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When I've suggested in the past that there might be Hindus in heaven, some of my conservative friends have found the idea unsettling. In what follows I'd like to approach a notion that might be equally unsettling to some of my liberal friends: the idea of hell and the reality that some people are destined to go there.

Hell seems, to many people, to be one of those doctrines that is inconsistent with the idea of a loving and merciful God. There are at least three dimensions of hell many find disturbing. First, we are disturbed by the idea of good people being sent to hell. We can find the idea of hell more acceptable when we think of evil people who abuse, rape, and murder. But thinking of hell as a place where a loving grandfather, or a mother of small children, or a best friend might be sent simply because they did not understand or believe the gospel when it was presented? Many find this idea upsetting.

Second, we are disturbed by the idea of hell as torture and punishment for its inhabitants. We can relate to punishment—we've all been disciplined

for doing the wrong thing. But as parents, when we discipline our children, it is redemptive; that is, the intention is to teach them something and to shape their character. But even here we try to make sure that the punishment fits the crime. We would not torture our children for doing wrong. But the idea of the kind of punishment usually associated with hell—torment in a furnace of fire “where the worm dies not” (Mark 9:47-48, paraphrased), “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:42)—is unsettling. Would the God whose nature is love create a place where people would be tortured by fire, or worse? Can we attribute to God the creation of a prison whose cruelty exceeds that of any prisons run by contemporary diabolical dictators?

Finally, the question is not simply who populates hell, nor the kind of torment that is experienced there, but the duration of the sentence to hell; namely, that hell is eternal punishment for those who have been sent there. Such a punishment is disproportionate to the crime—an eternity of suffering for eighty or ninety years of sin? Would God subject a soul to eternal torture for failing to respond to his offer of grace in this temporal life?

My aim here is not to offer a comprehensive statement, but to describe a few ideas that shape my own view of hell—ideas that may either be helpful to you, or at least serve as a basis for clarifying your own views.

I reject the literalistic perspectives of some conservatives concerning hell, and the dismissive and overly optimistic view of some liberals, but I would suggest a thirdway to think about hell and invite you to consider it in the light of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. I reject the idea that there is no such place or state as hell. Jesus speaks with some regularity about judgment and a place of “outer darkness.” He embodies this judgment when, in anger, he casts the moneychangers from the temple. I can picture his jaw clenched and the look in his eyes as he describes those

dismissed from the Son of Man's presence at the Last Judgment for seeing the hungry, thirsty, and naked and doing nothing to help. I cannot ignore this idea of judgment if I am to take Jesus seriously.

At the same time I recognize that Jesus speaks in metaphors and similes and uses hyperbole frequently in order to make his point. We must take Jesus' comments about the judgment and a negative afterlife seriously, but I don't believe we must take them literally, just as I don't think we take literally his command to cut off our hand or pluck out our eyes if they cause us to sin. These directives from Jesus are meant to be taken seriously, but not literally.

As an aside, I have heard a handful of people over the years describe near-death experiences that were not of the pleasant variety—near-death experiences that literally “scared the hell out” of them. One such man, an atheist before the experience, and now a United Church of Christ pastor, described his near death experience this way:

“I always believed you died, and after that nothing—a kind of darkness—but now I was in that darkness, beyond life, and it was hell. . . . I was left alone to become a creature of the dark. . . . I desperately needed someone to love me, someone to know I was alive.” He notes that at that moment the words and tune to a song he had learned when he was a small child began to enter his thoughts: “Jesus loves me, this I know.” He continues that, as he began to sing this song, “for the first time in my adult life I wanted it to be true that Jesus loved me. I didn't know how to express what I wanted and needed, but with every bit of my last ounce of strength I yelled out into the darkness ‘Jesus save me’ . . . far off in the distance, I saw a pinpoint of light.” Shortly after this the doctors resuscitated him. His experience of a place of utter darkness seems consistent with some of the biblical descriptions of hell.

I want to say a word to those who may be a bit more conservative, and who believe that there are many who are going to hell. I would encourage you to take the time to study what Jesus says about who is going to hell. Those who are going to hell, according to Jesus are those who call their neighbor a “fool” (Matthew 5:22b); those who lust after women in their hearts (Matthew 5:27-30); religious leaders who are hypocritical (Matthew 23:1-36); those who are not good stewards of the gifts God has given them (Matthew 25:14-30); and religious people who refuse to help those in need (Matthew 25:31-46). Nothing is said in these passages about people of other religions, or even lost people; most of what Jesus says about hell seems reserved for those who are religious. Most of us have said to another “You fool!” Most of us have lusted after others in our hearts. We've all acted with hypocrisy. And none of us have done as much as we should have to help those in need.

