

Heaven and Hell: Part Four

Speaker: Tim Mackie

[EMSB theme fades in]

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, "Exploring My Strange Bible." I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last twenty years' worth of lectures and sermons, where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible, and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called BibleProject. We make animated videos and podcasts and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at bibleproject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[EMSB theme fades out]

All right, in this episode, this is going to be part four of the four-part series we've been doing on Heaven and hell. These were a series of lectures I gave a number of years ago. This fourth lecture is drawing together all of the previous three. And so I really recommend you listening to the first three parts if you haven't already.

Here we're going to explore, in greater depth, the images of "eternal death," and what these images mean—both in the Old Testament of, like, "fire"—we'll explore the origins of the word "hell"—like where does that word come from in the Bible? What does it mean? All of the images used by Jesus, and his teachings about God's "final justice," and what it means—like, what these concepts refer to and what we can say about them. It's very powerful and sobering. But that's not where we're going to end. This is going to be the first half of this lecture.

And then the second half is about the images that are the opposite of all of this, which is “new creation,” and “resurrection,” and “eternal life.” And so we’ll explore what Jesus and the apostles have to say about these realities and hopes. And then we’ll spend the last few minutes just focusing on the last two pages of the Bible, which are beautiful, amazing, and full of hope for us and for our world. So there you go. I hope this has been a helpful series for you. This is, I think, the longest lecture—like almost an hour. So get ready, buckle your seat belt, and let’s dive in.

[Musical break (2:30–2:37)]

So we’re letting Daniel 12, kind of, shape our trajectory for the “resurrection to life” in the age to come—resurrection to the age of contempt or shame—two trajectories—two trajectories. And there are lots of descriptions about both of those realities in the Bible.

So a couple of thoughts here. We’re going to take the second one first: the resurrection to—you know, there’s a host of images or phrases—I’m going to use the phrase “eternal death.” You could say “hell.” The problem is “hell” only refers to *one* set of descriptions that the Bible has. And there’s a wider set of descriptions that the Bible uses. And so I think it’s rather limiting to only use the word “hell.”

So what I’m going to offer is what I call the “kaleidoscope” view—you guys know kaleidoscopes, as little kids? You look in the end and what you see is light coming in, but then the little—what’s in there, plastic pieces? Glass? Probably glass before, and then there was some safety code, and they were like, “No, only plastic.” [Tim laughs] So plastic in there—and so you see each of those pieces of glass, or whatever, and the light shines through it [Tim makes sound effect].

And it’s just one little piece of glass, but the light shining through it makes it look like it can divide up into all the different things. Kaleidoscope? [Tim laughs] I don’t really know how to describe a kaleidoscope, but you guys know what I’m talking about. Multifaceted—maybe a better . . . would be like a “diamond view.” There’s one diamond, but light comes into it [Tim makes sound effect] and depending on what facet you’re looking through, it’s going to shine and look a little differently.

So “hell,” whatever “hell,” “eternal death” is, it’s some kind of ongoing eternal continuation of this trajectory, right here. It’s not a surprise. It’s not some twist at the end of the game. It’s exactly what you would expect. It’s just the ongoing state of that reality.

It's the end result of the entire life trajectory of separation from God, and increasingly, increasingly so.

So these are other caveats here. Hell is real—whatever this reality is, it's real. It's real. It's my conviction that almost all of the biblical passages in the Bible that describe this reality use metaphor and imagery. Now, I've had a lot of pushback on that from people because some people think the words "metaphor" and "imagery" mean it's not real, right? And that's exactly *not* what I'm saying.

If I say, "Jessica is a ball of fire." All right, that's my wife, Jessica—she's a "ball of fire"—right? So obviously that's a metaphor. Does that mean Jessica is not real? No, she's very real, right? So that's why I'm using the metaphor.

So the metaphor is—it's an image—it's an analogy. It's using something from common known life experience to describe something that's beyond description. *Oh, right.* So Jessica—that's what metaphors do. That's what metaphors do. So it doesn't mean that—I think it doesn't mean that I don't think this is a real place. But we shouldn't confuse the metaphors with the reality. The metaphors are giving us a "window" to describe the nature of this reality.

And only one person has been there and back—[Tim laughs] you know what I mean? Or that knows what this reality is going to be like, and that's the creator, God. And so I'm not going to presume to speculate, or use the images in the Bible to build all sorts of other ideas that aren't actually in the Bible, but you just take the images on its own. And you'll see what I mean. So it's real—but it's metaphor and imagery.

So we're just going to run through the images, the images here. The most common and predominant one is the one that, I think, is in most of our imaginations, and that is "fire." So the image of "fire" has Old Testament roots, with the Day of the Lord, the Day of Judgment.

So we've already read Malachi 4, verse 1: it's the day of "God's judgment is coming." It will "burn like a furnace," right? Arrogant evildoers are "stubble." What's the point of the fire? What's the point of "fire" here? It's destructive, but is the point just to ruin and bring destruction? What's the point of the fire? It has a consuming, *eliminator*y—it has an eliminating purpose. It has a purifying, purging . . .

