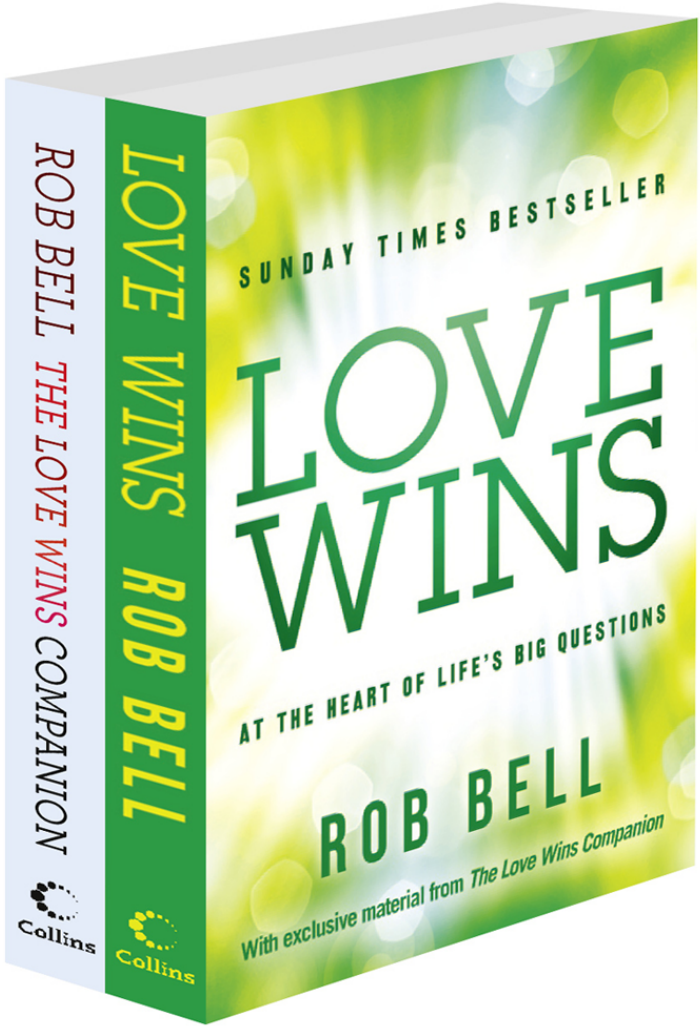
ROB BELL THE LOVE WINS COMPANION
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LOVE WINS ROB BELL
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SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER
LOVE WINS
AT THE HEART OF LIFE'S BIG QUESTIONS
ROB BELL
With exclusive material from The Love Wins Companion

Rob Bell
Love Wins and The Love Wins Companion

Аннотация

This two-book edition combines Rob Bell's bestselling Love Wins with the Love Wins Companion, helping you get the most out of this pioneering book.In Love Wins, Rob Bell presents a richer, truer, and more spiritually satisfying way of understanding heaven, hell and Jesus's message. The result is the discovery that the 'good news' is much, much better than we ever imagined.Alongside Love Wins, this edition offers The Love Wins Companion: a study guide for those who want to go deeper. The extra material includes:• Insights and commentary by theologians, Bible scholars, scientists, and pastors• Deep analysis of all relevant Bible passages on heaven, hell, and salvation• Detailed chapter summaries, discussion questions, and Bible studies for individuals, groups, and classes• Excerpts from works throughout Christian history illustrating the variety of teachers also debating the issues Bell wrestles with• New material by Bell on his mission for the book and how people can take the next stepThe two-book edition is perfect for readers looking to engage with this provocative, inspiring classic.

Содержание

Love Wins
and
The Love Wins Companion
ROB BELL

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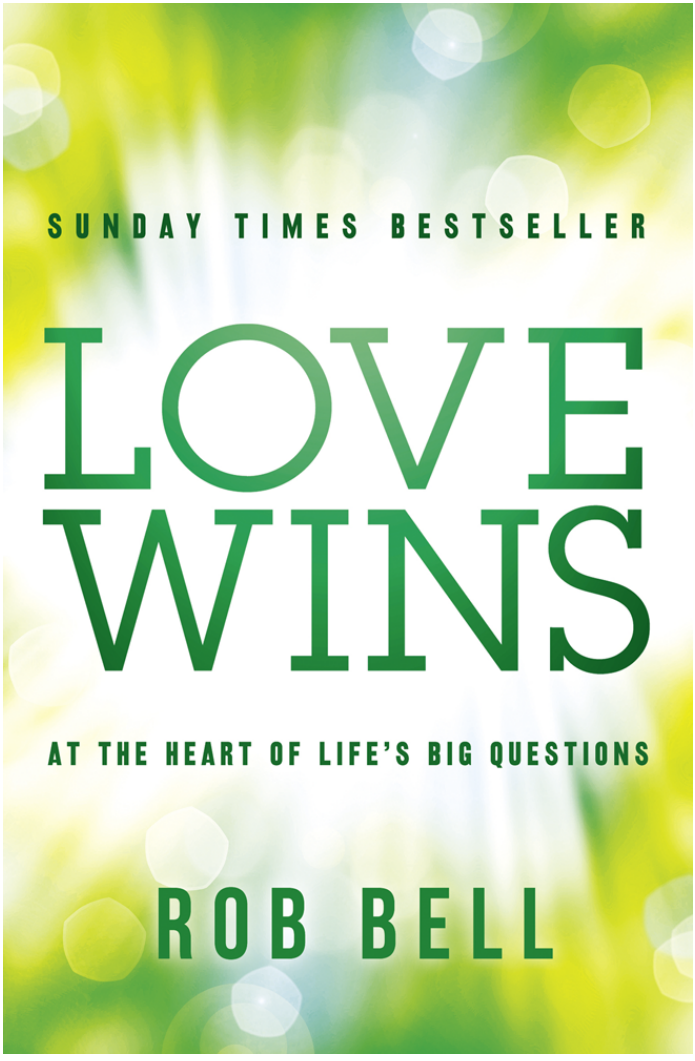
Contents


SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER
LOVE WINS
AT THE HEART OF LIFE'S BIG QUESTIONS
ROB BELL

Contents

Preface

Millions of Us

To begin with,

a bit about this book.

First, I believe that Jesus's story is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us. It is a stunning, beautiful, expansive love, and it is for everybody, everywhere.

That's the story.

"For God so loved the world . . ."

That's why Jesus came.

That's his message.

That's where the life is found.

There are a growing number of us who have become acutely aware that Jesus's story has been hijacked by a number of other stories, stories Jesus isn't interested in telling, because they have nothing to do with what he came to do. The plot has been lost, and it's time to reclaim it.

I've written this book for all those, everywhere, who have heard some version of the Jesus story that caused their pulse rate to rise, their stomach to churn, and their heart to utter those resolute words, "I would never be a part of that."

You are not alone.

There are millions of us.

This love compels us to question some of the dominant stories that are being told as the Jesus story. A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. It's been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus's message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.

And so this book.

Second, I've written this book because the kind of faith Jesus

invites us into doesn't skirt the big questions about topics like God and Jesus and salvation and judgment and heaven and hell, but takes us deep into the heart of them.

Many have these questions.

Christians,

people who aren't Christians,

people who were Christians,

but can't do it anymore because of questions about these very topics,

people who think Christians are delusional and profoundly misguided,

pastors, leaders, preachers—

these questions are everywhere.

Some communities don't permit open, honest inquiry about the things that matter most. Lots of people have voiced a concern, expressed a doubt, or raised a question, only to be told by their family, church, friends, or tribe: "We don't discuss those things here."

I believe the discussion itself is divine. Abraham does his best to bargain with God, most of the book of Job consists of arguments by Job and his friends about the deepest questions of human suffering, God is practically on trial in the poems of Lamentations, and Jesus responds to almost every question he's asked with . . . a question.

"What do you think? How do you read it?"

he asks, again and again and again.

The ancient sages said the words of the sacred text were black letters on a white page—there's all that white space, waiting to be filled with our responses and discussions and debates and opinions and longings and desires and wisdom and insights. We read the words, and then enter into the discussion that has been going on for thousands of years across cultures and continents.

My hope is that this frees you. There is no question that Jesus cannot handle, no discussion too volatile, no issue too dangerous. At the same time, some issues aren't as big as people have made them. Much blood has been spilled in church splits, heresy trials, and raging debates over issues that are, in the end, not that essential. Sometimes what we are witnessing is simply a massive exercise in missing the point. Jesus frees us to call things what they are.

And then, last of all, please understand that nothing in this book hasn't been taught, suggested, or celebrated by many before me. I haven't come up with a radical new teaching that's any kind of departure from what's been said an untold number of times. That's the beauty of the historic, orthodox Christian faith. It's a deep, wide, diverse stream that's been flowing for thousands of years, carrying a staggering variety of voices, perspectives, and experiences.

If this book, then, does nothing more than introduce you to the ancient, ongoing discussion surrounding the resurrected Jesus in all its vibrant, diverse, messy, multivoiced complexity—well, I'd be thrilled.

Chapter 1

What About the Flat Tire?

Several years ago we had an art show at our church. I had been giving a series of teachings on peacemaking, and we invited artists to display their paintings, poems, and sculptures that reflected their understanding of what it means to be a peacemaker. One woman included in her work a quote from Mahatma Gandhi, which a number of people found quite compelling.

But not everyone.

Someone attached a piece of paper to it.

On the piece of paper was written: "Reality check: He's in hell."

Really?

Gandhi's in hell?

He is?

We have confirmation of this?

Somebody knows this?

Without a doubt?

And that somebody decided to take on the responsibility of letting the rest of us know?

Of all the billions of people who have ever lived, will only a select number "make it to a better place" and every single other person suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God? Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish?

Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?

Does God punish people for thousands of years with infinite, eternal torment for things they did in their few finite years of life?

This doesn't just raise disturbing questions about God; it raises questions about the beliefs themselves.

Why them?

Why you?

Why me?

Why not him or her or them?

If there are only a select few who go to heaven, which is more terrifying to fathom: the billions who burn forever or the few who escape this fate? How does a person end up being one of the few?

Chance?

Luck?

Random selection?

Being born in the right place, family, or country?

Having a youth pastor who "relates better to the kids"?

God choosing you instead of others?

What kind of faith is that?

Or, more important:

What kind of God is that?

And whenever people claim that one group is in, saved, accepted by God, forgiven, enlightened, redeemed—and everybody else isn't—why is it that those who make this claim are almost always part of the group that's "in"?

Have you ever heard people make claims about a select few being the chosen and then claim that they're not part of that group?

Several years ago I heard a woman tell about the funeral of her daughter's friend, a high-school student who was killed in a car accident. Her daughter was asked by a Christian if the young man who had died was a Christian. She said that he told people he was an atheist. This person then said to her, "So there's no hope then."

No hope?

Is that the Christian message?

"No hope"?

Is that what Jesus offers the world?

Is this the sacred calling of Christians—to announce that there's no hope?

The death of this high-school student raises questions about what's called the "age of accountability." Some Christians believe that up to a certain age children aren't held accountable for what they believe or who they believe in, so if they die during those years, they go to be with God. But then when they reach a certain age, they become accountable for their beliefs, and if they die, they go to be with God only if they have said or done or believed the "right" things. Among those who believe this, this age of accountability is generally considered to be sometime around age twelve.