I think Jesus uses hell as a way of warning us to take our sin seriously, just as I warned my daughters when they were teenagers that they would be grounded for the “rest of your lives” if they lied to me, or they would lose their right to drive for “months” if I caught them driving without their seatbelt, or I would refuse to pay for a cent of their college if they got any kind of extraneous piercing or tattoo while they were still on my “payroll.” I meant for them to take me very seriously when I said these things, but ultimately my mercy prevailed and the judgment, though meted out, was typically of a briefer duration than the threat. The threat is like saying, “This is the maximum penalty by law,” but I reserved the right to lower the penalty.

Yet I believe in hell. I do so not simply because Jesus talked about it, but because it seems to me to be a necessary and logical corollary to heaven. Jesus tells us that we are to pray “thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This tells us something about heaven—it tells us that in heaven God's will is done. If heaven is that place where God's reign is complete, where God's will is always done, where people no longer hate, kill, steal, mistreat, go to war, or inflict pain on others, then those who enter must either have their freedom removed, or they agree to submit to God's reign and will.

But what if someone is unwilling to live according to God's will? Would that person be forced to dwell in the heavenly kingdom? I don't think so. Such an existence would be a hell for them, and

heaven would no longer be a place where God's will is done. Hell, it seems to me, is the place for all of those who do not wish to live according to God's will and submit their lives to God's reign. God wishes all to join him and to live as his children and his subjects. He is a good King, a benevolent King, and a loving King. But he will not force persons to be his subjects. He beckons them to choose, and to willingly follow him. If one does not wish to do this, there is a place, a kind of dark kingdom, reserved for all who wish to do things their own way.

Let's consider what this hell must be like. If it is populated by those who wish not to live according to the will of God, then it is filled with those who wish to do things their own way. It is filled with people who believe the world revolves around them. It is filled with people who are always "looking out for number one"; countless narcissistic souls who are taking advantage of other narcissistic souls in order to meet their own needs—people feeding on one another until there is nothing left to feed on. Hell would be a place where most goodness has been removed, where the restraints that come from people following God have been removed, and where the light of God's presence may be dim, or absent altogether. Dante may not have been far off in describing one scene from hell where one resident is gnawing on the flesh of another. In essence, this may be a powerful picture of hell—a place filled with the self-absorbed, absent of nearly all goodness, darkened as we would expect by the desire to be as far away from God's reign as possible.

What's important to note in this concept is that hell is a nightmare, and the nightmare is not the result of something God has created, but the result of the exercise of freedom on the part of inhabitants who have chosen to reject God's rule and reign.

Not long ago a woman who had escaped the Congo shared her story with the staff of our church. The horrors she described in her country gave me a picture of what hell must be like. She spoke of homes destroyed, property confiscated, brutal murders, cannibalism, and of her own rape and the rape of her children. She showed photos so gruesome that, after I wrote a description of them here I decided to take it out—it is simply too disturbing. These events are happening now, today, by men who are utterly depraved and who have the ability to do whatever they wish wherever they wish. Do we really believe such men would submit to the rule of God and enter the kingdom of heaven? This is my picture of the inhabitants of hell ever seeking to do whatever they wish to one another. This is utter darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

I have one last thought about hell, and perhaps heaven, for that matter. Is it possible that those in heaven might choose to rebel against God's rule at some time in the future? Many Christian theologians suggest that once we are in heaven, we find it impossible to sin. Perhaps, but is it possible, even in heaven, that we might rebel, and that God might let us go to the place reserved for those who rebel against him? And, likewise, I wonder if it is possible that some in hell could choose to leave hell and yield or submit to God's will?

What if hell itself is aimed at working out God's redemptive purposes? What if the aim of hell is not only punishment or discipline, nor even simply God's provision of a place for those who wish to live outside of his will? What if God's hope is that those in hell will finally come to understand the darkness of living for self and in rebellion to God, so that they will cry out, even from hell, "Lord Jesus, be merciful to me a sinner"? C. S. Lewis seems to suggest this view in his wonderful little book *The Great Divorce*. In it he notes that the doors of hell are "locked from the inside." The story tells of a busload of people in hell who journey to heaven and are given the opportunity to yield and stay in heaven, but one by one they choose to return to hell rather than live in the light of God's will. Lewis notes, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'"

May we be those who say to him, daily, "Thy will be done."

Excerpted from Adam Hamilton's [Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White: Thoughts of Religion, Morality, and Politics](#), Copyright © 2008 by Abingdon Press. Adam is the Senior Pastor of the 16,000 member Church of the Resurrection in suburban Kansas City.