Zephaniah 3, "'Therefore, wait for me,' declares the Lord, 'for the day I will stand up and testify. I have decided to assemble all nations, to gather the kingdoms, to pour out my wrath on them.'" And the moment you say, "Geesh, let up a little bit, God," just—twentieth century—are you kidding me? You're kidding me, right? That you think this is not a justified response to what we've done to God's world?

“To pour out my wrath on them, all of my fierce anger. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my passionate anger.” So does that—God hates the physical world? He’s just going to roast it to them, right? This is an image of judgment, an image of judgment—fire is “judgment.” You read the book of Revelation—it’s full of fire. There’s lots of “purging of evil” in the book of Revelation.

So closely connected with the image of “fire” then comes an image in the New Testament—the word we’re most familiar with—the word “hell.” So some background here. The word “hell” in our English Bibles, when you read that word, 99.9% of the time, the Greek word behind it is the word right *there* [Tim gestures to visual]. How do you want to pronounce that—anybody? Gehenna, Gehenna.

So Gehenna is a Greek spelling of a Hebrew-Aramaic word, Ge Ben Hinnom, or just Ge Hinnom, which is the Valley of Hinnom in southwest Jerusalem. Now I pulled up Google Maps here. So this—[Tim refers to visual] can you guys see this up here? So this is modern Jerusalem. This—can you see these lines right here that I’m doing here? If you go to Jerusalem, those lines right there are castle walls. And that’s what’s called the “Old City of Jerusalem.” And those walls are old, but they’re not that old—they’re from, like, the 1400s. Jerusalem has been burned to the ground and rebuilt about two dozen times.

In Jesus’s time, the walls actually, kind of went, like, around here—this is the gold, shiny Dome of the Rock, here—if you know that building. [Tim gestures to visual] The walls kind of went *here*, and then down *here*, and then down *here*. The Valley of Hinnom is right—green, silver—right *here*—right *there*. Now from an aerial view, you can’t quite see it as a depression— isn’t Google Maps awesome? [Tim laughs]—okay, so it’s this strip right *here*. This road right *here* is a little two-lane street. It goes steep downhill, and it’s a deep valley.

And let me show you—this is the valley, right down *here*. So if you were to stand right *here*—again, so it goes *down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down*—lowest part of the valley—*up, up, up, up, up, up, up, up*—and you can stand on a hill, right *here*, where you would take this image.

And this is Jessica, descending into “hell” [Tim laughs]. So she’s standing right *here*, going down a little set of stairs, and looking up the valley this way. And do you see—do you see it now? It’s going up the valley, and then right up at the back. You can see the valley, kind of, turns a corner, and goes around, up—and that’s where it turns and goes up *here*.

So in this valley, bad stuff happened in Israel’s history. And the story is right here—2 Chronicles 28: “Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king. He reigned in Jerusalem sixteen years. He did not do what was pleasing in the sight of the Lord, as

his ancestor David had done. Instead, he followed the example of the kings of Israel. He cast metal images for the worship of Baal. He offered sacrifices in the valley of Ben Hinnom, even sacrificing his own sons in the fire. In this way, he followed the detestable practices of the pagan nations the Lord had driven from the land ahead of the Israelites.” So Ahaz and other kings sacrificed *kids* in this valley—and this was such a horrendous event. The memory of this event just reverberated throughout Jewish culture.

So Jeremiah came a little bit after Ahaz—and this is intense language—but just think about what Ahaz, and some of the kings of Israel, did: “The Lord said to Jeremiah, ‘Go out to the valley of Ben Hinnom, near the entrance of the Potsherd Gate. There proclaim the words I tell you, and say, ‘Hear the word of the Lord, kings of Judah, people of Jerusalem. This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says, “Listen, I am going to bring disaster on this place that will make the ears of everyone who hears it tingle”’—a very vivid image—“for they”—Israel—“they have forsaken me.

“They have made this a place of foreign gods. They have burned sacrifices in it to gods neither they, nor their fathers, nor the kings of Judah ever knew. They’ve filled this place with the blood of the innocent. They’ve built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as offerings to Baal, something I did not command or mention; it never entered my mind.

“‘So beware, days are coming,’ declares Yahweh, ‘when this people will no longer call this place’”—the valley—“‘Topheth’”—which is a Hebrew word that means “a place of burning”—“‘They won’t call it the Valley of Ben Hinnom. They will call it the Valley of Slaughter. In this place, I’ll ruin the plans of Judah and Jerusalem. I will make them fall by the sword before their enemies at the hands of those who seek their lives. I will give their carcasses as food to the birds of the air and beasts of the Earth.’”

Okay, and again, you say, “Yeesh, God—let up”—you know what I mean?—“on the intensity.” And he’s like, “Don’t sacrifice children”—you know what I’m saying? Is this a warranted response to what the Israelites were doing? To allow them to be conquered by a foreign nation and to have their soldiers, just, die by the hundreds, falling into the valley and their corpses rotting?