This belief raises a number of issues, one of them being the

risk each new life faces. If every new baby being born could grow up to not believe the right things and go to hell forever, then prematurely terminating a child's life anytime from conception to twelve years of age would actually be the loving thing to do, guaranteeing that the child ends up in heaven, and not hell, forever. Why run the risk?

And that risk raises another question about this high-school student's death. What happens when a fifteen-year-old atheist dies? Was there a three-year window when he could have made a decision to change his eternal destiny? Did he miss his chance? What if he had lived to sixteen, and it was in that sixteenth year that he came to believe what he was supposed to believe? Was God limited to that three-year window, and if the message didn't get to the young man in that time, well, that's just unfortunate?

And what exactly would have had to happen in that three-year window to change his future?

Would he have had to perform a specific rite or ritual?

Or take a class?

Or be baptized?

Or join a church?

Or have something happen somewhere in his heart?

Some believe he would have had to say a specific prayer. Christians don't agree on exactly what this prayer is, but for many the essential idea is that the only way to get into heaven is to pray at some point in your life, asking God to forgive you and telling God that you accept Jesus, you believe Jesus died on the

cross to pay the price for your sins, and you want to go to heaven when you die. Some call this "accepting Christ," others call it the "sinner's prayer," and still others call it "getting saved," being "born again," or being "converted."

That, of course, raises more questions. What about people who have said some form of "the prayer" at some point in their life, but it means nothing to them today? What about those who said it in a highly emotionally charged environment like a youth camp or church service because it was the thing to do, but were unaware of the significance of what they were doing? What about people who have never said the prayer and don't claim to be Christians, but live a more Christlike life than some Christians?

This raises even more disconcerting questions about what the message even is. Some Christians believe and often repeat that all that matters is whether or not a person is going to heaven. Is that the message? Is that what life is about? Going somewhere else? If that's the gospel, the good news—if what Jesus does is get people somewhere else—then the central message of the Christian faith has very little to do with this life other than getting you what you need for the next one. Which of course raises the question: Is that the best God can do?

Which leads to a far more disturbing question. So is it true that the kind of person you are doesn't ultimately matter, as long as you've said or prayed or believed the right things? If you truly believed that, and you were surrounded by Christians who believed that, then you wouldn't have much motivation to

do anything about the present suffering of the world, because you would believe you were going to leave someday and go somewhere else to be with Jesus. If this understanding of the good news of Jesus prevailed among Christians, the belief that Jesus's message is about how to get somewhere else, you could possibly end up with a world in which millions of people were starving, thirsty, and poor; the earth was being exploited and polluted; disease and despair were everywhere; and Christians weren't known for doing much about it. If it got bad enough, you might even have people rejecting Jesus because of how his followers lived.

That would be tragic.

One way to respond to these questions is with the clear, helpful answer: all that matters is how you respond to Jesus. And that answer totally resonates with me; it is about how you respond to Jesus. But it raises another important question: Which Jesus?

Renee Altson begins her book Stumbling Toward Faith with these words:

I grew up in an abusive household. Much of my abuse was spiritual—and when I say spiritual, I don't mean new age, esoteric, random mumblings from half-Wiccan, hippie parents. . . . I mean that my father raped me while reciting the Lord's Prayer. I mean that my father molested me while singing Christian hymns.

That Jesus?

When one woman in our church invited her friend to come to

one of our services, he asked her if it was a Christian church. She said yes, it was. He then told her about Christians in his village in eastern Europe who rounded up the Muslims in town and herded them into a building, where they opened fire on them with their machine guns and killed them all. He explained to her that he was a Muslim and had no interest in going to her Christian church.

That Jesus?

Or think about the many who know about Christians only from what they've seen on television and so assume that Jesus is antiscience, antigay, standing out on the sidewalk with his bullhorn, telling people that they're going to burn forever?

Those Jesuses?

Do you know any individuals who grew up in a Christian church and then walked away when they got older? Often pastors and parents and brothers and sisters are concerned about them and their spirituality—and often they should be. But sometimes those individuals' rejection of church and the Christian faith they were presented with as the only possible interpretation of what it means to follow Jesus may in fact be a sign of spiritual health. They may be resisting behaviors, interpretations, and attitudes that should be rejected. Perhaps they simply came to a point where they refused to accept the very sorts of things that Jesus would refuse to accept.

Some Jesuses should be rejected.

Often times when I meet atheists and we talk about the god they don't believe in, we quickly discover that I don't believe in

that god either.

So when we hear that a certain person has "rejected Christ," we should first ask, "Which Christ?"

Many would respond to the question, "Which Jesus?" by saying that we have to trust that God will bring those who authentically represent the real Jesus into people's lives to show them the transforming truths of Jesus's life and message. A passage from Romans 10 is often quoted to explain this trust: "How can they hear without someone preaching to them?" And I wholeheartedly agree, but that raises another question. If our salvation, our future, our destiny is dependent on others bringing the message to us, teaching us, showing us—what happens if they don't do their part?

What if the missionary gets a flat tire?

This raises another, far more disturbing question:

Is your future in someone else's hands?

Which raises another question:

Is someone else's eternity resting in your hands?

So is it not only that a person has to respond, pray, accept, believe, trust, confess, and do—but also that someone else has to act, teach, travel, organize, fund-raise, and build so that the person can know what to respond, pray, accept, believe, trust, confess, and do?

At this point some would step in and remind us in the midst of all of these questions that it's not that complicated, and we have to remember that God has lots of ways of communicating

apart from people speaking to each other face-to-face; the real issue, the one that can't be avoided, is whether a person has a "personal relationship" with God through Jesus. However that happens, whoever told whomever, however it was done, that's the bottom line: a personal relationship. If you don't have that, you will die apart from God and spend eternity in torment in hell.

The problem, however, is that the phrase "personal relationship" is found nowhere in the Bible.

Nowhere in the Hebrew scriptures, nowhere in the New Testament. Jesus never used the phrase. Paul didn't use it. Nor did John, Peter, James, or the woman who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews.

So if that's it,
if that's the point of it all,
if that's the ticket,
the center,
the one unavoidable reality,
the heart of the Christian faith,
why is it that no one used the phrase until the last hundred years or so?

And that question raises another question. If the message of Jesus is that God is offering the free gift of eternal life through him—a gift we cannot earn by our own efforts, works, or good deeds—and all we have to do is accept and confess and believe, aren't those verbs?

And aren't verbs actions?

Accepting, confessing, believing—those are things we do.

Does that mean, then, that going to heaven is dependent on something I do?

How is any of that grace?

How is that a gift?

How is that good news?

Isn't that what Christians have always claimed set their religion apart—that it wasn't, in the end, a religion at all—that you don't have to do anything, because God has already done it through Jesus?

At this point another voice enters the discussion—the reasoned, wise voice of the one who reminds us that it is, after all, a story.

Just read the story, because a good story has a powerful way of rescuing us from abstract theological discussions that can tie us up in knots for years.

Excellent point.

In Luke 7 we read a story about a Roman centurion who sends a message to Jesus, telling him that all he has to do is say the word and the centurion's sick servant will be healed. Jesus is amazed at the man's confidence in him, and, turning to the crowd following him, he says, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel."

Then in Luke 18, Jesus tells a story about two people who go to the temple to pray. The one prays about how glad he is to not be a sinner like other people, while the other stands at a distance

and says, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

And then in Luke 23, the man hanging on the cross next to Jesus says to him, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom,” and Jesus assures him that they’ll be together in paradise.

So in the first story the centurion gives a speech about how authority works, in the second story the man praying asks for mercy, and in the third story the man asks to be remembered at a future date in time.

In the first case, Jesus isn’t just accepting and approving; he’s amazed.

And in the second case, he states that the man’s words put him in better standing with God than God’s own people.

And in the third case, the man is promised that later that very day he will be with Jesus in “paradise.”

So is it what you say that saves you?

But then in John 3 Jesus tells a man named Nicodemus that if he wants to see the “kingdom of God” he must be “born again.”

And in Luke 20, when Jesus is asked about the afterlife, he refers in his response to “those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come.”

So is it about being born again
or being considered worthy?
Is it what you say
or what you are that saves you?

But then, in Matthew 6, Jesus is teaching his disciples how

to pray, and he says that if they forgive others, then God will forgive them, and if they don't forgive others, then God won't forgive them.

Then in Matthew 7 Jesus explains, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom, but only those who do the will of my Father."

And then in Matthew 10 he teaches that "those who stand firm till the end will be saved."

So do we have to forgive others, do the will of the Father, or "stand firm" to be accepted by God?

Which is it?

Is it what we say,

or what we are,

or who we forgive,

or whether we do the will of God,

or if we "stand firm" or not?

But then in Luke 19, a man named Zacchaeus tells Jesus, "Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

Jesus's response? "Today salvation has come to this house."

So is it what we say,

or is it who we are,

or is it what we do,

or is it what we say we're going to do?

And then in Mark 2, Jesus is teaching in a house and some

men cut a hole in the roof and lower down their sick friend for Jesus to heal. When Jesus sees their faith, he says to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

His sins are forgiven because of their faith?

Is it what you say,
or who you are,
or what you do,
or what you say you're going to do,
or is it who your friends are or what your friends do?

But then in 1 Corinthians 7 it's written: "How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" And then Paul writes in his first letter to Timothy that women "will be saved through childbearing" (chap. 2).

So is it what you say,
or who you are,
or what you do,
or what you say you're going to do,
or who your friends are,
or who you're married to,
or whether you give birth to children?

These questions bring us to one of the first "conversion" stories of the early church. We read in Acts 22 about a man named Saul (later, Paul) who is traveling to the city of Damascus to persecute Christians when he hears a voice ask him, "Why do you persecute me?"

He responds, "Who are you, Lord?"

The voice then replies: "I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting. . . . Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that you have been assigned to do."

That's his "conversion" experience?

Paul is asked a question.

Paul then asks a question in response to the question he's just been asked.

He's then told it's Jesus and he should go into the city and he'll know what to do.

Is it what you say,
or who you are,
or what you do,
or what you say you're going to do,
or who your friends are,
or who you're married to,
or whether you give birth to children?
Or is it what questions you're asked?
Or is it what questions you ask in return?
Or is it whether you do what you're told and go into the city?

And then in Romans 11, Paul writes, "And in this way all Israel will be saved."

All of Israel?

So is it the tribe, or family, or ethnic group you're born into?

But maybe all of these questions are missing the point. Let's set aside all of the saying and doing and being and cutting holes

in roofs and assume it's more simple than that. As some would say, "Just believe."

In Luke 11, the Pharisees say that the only way that Jesus can drive out demons is that he's in league with the devil. Then in Mark 3, Jesus's family members come to get him because they think he's "out of his mind." And then in Matthew 16, when Jesus asks his disciples who people say he is, they tell him, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

What we see in these passages and many others is that almost everybody, at least at first, has a difficult time grasping just who Jesus is.

Except for one particular group.

In Luke 4 a man possessed by an "evil spirit" yells at Jesus, "I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"

And in Matthew 8, when Jesus arrives on the shore in the region of the Gadarenes, the demon-possessed men shout at him, "What do you want with us, Son of God?"

And in Mark 1, Jesus wouldn't let demons speak, "because they knew who he was."

