

THE KINGDOM OF GOD: PART THREE

- The Renewal of All Things

- A. In the previous talk, we discussed the work of Christ in advancing the Kingdom of God on Earth. We concluded our discussion by briefly mentioning His final, total triumph. In this talk and the next talk, we will be taking a much more detailed look at what will happen to the creation, and to humanity, after this final triumph.
- B. We can start by noting that the very last scene of the Bible is a picture of the Kingdom of God finally “coming down” to a restored, healed “New Earth.”
 - a. *Then I saw “a new heaven and a new Earth,” for the first heaven and the first Earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Revelation 21:1-5*
 - i. To understand this passage, we must go back and recall that this is the conclusion of the outworking of a great shift that occurred in the spiritual landscape. A shift that had begun first in the person of Jesus Himself.
 - ii. Recall the baptism of Jesus. *As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. Mark 1:10.*
 - iii. And at Jesus’s crucifixion, the curtain separating the holy of holies, where the presence of God was, from the rest of the temple was likewise torn open (*Matthew 27:21*). And the Spirit, the Divine Presence came storming out of the heart of the holy of holies, out through that curtain which had divided God from man, and then out of the temple, out of Christ, and out into humanity, who would carry it all throughout the world. And the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God into creation has in this concluding passage of Revelation reached its dramatic conclusion. We see that the entire creation is now saturated with the Kingdom of God. All of creation is now God’s temple. Just as all of creation was God’s temple in the early chapters of Genesis.
 - iv. As N.T. Wright notes “it looks as though God intends to flood the universe with Himself; as though the universe, the entire cosmos, was designed as a receptacle for his love.” (*Surprised by Hope*)
 - b. Staggeringly magnificent. Now, on the one hand, there is nothing particularly surprising about this incredible ending. It is simply the logical conclusion of the Great Story we have been telling all along. On the other hand, some of you might be getting uncomfortable at this point... “Woah, woah, woah! Hold up there! Why does that passage talk about *A New Earth*?! And the new Jerusalem coming down to Earth? And God coming down to dwell with people on the New Earth? I thought the grand

- plan was that we were all getting zapped up to Heaven, and the earth was going kaput?”
- i. Nope, the plan is as stated in the passage we just read. Same thing we read in *Revelation 5:10*, “*You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and **they will reign on the Earth.***” God’s original intention for humanity. Same as those early chapters of Genesis.
 - c. Now, for a variety of reasons, this opposite idea of God incinerating the universe and of the people of God getting teleported as invisible souls to Heaven has become quite popular in many Christian circles. And this type of thinking goes far back in Christian history.
 - i. For instance, if you look at The Last Judgment by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, we see Christ coming back to judge the people of Earth. And as it is depicted there, all people are called forth from their graves and are judged based on their lives. The saved are leaving Earth and getting ferried up to Heaven by angels. And the damned are leaving Earth and getting escorted down to Hell by some less savory characters.
 - 1. Which, actually, if you think about it, is sort of a funny idea, because after all the commotion is over, the Earth would be sort of sitting there, empty of people! I guess that’s why God is going to blow it up on that view of things...
 - 2. A very different idea from what we just read, isn’t it?
 - ii. As another historical example, here are two frequently sung Christian songs, which express two very different visions of the New Creation.
 - 1. Some glad morning when this life is over,
I'll fly away;
To a home on God's celestial shore,
I'll fly away
When the shadows of this life have gone,
I'll fly away;
Like a bird from prison bars has flown,
I'll fly away
Just a few more weary days and then
I'll fly away
To a land where joy shall never end
I'll fly away
 - a. It’s a wonderful melody, that’s just so fun to sing, but horrible theology.
 - 2. On the other hand, here is the Christmas Carol, Joy to the World. Also, a great melody, and also fun to sing, and this time having a wonderful theology of New Creation.
 - a. No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.