And God’s saying, “That’s an absolutely warranted response for sacrificing children in this valley.” So this memory of the Valley of Ben Hinnom is—it’s a dark place. It’s a bad time in Israel’s history. And so in the history of Judaism, this place became a vivid metaphor of an image. What God did to Israel, because of the Valley of Ben Hinnom—it becomes the image of what God is going to do for the whole world because of its evil and injustice and so on. So that’s where “Gehenna” comes from.

When we read the word “hell” in our Bibles, we need to have that story in the back of our heads, or else, if we have some, like, disembodied non-physical place of “devils poking people in fire,” or something like that—*no, no, no*. This is what the Bible means when he uses this word, okay?

So Jesus primarily uses this word, “Gehenna.” In fact, the word “Gehenna” occurs, in the New Testament, almost only on the lips of Jesus. And here are the passages, right here: “But I say, even if you’re angry with someone, you are subject to judgment. If you call someone ‘idiot,’ you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you’re in danger of the fires of Gehenna.”

Now, Jesus has given the hyperbole in this teaching, right? Because he says, “You know, if you like, look at a really hot guy or hot girl in a bad way, what should you probably do? *Gouge out your eyes*”—[Tim laughs] you know what I mean? So Jesus is constantly speaking in extreme language like this. “You call someone ‘idiot;’ you’re bound for Gehenna.” He’s saying here, “Sin is very serious.” You need that ‘all-costs’ deal with sin in your life, because sin is what sets you on that trajectory towards Gehenna. You don’t want your life to be on that trajectory. Don’t do that.”

Sorry about the eye—“taking out the eye” thing. I had a teacher in college—no joke—I went to a Christian college and majored in biblical studies—and he had a glass eye—a false eye. And you know what he did in, like, Gospels class? He totally, like, popped out his eye when he was, like—[Tim laughs] one day, when he’s talking about this passage. Anyway, great.

Oh, so here’s the passage right here—so he says, “So if your eye, even your good eye, causes you to lust, just gouge that thing out and get rid of it. It’s better to lose one part of your body than your whole body to be thrown into the Valley of Ben-Hinnom.” It was serious—it was very serious. Again, so it’s an image—the Valley becomes an image or a metaphor [Tim gestures to visual] for *this* right here.

Does this mean Jesus doesn’t think it’s *real*, just because he’s using the metaphor of the Valley of Ben Hinnom to describe it? No—he clearly thinks it’s very real, and you should avoid it at all costs. But he uses the Valley of Ben Hinnom to describe it. He talks about the “fire of hell.” He talks about being thrown “into the Valley.”

Matthew 10, “Don’t be afraid of those who want to kill your body. They cannot touch the core part of who you are that lives on beyond your physical past. Fear only God, who can destroy both your core of who you are and your physical body in the Valley of Hinnom.” Jesus—ooh, here’s good Bible trivia—Matthew 23—Jesus called somebody “Snake, son of vipers, how will you escape the judgment of the Valley of Hinnom?”

Who's he talking to here? The most religious people you would ever meet in your life. Okay, so let's just get that clear. So in his mind, religion—the human structure of religion—sets people on a track for “the Valley of Ben Hinnom,” because it teaches you to trust in your own ability to do the right thing. Jesus talks about “the eternal fire.” This is different—so there you go. The path, the path. There you have it.

You have Matthew 5: a handful of passages and parallels. You have Matthew 10, and it's parallel in Luke—and Matthew 23. And those are all of Jesus's mentionings of the Valley of Hinnom, “hell.” But he talks about—he uses—Jesus also uses “fire.” “The king will say to those on his left, ‘Away with you, cursed ones, into the eternal fire, prepared for the devil and his demons.’ And they will go away into eternal punishment. But the righteous will go into eternal life.” What does this sound like? It sounds like Daniel 12, doesn't it?

Now, this is a parable Jesus is telling—it's a parable. And what is it that sets some on a track for eternal fire, and some on a track for eternal life? *How you respond to the poor.* So this parable, like, does all kinds of crazy things with your theology. But Jesus says, “How you respond to the poor is the deepest indicator of your relationship with God, and what the trajectory of your life is on. And people who ignore and are apathetic toward the poor are those who end up on the track towards eternal punishment.” So it's a very, very challenging passage.

This is “judgment according to works.” So again, you have to read it in light of the whole Bible, of course. It's not, just—you don't, like, get into eternal life just because you, whatever, dedicate your life to serving the poor, or something like that. It's a larger set of issues going on, but he says “it's an indicator.” So eternal fire . . .

And then of course, fire in the book of Revelation—fire is all over the book of Revelation. You know, these are the passages that we kick back against. I'm just going to read them, and you've got to let them sit with you. These are in the Bible, and we have to wrestle with them.

So we have an image of “fire and sulfur.” Here's the passage here, Revelation 14, “Then a third angel followed them”—I *hate* reading these passages out of context. It's just as lame, but you have to do it—we can't read the whole book of Revelation right now. So there's a whole sequence of angels bringing judgment—shouting, “Anyone who worships the beast and his statue, who accepts his mark on the forehead and the hand.”