In the stories about Jesus a lot of people, including his own family, are uncertain about exactly who Jesus is and what he's up to—except demons, who know exactly who he is and what's he doing.

As James wrote: "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder" (chap. 2).

And then in Luke 7, a woman who has lived a "sinful life" crashes a dinner Jesus is at and pours perfume on his feet after wetting his feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. Jesus then tells her that her "sins have been forgiven."

So demons believe,

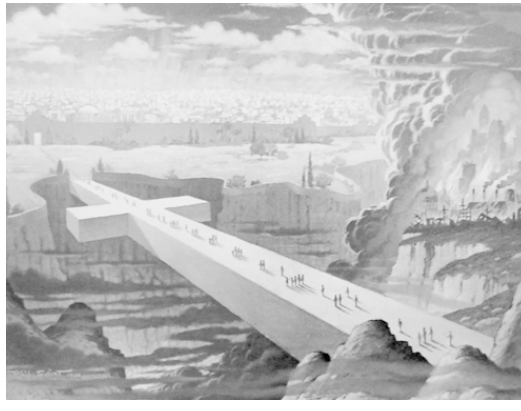
and washing Jesus's feet with your tears gets your sins forgiven?

_____

We could go on,
verse after verse,
passage after passage,
question after question,
about heaven and hell and the afterlife
and salvation and believing and judgment
and who God is and what God is like
and how Jesus fits into any of it.
But this isn't just a book of questions.
It's a book of responses to these questions.
And so, away we go.
First, heaven.

Click here for notes on this chapter from The Love Wins Companion

Chapter 2
Here Is the New There



First,
heaven.

This is a photograph of a painting that hung on a wall in my grandmother's house from before I was born. As you can see, in the center of the picture is a massive cross, big enough for people to walk on. It hangs suspended in space, floating above an ominous red and black realm that threatens to swallow up whoever takes a wrong step. The people in the picture walking on the cross are clearly headed somewhere—and that somewhere is a city. A gleaming, bright city with a wall around it and lots of sunshine.

It's as if Thomas Kinkade and Dante were at a party, and one turned to the other sometime after midnight and uttered that classic line "You know, we really should work together sometime . . ."

When I asked my sister Ruth if she remembered this painting, she immediately replied, "Of course, it gave us all the creeps."

It's striking what we remember, isn't it? An image or idea can lodge itself in our consciousness to such a degree that, years later, it's still there. This is especially true when it comes to religion.

My wife, Kristen, and I often talk about raising our kids in such a way that they have as little as possible to unlearn later on in life.

One of the only violent images Jesus ever uses is when he speaks about those who cause children to stumble. With a shockingly hyperbolic flourish, he declares that the only fitting punishment is to tie a giant stone around their neck and throw them into the sea (Matt. 18).

Death by drowning—Jesus's idea of punishment for those who lead children astray. A haunting warning if there ever was one about the spongelike nature of a child's psyche.

I'm not saying that my grandma's painting did that, but it clearly unnerved at least two of us.

I show you this painting not because of its astounding ability to somehow fuse Dungeons and Dragons, Billy Graham, and that barbecue pit your uncle made out of half of a fifty-gallon barrel into one piece of art, but because this painting tells a story.

It's a story of movement,
from one place to the next,
from one realm to another,
from death to life,

with the cross as the bridge, the way, the hope.

From what we can see, the people in the painting are going somewhere, somewhere they've chosen to go, and they're leaving something behind so that they can go there.

But the story also tells us something else,
something really, really important,
something significant about location.
According to the painting,
all of this is happening somewhere else.

Giant crosses do not hang suspended in the air in the world that you and I call home. Cities do not float. And if you tripped and fell off the cross/sidewalk in this world, you would not free-fall indefinitely down into an abyss of giant red caves and hissing steam.

I show you this painting because, as surreal as it is, the fundamental story it tells about heaven—that it is somewhere else—is the story that many people know to be the Christian story.

Think of the cultural images that are associated with heaven: harps and clouds and streets of gold, everybody dressed in white robes.

(Does anybody look good in a white robe? Can you play sports in a white robe? How could it be heaven without sports? What about swimming? What if you spill food on the robe?)

Think of all of the jokes that begin with someone showing up at the gates of heaven, and St. Peter is there, like a bouncer at a club, deciding who does and doesn't get to enter.

For all of the questions and confusion about just what heaven is and who will be there, the one thing that appears to unite all of the speculation is the generally agreed-upon notion that heaven is, obviously, somewhere else.

And so the questions that are asked about heaven often have an otherworldly air to them:

What will we do all day?

Will we recognize people we used to know?

What will it be like?

Will there be dogs there?

I've heard pastors answer, "It will be unlike anything we can comprehend, like a church service that goes on forever," causing some to think, "That sounds more like hell."

And then there are those whose lessons about heaven consist primarily of who will be there and who won't be there. And so there's a woman sitting in a church service with tears streaming down her face, as she imagines being reunited with her sister who was killed in a car accident seventeen years ago. The woman sitting next to her, however, is realizing that if what the pastor is saying about heaven is true, she will be separated from her mother and father, brothers and sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, and friends forever, with no chance of any reunion, ever. She in that very same moment has tears streaming down her face too, but they are tears of a different kind.

When she asks the pastor afterward if it's true that, because they aren't Christians none of her family will be there, she's told

that she'll be having so much fun worshipping God that it won't matter to her. Which is quite troubling and confusing, because the people she loves the most in the world do matter to her.

Are there other ways to think about heaven, other than as that perfect floating shiny city hanging suspended there in the air above that ominous red and black realm with all that smoke and steam and hissing fire?

I say yes, there are.

In Matthew 19 a rich man asks Jesus: "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

For some Christians, this is the question, the one that matters most. Compassion for the poor, racial justice, care for the environment, worship, teaching, and art are important, but in the end, for some followers of Jesus, they're not ultimately what it's all about.

It's "all about eternity," right?

Because that's what the bumper sticker says.

There are entire organizations with employees, websites, and newsletters devoted to training people to walk up to strangers in public places and ask them, "When you die and God asks you why you should be let into heaven, what will you say?" There are well-organized groups of Christians who go door-to-door asking people, "If you were to die tonight, where would you go?"

The rich man's question, then, is the perfect opportunity for Jesus to give a clear, straightforward answer to the only question

that ultimately matters for many.

First, we can only assume, he'll correct the man's flawed understanding of how salvation works. He'll show the man how eternal life isn't something he has to earn or work for; it's a free gift of grace.

Then, he'll invite the man to confess, repent, trust, accept, and believe that Jesus has made a way for him to have a relationship with God.

Like any good Christian would.

Jesus, however, doesn't do any of that.

He asks the man: "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments."

"Enter life?"

Jesus refers to the man's intention as "entering life"? And then he tells him that you do that by keeping the commandments? This wasn't what Jesus was supposed to say.

The man, however, wants to know which of the commandments. There are 613 of them in the first five books of the Bible, so it's a fair question. In the culture Jesus lived in, an extraordinary amount of time was spent in serious discussion and debate about these 613 commandments, dissecting and debating just how to interpret and obey them.

Were some more important than others?

Could they be summarized?

What do you do when your donkey falls in a hole on the

Sabbath?

Rescuing your donkey would be work, and that would be breaking the Sabbath commandment to rest, but there were also commands to protect and preserve life, including the life of donkeys, so what happens when obeying one commandment requires you to break another?

The Ten Commandments were central to this discussion because of the way in which they covered so many aspects of life in so few words. Jesus refers to them in answering the man's question about "which ones" by listing five of the Ten Commandments. But not just any five. The first four of the commandments were understood as dealing with our relationship with God—Jesus doesn't list any of those. The remaining six deal with our relationships with each other. Jesus mentions five of them, leaving one out.

The man hears Jesus's list of five and insists he's kept them all.

Jesus then tells him, "Go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven," which causes the man to walk away sad, "because he had great wealth."

Did we miss something?

The big words, the important words—"eternal life," "treasure," "heaven"—were all there in the conversation, but they weren't used in the ways that many Christians use them.

Shouldn't Jesus have given a clear answer to the man's obvious desire to know how to go to heaven when he dies? Is that why he walks away—because Jesus blew a perfectly good "evangelistic"

opportunity? How does such a simple question—one Jesus could have answered so clearly from a Christian perspective—turn into such a convoluted dialogue involving commandments and treasures and wealth and ending with the man walking away?

The answer,

it turns out,

is in the question.

When the man asks about getting "eternal life," he isn't asking about how to go to heaven when he dies. This wasn't a concern for the man or Jesus. This is why Jesus doesn't tell people how to "go to heaven." It wasn't what Jesus came to do.

Heaven, for Jesus, was deeply connected with what he called "this age" and "the age to come."

In Matthew 13 Jesus speaks of a harvest at the "end of the age," and in Luke 20 he teaches about "the people of this age" and some who are "considered worthy of taking part in the age to come." Sometimes he describes the age to come simply as "entering life," as in Mark 9—"it's better for you to enter life maimed"—and other times he teaches that by standing firm "you will win life [in the age to come]," as in Luke 21. And then, just before he leaves his disciples in Matthew 28, Jesus reassures them that he is with them "always, to the very end of the age."

Jesus's disciples ask him in Matthew 24, "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" because this is how they had been taught to think about things—

this age,

and then the age to come.

We might call them "eras" or "periods of time":

this age—the one we're living in—and the age to come.

Another way of saying "life in the age to come" in Jesus's day was to say "eternal life." In Hebrew the phrase is olam habah.

What must I do to inherit olam habah?

This age,

and the one to come,

the one after this one.

When the wealthy man walks away from Jesus, Jesus turns to his disciples and says to them, "No one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life" (Luke 18).

Now, the English word "age" here is the word aion in New Testament Greek. Aion has multiple meanings—one we'll look at here, and another we'll explore later. One meaning of aion refers to a period of time, as in "The spirit of the age" or "They were gone for ages." When we use the word "age" like this, we are referring less to a precise measurement of time, like an hour or a day or a year, and more to a period or era of time. This is crucial to our understanding of the word aion, because it doesn't mean "forever" as we think of forever. When we say "forever," what we are generally referring to is something that will go on, year after 365-day year, never ceasing in the endless unfolding of segmented, measurable units of time, like a clock that never

stops ticking. That's not this word. The first meaning of this word aion refers to a period of time with a beginning and an end.

So according to Jesus there is this age, this aion—
the one they, and we, are living in—
and then a coming age,
also called "the world to come"
or simply "eternal life."

Seeing the present and future in terms of two ages was not a concept or teaching that originated with Jesus. He came from a long line of prophets who had been talking about life in the age to come for hundreds of years before him. They believed that history was headed somewhere—not just their history as a tribe and nation, but the history of the entire universe—because they believed that God had not abandoned the world and that a new day, a new age, a new era was coming.

The prophet Isaiah said that in that new day
"the nations will stream to" Jerusalem,
and God will
"settle disputes for many peoples";
people will "beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks" (chap. 2).
As we would say,
peace on earth.
Isaiah said that everybody will walk
"in the light of the LORD"
and

"they will neither harm nor destroy"
in that day.
The earth, Isaiah said, will be
"filled with the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea" (chap. 11).
He described
"a feast of rich food for all peoples"
because God will
"destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations,
he will swallow up death forever."
God "will wipe away the tears from all faces";
and "remove his people's disgrace from all the earth" (chap. 25).
The prophet Ezekiel said that people will be given
grain and fruit and crops and new hearts and new spirits (chap. 36).
The prophet Amos promised that everything will be
repaired and restored and rebuilt and
"new wine will drip from the mountains" (chap. 9).
Life in the age to come.
If this sounds like heaven on earth,
that's because it is.
Literally.

