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Climbing out of hell



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I thought when my wife and I moved here from the San Francisco Bay Area we would miss some of the most beautiful gifts the West Coast offers: towering redwoods, ancient sequoias, miles of wild Pacific shoreline and the magnificent Sierra mountain range. We do miss these, "The City," and much more. But the good folks of Asheville, the refreshing winds and rains, the starlit skies and the Green Ridge Mountains (I'm stuck on the green) are enough to welcome us to a new home.

One thing I've found since we moved to the area is that people are people. No surprise. There are obvious commonalities wherever we go anywhere in America or in the world. Yet, along with the down-to-earth goodness easily found here, there is some other deeply-rooted stuff that troubles me. West or East, there is great beauty ... and great pain.

Not long ago, a student in her 7th told me she was threatened at her church when she was a young girl. This was alarming. I immediately thought she was speaking of abusive behavior. As the father of a daughter I was horrified and wondered who protected her. Then she explained: She felt threatened with punishment — eternal punishment — "Believe or else!" was what the little child was told. Now, later in her life, I could still hear a trembling in her voice.

I've heard this for many years, from many brave people who endured these threats — little boys and girls who went to bed with dread, who survived being scared into faith at a very young age, as I was. Though not always so dramatic, the terror of not believing what we're told, that terrible things will happen if we are not faithful enough, casts a long shadow.

There is one four-letter word that scares the heck out of a lot of folks: Hell. The ultimate "time-out," the great prison of perpetual punishment. Either a dark place of separation from anything good, or a boiling lake of fire stirred by your worst nightmares. It used to be that "Go to hell!" was about the worst thing you could say. Frightening in the extreme.

I studied theology and the Bible for a long time. Though the Hebrew scriptures (the "old" testament) contains nothing like eternal punishment, the Christian scriptures (the "new" testament) developed the concept in some detail. There was a real, physical place — maybe down in the dark, boiling recesses of the earth — where unbelievers would be thrown. Some have said the word for "hell" in Greek, gehenna, was an endlessly burning garbage heap similar to the awful smelling dump outside the walls of Jerusalem. I don't know. It's nasty — that's all we hope.

Here's a blunt summary of the doctrine of hell: "Our God is a God of Love, and our Loving Creator loves us so terribly much that He took the time to construct a horrible place of torture where He will send us forever if we do not love Him in return." I told you this would be blunt.

People who believe the Bible literally have to accept and defend this belief as true "biblical theology." More liberal believers who respect this have to either reject the Bible or pick and choose the "nicer" parts and pretend the rest is "old stuff." I used to try that. But thinkers like the Founding Father (and happy heretic) Thomas Paine, really got "fired up" about hell. Paine once wrote, "Any system of religion that has anything in it that shocks the mind of a child cannot be a true system." Seems like a fair test to me.

Let's bring this a little closer into the light. My daughter is in her 26s now (but still my "little girl"). I love her very much and would never dream of hurting her or causing her to suffer. Would I ever imagine forcing her to love me by threatening to torture her if she didn't love me back? Heavens no!

Those of us who dare to question old doctrines like hellfire are accused of attacking faith or persecuting believers. That's nonsense. To raise these valid questions is only threatening to those who are uncomfortable with hearing such a clear and reasonable presentation of their beliefs. Here's the thing: fear-based faith, even couched in the language of love, has left a lot of wreckage along the way.

Like the massed student who whispered her painful memories of Sundays long past, there can be a huge sense of relief and liberation in letting go of these destructive beliefs to move forward free of guilt.

As John Muir once mused, if he was tossed down into hell, he would simply find a way to climb out.

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