In the book of Revelation, there's a bunch of key characters. There's *two* trinities. There's the Father, the Son—who is the slaughtered lamb, who conquers a victory over the powers of evil by being killed—it's this subversion of “power and death” in Revelation—and then the Spirit. And then you also have this unholy trinity of what's

called the “beast,” who represents the world system, as opposed to God. And then you have the false prophets, and then the magicians and the false prophets and so on.

And again, it’s Jewish, apocalyptic—full of symbolism and imagery. Most of it is taken from the Hebrew Bible. But “taking the mark on the forehead or the hand”—in the Jewish prayer of the Shema—you know, “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one . . . Write the commands of the Torah”—where are you supposed to write them? Where are you supposed to put them? On your hand and on your forehead—why? Because God’s Torah, His way of living—it’s supposed to immerse and shape your mind, and shape everything you do.

And so the book of Revelation picks up the symbol: those who buy into the world system as opposed to God, in their worldview and in their actions. That’s the imagery here, of the mark of the unholy trinity on the ‘forehead’ and on the ‘hand.’ Don’t watch the 1970s *Left Behind* movie, okay? [Tim laughs] So there’s, like, microchips embedded in your hand, where you combine—you’re just like, “Oh my gosh, you’ve so misunderstood things.”

Okay, “they must drink the wine”—so people who participate, who are “embedded” and “immersed” in the worldview of the world, as it’s opposed to God, they will “drink the wine” of God’s anger. “It’s been poured, full strength, into the cup of God’s wrath”—it’s first mentioned in Psalm 74—and those who are on that trajectory, who are participating in that line, “they will be tormented with fire and burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. The smoke of their torment will rise forever and ever. They will have no relief, day and night, for they have worshiped the beast and his statue . . . accepted the mark of his name.” This means that God’s holy people must endure patiently, obeying his commands and maintaining their faith in Jesus.

Couple things here. First of all, remember, the book of Revelation is literature produced by what community of Christians? Persecuted—who are *dying* daily at the hands of the Roman Empire and Roman soldiers for their faith—it was for the persecuted church. So the people—you just read their stories—for them to be able to have their hope, those who are propagating systems of injustice—of murder and of oppression of the innocent, of people who are not guilty, of people who are just trying to follow Jesus—will they be held *accountable* for what they’ve done? Answer: Yes, yes.

I think what’s troubling for us in passages like this is we say, “This is, like, more than being held accountable, it seems.” In other words: Is this judgment proportionate to the actions done? Do you guys get what I’m saying here? This is where we kick back and resist here. And so there’s two pieces here. One, I—again, so my caveat is: all of these images, they are this metaphor and imagery. It doesn’t mean it’s *not* real, but it does mean—Christians are being burned at the stake—they’re being, like, poured over with hot oil—they’re being speared on sticks, with tar, being set on fire—and so John

reverses the imagery and he says, “What they’ve done to you, it’s going to be done to them.” That’s what’s happening here.

And if that bothers you, I just have to let that sit with you in the Bible. And you’ve got to wrestle that one out. You’ve got to wrestle that one out with God. But you have to remember who this is written by and who it’s for.

The lake of fire, in the book of Revelation: “The lake of fire”—we’ll again, we’ll read it here, in Revelation 20—“I saw the dead, both great and small, standing before God’s throne. Books were opened, including the Book of Life. The dead were judged according to what they’ve done”—we’ve read this passage already—“The sea gave up the dead. Death gave up, and the grave gave up their dead. All were judged according to the deeds. Death and the grave were thrown into the lake of fire.”

Death and the grave—death—this is the death of death, right? So this is conquering of death. Death will no longer have power in God’s new world, in the new creation. “This lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found recorded in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.”

Now, where does this idea of “the lake of fire” come from? Remember, the book of Revelation. It’s the combination of John’s visions, but most of his visions are inspired by immersing himself in Scripture, in the Hebrew Bible. And everything in this judgment scene comes from the book of Daniel.

And you read the book of Daniel closely; his vision is of God—and he just calls him “the Ancient of Days”—he’s on a throne, and what’s flowing out of the throne in Daniel’s vision? This is for Bible geeks—he says “a river of fire,” a river of fire coming out. The books are open, and there’s the final judgment.

And so I think what John is doing in this vision: he’s kind of putting two and two together. The river of fire is the Day of the Lord—that comes out—it consumes evil, it does away with it. And all rivers end up in the sea—or they end up in the lake. So he makes this depiction of “the lake of fire”—it’s the final consumption of all that is evil. So there you go. Those are the primary “fire passages” in the Bible. It’s a lot of them, yes? A lot of them—primary image. It’s not the only image—it’s the primary one.

Other images are of darkness. And whenever Jesus uses the image of darkness—okay, hold on. Metaphors and imagery—if it’s literal language, can whatever this reality is—can it be a place full of “fire” and “darkness” at the same time? Okay, so again, obviously these are images getting at some sort of reality beyond them. Jesus always matches darkness with “remorse” or “sadness.”