A couple of observations about the prophets' promises regarding life in the age to come.

First, they spoke about "all the nations." That's everybody. That's all those different skin colors, languages, dialects, and accents; all those kinds of food and music; all those customs, habits, patterns, clothing, traditions, and ways of celebrating—

multiethnic,

multisensory,

multieverything.

That's an extraordinarily complex, interconnected, and diverse reality, a reality in which individual identities aren't lost or repressed, but embraced and celebrated. An expansive unity that goes beyond and yet fully embraces staggering levels of diversity.

A racist would be miserable in the world to come.

Second, one of the most striking aspects of the pictures the prophets used to describe this reality is how earthy it is. Wine and crops and grain and people and feasts and buildings and homes. It's here they were talking about, this world, the one we know—but rescued, transformed, and renewed.

When Isaiah predicted that spears would become pruning hooks, that's a reference to cultivating. Pruning and trimming and growing and paying close attention to the plants and whether they're getting enough water and if their roots are deep enough. Soil under the fingernails, grapes being trampled under bare feet, fingers sticky from handling fresh fruit.

It's that green stripe you get around the sole of your shoes when you mow the lawn.

Life in the age to come.

Earthy.

Third, much of their vision of life in the age to come was not new. Deep in their bones was the Genesis story of Adam and Eve, who were turned loose in a garden to name the animals and care for the earth and enjoy it.

To name is to order, to participate, to partner with God in taking the world somewhere.

"Here it is,

a big, beautiful, fascinating world,"

God says.

"Do something with it!"

For there to be new wine, someone has to crush the grapes.

For the city to be rebuilt, someone has to chop down the trees to make the beams to construct the houses.

For there to be no more war, someone has to take the sword and get it hot enough in the fire to hammer into the shape of a plow.

This participation is important, because Jesus and the prophets lived with an awareness that God has been looking for partners since the beginning, people who will take seriously their divine responsibility to care for the earth and each other in loving, sustainable ways. They centered their hopes in the God who simply does not give up on creation and the people who inhabit it. The God who is the source of all life, who works from within creation to make something new. The God who can do

what humans cannot. The God who gives new spirits and new hearts and new futures.

Central to their vision of human flourishing in God's renewed world, then, was the prophets' announcement that a number of things that can survive in this world will not be able to survive in the world to come.

Like war.

Rape.

Greed.

Injustice.

Violence.

Pride.

Division.

Exploitation.

Disgrace.

Their description of life in the age to come is both thrilling and unnerving at the same time. For the earth to be free of anything destructive or damaging, certain things have to be banished. Decisions have to be made. Judgments have to be rendered. And so they spoke of a cleansing, purging, decisive day when God would make those judgments. They called this day the "day of the LORD."

The day when God says "ENOUGH!" to anything that threatens the peace (shalom is the Hebrew word), harmony, and health that God intends for the world.

God says no to injustice.

God says, "Never again" to the oppressors who prey on the weak and vulnerable.

God declares a ban on weapons.

It's important to remember this the next time we hear people say they can't believe in a "God of judgment."

Yes, they can.

Often, we can think of little else.

Every oil spill,

every report of another woman sexually assaulted,

every news report that another political leader has silenced the opposition through torture, imprisonment, and execution,

every time we see someone stepped on by an institution or corporation more interested in profit than people,

every time we stumble upon one more instance of the human heart gone wrong,

we shake our fist and cry out,

"Will somebody please do something about this?"

We crave judgment,

we long for it,

we thirst for it.

Bring it,

unleash it,

as the prophet Amos says,

"Let justice roll on like a river" (chap. 5).

Same with the word "anger." When we hear people saying they can't believe in a God who gets angry—yes, they can.

How should God react to a child being forced into prostitution? How should God feel about a country starving while warlords hoard the food supply? What kind of God wouldn't get angry at a financial scheme that robs thousands of people of their life savings?

And that is the promise of the prophets in the age to come:

God acts.

Decisively.

On behalf of everybody

who's ever been stepped on by the machine,

exploited,

abused,

forgotten,

or mistreated.

God puts an end to it.

God says, "Enough."

Of course, to celebrate this, anticipate this, and find ourselves thrilled by this promise of the world made right brings with it the haunting thought that we each know what lurks in our own heart—

our role in corrupting this world,

the litany of ways in which our own sins have contributed to the heartbreak we're surrounded by,

all those times we hardened our heart and kept right on walking,

ignoring the cry of someone in need.

And so in the midst of prophets' announcements about God's judgment we also find promises about mercy and grace.

Isaiah quotes God, saying, "Come, . . . though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (chap. 1).

Justice and mercy hold hands,

they kiss,

they belong together in the age to come,

an age that is complex, earthy, participatory, and free from all death, destruction, and despair.

When we talk about heaven, then, or eternal life, or the afterlife—any of that—it's important that we begin with the categories and claims that people were familiar with in Jesus's first-century Jewish world. They did not talk about a future life somewhere else, because they anticipated a coming day when the world would be restored, renewed, and redeemed and there would be peace on earth.

So when the man asks Jesus how he can get eternal life, Jesus is not surprised or caught off guard by the man's question, because this was one of the most important things people were talking about in Jesus's day.

How do you make sure you'll be a part of the new thing God is going to do? How do you best become the kind of person whom God could entrust with significant responsibility in the age to come?

The standard answer was: live the commandments. God has shown you how to live. Live that way. The more you become a

person of peace and justice and worship and generosity, the more actively you participate now in ordering and working to bring about God's kind of world, the more ready you will be to assume an even greater role in the age to come.

But Jesus is aware that something is wrong with the man. Rich people were rare at that time, so there is good reason to believe that Jesus knew something about him and his reputation. Jesus mentions five, not six, of the commandments about relationship with others. He leaves out the last command, which prohibited coveting. To covet is to crave what someone else has. Coveting is the disease of always wanting more, and it's rooted in a profound dissatisfaction with the life God has given you. Coveting is what happens when you aren't at peace.

The man says he's kept all of the commandments that Jesus mentions, but Jesus hasn't mentioned the one about coveting. Jesus then tells him to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor, which Jesus doesn't tell other people, because it's not an issue for them. It is, for this man. The man is greedy—and greed has no place in the world to come. He hasn't learned yet that he has a sacred calling to use his wealth to move creation forward. How can God give him more responsibility and resources in the age to come, when he hasn't handled well what he's been given in this age?

Jesus promises him that if he can do it, if he can trust God to liberate him from his greed, he'll have "treasure in heaven."

The man can't do it, and so he walks away.

Jesus takes the man's question about his life then and makes it about the kind of life he's living now. Jesus drags the future into the present, promising the man that there will be treasure in heaven for him if he can do it. All of which raises the question: What does Jesus mean when he uses that word "heaven"?

First, there was tremendous respect in the culture that Jesus lived in for the name of God—so much so that many wouldn't even say it. That is true to this day. I occasionally receive e-mails and letters from people who spell the name "G-d." In Jesus's day, one of the ways that people got around actually saying the name of God was to substitute the word "heaven" for the word "God." Jesus often referred to the "kingdom of heaven," and he tells stories about people "sinning against heaven." "Heaven" in these cases is simply another way of saying "God."

Second, Jesus consistently affirmed heaven as a real place, space, and dimension of God's creation, where God's will and only God's will is done. Heaven is that realm where things are as God intends them to be.

On earth, lots of wills are done.
Yours, mine, and many others.
And so, at present, heaven and earth are not one.
What Jesus taught,
what the prophets taught,
what all of Jewish tradition pointed to
and what Jesus lived in anticipation of,

was the day when earth and heaven would be one.

The day when God's will would be done on earth as it is now done in heaven.

The day when earth and heaven will be the same place.

This is the story of the Bible.

This is the story Jesus lived and told.

As it's written at the end of the Bible in Revelation 21: "God's dwelling place is now among the people."

Life in the age to come.

This is why Jesus tells the man that if he sells his possessions, he'll have rewards in heaven. Rewards are a dynamic rather than a static reality. Many people think of heaven, and they picture mansions (a word nowhere in the Bible's descriptions of heaven) and Ferraris and literal streets of gold, as if the best God can come up with is Beverly Hills in the sky. Tax-free, of course, and without the smog.

But those are static images—fixed, flat, unchanging. A car is a car is a car; same with a mansion. They are the same, day after day after day, give or take a bit of wear and tear.

There's even a phrase about doing a good deed. People will say that it earns you "another star in your crown."

(By the way, when the writer John in the book of Revelation gets a current glimpse of the heavens, one detail he mentions about crowns is that people are taking them off [chap. 4]. Apparently, in the unvarnished presence of the divine a lot of things that we consider significant turn out to be, much like

wearing a crown, quite absurd.)

But a crown, much like a mansion or a car, is a possession. There's nothing wrong with possessions; it's just that they have value to us only when we use them, engage them, and enjoy them. They're nouns that mean something only in conjunction with verbs.

That's why wealth is so dangerous: if you're not careful you can easily end up with a garage full of nouns.

In the Genesis poem that begins the Bible, life is a pulsing, progressing, evolving, dynamic reality in which tomorrow will not be a repeat of today, because things are, at the most fundamental level of existence, going somewhere.

When Jesus tells the man that there are rewards for him, he's promising the man that receiving the peace of God now, finding gratitude for what he does have, and sharing it with those who need it will create in him all the more capacity for joy in the world to come.

How we think about heaven, then, directly affects how we understand what we do with our days and energies now, in this age. Jesus teaches us how to live now in such a way that what we create, who we give our efforts to, and how we spend our time will all endure in the new world.

Taking heaven seriously, then, means taking suffering seriously, now. Not because we've bought into the myth that we can create a utopia given enough time, technology, and good voting choices, but because we have great confidence that God

has not abandoned human history and is actively at work within it, taking it somewhere.

Around a billion people in the world today do not have access to clean water. People will have access to clean water in the age to come, and so working for clean-water access for all is participating now in the life of the age to come.

That's what happens when the future is dragged into the present.

It often appears that those who talk the most about going to heaven when you die talk the least about bringing heaven to earth right now, as Jesus taught us to pray: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." At the same time, it often appears that those who talk the most about relieving suffering now talk the least about heaven when we die.

Jesus teaches us to pursue the life of heaven now and also then, anticipating the day when earth and heaven are one.

Honest business,
redemptive art,
honorable law,
sustainable living,
medicine,
education,
making a home,
tending a garden—

they're all sacred tasks to be done in partnership with God now, because they will all go on in the age to come.

In heaven,
on earth.
Our eschatology shapes our ethics.
Eschatology is about last things.
Ethics are about how you live.

What you believe about the future shapes, informs, and determines how you live now.

If you believe that you're going to leave and evacuate to somewhere else, then why do anything about this world? A proper view of heaven leads not to escape from the world, but to full engagement with it, all with the anticipation of a coming day when things are on earth as they currently are in heaven.

