

SEEING
GOD
DIFFERENTLY

a fresh look at
OUR UNCHANGING FATHER

Eddie Chu

SEEING GOD DIFFERENTLY

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What About Hell?



TEN

ETERNAL JUDGMENT ACCORDING TO MATTHEW 25:31–46

In this passage Jesus teaches the need for us to perform deeds of charity for the hungry, the thirsty, homeless strangers, the naked, the sick, and those in prison. Based on passages such as this, Mother Teresa built her legacy of compassion for millions around the world.

The NASB assigns the heading “The Judgment” to this passage. According to the content, I think a more appropriate heading would be “The Call for Compassion.” The theme and focus of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 25 is that we should be compassionate to people who are in need.

Nonetheless, we need to address the topic of hell. There are five main issues: what hell is, who ends up there, how people end up there, how long hell lasts, and whether there’s a way out. These questions have generated numerous debates over the centuries. It’s an emotional topic for many, Christians and otherwise. Timothy Keller noted in his 2009 best seller, *The Reason for God*:

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In our culture, divine judgment is one of Christianity's most offensive doctrines.⁴⁷

I don't hope to resolve anything that has been controversial for as long as there have been Christians. I will, however, summarize the most popular views and state my preferences.

WHAT IS HELL?

There are two common views of hell. One describes a physical place of intense eternal suffering. The other describes not a physical place but a state of godless existence.

Those who view hell as a physical place base their view on the New Testament concept derived from the word *Gehenna*, the Hebrew name for a valley outside Jerusalem where sacrifices were made to pagan gods. This place came to be associated with hell because of the threats of judgment found in Jeremiah 7:32 and 19:6. Many view this as a place where God will dispose of His enemies and those who aren't His children.

Many metaphors lead to this conclusion, starting with Jesus' words in Matthew 25.

Depart from me, you who are accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels...Then they will go away to eternal punishment. (Matthew 25:41, 46)

We can find further fire-and-brimstone references to hell in Mark 9:43 and 48, Matthew 13:42 and 50, and in Revelation 20:15, where it's called "the lake of fire." Although this description has caused many writers and artists to describe punishment in hell, there isn't much biblical support for graphic depictions.

In addition to fire, hell is described as a place of utter darkness in Matthew 8:12, 22:13, and 25:30. Since fire and darkness don't physically go together, we can surmise that the Bible doesn't necessarily mean hell as a physical place of fire *and* darkness, but that these are metaphors of intense suffering and separation from God, who is the source of eternal bliss and light.

In eternity, when all worldly distractions and fleshly desires vanish, we're left with our most basic and fundamental object of desire: a relationship with God.

This explanation leads us to the view that hell is a state of existence without God. Darkness is the absence of light. Darkness is not a “thing” as such but the lack of light. Light is a form of energy; the absence of this energy is darkness. So it is with hell along this line of reasoning. Although it is a state of intense suffering,

some believe this suffering isn't really an imposition of any punishment but the absence of the object of one's deepest longing—God.

Christians agree that, whether we're aware of it or not, all humans need the love of God. Every one of us has a longing inside to relate to God in love. It may be suppressed and denied, but in eternity, when all worldly distractions and fleshly desires vanish, we're left with our most basic and fundamental desire: a relationship with God. Those who deny God will find this desire missing in the very core of their being. The thirst and pain that result from this unmet longing will burn like the hottest flame, and the deprivation of the presence of God will overwhelm like the deepest darkness. This is intense suffering, indeed. I don't think God needs to add any fire and brimstone to intensify such impossibly extreme longing and thirst.

Before we were married, my wife and I had to endure several months of a long-distance relationship when I was in Canada and she was in the United States. This was more decades ago than I would like to count. Back then long-distance landline calls were our only form of “live” interaction. Flying was relatively expensive. There was no e-mail or mobile phones. Although we tried to stay in contact often, there was no way for us to know what the other was doing all the time. Some evenings when I didn't know where she was and there was no answer on her line (there was no voicemail back then, either), I would go crazy and call every few minutes, letting it ring and ring. Finally, when she answered I'd let out a sigh of relief. The longing to connect with her, even if only through the telephone, was met. Until that moment I was restless and anxious.

This is a very limited example of our deep longing for God. We can imagine this longing multiplied by a million times, but that would still

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be inadequate to describe the longing for God's loving presence. In hell this longing will *never* be met. When those who reject God realize how desolate existence is without His loving presence, the unmet longing will burn hotter than the hottest flame. The loneliness will be darker than the deepest abyss. The realization that their unmet longing will last forever will be unimaginably tragic, beyond any description and understanding.

