but there were only 500 million Evangelical Christians in the world when those statistics were compiled. This means that Protestant Evangelical Christians represented around 7.3% of the world's population. (http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html)

³ Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27

⁴ James 1:5-7

⁵ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. 9 "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. (Luke 11:8-10, NRS)

⁶ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:23-24, NRS)

⁷ Weiman, Rabbi Max. "Hell No, We Won't Go: A Jewish View of Heaven & Hell." Aish.com - Judaism 101. 30 May 2009: n. page. Web. 18 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.aish.com/jl/l/a/48971646.html>>.

⁸ "Hades." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2012. Web. 18 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/251093/Hades>>.

⁹ "Tartarus." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2012. Web. 18 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/583773/Tartarus>>.

¹⁰ "Hellenistic Judaism." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2012. Web. 18 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/307197/Judaism/35185/Hellenistic-Judaism-4th-century-bce-2nd-century-ce>>.

¹¹ Acts 2:24

¹² "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 31 He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" (Luke 16:1-31, NRS)

¹³ Manser, Martin. "4324 dross -Dictionary of Bible Themes." BibleGateway.com. N.p., 2009. Web. 18 Mar 2012. <<http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/4324-dross/dictionary-of-bible-themes>>.

¹⁴ Dawson, Samuel G.. "Jesus' Teaching On Hell." Tentmaker. Tentmaker, September 2007. Web. 18 Mar 2012. <<http://www.tentmaker.org/articles/jesusteachingonHell.html>>.

¹⁵ Acts 7:54

¹⁶ Winesman, Albert L.. "Eternal Destinations: Americans Believe in Heaven, Hell." Gallup. Gallup, May 25, 2004. Web. 18 Mar 2012. <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/11770/eternal-destinations-americans-believe-heaven-Hell.aspx>>.