When Jesus tells the man he will have treasure in heaven, he's promising the man that taking steps to be free of his greed—in this case, selling his possessions—will open him up to more and more participation in God's new world, the one that was breaking into human history with Jesus himself.

In Matthew 20 the mother of two of Jesus's disciples says to Jesus, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and other at your left in your kingdom." She doesn't want bigger mansions or larger piles of gold for them, because static images of wealth and prosperity were not what filled people's heads when they thought of heaven in her day. She understood heaven to be about partnering with God to make a new and better world, one with increasingly complex and expansive expressions and dimensions of shalom, creativity, beauty, and design.

So when people ask, "What will we do in heaven?" one possible answer is to simply ask: "What do you love to do now that will go on in the world to come?"

What is it that when you do it, you lose track of time because you get lost in it? What do you do that makes you think, "I could do this forever"? What is it that makes you think, "I was made for this"?

If you ask these kinds of questions long enough you will find some impulse related to creation. Some way to be, something to do. Heaven is both the peace, stillness, serenity, and calm that come from having everything in its right place—that state in which nothing is required, needed, or missing—and the endless joy that comes from participating in the ongoing creation of the world.

The pastor John writes in Revelation 20 that people will reign with God. The word "reign" means "to actively participate in the ordering of creation." We were made to explore and discover and learn and create and shape and form and engage this world.

This helps us understand the exchange between the rich man and Jesus. Jesus wants to free him to more actively participate in God's good world, but the man isn't up for it.

And his unwillingness, we learn, leads us to another insight about heaven.

Heaven comforts, but it also confronts.

The prophets promised a new world free from tears and pain and harm and disgrace and disease. That's comforting. And

people have clung to those promises for years, because they're inspiring and can help sustain us through all kinds of difficulties.

But heaven also confronts. Heaven, we learn, has teeth, flames, edges, and sharp points. What Jesus is insisting with the rich man is that certain things simply will not survive in the age to come. Like coveting. And greed. The one thing people won't be wanting in the perfect peace and presence of God is someone else's life. The man is clearly attached to his wealth and possessions, so much so that when Jesus invites him to leave them behind, he can't do it.

Jesus brings the man hope, but that hope bears within it judgment.

The man's heart is revealed through his response to Jesus's invitation to sell his things, and his heart is hard. His attachment to his possessions is revealed, and he clings all the more tightly.

The apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3 that "the Day" the prophets spoke of, the one that inaugurates life in the age to come, will "bring everything to light" and "reveal it with fire," the kind of fire that will "test the quality of each person's work." Some in this process will find that they spent their energies and efforts on things that won't be in heaven-on-earth. "If it is burned up," Paul writes, "the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved, even though only as one escaping through the flames."

Flames in heaven.

Imagine being a racist in heaven-on-earth, sitting down at the great feast and realizing that you're sitting next to them. Those

people. The ones you've despised for years. Your racist attitude would simply not survive. Those flames in heaven would be hot.

Jesus makes no promise that in the blink of an eye we will suddenly become totally different people who have vastly different tastes, attitudes, and perspectives. Paul makes it very clear that we will have our true selves revealed and that once the sins and habits and bigotry and pride and petty jealousies are prohibited and removed, for some there simply won't be much left. "As one escaping through the flames" is how he put it.

It's very common to hear talk about heaven framed in terms of who "gets in" or how to "get in." What we find Jesus teaching, over and over and over again, is that he's interested in our hearts being transformed, so that we can actually handle heaven. To portray heaven as bliss, peace, and endless joy is a beautiful picture, but it raises the question: How many of us could handle it, as we are today? How would we each do in a reality that had no capacity for cynicism or slander or worry or pride?

It's important, then, to keep in mind that heaven has the potential to be a kind of starting over. Learning how to be human all over again. Imagine living with no fear. Ever. That would take some getting used to. So would a world where loving your neighbor was the only option. So would a world where every choice was good for the earth. That would be a strange world at first. That could take some getting used to.

Jesus called disciples—students of life—to learn from him how to live in God's world God's way. Constantly learning and

growing and evolving and absorbing. Tomorrow is never simply a repeat of today.

Much of the speculation about heaven—and, more important, the confusion—comes from the idea that in the blink of an eye we will automatically become totally different people who "know" everything. But our heart, our character, our desires, our longings—those things take time.

Jesus calls disciples in order to teach us how to be and what to be; his intention is for us to be growing progressively in generosity, forgiveness, honesty, courage, truth telling, and responsibility, so that as these take over our lives we are taking part more and more and more in life in the age to come, now.

The flames of heaven, it turns out, lead us to the surprise of heaven. Jesus tells a story in Matthew 25 about people invited into "the kingdom prepared for [them] since the creation of the world," and their first reaction is . . . surprise.

They start asking questions, trying to figure it out. Interesting, that. It's not a story of people boldly walking in through the pearly gates, confident that, because of their faith, beliefs, or even actions, they'll be welcomed in. It's a story about people saying,

"What?"

"Us?"

"When did we ever see you?"

"What did we ever do to deserve it?"

In other stories he tells, very religious people who presume that they're "in" hear from him: "I never knew you. Away from

me, you evildoers!" (Matt. 7).

Heaven, it turns out, is full of the unexpected.

In a story Jesus tells in Luke 18 about two men going up to the temple to pray, it's the "sinner," the "unrighteous man," who goes home justified, while the faithful, observant religious man is harshly judged.

Again, surprise.

Jesus tells another story about a great banquet a man gave (Luke 14). The people who were invited, those who would normally attend such a feast, had better things to do. So, in their absence, the host invites all of the people from the streets and alleyways who would never attend a party like this.

Unexpected, surprising—not what you'd think. These aren't isolated impulses in Jesus's outlook; they're the themes he comes back to again and again. He tells entire villages full of extremely devoted religious people that they're in danger, while seriously questionable "sinners" will be better off than them "in that day."

Think about the single mom, trying to raise kids, work multiple jobs, and wrangle child support out of the kids' father, who used to beat her. She's faithful, true, and utterly devoted to her children. In spite of the circumstances, she never loses hope that they can be raised in love and go on to break the cycle of dysfunction and abuse. She never goes out, never takes a vacation, never has enough money to buy anything for herself. She gets a few hours of sleep and then repeats the cycle of cooking, work, laundry, bills, more work, until she falls into bed

late at night, exhausted.

With what she has been given she has been faithful. She is a woman of character and substance. She never gives up. She is kind and loving even when she's exhausted.

She can be trusted.

Is she the last who Jesus says will be first?

Does God say to her, "You're the kind of person I can run the world with"?

Think about her, and then think about the magazines that line the checkout aisles at most grocery stores. The faces on the covers are often of beautiful, rich, famous, talented people embroiled in endless variations of scandal and controversy.

Where did they spend those millions of dollars?

What did they do with those talents?

How did they use their influence?

Did they use any of it to help create the new world God is making?

Or are we seeing the first who will be last that Jesus spoke of?

When it comes to people, then—the who of heaven—what Jesus does again and again is warn us against rash judgments about who's in and who's out.

But the surprise isn't just regarding the who;

it's also about the when of heaven.

Jesus is hanging on the cross between two insurgents when one of them says to him, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Notice that the man doesn't ask to go to heaven. He doesn't ask for his sins to be forgiven. He doesn't invite Jesus into his heart. He doesn't announce that he now believes.

He simply asks to be remembered by Jesus in the age to come.

_____

He wants to be a part of it. Of course.

Jesus assures him that he'll be with him in paradise . . . that day. The man hadn't asked about today; he had asked about that day. He believes that God is doing something new through Jesus and he wants to be a part of it, whenever it is.

And that's all Jesus needs to hear to promise him "paradise" later that day. Just around the corner. In a few hours.

According to Jesus, then, heaven is as far away as that day when heaven and earth become one again and as close as a few hours.

The apostle Paul writes to the Philippians that either he would go on living, or he would be killed and immediately be with Christ (chap. 1).

Paul believed that there is a dimension of creation,
a place, a space, a realm beyond the one we currently inhabit
and yet near and connected with it.
He writes of getting glimpses of it,
being a citizen of it,
and being there the moment he dies.

Paul writes to the Corinthians about two kinds of bodies. The first is the kind we each inhabit now, the kind that gets old and

weary and eventually gives out on us. The second kind is one he calls "imperishable" (1 Cor. 15), one immune to the ravages of time, one we'll receive when heaven and earth are one. Prior to that, then, after death we are without a body. In heaven, but without a body. A body is of the earth. Made of dust. Part of this creation, not that one. Those currently "in heaven" are not, obviously, here. And so they're with God, but without a body.

These truths, about the present incompleteness of both earth and heaven, lead us to another truth about heaven:

Heaven, for Jesus, wasn't less real, but more real.

The dominant cultural assumptions and misunderstandings about heaven have been at work for so long, it's almost automatic for many to think of heaven as ethereal, intangible, esoteric, and immaterial.

Floaty, dreamy, hazy.

Somewhere else.

People in white robes with perfect hair floating by on clouds, singing in perfect pitch.

But for Jesus, heaven is more real than what we experience now. This is true for the future, when earth and heaven become one, but also for today.

To understand this, let's return to that Greek word aion, the one that we translate as "age" in English. We saw earlier how aion refers to a period of time with a beginning and an end. Another meaning of aion is a bit more complex and nuanced, because it refers to a particular intensity of experience that transcends time.

Remember sitting in class, and it was so excruciatingly boring that you found yourself staring at the clock? Tick. Tick. Tick. What happened to time in those moments? It slowed down. We even say, "It felt like it was taking forever." Now when we use the word "forever" in this way, we are not talking about a 365-day year followed by a 365-day year followed by another 365-day year, and so on. What we are referring to is the intensity of feeling in that moment. That agonized boredom caused time to appear to bend and twist and warp.

Another example, this one less about agony and more about ecstasy. When you fall in love, those first conversations can take hours and yet they feel like minutes. You're so caught up in being with that person that you lose track of time. In that case, the clock doesn't slow down; instead, time "flies."

Whether an experience is pleasurable or painful, in the extreme moments of life what we encounter is time dragging and flying, slowing down and speeding up. That's what aion refers to —a particularly intense experience. Aion is often translated as "eternal" in English, which is an altogether different word from "forever."

Let me be clear: heaven is not forever in the way that we think of forever, as a uniform measurement of time, like days and years, marching endlessly into the future. That's not a category or concept we find in the Bible. This is why a lot of translators choose to translate aion as "eternal." By this they don't mean the literal passing of time; they mean transcending time, belonging

to another realm altogether.

To summarize, then, sometimes when Jesus used the word "heaven," he was simply referring to God, using the word as a substitute for the name of God.

Second, sometimes when Jesus spoke of heaven, he was referring to the future coming together of heaven and earth in what he and his contemporaries called life in the age to come.

And then third—and this is where things get really, really interesting—when Jesus talked about heaven, he was talking about our present eternal, intense, real experiences of joy, peace, and love in this life, this side of death and the age to come. Heaven for Jesus wasn't just "someday"; it was a present reality. Jesus blurs the lines, inviting the rich man, and us, into the merging of heaven and earth, the future and present, here and now.

To say it again, eternal life is less about a kind of time that starts when we die, and more about a quality and vitality of life lived now in connection to God.