So Matthew 8, he says, “I tell you this, many Gentiles will come from all over the world and sit—from the east and the west—and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at

the feast of the Kingdom of Heaven.” The feast? Where’s this idea of a feast come from? You read the passage earlier—Isaiah, the book of Isaiah 25—like, a big feast.

“But many Israelites, for whom the Kingdom was prepared, they’ll be thrown into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Literally, the phrase Jesus uses here is “the sons of the Kingdom.” So this is—there was a Gentile centurion that Jesus healed, and he responds to Jesus in faith. Meanwhile, most of Jesus’s Jewish contemporaries are totally rejecting him and saying, “You’re not the Messiah,” and so on.

And so Jesus uses these very powerful words. He says, “Gentiles are going to come and enjoy the feast of the Kingdom. And the people for whom the Kingdom of God was given—the promise of the Kingdom—are going to find themselves outside, in darkness.

So all of these images: “darkness, fire, remorse.” The apostle Paul uses an image that I find—it’s not a pleasant image—I found this helpful: the image that Paul uses. And I think this helps us get at the core of what is being described here. Paul speaks of being “punished with eternal destruction.” What does that mean? Unpack that for us, Paul. What does “eternal destruction” look like? And he uses this language right here—this is the New Living Translation—“forever separated from the Lord and from his glorious power.”

[Tim gestures to visual] I’ll throw this up in a few different translations. So King James: “punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord.” The New American Standard’s a little more helpful: “away from the presence of the Lord.” The NIV, kind of, takes that “away from”—they paraphrase it with “shut out from the presence of the Lord.”

So the language that Paul literally uses right here is this word, “away from the face of the Lord.” So somehow, whatever this reality is, it’s destruction—which in the Bible doesn’t mean, like, you go “out of existence,” it means you lose your purpose. You’re ruined—you’re lost. And what does it mean to be ruined or lost as a human? To be ruined or lost as a human is to have a form of existence that’s separate from a relationship with the Creator. Does that make sense—what Paul’s saying here?

Think back to Genesis 1—what are humans made for? What’s our primary goal and vocation and purpose? To image the creator God into the world. But when that connection between the image and the person to whom it points is severed—permanently severed—how do you describe this state, [Tim gestures to visual] *right here*, of something that’s completely cut off from its purpose? So Paul uses this language, “lost, ruined, destroyed—shut off from relationship with the creator.”

And so one commentator, here, sums it up well—a guy named Gordon Fee: “For Paul, the ultimate judgment is to be forever incapable of knowing God’s presence as it’s been

revealed in Christ. For beings created in the divine image, this is the ultimate desolation. Paul's emphasis is on their being shut out of God's presence. It's the ultimate, the ultimate law."

And this, for me, has been helpful in processing my understanding of what "hell" is. [Tim laughs] What the hell is "hell," you know what I'm saying? And I don't mean that lightly because this is a hard—how many of you guys are struggling right now? This is hard. This is very, very hard.

And so there's two—there's two things going on. One is images of "fire" that emphasize God's response to human evil and human rejection of relationship. But what Paul is getting at is something different, because who is it who doesn't want relationship with God? It's us. And so what Paul's image is doing, I think, is here giving another side of it. "Fire" is God's response to human evil—but what do we bring to the equation?

What we bring to the equation is—that close relationship with God is actually so terrifying, because you have to bring everything—you have to bring all of your mess-ups, your failures, your pride, your sin to the table, and somehow just let it be exposed. You have to humble yourself and deal with it. And for some people—to be in God's presence that closely, with all of who they are exposed to God in relationship—for some people that would be hell. That would be hell, right? Because they've turned so "inward" on themselves.

And so we won't go into it. We don't have time. But that's precisely what I think Jesus is doing in this parable of Luke 16. It describes a rich man who ignored the poor all of his life. And I'll just, kind of, read from my notes at the end of Luke 16. You read the parable, and this guy does not *want* to get out of this existence that he's in. He doesn't like it, but he doesn't want to leave. In fact, not only does he not want to leave, he wants to get everybody else *in* with him, [Tim grins] you know what I mean? Because he says, "Get that Lazarus—get that guy to come down here and keep serving me."

And so what you get in Luke 16, I think, is one of the most profound descriptions of this other side of hell that you get in the Bible is that it's what we want. Hell is what we want. We want hell—we like it—we choose it. And we choose it every time we choose sin. Humans choose it every time we choose selfishness or pride or rebellion or taking advantage. We love hell, actually.

So imagine existing in a state where you are allowed to, just, go into your own world of selfishness for eternity, and that's the image of hell I think Paul is getting at: cut off—you separate from God's presence, or relationship with God. And Luke 16, forever going inward on yourself.

And so one of my favorite theologians, he puts it this way—[Tim gestures to handout] you have the quote there—a guy named Millard Erickson, "Hell is God's leaving a sinful

human with the particular character that the person has fashioned for themselves in this life. The misery one will experience from having to live with one's wicked self will be proportionate to one's degree of awareness of precisely what one was doing when in choosing evil."