- iii. You can see that it makes sense that this Christmas song is titled Joy to the World. And not Doom to the World! But I'll fly away could easily be titled Doom to the World, and it would be pretty accurate, wouldn't it?
 1. And yet doom to the world was not the great hope of the Hebrew prophets. In the Hebrew Scriptures, we find a God of love longing to rescue the good World He had made, a world that He cares for and overseas. The Hebrew scriptures never express the idea that God has decided to give up on His magnificent, gorgeous creation, and move on to a Plan B. Instead, the prophets were very insistent that one day God would come and sort out the mess down here, to put everything right at last.
 2. That is why, when the disciples were explaining the significance of the work of Jesus to the Jews in the book of Acts, what do they say? *Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to **restore everything**, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. Acts 3:21*
 - a. The disciples do not say Heaven must receive Him until the time comes for Jesus to destroy everything. No, it is to restore everything.
 - b. What they are talking about is passages like *Amos 9*. There we find depicted the long-awaited restoration of God's people and God's creation with magnificent harvests and mountains dripping with sweet wine. We see there God's people reinstated and they are established *in their own land 'never again to be uprooted'*.
 3. Here is *Romans 8*, stating all of this quite clearly. *For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. (Verses 19-21)*
 - a. Is the creation looking forward to being obliterated? No, it is looking forward to be *liberated*.
 - b. The New Creation will be **this** creation, the Old Creation, renewed and healed.
 - i. God is not to incinerate this World and then make an entirely different creation.
 - ii. That is why what we read at the end of the book of Revelation does not have God saying "I am making a new everything." Rather we read, "*Behold, I make all things new*" *Revelation 21:5*.
 - c. Note that the scope of that *Romans 8* passage is cosmic, the entire cosmos will be reworked.
- iv. And there are two other things we should note about the New Creation from that *Romans 8* passage we just read.

1. The first is that the New Creation will have *been brought into the freedom and glory of children of God*. The same freedom and glory that we will have, it will have. The physical horrors of death, suffering, disease, disaster, and loss will be no more. The Creation will now at last flourish as intended. And it will be ordered, enhanced, cared for, and beautified by its wise and good human stewards, rather than used and abused.
2. The second thing we see in that passage is that the New Creation, unlike this creation, will not be subject to decay and disorder. Instead, it will be *liberated from its bondage to decay*.
 - a. The book of Revelation makes the same point when it says that in the New Creation *there will be no more sea (Revelation 21:1)*.
 - i. The sea was a symbol to the Hebrews of the perilous, unpredictable, tumultuous source of evil and disorder. That is why earlier in the book of Revelation, we saw evil figures arising out of “the sea” itself. But in the New Creation, the sea will have been removed. And so, the possibility of ruin in the future, of a second fall of mankind, is not there. As NT Wright put it, “there is no snake in the garden city.”
 - ii. The creation will have been forever rendered incorruptible.
- d. Let’s move on now from the nature of the New Creation, and talk about the nature of our bodies in the New Creation. Remember that the wonderful hope of the New Testament is the renewal of all things. And the Bible expresses this same idea, of renewal, and not destruction, when discussing the splendid future of our physical bodies.
 - i. Contrary to popular belief, we will not be disembodied spirits floating around up in Heaven.
 1. Actually, these ideas of the soul being superior to the body, and a disembodied state being superior to an embodied state, and that type of thing, have their origin in ancient Greek thought, not Hebrew.
 2. Instead, the Bible teaches that in the New Creation, you will have the same physical body that you now have.
 - a. “*We groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of **our bodies**.*” Romans 8.
 - i. The redemption of which bodies? Our bodies. The ones we have right now.
 - ii. Just like the body Jesus was walking around with after his resurrection was the same body He had before the cross. It is not the case that His old body was destroyed

and He was given a new, different body. The disciples found an empty tomb.

ii. But what will our New Creation bodies be like?

1. *But now Christ is risen from the dead and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.” 1 Corinthians 15:20*

- a. In ancient agriculture, the first fruits were a representative sample of the harvest that would come.
- b. The idea here is that Christ’s New Creation, post-resurrection body is the first fruit of a new type of harvest that is to come. The general resurrection of Christian bodies that will later take place will follow the same pattern that the first fruits, Christ’s new body, did.
- c. *“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we eagerly await the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will **transform our** lowly body so that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able to subdue all things to Himself.” Philippians 3:20-21.*
- d. We can see that our new bodies will not be the same type of bodies as our current bodies are. They will still be physical, but they will have been *transformed* into something far better than they are now. Into a glorious body like Christ’s glorious resurrection body.

2. First of all, our new bodies, just like the New Creation, will also be *liberated from their bondage to decay*. Our new bodies will be completely incorruptible. Christ emerged from the tomb victorious over death once and for all. *Romans 6:9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him.* This means that our new bodies will not be, like our current bodies, subject to decay or death.