Eternal life doesn't start when we die;

it starts now.

It's not about a life that begins at death;

it's about experiencing the kind of life now that can endure and survive even death.

We live in several dimensions.

Up and down.

Left and right.

Forward and backward.

Three to be exact.

And yet we've all had experiences when those three dimensions weren't adequate. Moments when we were acutely, overwhelmingly aware of other realities just beyond this one.

At the front edge of science string theorists are now telling us that they can show the existence of at least eleven dimensions. If we count time as the fourth dimension, that's seven dimensions beyond what we now know.

So there's left and right, and up and down, and front and back.

Got that.

But is there also

in . . . ?

and out . . . ?

or around . . . ?

and through . . . ?

or between . . . ?

or beside . . . ?

or beyond . . . ?

Jesus talked about a reality he called the kingdom of God. He described an all-pervasive dimension of being, a bit like oxygen for us or water for a fish, that he insisted was here, at hand, now, among us, and upon us. He spoke with God as if God was right here, he healed with power that he claimed was readily accessible all the time, and he taught his disciples that they would do even greater things than what they saw him doing. He spoke

of oneness with God, the God who is so intimately connected with life in this world that every hair on your head is known. Jesus lived and spoke as if the whole world was a thin place for him, with endless dimensions of the divine infinitesimally close, with every moment and every location simply another experience of the divine reality that is all around us, through us, under and above us all the time.

It's as if we're currently trying to play the piano while wearing oven mitts.

We can make a noise, sometimes even hit the notes well enough to bang out a melody, but it doesn't sound like it could, or should.

The elements are all there—fingers, keys, strings, ears—but there's something in the way, something inhibiting our ability to fully experience all the possibilities. The apostle Paul writes that now we see "as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face" (1 Cor. 13).

Right now, we're trying to embrace our lover, but we're wearing a hazmat suit.

We're trying to have a detailed conversation about complex emotions, but we're underwater.

We're trying to taste the thirty-two different spices in the curry, but our mouth is filled with gravel.

Yes, there is plenty in the scriptures about life in the age to come, about our resurrected, heaven-and-earth-finally-come-together-as-one body, a body that's been "clothed in the

immortal" that will make this body, the one we inhabit at this moment, seem like a temporary tent.

And yes, there were plenty of beliefs then about what the future would hold, just as there are now.

But when Jesus talks with the rich man, he has one thing in mind: he wants the man to experience the life of heaven, eternal life, "aionian" life, now. For that man, his wealth was in the way; for others it's worry or stress or pride or envy—the list goes on. We know that list.

Jesus invites us,
in this life,
in this broken, beautiful world,
to experience the life of heaven now.

He insisted over and over that God's peace, joy, and love are currently available to us, exactly as we are.

So how do I answer questions about heaven?

How would I summarize all that Jesus teaches?

There's heaven now, somewhere else.

There's heaven here, sometime else.

And then there's Jesus's invitation to heaven
here
and
now,
in this moment,
in this place.

Try and paint that.

Click here for notes on this chapter from The Love Wins Companion

Chapter 3

Hell

First, heaven.

Now, hell.

Several years ago I was getting ready to speak in San Francisco when I was told that there were protestors on the sidewalk in front of the theater. They were telling the people standing in line waiting to get in that they were in serious trouble with God because they had come to hear me talk. A friend of mine thought it would be fun to get pictures of the protesters. When he showed them to me later, I noticed that one of the protestors had a jacket on with these words stitched on the back:

"Turn or Burn."

That about sums it up, doesn't it?

Fury, wrath, fire, torment, judgment, eternal agony, endless anguish.

Hell.

That's all part of the story, right?

Trust God, accept Jesus, confess, repent, and everything will go well for you. But if you don't, well, the Bible is quite clear . . .

Sin, refuse to repent, harden your heart, reject Jesus, and when you die, it's over. Or actually, the torture and anguish and eternal torment will have just begun.

That's how it is—because that's what God is like, correct?

God is loving and kind and full of grace and mercy—unless there isn't confession and repentance and salvation in this lifetime, at which point God punishes forever. That's the Christian story, right?

Is that what Jesus taught?

To answer that question, I want to show you every single verse in the Bible in which we find the actual word "hell."

First, the Hebrew scriptures. There isn't an exact word or concept in the Hebrew scriptures for hell other than a few words that refer to death and the grave.

One of them is the Hebrew word "Sheol," a dark, mysterious, murky place people go when they die, as in Psalm 18: "The cords of Sheol entangled me" (NRSV). There's also mention of "the depths," as in Psalm 30: "I will exalt you, LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths"; the "pit," as in Psalm 103: "The LORD . . . who redeems your life from the pit"; and the grave, as in Psalm 6: "Who praises you from the grave?"

There are a few references to the realm of the dead, as in Psalm 16: "My body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead," but as far as meanings go, that's the extent of what we find in the Hebrew scriptures.

So what do we learn?

First, we consistently find affirmations of the power of God over all of life and death, as in 1 Samuel 2: "The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up"; and Deuteronomy 32: "There is no god besides me. I put to

death and I bring to life."

We do find several affirmations of God's presence and involvement in whatever it is that happens after a person dies, although it's fairly ambiguous at best as to just what exactly that looks like.

In one of the stories about Moses, God is identified as the God of "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Those three—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—were dead by the time this story about Moses takes place. Where exactly Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were at that time isn't mentioned, but Moses is told that God is still their God (Exod. 3).

Once again, it's an affirmation of God's enduring and sustaining power over life and death, and yet very little is given in the way of actual details regarding individual destinies.

Second, the Hebrews often used the words "life" and "death" in a different sense than we do. We're used to people speaking of life and death as fixed states or destinations, as in you're either alive or you're dead. What we find in the scriptures is a more nuanced understanding that sees life and death as two ways of being alive. When Moses in Deuteronomy 30 calls the Hebrews to choose life over death, he's not forcing them to decide whether they will be killed on the spot; he's confronting them with their choice of the kind of life they're going to keep on living. The one kind of life is in vital connection with the living God, in which they experience more and more peace and wholeness. The other kind of life is less and less connected with God and contains more

and more despair and destruction.

Third, it's important here to remember that the Israelites, who wrote the Hebrew scriptures, had been oppressed and enslaved by their neighbors the Egyptians, who built pyramids and ornate coffins and buried themselves in rooms filled with gold, because of their beliefs about life after death. Those beliefs appear to have been a turnoff for the Jews, who were far more interested in the ethics of and ways of living this life.

There is a story about the death of King David's child, in which David says that if he can't bring the child back, he would go to where the child is (2 Sam. 12). There are several mentions in the book of Job about lying down, descending, and being buried in the dust—all references to death.

But, simply put, the Hebrew commentary on what happens after a person dies isn't very articulated or defined. Sheol, death, and the grave in the consciousness of the Hebrew writers are all a bit vague and "underworldly." For whatever reasons, the precise details of who goes where, when, how, with what, and for how long simply aren't things the Hebrew writers were terribly concerned with.

Next, then, the New Testament. The actual word "hell" is used roughly twelve times in the New Testament, almost exclusively by Jesus himself. The Greek word that gets translated as "hell" in English is the word "Gehenna." Ge means "valley," and henna means "Hinnom." Gehenna, the Valley of Hinnom, was an actual valley on the south and west side of the city of Jerusalem.

Gehenna, in Jesus's day, was the city dump.

People tossed their garbage and waste into this valley. There was a fire there, burning constantly to consume the trash. Wild animals fought over scraps of food along the edges of the heap. When they fought, their teeth would make a gnashing sound. Gehenna was the place with the gnashing of teeth, where the fire never went out.

Gehenna was an actual place that Jesus's listeners would have been familiar with. So the next time someone asks you if you believe in an actual hell, you can always say, "Yes, I do believe that my garbage goes somewhere . . ."

James uses the word "Gehenna" once in his letter to refer to the power of the tongue (chap. 3), but otherwise all of the mentions are from Jesus.

Jesus says in Matthew 5, "Anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell," and "It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." In Matthew 10 and Luke 12 he says, "Be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell," and in Matthew 18 and Mark 9 he says, "It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell." In Matthew 23 he tells very committed religious leaders that they win converts and make them "twice as much a child of hell" as they are, and then he asks them, "How will you escape being condemned to hell?"

Gehenna,

the town garbage pile.

And that's it.

Those are all of the mentions of "hell" in the Bible.

There are two other words that occasionally mean something similar to hell. One is the word "Tartarus," which we find once in chapter 2 of Peter's second letter. It's a term Peter borrowed from Greek mythology, referring to the underworld, the place where the Greek demigods were judged in the "abyss."

The other Greek word is "Hades."

Obscure, dark, murky—Hades is essentially the Greek version of the Hebrew word "Sheol." We find the word "Hades" in Revelation 1, 6, and 20 and in Acts 2, which is a quote from Psalm 16. Jesus uses the word in Matthew 11 and Luke 10: "You will go down to Hades"; in Matthew 16: "The gates of Hades will not overcome it"; and in the parable of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus in Luke 16.

And that's it.

Anything you have ever heard people say about the actual word "hell" in the Bible they got from those verses you just read.

For many in the modern world, the idea of hell is a holdover from primitive, mythic religion that uses fear and punishment to control people for all sorts of devious reasons. And so the logical conclusion is that we've evolved beyond all of that outdated belief, right?

I get that. I understand that aversion, and I as well have a hard time believing that somewhere down below the earth's crust is

a really crafty figure in red tights holding a three-pointed spear, playing Pink Floyd records backward, and enjoying the hidden messages.

So how should we think,
or not think,
about hell?

_____

I remember arriving in Kigali, Rwanda, in December 2002 and driving from the airport to our hotel. Soon after leaving the airport I saw a kid, probably ten or eleven, with a missing hand standing by the side of the road. Then I saw another kid, just down the street, missing a leg. Then another in a wheelchair. Hands, arms, legs—I must have seen fifty or more teenagers with missing limbs in just those first several miles. My guide explained that during the genocide one of the ways to most degrade and humiliate your enemy was to remove an arm or a leg of his young child with a machete, so that years later he would have to live with the reminder of what you did to him.

Do I believe in a literal hell?

Of course.

Those aren't metaphorical missing arms and legs.

Have you ever sat with a woman while she talked about what it was like to be raped? How does a person describe what it's like to hear a five-year-old boy whose father has just committed suicide ask: "When is daddy coming home?" How does a person describe that unique look, that ravaged, empty stare you find in

the eyes of a cocaine addict?

I've seen what happens when people abandon all that is good and right and kind and humane.

Once I conducted a funeral for a man I'd never met. His children warned me when they asked me to do the service that I was getting into a mess and that the closer we got to the service itself, the uglier it was going to get.

This man was cruel and mean. To everybody around him. No one had anything positive to say about him. The pastor's job, among other things, is to help family and friends properly honor the dead. This man made my job quite difficult.

I eventually realized what they meant by "ugly." When he realized he was about to die, he had his will rewritten. He purposely left relatives out who were expecting something and gave that wealth to other family members he knew they despised. He had his will changed so that at his funeral there would be pain and anger. He wanted to make sure that he would be causing destruction in this life, even after he'd left it.