So, however you put this together, there's two sides of hell: there's God's response, and there's what we bring to the table. And what Jesus does in this parable and what Paul does in Second Thessalonians is give us—for me, what has been a helpful handle on this—is: yes, God is ticked at what we've done, but at the same time, we're not innocent.

And hell is, in a sense, God giving us exactly what we want. I mean, you look at the state of our world, and you say, "This is what we want, because look at the world we've made. This is what we wanted. This is humans doing what we want." And hell is God letting people go along that trajectory.

I have some reflections here on hell, and I'm going to go through them quickly because I don't want to end with hell, you guys [Tim laughs] all right? Some objections to hell. It's brutal: why a good, loving God would never even allow the possibility of such a thing or such a place. I would argue that hell, actually, is not—the idea of rejection of God, of separation from relationship with God—is *necessary*—it *has to be*, in a world of creatures who are designed for love, right? For love to be genuine, for there to be a true love relationship, love is always a risk, right? And for love to be truly love, you have to run the risk of being rejected, right?

So some of you have, like, sixth-grade wounds from this. You called her up, and she said *no*—you know what I'm saying? And so that's the risk. In a universe where love and relationship are the highest priority, the existence of hell is a necessary possibility in a universe where humans are given genuine freedom of choice. And so one of—again one of my favorite theologians—Stanley Grenz, he says, "From the fundamental truth that 'God is love,' it follows that he pays us the compliment of treating all our actions as significant."

Do you see what he's saying here? In other words, hell, we might say: this is a brutal side of God. He would argue that hell is actually a function of the *love* of God, because love truly allows the other to decide. And if the other decides against—to reject that love—does that mean the love doesn't exist? No. It means love "allows"—it does everything it can to be compelling and to persuade—but if, in the end, they don't want it, then that possibility has to exist. God does not desire that anyone share this fate, and there are biblical passages there.

And I'll end with this part, with a great quote from C.S. Lewis, of course: "Hell is God honoring human freedom to choose an existence independent from the Creator." This is

from C.S. Lewis. Does anyone—I won't ask to raise hands of who hasn't read *The Great Divorce*—how many have read *The Great Divorce* though, okay? Go read *The Great Divorce*. Go read *The Great Divorce*—it will spin your mind. I think *The Great Divorce* is essentially a commentary on these two passages—Luke 16—2 Thessalonians 1:9—unpacking what's going on there.

In the long run, the answer to those who object to the doctrine of hell is itself a question: What is it you're asking God to do? Are you asking God to wipe out past sins and, at all costs, give people a fresh start? Well, he did that on the cross. Are they asking people to forgive them? These are people who don't want forgiveness. Are you asking God to leave them alone? That's what hell is. There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done." All that are in hell choose it. Without that self-choice, it wouldn't be hell.

I think the way Jesus handles scenarios like this is—we say, "Wait, what about, what about, what about . . . ?" And Jesus always turns it back, and he just said, "Hold on, so okay, I'll deal with everyone justly." Right? So that's what Abraham says, Genesis 18, "Will not the judge of all the Earth do what is right?" Can we trust God to do what is right? Can we? *Absolutely*. He will do what is right. Will anyone end up in a scenario that they should not end up in—a surprise twist at the end of [the] game? No. What will happen is just—God will do what is right and just.

And Jesus always turns the table and he says, "You worry about yourself. You think about your own story. That's what you need to think about." And so for those of us here, right now—I don't know if we're all followers of Jesus—but for those who embrace God's love, this is a hope to which God points us.

There is a debate—a theological debate—on whether Heaven and hell are both realities that are part of the new creation. I was talking with someone about this earlier: Is God present with those who are separate from God in death? Well, actually, you'll be hard-pressed to support that idea from the Bible. So you have 2 Thessalonians, "away from the face of God," but the awesome poet of Psalm 139 says, "I go to the grave, I go down to the deepest, darkest place, and who do I find there? God's there"—Psalm 139. And the idea that God is the sustainer of all reality that exists, and if—whatever hell is—if it's real, if it's *reality*, then in some sense, God upholds that reality and sustains it—allows it to exist.

And so whatever the new creation looks like, the biblical depiction of hell is within it. And again, we want to know more. We want to press the language of the Bible to say more than it does say, and it doesn't say that. You'd be hard-pressed to find, in the Bible, the idea that hell is a place where God's presence is simply not there. Relationship is cut off, but that doesn't mean his presence is not there, because if God's presence isn't

somewhere, it doesn't exist—you know what I'm saying? And hell exists. So there you go. [Tim laughs] That one will spin your mind. There we go.

Okay, so the resurrection to contempt and shame or the resurrection to eternal life in the new creation. John Eldredge, "Nearly every Christian I've spoken with has some idea that eternity is an unending church service. [Tim laughs] We have settled on an image of the never-ending sing-along in the sky—one great hymn after another, forever and ever, amen—and our heart sinks."