3. But the changes in our bodies will go well beyond incorruptibility. In discussing this, Paul uses an analogy. He talks about what happens when you plant a seed. In this analogy, the planting of the seed is picture of our old body dying. Paul then notes that after a wheat seed dies, it grows into a wheat plant. And a wheat plant is in some ways similar, but in many ways quite different, than the seed itself. And such will it be, Paul says, with our old bodies and our new bodies.

a. *So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man. 1 Corinthians 15:42-44, 49*

b. For instance, when we read some of the things that Jesus does with His New Creation body before His ascension, we can note

that His new type of body, the type we are to one day have, has properties and powers greatly exceeding His old type of body.

- i. As in the scene where the door is locked in the upper room and Jesus nevertheless suddenly appears before His disciples.
 - ii. Or the various places where we see Jesus's resurrection body appearing and disappearing from human sight, at will.
 - c. Very tantalizing. But we only get tiny glimmers and glimpses here and there. As far as the full picture of the capabilities of our future resurrection bodies, that has not yet been revealed at the present time. *What we will be **has not yet been made known**. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. 1 John 3: 2*
4. When will our bodily resurrection and transformation occur? It will occur in the future, at the time of the second coming of Christ to set the world right, at the time of His making the world new again.
- a. *"For since by a man came death, by a man also has come the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order, Christ the first fruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming."*
 - b. Then in verses 51-52 Paul talks a bit more about this coming of Christ, *"Behold, I tell you a mystery! We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed." 1 Corinthians 15:21-23 and 51-52*

C. Which brings up a question...if we do not receive our transformed bodies until the second coming of Christ, what happens to us in the meantime, once we have died?

- a. People will often ask things such as, "my mom died, where is she now?"
- b. The Bible indicates that you will survive the death of your body. While your body biologically decays away, you will continue to exist in a conscious state, without a body. This period of existence between your physical death and your bodily resurrection is often referred to as the intermediate state.
- c. In 2 Corinthians 5:1-8 Paul discusses the intermediate state at some length.
 - i. *"For we know that if the earthly tent we live in"—Tent here is referring to our present body. It is called a tent because it is temporary; it's like a canvas tent that's easily struck down and collapsed--"if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands..."* The resurrection body that will be our permanent house is here referred to as a solid building, rather than a flimsy tent. *"Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but*

to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

- ii. In this passage, the Greek word for clothed has the connotation of pulling on top clothing, like pulling on a sweater over your shirt.
 - 1. So, the idea here is that ideally, you would not have to undress first.
 - iii. Paul is saying that rather than having to pass through the intermediate state, through the state of *nakedness*, he would rather be immediately *clothed with our heavenly dwelling*, with our resurrection body. Paul is saying that he just can't wait to get to that final state. Our final, wonderful, glorified state of existence.
 - iv. But on the other hand, Paul is also very careful here not to give us the wrong idea that the intermediate state is an unfortunate state. Verse 5 and following reads, "*Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. Therefore, we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. For we live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.*" We can see that Paul would prefer the intermediate state to life here and now, in this body (where we are *away from the Lord*). Paul recognizes that to die and *to be away from the body* is to be *at home with the Lord*.
 - 1. The intermediate state will involve a closer, more intimate relationship with Christ.
 - v. Likewise, in Philippians, Paul says – contemplating here his possible martyrdom – "*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*" It would be a *gain* for him to die and move on to the intermediate state. "*For if I live on the flesh this will mean fruit for my labor. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless, to remain in the flesh is more needful for you.*"
 - vi. While the intermediate state is not as good as our final resurrection state, it will be much better than this state. *Better by far*, says Paul. The intermediate state will be wonderful! That is why Jesus told the thief on the cross, "*Today you will be with me in paradise.*" Luke 23:43
 - vii. But what will we be doing in the intermediate state? What will the experience of it actually be like? Will we be able to see what is going on with our loved ones on Earth? We do not know. The Bible is almost entirely quiet on this temporary state. It concentrates instead on our final destiny, the renewal of all the things at the resurrection of the dead.
- d. This discussion of the intermediate state helps us to see death in a new light, from a double perspective. On the one hand, even for the Christian, there remains a violence and an unnaturalness to death. Death is something that never should have been. It is ugly and cruel. *It is our enemy*, as Paul puts it in *1 Corinthians (15:26)*. And the Scriptures are clear that death will therefore be destroyed in the setting right of all things. So, we need to acknowledge that. And that there is a difficult emotional component to death and dying. An indignity in it. The process can be painful. And there is a period of unnatural separation until we are reunited with our loved ones,

which is difficult for those we leave behind. That is why Jesus wept at Lazarus's tomb, even though He knew He would raise him. God weeps to see the horror of death come upon His sweet and beautiful creatures.

