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Can We Bear the Thought of Hell?

The two figures walked slowly down the long hospital hallway, the ten-year-old girl apprehensively holding her mother's hand. When they reached Room 148, they stopped and cautiously opened the door.

"This is Granny's room," the woman said. They stepped slowly up to the bed. The old woman lay quite still, asleep. Tubes provided her with oxygen and nutrition, but there was little visible life in the aging body.

"Hi, Mom," the woman said loudly, but there was no reply from the sleeping figure.

The woman and her daughter remained with the old lady for a few minutes, then left again.

Back in the hallway, the little girl looked uneasily at her mother. "Mommy, is Granny dying?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," said her mother.

The little girl thought for a long while.

"Mommy, does Granny believe in Jesus?"

The woman sighed deeply; she knew where this was leading. "No, I don't think she does," she answered in a quiet voice.

Another long pause.

"Won't Granny go to heaven then?"

The mother had expected this question, and she knew what she had to do—above all, she must dodge the issue!

"We must believe that everything is in God's hands," she said evasively. "God loves Granny very much."

The little girl fell silent. Her question had not been answered, but she could not find the courage to ask it again.

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What would we have done in the woman's place? How would we have reacted if it had been our child asking about her unbelieving grandmother's or grandfather's destiny after death? Would we also dodge the issue? Or would we hazard a "Yes, honey, Granny will probably end up in hell where she will be tormented for all eternity!" What would an answer like that do for a small girl's faith in a loving God? For that matter, what would an answer like that do for an adult's faith in a loving God?

If we believe that the Bible tells the truth when it talks of people perishing, we must also realize that eternal damnation can be the ending for someone we love very much. How do we handle a situation like that? How do we reconcile our belief in God's boundless love with the fact that the Bible incontrovertibly talks about condemnation and hell as a reality?

Many years ago, I came across this sentence in a book: *Hell is an aspect of God's love*. This sentence captured me with its provocatively simple way of stating the point, and it has stayed with me since. Could it really be true? Was it possible to see eternal damnation and hell as a side of God's love? In this book I hope to prove that the answer is *yes*.

The Christian Church has often had a very strained relationship with the concept of hell. On one side we have the terrifying fire-and-brimstone preachers who try to persuade people to believe in Jesus, using fear as their weapon. By conjuring up vivid and frightening images of hell's eternal torments, they try to create so much fear that their audience reaches for Jesus in pure terror. God ends up with a neurotic army of slaves instead of happy children. We meet these preachers primarily in less-than-credible cinema and TV movies, shout-

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ing, “This girl is a child of the devil! She will be cast into hell!”

On the other side we have the deniers. This is the huge group of people who claim that the concept of hell is incompatible with God’s loving nature. They argue that the concept of hell is a barbaric legacy from the Dark Ages.

The Bible, however, says differently. If we take the words of the Bible at face value, there is no denying the reality of hell. Throughout this book we shall see many examples of Jesus talking about a tangible hell. But most Bible-believing Christians hide this truth in a small, remote corner of their mind and are reluctant to let it surface. It is, after all, not true when numerous movies and novels suggest that committed Christians are a vengeful lot who enjoy threatening unbelievers with hell. I will not deny that these sort of bloodthirsty people exist, but the vast majority of Christians prefer not to talk about hell at all.

It is very difficult for most of us to reconcile our faith in God’s love with the Bible’s irrefutable talk of hell. I think deep down many Christians would prefer it if there were no hell. We do not like it; we accept it as a necessary evil, but we generally avoid thinking about it—especially if we have close friends or relatives who are not believers.

But once in a while we are confronted with hell. When a dear, unbelieving friend dies, the thought pops up—will God really let her end up in hell? Depending on our psychological disposition, we choose to shrug, become angry with God or abandon our faith.

Unfortunately, it is also a fact that the Church has had very few comforting words for those whose beloved, unbelieving parents or friends have passed away. When a person loses their devout mother, we are quick to remind them that

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death is not a *farewell*, only a *see you later*. We are quick to assure the bereaved that their mother is with God now, and she is happy there.

But what words do we have for the person who has just lost their unbelieving mother? Probably none at all! Yes, we can say something about everything being in God's hands, and we cannot know if the mother accepted Jesus on her deathbed. That is quite true, and indeed a legitimate hope, but in most cases it appears to be a rather frail hope, for we know very well that Jesus says many people follow the broad road to destruction, and only a few will find the narrow gate to life.

There are many Christian songs and hymns that encourage us to praise God for all the wonderful things he has done. And rightly so! But I do not know a single hymn that addresses the grief that every Christian who has lost an unbelieving friend must feel. If you have just faced the fact that a person whom you loved is now lost forever, it is very difficult to put much enthusiasm into praising God's salvation.

Part of the explanation is that in truth there is very little comfort to give when a person is lost. God too is sad. But the tragedy is that we often completely give up trying to understand what is happening. We hide the sorrow deep in our mind, we try to ignore the entire problem, and we let the serpent of doubt whisper to us, "Is God really love after all?"

As Christians we are subject to a colossal, collective repression of a very big and important question: How can a loving God allow anybody to be lost forever? How can we believe that God is almighty and infinitely loving when at the same time he refuses to let my father, my friend or my wife into his kingdom?

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This book is an attempt to tackle this problem. But at the same time, I have to admit that it is a subject I approach with much apprehension. I do not have a ready answer for all the questions, and the reader will note that words such as “probably” and “I think that” appear fairly frequently throughout the text. But this is common with the difficult parts of Christianity—we often only see hints of the truth. So let me say it again: This book is an *attempt* to tackle this problem.

And even if my goal is to emphasize that hell really *is* a side of God’s love, I definitely do not want to make it any less frightening. If reading this book leaves you thinking, “Being lost is not so horrible after all,” then I have completely failed to make my point. It is terrible when a person is lost! That is the simple truth. But it is also true that if a person is lost, the reason is not that there are limits to God’s love.

It would also be wrong of me to claim that the book will bring a profound comfort to the person who fears that a close friend or relative has been lost. As I have already said, there really is not much comfort to find in that situation, and I shall return to the few words of consolation that might be offered in spite of everything. However, my main objective is to help my readers retain their faith in God’s love, even when they are confronted with the reality of hell.

When you read this book you will note that I use the terms “being lost,” “perdition,” “hell,” “eternal damnation” and related expressions more or less interchangeably. On a more subtle level I see “being lost” as a state and “hell” as a place, but when you consider the subject of the book—namely, how being lost and going to hell can be reconciled with a loving God—it is not always important to distinguish between the concepts. Also, I should mention that I use the old-fashioned word “perdition” quite frequently. The word

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refers to the state of being lost (you might translate it as “lostness”), but it is much more handy than “eternal damnation” or similar terms.

At various places in the book you will find remarks written in a different style.

Like this. To the right, and written in another font than the rest of the text.

This is how I shall mark objections to what is being said in the rest of the text. I am sure that as you read the book, you will occasionally object to what I write. There will be certain things that you disagree with, or there may be passages where you feel that I have not thought the subject through. I hope to capture at least a few of your thoughts in these specially marked objections, and I shall try to answer them.