Whether or not hell is a physical place, there is a belief that in hell all persons maintain their identity and will have a conscious awareness of their existence into eternity. There is also a view called annihilationism, which teaches that hell is where a soul loses its self-awareness and becomes nothing after earthly death.⁴⁸ This isn't very common among Christians because of their belief in an eternal identity for every human. Generally speaking, Christians don't adopt a view that promotes the concept of "eternal nothingness." In all cases, however, God's presence is not in hell.

WHO GOES TO HELL?

This question, a hotly contested topic that has generated debate for centuries, is what started me on this journey of writing this book. Most of us appreciate certainty. Some may enjoy ambiguity and questions, but most of us prefer clarity and answers. It applies to many areas in life, including our financial security, relationships, and eternal destiny. That's why we like to have a nice bank account and steady income, committed and loving relationships, and a surefire ticket to heaven.

Many religious leaders try to tell us how we can get into heaven to enjoy eternal bliss and avoid everlasting torture in hell. With the exception of Buddhism, which advocates a return after this earthly life to eternal nothingness as a drop of water returns to the ocean, most major religions attempt to show how we can find our way to heaven and avoid the road to hell. Many feel Christianity is no different from other religions in this aspect.

Most view hell as the opposite of heaven. There's no in-between after this life ends. A person who dies goes to either heaven or hell. In terms of who goes where—and to summarize the Christian view at the

risk of oversimplifying—there are three camps of thought: universalism, exclusivism, and inclusivism.

Universalism teaches that all are saved through the sacrifice of Christ, although most don't know it yet.⁴⁹ Proponents of this school of thought teach that no one is unredeemable. In His mercy, God will eventually redeem every soul and reconcile through Christ all humankind into God's presence.

There are strengths and weaknesses to universalism. One strength is that it shows an all-loving and forgiving God who reconciles with humankind at great cost to Himself. The most obvious weakness to many is the repugnance that historical monsters such as brutal dictators, indiscriminate terrorists, and unrepentant mass murderers might share eternal forgiveness with their countless victims.

The other extreme school of thought is exclusivism, which teaches that unless one makes a deliberate and conscious decision to receive Christ's gift of salvation in this life (to be "born again"), one goes to hell. If one does not make that choice, there's no recourse after the end of this life. The person will suffer in hell eternally. The form of receiving the gift of salvation may vary, but exclusivism essentially guarantees a sincerely repentant sinner entrance into heaven after making a decision, usually through some kind of "sinner's prayer." This view is adopted by most evangelicals.

The following joke may shed some light on how other people view the exclusivism doctrine:

A man arrives at the gates of heaven. St. Peter asks, "Religion?"

The man says, "Roman Catholic."

St. Peter looks down his list, and says, "Go to room 24, but be very quiet as you pass room 8."

Another man arrives at the gates of heaven. "Religion?"

"Buddhism."

"Go to room 18, but be very quiet as you pass room 8."

A third man arrives at the gates. "Religion?"

"Jewish."

"Go to room 11, but be very quiet as you pass room 8."

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The man says, “I can understand there being different rooms for different religions, but why must I be quiet when I pass room 8?”

St. Peter tells him, “Well the exclusive evangelicals are in room 8, and they think they’re the only ones here.”⁵⁰

There are strengths and weaknesses for exclusivism. One strength is the certainty of eternal salvation after making a clear choice. Another is that it drives evangelistic zeal in its adherents to save as many as possible by telling others how to receive Christ. One weakness is that the proponents have to explain what to do with those who are too young or lacking the mental facility to make a choice.

The “age of accountability” theory says that a person needs to reach a certain level of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual maturity in order to understand the meaning of receiving Christ. Most people suppose this maturity happens during the teen years. However, many of us know children who have received Jesus into their lives in childhood. Do these decisions count? Will they need to recommit when they’re older? When a young person dies before making a decision for or against Christ, how do we know whether he or she has reached the age of accountability?

Inclusivism portrays a God who is fair and ultimately compassionate, who honors each person’s choice.

There is also a question about one’s level of IQ. Regardless of age some simply don’t have the mental facility to make an independent decision of this nature. The cause may be birth defects, genetics, illness, or other unfortunate circumstances. I read somewhere that in the United States it isn’t possible to convict someone with an IQ below 80 of first-degree murder because of the presumed lack of ability to make a clear moral choice between what’s right and wrong. What IQ does God require before he decides whether a person is intelligent enough to make a decision for or against Christ?