All right, so sufficient? Have I done away with the idea of "clouds in the sky, harps" — yes? Has this gone from your minds? I sponged—I cleaned—purged it away? Okay, well, we're going to purge it away more.

First of all, we're going to race. Sorry guys, I didn't know the shape of the night. [Tim laughs] I didn't know how many pages—okay.

Resurrection life is a physical life—it's a transformed physical existence. Paul says, Philippians 3, "Our citizenship is in Heaven," which we normally read and think, "Which is why I'm going, 'Heaven is my home,' and I'm going to Heaven—float away on the clouds after I die, right? Right? My citizenship is in Heaven."

Paul says, "No, no, of course not. Your citizenship is in Heaven, and Heaven is coming here. We eagerly await a Savior from there—we will not go to the Savior there. We await a Savior from Heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ. He comes here. Who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our *lowly* bodies"—[Tim laughs] that's putting it generously—"our lowly bodies, so they will be like his glorious body."

And there's two other key passages there that I would encourage you to look up right underneath: 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4. But this is the idea: transformed physical existence. And Jesus had a physical body—he ate food after his resurrection—he hung out on the seashore—he talked with—he had meals, he hung out with people. But there were also—his body had properties that were mysterious, and it seems, perhaps, that his relationship to our dimensions—physical objects—was different, because he could appear in a lot—strange, strange, transformed physical existence.

And resurrection for humans means resurrection for all creation. So the key passage here is Isaiah 65: "Behold, I will create a new Heavens and a new Earth." And here's a poetic description of Isaiah—of what life in this new creation must be like. Look at the poetic images here. It's very powerful: "The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. Be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy."

Remember, everything in Isaiah centers around what God does in and through Jerusalem for the whole world. “I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people. The sound of weeping and crying will be heard in it no more. Never again will there be an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years. No—no, the one who dies at a hundred will be thought a little, mere youth”—[Tim grins] isn’t this a great image?

“The guy who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. They will build houses and dwell in them; plant vineyards, eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will the days be, the days of my people.” Is that not a great image here? All right, so the days of a tree—huge, mammoth, long-aged tree.

“My chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune. They’ll be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them. Before they call”—what does our relationship to God look like in the new creation—“Before you call, I will answer. While they’re still speaking, I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together. The lion will eat straw like an ox”—the lion becomes a vegetarian.

Okay, all right—what’s going on? The most violent forces in creation—there’s a sense of *shalom* that floods all of creation—“but dust will be the serpent’s food.” What do we think—what story is coming in your minds here? Genesis 3. Genesis 3—“They will neither harm nor destroy in all my holy mountain.”

So these are the two passages—we can’t read them at length, unfortunately. But what they describe is very earthy imagery of a new physical creation. This is hope—the resurrection of our bodies and resurrection of all creation. The new creation—to come back to this image here—is a reuniting of Heaven and Earth. Again, it’s the two becoming one.

And so John—again, the visionary—Revelation—his way of describing it is—he calls it “the heavenly Jerusalem,” which is his idea of “God’s space.” It’s like the Temple in Jerusalem. And Heaven “comes down from God”—it’s like “a bride dressed for her husband.” Did you get this—it’s clearly metaphor and imagery here, right—do you see this, here?

So how many of you, your favorite moment at the wedding, wedding ceremonies—what moment? When *she* appears. You know, I didn’t ever plan on becoming a pastor, but to be honest, one of my *favorite* things about being a pastor is doing weddings—even though they terrify me. I get so nervous at weddings—speaking at weddings. But my favorite moment, what—such a privileged moment—is to stand up front, next to the groom. Time after—all these different people’s stories and weddings—and the moment

the bride appears, always—it's just, like, [Tim makes sound effect] *gaah*—it's just such a *beautiful* moment—all the tension in that moment, and then the two coming together, and so on. And that's precisely the image he uses here, "like a bride finally coming"—been *waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting*, and then it's finally here.

"I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. He'll wipe every tear from their eyes'—that's not the first time, that line—we read that earlier, didn't we? Yeah, John's borrowing this line from Isaiah 25.

"There's no more death or mourning or crying or pain. The old thing—order of things has passed away. He who's seated on the throne says, 'I'm making everything new.'" The new creation is a world of human flourishing. What are we going to *do* there? You know what I mean—what are we going to do there? What are humans made for? What's our vocation? To be images—image-bearing creatures of the creator. And doing what? Genesis 1—what are we supposed to be doing? *Ruling and reigning*.

Revelation 22, "The angel showed me the river with the water of life"—where'd all these images come from? From Genesis 1 and 2 and 3—"clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, down the middle of the streets of the city"—wait, am I in a garden? I'm in a garden? Or a city? *Both* are depictions of what God has—what are cities? Cities are where industry and innovation—invention, creativity happens. Gardens are rest and *shalom* and peace and beauty. And the new creation is both.

"There is—on each side of the river—is the tree of life"—makes a reappearance, right? So eternal life is given—remember it's a gift. We're not inherently immortal—the gift is given back again—"bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." It's beautiful, beautiful poetry. "No longer will there be any curse"—Genesis 3.