I tell these stories because it is absolutely vital that we acknowledge that love, grace, and humanity can be rejected. From the most subtle rolling of the eyes to the most violent degradation of another human, we are terrifyingly free to do as we please.

God gives us what we want, and if that's hell, we can have it.

We have that kind of freedom, that kind of choice. We are that free.

We can use machetes if we want to.

So when people say they don't believe in hell and they don't like the word "sin," my first response is to ask, "Have you sat and talked with a family who just found out their child has been molested? Repeatedly? Over a number of years? By a relative?"

Some words are strong for a reason. We need those words to be that intense, loaded, complex, and offensive, because they need to reflect the realities they describe.

And that's what we find in Jesus's teaching about hell—a volatile mixture of images, pictures, and metaphors that describe the very real experiences and consequences of rejecting our God-given goodness and humanity. Something we are all free to do, anytime, anywhere, with anyone.

He uses hyperbole often—telling people to gouge out their eyes and maim themselves rather than commit certain sins. It can all sound a bit over-the-top at times, leading us to question just what he's so worked up about. Other times he sounds just plain violent.

But when you've sat with a wife who has just found out that her husband has been cheating on her for years, and you realize what it is going to do to their marriage and children and finances and friendships and future, and you see the concentric rings of pain that are going to emanate from this one man's choices—in that moment Jesus's warnings don't seem that over-the-top or drastic; they seem perfectly spot-on.

Gouging out his eye may actually have been a better choice.

Some agony needs agonizing language.

Some destruction does make you think of fire.

Some betrayal actually feels like you've been burned.

Some injustices do cause things to heat up.

But it isn't just the striking images that stand out in Jesus's teaching about hell; it's the surreal nature of the stories he tells.

Jesus talks in Luke 16 about a rich man who ignored a poor beggar named Lazarus who was outside his gate. They both die, and the rich man goes to Hades, while Lazarus is "carried" by angels to "Abraham's side," a Jewish way of talking about what we would call heaven.

The rich man then asks Abraham to have Lazarus get him some water, because he is "in agony in this fire."

People in hell can communicate with people in bliss? The rich man is in the fire, and he can talk? He's surviving?

Abraham tells him it's not possible for Lazarus to bring him water. The rich man then asks that Lazarus be sent to warn his family of what's in store for them. Abraham tells him that's not necessary, because they already have that message in the scriptures. The man continues to plead with Abraham, insisting that if they could just hear from someone who came back from the dead, they would change their ways, to which Abraham replies, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

And that's the story.

Notice that the story ends with a reference to resurrection,

something that was going to happen very soon with Jesus himself. This is crucial for understanding the story, because the story is about Jesus's listeners at that moment. The story, for them, moves from then to now. Whatever the meaning was for Jesus's first listeners, it was directly related to what he was doing right there in their midst.

Second, note what it is the man wants in hell: he wants Lazarus to get him water. When you get someone water, you're serving them.

The rich man wants Lazarus to serve him.

In their previous life, the rich man saw himself as better than Lazarus, and now, in hell, the rich man still sees himself as above Lazarus. It's no wonder Abraham says there's a chasm that can't be crossed. The chasm is the rich man's heart! It hasn't changed, even in death and torment and agony. He's still clinging to the old hierarchy. He still thinks he's better.

The gospel Jesus spreads in the book of Luke has as one of its main themes that Jesus brings a social revolution, in which the previous systems and hierarchies of clean and unclean, sinner and saved, and up and down don't mean what they used to. God is doing a new work through Jesus, calling all people to human solidarity. Everybody is a brother, a sister. Equals, children of the God who shows no favoritism.

To reject this new social order was to reject Jesus, the very movement of God in flesh and blood.

This story about the rich man and Lazarus was an incredibly

sharp warning for Jesus's audience, particularly the religious leaders who Luke tells us were listening, to rethink how they viewed the world, because there would be serious consequences for ignoring the Lazaruses outside their gates. To reject those Lazaruses was to reject God.

What a brilliant, surreal, poignant, subversive, loaded story.

And there's more.

Jesus teaches again and again that the gospel is about a death that leads to life. It's a pattern, a truth, a reality that comes from losing your life and then finding it. This rich man Jesus tells us about hasn't yet figured that out. He's still clinging to his ego, his status, his pride—he's unable to let go of the world he's constructed, which puts him on the top and Lazarus on the bottom, the world in which Lazarus is serving him.

He's dead, but he hasn't died.

He's in Hades, but he still hasn't died the kind of death that actually brings life.

He's alive in death, but in profound torment, because he's living with the realities of not properly dying the kind of death that actually leads a person into the only kind of life that's worth living.

A pause, to recover from that last sentence.

How do you communicate a truth that complex and multilayered? You tell a nuanced, shocking story about a rich man and a poor man, and you throw in gruesome details about dogs licking his sores, and then you tell about a massive reversal

in their deaths in which the rich man in hell has the ability to converse with Abraham, the father of the faith. And then you end it all with a twist about resurrection, a twist that is actually a hint about something about to happen in real history soon after this parable is told.

Brilliant, just brilliant.

There's more. The plot of the story spins around the heart of the rich man, who is a stand-in for Jesus's original audience. Jesus shows them the heart of the rich man, because he wants them to ask probing questions about their own hearts. It's a story about an individual, but how does the darkness of that individual's heart display itself?

He fails to love his neighbor.

In fact, he ignores his neighbor, who spends each day outside his gate begging for food, of which the rich man has plenty. It's a story about individual sin, but that individual sin leads directly to very real suffering at a societal level. If enough rich men treated enough Lazaruses outside their gates like that, that could conceivably lead to a widening gap between the rich and the poor.

Imagine.

Some people are primarily concerned with systemic evils —corporations, nations, and institutions that enslave people, exploit the earth, and disregard the welfare of the weak and disempowered. Others are primarily concerned with individual sins, and so they focus on personal morality, individual patterns, habits, and addictions that prevent human flourishing and cause

profound suffering.

Some pass out pamphlets that explain how to have peace with God; some work in refugee camps in war zones. Some have radio shows that discuss particular interpretations of particular Bible verses; others work to liberate women and children from the sex trade.

Often the people most concerned about others going to hell when they die seem less concerned with the hells on earth right now, while the people most concerned with the hells on earth right now seem the least concerned about hell after death.

What we see in Jesus's story about the rich man and Lazarus is an affirmation that there are all kinds of hells, because there are all kinds of ways to resist and reject all that is good and true and beautiful and human now, in this life, and so we can only assume we can do the same in the next.

There are individual hells,
and communal, society-wide hells,
and Jesus teaches us to take both seriously.
There is hell now,
and there is hell later,
and Jesus teaches us to take both seriously.

So what about the passages in the Bible that don't specifically mention the word "hell," but clearly talk about judgment and punishment?

First, a political answer, then a religious answer, and then we'll

look at a few of those passages.

Jesus lived in an incredibly volatile political climate. His native Israel had been conquered once again by another military superpower, this time the Roman Empire. Roman soldiers were everywhere, patrolling the streets, standing guard over the temple in Jerusalem, reminding everybody of their conquest and power. There were a number of Jesus's contemporaries who believed that the only proper response to this outrage was to pick up swords and declare war.

Many in the crowds that followed Jesus assumed that he at some point would become one of those leaders, driving the Romans out of their land. But Jesus wasn't interested. He was trying to bring Israel back to its roots, to its divine calling to be a light to the world, showing the nations just what the redeeming love of God looks like. And he was confident that this love doesn't wield a sword. To respond to violence with more violence, according to Jesus, is not the way of God. We find him in his teachings again and again inviting his people to see their role in the world in a whole new way. As he says at one point, those who "draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matt. 26).

And so he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, weeping because he realizes that they just don't get it. They're unable to see just what their insistence on violent revolt is going to cost them. He continually warns them how tragic the suffering will be if they actually try to fight Rome with the methods and mind-set of Rome.

When he warns of the "coming wrath," then, this is a very practical, political, heartfelt warning to his people to not go the way they're intent on going.

The Romans, he keeps insisting, will crush you.

The tragedy in all of this is that his warnings came true. In the great revolt that began in 66 CE, the Jews took up arms against the Romans—who eventually crushed them, grinding the stones of their temple into dust.

Because of this history, it's important that we don't take Jesus's very real and prescient warnings about judgment then out of context, making them about someday, somewhere else. That wasn't what he was talking about.

Now, a religious answer that begins with a question: Who is Jesus talking to? In general, in the Gospels and the stories about what he did, where he went, and what he said, who is he talking to most of the time?

Other than interactions with a Roman centurion and a woman by the well in Samaria and a few others, he's talking to very devoted, religious Jews. He's talking to people who saw themselves as God's people. Light of the world, salt of the earth, all that. His audience was people who were "in." Believers, redeemed, devoted, passionate, secure in their knowledge that they were God's chosen, saved, covenant people.

Many people in our world have only ever heard hell talked about as the place reserved for those who are "out," who don't believe, who haven't "joined the church." Christians talking

about people who aren't Christians going to hell when they die because they aren't . . . Christians. People who don't believe the right things.

But in reading all of the passages in which Jesus uses the word "hell," what is so striking is that people believing the right or wrong things isn't his point. He's often not talking about "beliefs" as we think of them—he's talking about anger and lust and indifference. He's talking about the state of his listeners' hearts, about how they conduct themselves, how they interact with their neighbors, about the kind of effect they have on the world.

Jesus did not use hell to try and compel "heathens" and "pagans" to believe in God, so they wouldn't burn when they die. He talked about hell to very religious people to warn them about the consequences of straying from their God-given calling and identity to show the world God's love.

This is not to say that hell is not a pointed, urgent warning or that it isn't intimately connected with what we actually do believe, but simply to point out that Jesus talked about hell to the people who considered themselves "in," warning them that their hard hearts were putting their "in-ness" at risk, reminding them that whatever "chosen-ness" or "election" meant, whatever special standing they believed they had with God was always, only, ever about their being the kind of transformed, generous, loving people through whom God could show the world what God's love looks like in flesh and blood.

Now, on to the passages that seem to be talking about hell, but don't mention it specifically. Let's start with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the poster cities for deviant sinfulness run amok. In Genesis 19 we read that the city of Sodom has so lost its way, "the outcry to the LORD against its people is so great," that burning sulfur rains down from the heavens, "destroying all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land."

"Early the next morning Abraham . . . looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah . . . and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace."

And so for thousands of years the words "Sodom and Gomorrah" have served as a warning, an ominous sign of just what happens when God decides to judge swiftly and decisively.

But this isn't the last we read of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The prophet Ezekiel had a series of visions in which God shows him what's coming, including the promise that God will "restore the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters" and they will "return to what they were before" (chap. 16).

Restore the fortunes of Sodom?

The story isn't over for Sodom and Gomorrah?

What appeared to be a final, forever, smoldering, smoking verdict regarding their destiny . . . wasn't?

What appeared to be over, isn't.

Ezekiel says that where there was destruction there will be restoration.

But that still isn't the last we hear of these two cities. As

Jesus travels from village to village in Galilee, calling people to see things in a whole new way, he encounters great resistance in some areas, especially among the more religious and devout. In Matthew 10, he warns the people living in the village of Capernaum, "It will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for you."

More bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah?

He tells highly committed, pious, religious people that it will be better for Sodom and Gomorrah than them on judgment day?

There's still hope?