These two concepts introduce uncertainty regarding who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. Similarly, it’s difficult to come up with a

satisfactory response to those who ask about people who never have a chance to hear about Jesus Christ in their earthly lives, such as those in regions where Christianity is unheard of. Unless exclusivism adherents are willing to accept the concept that these people all end up in hell, they have to embrace principles of inclusivism, at least to some extent.

Inclusivism occupies the huge middle ground between the two extremes. Simply stated, it essentially says, “I don’t know, but God knows, and that’s good enough for me.” Inclusivists tend not to insist that it’s necessary for every human to make a conscious decision *in this life* to receive Christ in order to avoid hell and enter into the presence of God in eternity. There are many opportunities for a person to experience God and submit to God, whether one is directly and consciously exposed to Christianity or not.

Inclusivism portrays a God who is fair and ultimately compassionate, who honors each person’s choice. Some proponents of inclusivism may believe that this life is the only opportunity to make a decision for God, and others may accept opportunities after this life and before the final judgment. Most accept that there’s no one in heaven who doesn’t want to be there and there’s no one in hell who doesn’t choose to be there.

Inclusivism relieves us of the need to assess who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. Instead, Christians should focus on submitting to God’s will and calling. There are many things Christians can do—such as deeds of compassion for the poor and marginalized, caring for one another, visiting those in prison, witnessing for Christ, and making disciples for Christ. The list of such callings is almost endless. Christians can keep themselves occupied in carrying out God’s callings and leave to God the issue of other people’s eternal destiny.

One of the difficulties with inclusivism is the uncertainty of an individual’s eternal destiny. People want clarity. “Only God knows” is a concept many find difficult to accept. Evangelicals especially like the certainty of a transaction; if someone says a prayer of repentance and submits to Jesus sincerely, it’s a done deal. Leaving it up to God during or after this life is too uncertain. Besides, the thought of non-Christians, even after they’ve been exposed to and rejected faith in this life, going

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to heaven makes some people wonder why they would even bother to evangelize and tell others about the good news of Jesus Christ.

Exclusivists often accuse universalists and inclusivists of degrading or cheapening the saving grace of Jesus Christ. If it's unnecessary for a person to consciously receive in this life the gift of salvation to avoid going to hell, then Christ died for nothing.

I find this line of reasoning faulty. If anything, universalists and inclusivists *increase* the worth of the work of Christ by including more who would benefit from it. If the ministry of Christ rescues, say, seventy percent—or even a hundred percent—of humanity, it is more worthy and precious than if it rescues only, say, ten percent of humanity. It seems unreasonable for exclusivists to accuse inclusivists or universalists of cheapening the work of Jesus Christ. The ministry of Christ is more precious and worthy when more are saved.

Those are the three schools of thought. I think inclusivism makes the most sense.

HOW DOES ONE END UP IN HELL?

All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice, there can be no Hell. —C.S. Lewis

Many Christians believe that a person ends up in hell because of God's judgment against those who aren't Christians, or at least those who oppose God. As a result God casts them into hell. This view is well known and teaches that all who are disqualified for heaven end up in hell because God puts them there. They're cast into hell as their well-deserved consequence for the choices they've either made or failed to make during their earthly lives. At the end of their lives God makes a judgment, and they go one way or the other for eternity, whether they like it or not.

Others believe hell exists because of God's respect for free will for every human. C.S. Lewis expresses his view about those who choose joyful submission to God and those who have their own way in hell:

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.” All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice, there can be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock, it is open.⁵¹

Timothy Keller, author of *The Reason for God*, agrees:

Hell...is the trajectory of a soul, living a self-absorbed, self-centered life, going on and on forever....In short, hell is simply one’s freely chosen identity apart from God on a trajectory into infinity....It is a travesty to picture God casting people into a pit who are crying “I’m sorry! Let me out!”⁵²

It’s safe to say most Christians believe God will judge at the end of time and make all things right. That includes every soul’s eternal destiny. There are different opinions about whether decisions are based solely on a person’s deeds and decisions in this life, or whether there’s a second chance after this life and before the end of time.

These are difficult issues to resolve. Theologians over the centuries haven’t resolved them to unanimity. The chief argument against the exclusivism theory is that eternity is infinite; it would be difficult to accept that our eternal destiny is based only on what we do or choose during our short span of earthly life. On the other hand, there are strong arguments against the inclusivism theory. For instance, if there’s a second chance after this life, then why not a third or fourth and into infinity, since eternity is timeless? If that’s the case, what’s the use of making any decisions for God or people, now or whenever?