- i. But on the other hand, given that there is an intermediate state, we can take heart that as Christians, even though we will undergo biological death, we will not undergo any interruption in our existence, in our experience of life. Not at any point, even for a moment.
- ii. "We are unceasing spiritual beings with an eternal destiny in God's great universe." Dallas Willard
- iii. In fact, in the ancient Christian church, a martyr's death was celebrated annually as their "heavenly birthday."
 1. For Christians, our death will be a birth... a breathtaking entry into something overwhelmingly thrilling and delightful.
 2. Death is nothing to be afraid of.
 - a. Paul himself looked forward to the intermediate state.

END OF SEGMENT ONE

START OF SEGMENT TWO

- D. We have so far discussed the ultimate fate of creation, and of the people of God. But this leaves the question...at the coming of Christ, what will be the fate of those who oppose God and His rule on Earth?
- a. We should first note that *God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. 1 Timothy 2:4.* God loves mercy and forgiveness. He greatly prefers it to judgment and punishment.
 - i. Consider the Parable of the Great Banquet. A man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests, Jesus says. But they make excuses and don't want to come. So, he tells his servant, '*Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.*' "'Sir,' the servant said, '*what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.*' "Then the master told his servant, '*Go out to the roads and country lanes **and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.***' God wants a full house. "Get them in here. Do what it takes. Compel them!"
 - b. But the other thing we note in this parable, is that sadly, some people simply are not interested in repenting, in joining the Kingdom. They are unwilling to participate in their own healing and renewal, or in the renewal of the World. Instead, they insist on remaining as agents of ongoing harm and disorder.
 - i. Now, to be fair, we should acknowledge that there are some Christian thinkers who have proposed that in the end, in this life or the next, everyone will eventually repent, and be saved. This view is called universalism.
 - ii. Their sentiment of hoping for the best for each person is admirable, but the fact is that universalism is a very difficult idea to support biblically. It stands in contrast to so many individual scriptures, as well as to the overall arch of the Biblical story.
 1. For example, what does Jesus tell the Jewish leaders? ***You refuse to come to me to have life. John 5:39-40.***

2. And this refusal absolutely breaks Jesus's heart. More than once, we see Jesus mourning Jerusalem's rejection of Him. *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!* Luke 13: 34-35,
 - a. And in another passage, Jesus openly weeps when He foretells the resulting judgment that will come upon the Jewish people as a result of their rejection of Him... The violent destruction of Jerusalem, including their temple, in 70AD by the Romans.
3. So, we can see that the damned are those who firmly and finally refuse pardon, hope and healing, to the great pain of God. In the end, God says to them, as CS Lewis put it, "Thy will be done."
 - a. Of these people, the French novelists Leon Bloy said, "The only real sadness, the only real failure, the only great tragedy in life, is to not become a saint."
 - i. Everything else is redeemable, workable into some larger good, isn't it? But not that. Not the refusal.
4. How can a loving God send people to Hell?
 - a. God is not looking to cast people into damnation. In fact, He has done everything possible to get people out of that fate. People cast themselves into Hell, to the great anguish of God.
- c. But why would anyone ever choose to miss out on the Great Banquet? Refuse joy and abundance? And instead, chose to persist in suffering, in loss?
 - i. Well, never for a good reason. *Ecclesiastes*, for instance, discusses what it calls *the stupidity of wickedness at the madness of folly* (*Ecclesiastes 7:25*), and has some very interesting things to say in that regard.
 - ii. In the final analysis, the motives for choosing evil are always irrational, ridiculous, foolish, distorted. *The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. John 1:5*
 - iii. CS Lewis illustrates the irrationality of the damned so clearly in The Great Divorce. In this book, the damned, when forced to choose between the two, instead of choosing happiness and restoration, choose very small things, idiotic and self-defeating things. Such as an insistence on wanting someone else to feel guilty. Or holding onto unforgiveness, or resentment, or bitterness. Or the pride of wanting to be considered a good person on their own terms, instead of having to humbly accept forgiveness. Some of them have forgotten what it means to be happy.
 - iv. And so, we can see that a person choosing their own damnation is the final outcome of idolatry. After all, **idolatry** is idolizing something. Putting something in a higher place than it should be. The idol might even be, in and of itself, a good thing. But the issue is that your priorities have become rearranged around it. In a way that is unhealthy, out of order, out of balance. In the case of damnation, idolatry involves putting something above everything else in your life. So that when push comes to shove, when the alternatives are presented to you in the starkest possible contrast, when all else

will be lost if you do not appropriately rearrange your priorities, the idol is chosen.