And if there's still hope for Sodom and Gomorrah, what does that say about all of the other Sodoms and Gomorrahs?

This story, the one about Sodom and Gomorrah, isn't the only place we find this movement from judgment to restoration, from punishment to new life.

In Jeremiah 32, God says, "I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety."

Israel had been exiled, sent away, "banished" to a foreign land, the result of God's "furious anger and great wrath." But there's a point to what the prophet interprets and understands to be God's "anger and wrath." It's to teach the people, to correct them, to produce something new in them.

In Jeremiah 5, the prophet says, "You crushed them, but they

refused correction." That's the point, according to the prophet, of the crushing. To bring about correction.

According to the prophets,
God crushes,
refines,
tests,
corrects,
chastens,
and rebukes—
but always with a purpose.

No matter how painful, brutal, oppressive, no matter how far people find themselves from home because of their sin, indifference, and rejection, there's always the assurance that it won't be this way forever.

In Lamentations 3, the poet declares:
"People are not cast off by the Lord forever,
though he brings grief, he will show compassion,
so great is his unfailing love."
In Hosea 14 God says:
"I will heal their waywardness and love them freely
for my anger has turned away from them."
In chapter 3 Zephaniah says:
God "will take great delight in you;
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,
but will rejoice over you with singing."
No more anger, no more punishment, rebuke, or refining—

at some point
healing
and reconciling
and return.

God promises in Isaiah 57: "I will guide them and restore comfort to them."

In Hosea 6: "On the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence."

In Joel 3: "In those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem . . ."

In Amos 9: "I will restore David's fallen shelter."

In Nahum 2: "The LORD will restore the splendor of Jacob."

In Zephaniah 2: "The LORD their God will care for them; he will restore their fortunes."

In Zephaniah 3: "I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes."

In Zechariah 9: "Even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you."

In Zechariah 10: "I will restore them because I have compassion on them."

And in Micah 7: "You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea."

I realize that that's a lot of Bible verses, but I list them to simply show how dominant a theme restoration is in the Hebrew

scriptures. It comes up again and again and again. Sins trodden underfoot, iniquities hurled into the depths of the sea. God always has an intention.

Healing.

Redemption.

Love.

Bringing people home and rejoicing over them with singing.

The prophets are quick to point out that this isn't just something for "God's people," the "chosen," the "elect."

In Isaiah 19, the prophet announces, "In that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the heart of Egypt, and a monument to the LORD at its border."

What's the significance of Egypt?

Egypt was Israel's enemy.

Hated.

Despised.

An altar in the heart of Egypt?

An altar was where people worshipped.

They'll worship God in . . . Egypt?

Once again, things aren't what they appear to be. The people who are opposed to God will worship God, the ones far away will be brought near, the ones facing condemnation will be restored.

Failure, we see again and again, isn't final,

judgment has a point,

and consequences are for correction.

With this in mind, several bizarre passages later in the

New Testament begin to make more sense. In Paul's first letter to Timothy he mentions Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom he has "handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme." (Something in me wants to read that in a Darth Vader voice.)

Now I realize that the moment he mentions Satan, things can get really confusing. But beyond the questions—

"Handed over to Satan?"

Paul has handed people over to Satan?

Do you do that?

Can you do that?

How do you do that?

Is there paperwork involved?

What is clear is that Paul has great confidence that this handing over will be for good, as inconceivable as that appears at first. His confidence is that these two will be taught something. They will learn. They will grow. They will become better.

"Satan," according to Paul, is actually used by God for God's transforming purposes. Whoever and whatever he means by that word "Satan," there is something redemptive and renewing that will occur when Hymenaeus and Alexander are "handed over."

And this is not an isolated incident of Paul's confidence that the most severe judgment falls squarely within the redemptive purposes of God in the world. Paul gives a similar instruction in his first letter to the Corinthians, telling his friends to hand a certain man "over to Satan for the destruction of the sinful nature

so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord" (chap. 5).

How does that work? Because it's counterintuitive to say the least.

His assumption is that giving this man over to "Satan" will bring an end to the man's "sinful nature." It's as if Paul is saying, "We've tried everything to get his attention, and it isn't working, so turn him loose to experience the full consequences of his actions."

We have a term for this process. When people pursue a destructive course of action and they can't be convinced to change course, we say they're "hell-bent" on it. Fixed, obsessed, unshakable in their pursuit, unwavering in their commitment to a destructive direction. The stunning twist in all of this is that when God lets the Israelites go the way they're insisting on heading and when Paul "turns people over," it's all for good. The point of this turning loose, this letting go, this punishment, is to allow them to live with the full consequences of their choices, confident that the misery they find themselves in will have a way of getting their attention.

As God says time and time again in the Prophets, "I've tried everything else, and they won't listen." The result, Paul is convinced, is that wrongdoers will become right doers.

We see this same impulse in the story Jesus tells in Matthew 25 about sheep and goats being judged and separated. The sheep are sent to one place, while the goats go to another place because of their failure to see Jesus in the hungry and thirsty and naked.

The goats are sent, in the Greek language, to an aion of kolazo. Aion, we know, has several meanings. One is "age" or "period of time"; another refers to intensity of experience. The word kolazo is a term from horticulture. It refers to the pruning and trimming of the branches of a plant so it can flourish.

An aion of kolazo. Depending on how you translate aion and kolazo, then, the phrase can mean "a period of pruning" or "a time of trimming," or an intense experience of correction.

In a good number of English translations of the Bible, the phrase "aion of kolazo" gets translated as "eternal punishment," which many read to mean "punishment forever," as in never going to end.

But "forever" is not really a category the biblical writers used.

The closest the Hebrew writers come to a word for "forever" is the word olam. Olam can be translated as "to the vanishing point," "in the far distance," "a long time," "long lasting," or "that which is at or beyond the horizon." When olam refers to God, as in Psalm 90 ("from everlasting to everlasting you are God"), it's much closer to the word "forever" as we think of it, time without beginning or end. But then in the other passages, when it's not describing God, it has very different meanings, as when Jonah prays to God, who let him go down into the belly of a fish "forever" (olam) and then, three days later, brought him out of the belly of the fish.

Olam, in this instance,
turns out to be three days.

It's a versatile, pliable word,

in most occurrences referring to a particular period of time.

So when we read "eternal punishment," it's important that we don't read categories and concepts into a phrase that aren't there. Jesus isn't talking about forever as we think of forever. Jesus may be talking about something else, which has all sorts of implications for our understandings of what happens after we die, which we'll spend the next chapter sorting through.

To summarize, then, we need a loaded, volatile, adequately violent, dramatic, serious word to describe the very real consequences we experience when we reject the good and true and beautiful life that God has for us. We need a word that refers to the big, wide, terrible evil that comes from the secrets hidden deep within our hearts all the way to the massive, society-wide collapse and chaos that comes when we fail to live in God's world God's way.

And for that,

the word "hell" works quite well.

Let's keep it.

Click here for notes on this chapter from The Love Wins Companion

Chapter 4

Does God Get What God Wants?

On the websites of many churches, there is a page where you can read what the people in that particular church believe.

Usually the list starts with statements about the Bible, then God, Jesus, and the Spirit, then salvation and the church, and so on. Most of these lists and statements include a section on what the people in the church believe about the people who don't believe what they believe.

This is from an actual church website: "The unsaved will be separated forever from God in hell."

This is from another: "Those who don't believe in Jesus will be sent to eternal punishment in hell."

And this is from another: "The unsaved dead will be committed to an eternal conscious punishment."

So in the first statement, the "unsaved" won't be with God.

In the second, not only will they not be with God, but they'll be sent somewhere else to be punished.

And in the third, we're told that not only will these "unsaved" be punished forever, but they will be fully aware of it—in case we were concerned they might down an Ambien or two when God wasn't looking . . .

The people experiencing this separation and punishment will feel all of it, we are told, because they'll be fully conscious of it, fully awake and aware for every single second of it, as it never lets up for billions and billions of years.

All this,

on a website.

Welcome to our church.

Yet on these very same websites are extensive affirmations

of the goodness and greatness of God, proclamations and statements of belief about a God who is

"mighty,"
"powerful,"
"loving,"
"unchanging,"
"sovereign,"
"full of grace and mercy,"
and "all-knowing."
This God is the one who created
"the world and everything in it."
This is the God for whom
"all things are possible."
I point out these parallel claims:
that God is mighty, powerful, and "in control"
and that billions of people will spend forever apart from this God, who is their creator,
even though it's written in the Bible that
"God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2).
So does God get what God wants?
How great is God?
Great enough to achieve what God sets out to do,
or kind of great,
medium great,
great most of the time,

but in this,
the fate of billions of people,
not totally great.
Sort of great.
A little great.

According to the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, "God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear" (chap. 6).

God has a purpose, something God is doing in the world, something that has never changed, something that involves everybody, and God's intention all along has been to communicate this intention clearly.

Will all people be saved,
or will God not get what God wants?
Does this magnificent, mighty, marvelous God fail in the end?

People, according to the scriptures, are inextricably intertwined with God. As it's written in Psalm 24: "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it."

The prophet Isaiah, in chapter 45, says that God "did not create [the earth] to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited." Paul says in a speech in Acts 17 that in God "we live and move and have our being," and he writes in Romans 11, "From him and through him and to him are all things."

The prophet Malachi asks, "Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us?" (chap. 2). Paul says in Acts 17,

"We are God's offspring," and in Ephesians 3 he writes, "I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives it name."

The writers of the scriptures consistently affirm that we're all part of the same family. What we have in common—regardless of our tribe, language, customs, beliefs, or religion—outweighs our differences. This is why God wants "all people to be saved." History is about the kind of love a parent has for a child, the kind of love that pursues, searches, creates, connects, and bonds. The kind of love that moves toward, embraces, and always works to be reconciled with, regardless of the cost.

The writers of the Bible have a lot to say about this love:

In Psalm 65 it's written that "all people will come" to God.

In Ezekiel 36 God says, "The nations will know that I am the LORD."

The prophet Isaiah says, "All the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God" (chap. 52).

Zephaniah quotes God as saying, "Then I will purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder" (chap. 3).

And Paul writes in Philippians 2, "Every knee should bow . . . and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is LORD, to the glory of God the Father."

All people.

The nations.

Every person, every knee, every tongue.

Psalm 22 echoes these promises: "All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him."

But then it adds a number of details:

"All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;

all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—"

So everybody who dies will kneel before God, and "future generations will be told about the LORD. They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!"

This insistence that God will be united and reconciled with all people is a theme the writers and prophets return to again and again. They are very specific in their beliefs about who God is and what God is doing in the world, constantly affirming the simple fact that God does not fail.

In the book of Job the question arises: "Who can oppose God? He does whatever he pleases" (chap. 23). And then later it's affirmed when Job says to God, "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (chap. 42).

Through Isaiah God says, "I will do all that I please." Isaiah asks, "Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear?" while Jeremiah declares to God, "Nothing is too hard for you" (Isa. 46; 59; Jer. 32).

This God, in Psalm 145, "is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made."

This God's anger, in Psalm 30, "lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime."

This God, in Psalm 145, "is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love."

In the Bible, God is not helpless,

God is not powerless,

and God is not impotent.

Paul writes to the Philippians that "it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (chap. 2).

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.