I feel the exclusivism theory is too harsh. One of the disciples, the famous Doubting Thomas, didn’t believe in the resurrection of Christ. Instead of judging him, Jesus Christ appeared to him personally and let Thomas touch His wounds. Thomas believed and worshipped as a result (John 20:24–28). But what if Thomas got run over by an oxcart before Christ appeared to him and didn’t have a chance to change his mind? Would he have ended up in hell for his refusal to believe in Christ’s resurrection?

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Thomas had been a disciple of Christ for years. He had observed many miracles. The other disciples, his close friends, were ecstatic about the resurrection of their Master. Thomas still refused to believe. If Christ were kind enough to personally convince him, it's difficult to reason why Christ wouldn't offer at least one afterlife opportunity to billions others who have had fewer opportunities, if any, to know Him during their earthly lives.

For ten years I frequently, often weekly, flew in and out of Toronto for my work. I rode regularly with one taxi driver, George, for my trips between home and the airport. He was Greek Orthodox and had a deep faith.

George once told me a story about his father-in-law, who wasn't only an atheist but a communist as well. George spent many evenings over coffee or ouzo arguing faith and politics with him. They would go on for hours, often past midnight, discussing whether God existed and never came to agreement. The father-in-law fell ill and eventually went into a coma. George and his wife visited him often.

One day, about five weeks into his coma, George and his wife arrived for their regular visit. When they entered the room, his father-in-law suddenly woke up, sat up in bed, and said, "You gotta believe in God! You gotta believe in Christ!" Afterward, according to George, his father-in-law appeared to be at peace. He soon fell back into a coma and passed away.

In his coma George's father-in-law must have been given another opportunity to believe in God. I don't know what happens in a coma physiologically and spiritually, but from a human perspective a person in a coma is unconscious and shouldn't be able to consciously make a decision whether to trust God or not. But something happened during the father-in-law's coma for him to change his mind about God. Did God somehow reach his mind and reveal Christ to him?

HOW LONG DOES HELL LAST?

When Jesus speaks of the destination of goats (those who don't carry out the deeds of compassion), he says:

“Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels....” Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. (Matthew 25:41,46, TNIV)

Jesus uses the word *eternal* twice in this passage. Although it’s possible to interpret *eternal* as referring to a long period of time and not necessarily a never-ending one, it’s more appropriate to understand it as an unending duration. With respect to the eternal fire and punishment Jesus speaks of, I agree with the traditional understanding that Jesus speaks of a place or state of existence of unending suffering. This is what hell means.

There are some related questions. When does hell start? Is there an end to hell in God’s plan? If hell never ends, can anyone who’s in hell escape from it?

WHEN DOES HELL START?

Some believe hell starts after this earthly life. Indeed, many passages in the Bible talk about going to or being cast into a place or state of intense suffering characterized by darkness, fire, gnashing of teeth, thirst, and so on. Although agreeing to the afterlife hell, some believe hell starts with our earthly life. As long as we live a life without the presence of God, we are in hell, here and thereafter.

I want to tell the story of two sisters who are both in their eighties. Both are in poor health. One, Tina, has terminal cancer and has been near death more than once. At the time of this writing, her cancer is stabilized and she enjoys having her children and grandchildren around. She’s surrounded by loving relationships. Her two sons and a daughter as well as their families live nearby and attend to her needs lovingly. Even out-of-town grandchildren visit often.

Her sister, Rita, lives alone in another part of town, five minutes away by car. Rita isn’t healthy, but she has no known life-threatening diseases and is able to drive. However, she hardly talks to anyone throughout the day. Her conversations, whether on the phone or in person, are mostly negative. Rita’s always complaining about someone

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or something. Although she was born in the same town and has lived there for more than eighty years, she has no friends or relatives who regularly speak with or visit her; she has chased everyone away through her complaints and bitterness. She complains that no one calls her, but she refuses to call anyone, except to complain. The only driving she does is to the doctor or to the stores, never to visit friends or relatives.

Rita and Tina aren't on speaking terms because of a quarrel that started more than fifty years ago about some family property. Rita thinks Tina took advantage of her and has never forgiven her. When Tina was near death several months ago with cancer, Rita cursed her and told her that God was judging her, that she would go to hell because of the disputed property. Rita rained curses not only on Tina personally, but also through Tina's family members. Rita complains about her postman, her neighbors, the people who come to fix her appliances, the cable TV service people, call center employees, and pretty much everyone she comes in contact with, including her two daughters. No one dares call her for fear of being yelled at. Only one daughter loves her enough to endure the torrent of negativism and speak with her daily. The other daughter rarely calls. Her out-of-town grandchildren seldom visit, even though they often vacation at a timeshare just an hour away.