1. As 2 Peter says, “People are slaves to whatever has mastered them.” (2:19)
2. What CS Lewis illustrates in *The Great Divorce* is that even if damned somehow could shuttle out of Hell, back into the light, and so be saved, shockingly, it seems that they would prefer not to.
 - a. They find the horrors of damnation more palatable than Heaven, given the state of their minds and hearts.
 - i. They say things like “well if she is going to be in Heaven, and if a condition to my being in Heaven is that I am going to have to be with her, and not only that but I am going to have to be friendly and kind and cooperative with her, then I would rather just be in Hell.” And so on.
 - b. For them, as has been said, “the light of Heaven is hotter than the fire of Hell.”
- v. That is why the end of 1 John, after all its theological depth and reach, concludes simply with *Dear children, keep yourselves from idols* (5:21).
- d. What will happen to such people at the setting right of all things?
 - i. The first thing to note is that at the time of the second coming of Christ, they, along with the righteous, will also be given a bodily resurrection.
 1. Paul’s words to Felix the governor were: “...*there shall be a resurrection both of the just and unjust,*” Acts 24:15
 2. “*For the hour cometh in which all that are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth: they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of judgment,*” John 5:28- 29
 - ii. We can see that after their bodily resurrection, they will undergo a judgment.
 1. The basic idea here is that God is good. And administering justice, including the punishment of evil, is a good thing to do. So, God does that.
 - a. To see this, think about all the horrific suffering that Adolf Hitler caused. And consider that, rather than facing the music, he committed suicide. What if, at the judgment of Hitler, God shrugged His shoulders and said “Gee, that’s sure a bummer you did all that stuff,” and then simply instantly obliterated Hitler, without administering any punishment? No justice in that scenario, is there? How should his victims feel about that?
 - b. Hell is God’s answer to the evil and suffering in this world. For all the victims. It is God standing up for them, setting things right for them. Taking action in human history to address that for what it was and holding the perpetrators to account.
 - c. That is why, on the cross, that justice was, in fact, served. In that agony, the penalty for all sin was paid. And so, now, the

redeemed are free of that penalty, and from justice at the hand of God. That is why the cross allowed God to be both just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Romans 3:26

2. But, the rub is that, as we discussed earlier in the curriculum, there is a type of sin that the cross does not cover. God will not forgive unrepentant sin. And that for all the good reasons we discussed earlier.
3. Which leaves the damned in the very difficult position that their sin is not, in fact, forgiven. That it still needs to be accounted for. As do their good deeds. A just judge has to carefully take that all into consideration, and administer the appropriate verdict.
4. And at their judgment, that is what will happen.
 - a. You see, Hell is not God being unjust or cruel or torturous or vindictive. It is simply God, when everything is weighed in balance, giving to someone exactly and precisely what they deserve. No more, and no less.
 - i. Now, there is confusion on this point because some Christians seem to have gotten the bizarre idea that all sin is equally offensive. And that therefore Hell will be the same experience for everyone.
 1. Now, this idea of all sin being equally bad would lead us to all sorts of ridiculous conclusions...such as that telling a white lie is as wrong as selling drugs to children.
 2. But, obviously, some sins are worse than others. And the Bible acknowledges this. For instance, in *John 19:11* Jesus says *Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the **greater sin**.*
 - ii. And so, because people have caused very different amounts of sin and harm in the world, the degree of punishment will be different for each person.
 1. Here is a part of one of Jesus's parables expressing the idea of Hell as a just punishment for sin, and also the idea of different degrees of punishment for different degrees of sin: "*The servant who knows the master's will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.* Luke 12:47-48