"The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city. His servants will serve him. They'll see his face. His name will be on their foreheads"—so you remember this whole thing about your forehead? So those who are marked with the world system, in opposition to God—on their foreheads and their hands. Those who are immersed in the story of the creator God, marked on foreheads.

"There's no more night." So again, this *has* to be metaphor and imagery here—some sort of physical world—[Tim grins] well, I guess I have absolutely no idea what I'm talking about right now, you do realize that. [Tim laughs] Right? So I don't know what it's going to be like. So we just—all we have is the poetry here.

So there's "no more night"—is night good? Ancient world—is night good? Is it safe at night? No, you don't have . . . streetlights—you have your torch or whatever, but no—it's

dangerous, right? “They won’t need the light of a lamp, the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light.”

And what will they be doing—what will we be doing forever? Singing? Playing harps? *Ruling and reigning*. What does that mean, in Genesis 1: “Be fruitful and multiply.” Flourish—go fill the earth—do stuff, make stuff. Play music, fashion, video games, art, farming—whatever, just go do it.

So—and this is exactly what we have here at the end of Revelation 21. And this is fascinating—we’ll end here: “The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it. The glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations walk by the light. The kings of the earth bring their splendor into the city”—what is the splendor of the nations? It’s their finest works of art, right? Their *best* musicians—their *best* paintings—their treasures—their jewels, and so on, right?—the treasures of the nations.

“On no day will the gates of the city ever be shut. There will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.” Okay, let’s just pause right there. In other words, what they’re saying is: in the new creation, it’s multinational, right? It’s all the nations of the world and so on. And there’s industry—do you see this? There’s culture here going on: “the splendor and honor of the nations.” And it’s like, all the best, good stuff in the world [Tim grins]—like all the best movies, all the best music, all the best art—I don’t know—botanical gardens, [Tim laughs] whatever. And it’s like, all of that is finally able to be brought in honor to God.

It’s sort of like, you know, is Madison a good city to live in? It’s a great city to live in. We have great green spaces. There’s so much great music and culture and so on. So Madison is a city that brings honor and glory to Jesus, right? *Exactly*. There’s a lot of *good* stuff, but yet it’s all tainted and marred and fragmented and fractured and so on.

And so this is the idea—is: of a city whose works and art and its culture is all brought under, kind of, obedience and bringing glory and honor to Jesus. It’s a world of “redeemed cultures.” That makes sense—what this image is getting at here? It’s a beautiful image. You’re not going to be bored, you know what I’m saying? [Tim laughs] So I’m going to be skateboarding, that’s what I’m going to be doing—because my knees are going to work again.

So then there was a good quote here that I think sums it up: “Where our minds rarely go is to the eternal state—where we’ll spend eternity—where we’ll live forever after the culminating event of human history that’s linked to Christ’s return—our resurrection. We’ll reign over a resurrected universe, centered on a resurrected Earth. We will eat, drink, work, play, worship, discover, invent, travel”—add five more words. “Civilization will be resurrected, including human cultures, with distinctive ethnic traits”—it’s the splendor of the nations—“there will be both resurrected nation, nature, and human,

culture. Together, these elements combine to distinguish the eternal state where God will come down and live with his people.”

So this—again, I don’t want to, as much as we want to translate the poetry and the imagery, I think it’s just good to let it be. If Shakespeare could summarize *Hamlet* in five sentences, here’s the point: Would you want to hear that? No, you’d rather watch *Hamlet*—you know what I’m saying? [Tim laughs] Like just . . .

And so that’s the idea: just let the poetry work its way into your heart and your mind—and let it fill your imagination. This is a beautiful—and it’s a beautiful, inspiring vision. And remember, Revelation is literature produced by? Persecuted Christians, and it’s *for* persecuted Christians. And this image—you know, people who lived in one of the most oppressive empires in the ancient world, to hear about the Kingdom and the city, the everlasting city that will redeem and heal all the brokenness in our world—that will help you go to the lions, right? Or to the guillotine—well, the guillotine didn’t exist yet, but whatever. You know what I mean? That will give you hope to face death, to face death with Christ.

[Musical break (52:03–52:07)]

All right, you guys, thanks for listening to this four-part series. I hope it’s been helpful for you. I hope you still have a whole bunch of questions, but I hope they’re new questions that the actual biblical story, and what the biblical texts are actually saying about final judgment and new creation, should spark a whole bunch of questions—but it should allow you to leave a whole bunch of old questions behind, because they’re likely based on misunderstandings or distortions of what the Bible is saying.

[EMSB theme fades in]

So there you go. Onward. Let’s keep learning and growing in our understanding of the Scriptures so we can follow Jesus and love our neighbor—because that’s what the whole thing is about.

Thanks for listening to “Exploring My Strange Bible.” If you like this podcast, you can share it with a friend or go rate it on iTunes, and that helps other people know about it. So thank you guys for listening. See you next time.

[EMSB theme fades out]