Despite repeated pleas from the one daughter to forgive and forget, Rita steadfastly holds on to her bitterness and hatred. Rita has numerous ailments, real and imagined, and is in severe pain daily. My wife and I speculate that much of her pain and ailments are the result of bitterness and anger.

In contrast, Tina, with her diabetes and cancer, told my wife that she was surrounded by such love that she felt as though she were in heaven. She has always been a cheerful and reliable person, and people enjoy being in her company. She treasures each day and continues to express love to those around her. She doesn't know how long she has to live, but as far as she's concerned, she's already in heaven. She would love to reconcile with Rita, but the pain of Rita's curses still stings, and she knows Rita hasn't forgiven her.

I don't know what eternal destiny awaits Tina and Rita. Tina has faced imminent death and counts her earthly days as blessings. She

feels she's in heaven, giving and receiving loving relationships. In stark contrast, Rita is living in a hell of her own creation, shooting fiery darts of bitterness and pain and isolated from loving relationships. Although her daughter continues to beg Rita to reconcile with her dying sister, who is only a phone call or five-minute drive away, she refuses to do so. She even accuses her daughter of betraying her, because her daughter refuses to join in her hatred for Tina and her family. Physically, she has no life. As far as I understand, she's already in hell. We hope and pray that Rita finds release from hell through faith in Christ and forgiveness.

Whenever hell starts, we need to address whether it ends. There are two major camps. One advocates that notwithstanding the use of the word *eternity*, other Bible passages show that because of the love of God, which is more enduring than sin and suffering, God will eventually rescue all who are in hell to complete God's plan of redemption for all creation. The biblical basis of this view is similar to that of universalism. The other camp believes that hell, like heaven, is unending.

CAN SOMEONE IN HELL EVENTUALLY GET OUT?

Obviously, for those who advocate a final redemption that destroys hell, this isn't an issue, for God will bring an end to hell, redeeming all who are in it. This is essentially another form of universalism. For those who believe in an everlasting hell, we need to discuss whether it's possible to get out of hell after a soul is in it.

The basic principles between the disagreeing parties are similar to those who disagree over whether hell is eternal. Those who advocate an exit base their understanding on the unending love of God. Those who advocate no exit base it on the need for eternal punishment for offending the eternal God. The key arguments are similar to those about how one ends up in hell, whether God gives only one chance in this life or more opportunities after our earthly lives. If I choose to reject God in this life, can I change my mind after this life? If I choose to reject Him a second time, do I get a third, fourth, or infinite opportunities into eternity? This issue is definitely problematic.

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In my opinion, it is unnecessary for the proponents of the afterlife judgment to extend beyond the second chance. The Bible teaches in passages such as Hebrews 9:27 and Revelation 19:17–21 that there is a final judgment after this life. As we discussed earlier, this is a time of *judgment*, not necessarily *condemnation*. After that, we enter into eternity based on the final judgment.

I believe there's a second and final chance for a person to trust God after this life. Every person should get an opportunity similar to what Christ offered Thomas, leaving no doubt about the extent to which God goes to reconcile each child back to His love through Christ. At that one final time, when all doubts are gone and everyone is on the same footing and clarity of understanding—unaffected by cultural background, circumstances, and life experiences—the choice will be final.

THE FORK IN THE ROAD

It wouldn't be productive for an adherent of any view, or combination of views, to claim exclusivity and declare disagreeable ones as heresies.

Hell is associated with the final destiny of every human. After all is said and done, fantasies and fairytales notwithstanding, earthly death is inevitable. Since Christians believe in a never-ending afterlife, how we live this afterlife is more important than how we spend our earthly lives. Many endure hardship in this life for the hope of a better afterlife.

It's horrible to entertain the thought that anyone, ourselves included, could be in torment for eternity after this life, which is tough enough. Nonetheless, I think we've touched on most of the common views.

Though I've stated my own preferences, each view has its own biblical basis. It wouldn't be productive for an adherent of any view, or combination of views, to claim exclusivity and declare disagreeable ones as heresies. Many will differ from my preferences. My choices are based on the framework of a parent-first God who creates each human with an eternal soul whom He loves relentlessly. Love must be voluntary, and that applies to all humans in eternity. God respects the choices we make because He didn't create mindless robots or coerced slaves.

At the end, however, God is God and He'll make His judgment based on *shalom*—restorative justice. Those who accept the love of God will enjoy peace with God. Others are determined to reject God's love, and He will allow them to spend their eternity in a godless and loveless existence: hell. These convictions guide me to my choices. What are your convictions, and what are your choices?