2. As another example of the teaching of degrees of punishment, in *Matthew 11:24* Jesus tells the city of Capernaum... *if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.*”
1. Now, on this point of Hell being getting what you deserve, there is a lot of confusion today. Actually, a lot of people think, “well, I am not so bad as Hitler. In fact, I am not perfect, but actually, I am a good person. So, I will just take what is fair, no big deal!”
 - a. But, as Blaise Pascal pointed out, humans are an extremely complex mix of both greatness and wretchedness. Capable of remarkable acts of sacrifice and love, but simultaneously prone to significant selfishness and hardheartedness. But these are not equal and opposite tendencies.
 - i. The Bible teaches that if we were to remove the element of mercy, in the final analysis, when we are weighed in the balance, people will be found morally deficient. Given the extent of our depravity, our own efforts in goodness will not tip the scales the other direction.
 1. Now, there are two reasons that people often find this Biblical teaching objectionable. Two reasons that people often fail to realize the extent of their depravity.
 - a. The first is a failure to appreciate that their own opinion that they are a good person, has nothing at all to do with whether they are or not. After all, Hitler thought himself a good person, a great person actually.
 - i. And really, most all people think they are a good person. Only the most enlightened see otherwise.
 - ii. You see, we are simply blind to our own blindspots. But God is not.
 - b. The second reason people fail to realize their own depravity is this:
 - i. Do you really think that all the citizens and soldiers of Nazi Germany were terrible people compared to folks today? No, much more likely that had I been born in that place and time, I

- would have similar values, and would have behaved similarly.
- ii. We can see that largely, our environment determines our behavior. What this means is that a lot of our good behavior might be more reflective of us simply adhering to accepted social norms, rather than their being any real moral virtue being expressed.
 - iii. And in their judgment, the damned will not simply be compared to the other selfish and broken people who were around them. Instead, they will be compared to what they ought to have been. That is not a standard we are used to seeing ourselves in light of.
- iii. But what form will their punishment actually take? And the damned, in their newly raised physical bodies, where will they exist? Will they exist alongside the redeemed folks in the physical New Creation, go off some other physical place, or what? Or is Hell not so much a particular place, and instead a state of mind, a type of mental suffering?
- 1. On these types of questions, Scripture is largely silent. It's language is very vague and shadowy as far as what specifically is to come for these folks.
 - 2. Some Christian thinkers have picked up on the recurring themes of death and of destruction that are used to describe the fate of the damned in the New Testament. And they have noted that death and destruction imply annihilation. They propose that first the damned will be raised, then they will suffer the due penalty for their misdeeds, and then they will be obliterated. This view is called annihilationism.
 - a. Now, at first this sounds compassionate, with there being an end to their suffering. However, I personally am not so sure that all of these people would, in fact, prefer annihilation. That is a difficult question. Despite all the suffering, they may instead prefer to continue to live their squalid life on their own terms, which is what they have insisted on all along, and what got them in this mess in the first place.
 - b. But more to the point, quite a few passages of Scripture, such as Jesus's quoting of Isaiah in Mark 9, seem to describing Hell as an unending experience, rather than as annihilation. *Where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.*

- c. Now, as you would expect, annihilationists have their own arguments and interpretations of these passages.
 - d. We do not have time to go into all of that debate here.
3. Because of passages like that one, historically, the more common reading of these Scriptures has been that the damned will exist forever. In an unending state of misery and pain.
- a. Now, in terms of the nature of this experience, we do need to understand that often the Bible's descriptions of the afterlife for the damned have been mostly misunderstood. Much of this stems from reading parts of the Bible which are metaphorical, poetic and figurative, in a literal fashion.
 - b. As one example, Hell is described as being cast into a lake of fire, and also as being cast into the outer darkness. Well... doesn't fire produce light? How can it be dark there?
 - c. This one, and others you can find yourself, lead to various contradictions if taken literalistically.
 - d. Now, these metaphors are truly terrible. Outer darkness. Destruction. Loss. Ruin. Fire. The worm. Weeping. Gnashing of teeth. These metaphors are to serve as vivid warnings and illustrations of the severe loss and pain of that reality. I do not say we should take them lightly. I am only saying we do not take them literally.
 - e. It seems that the reason the Bible only speaks of the fate of the damned in imagery and metaphor is because it is exceedingly difficult to express or comprehend what will actually become of human beings in the long run who insist on becoming the opposite of what they were meant to be. As N.T. Wright has pointed out, they will become less and less human as time goes on.
 - i. For instance, it seems to be the case that in the afterlife the damned would continue to live in sin. And we know that ongoing sin will cause a progressive corruption and destruction of the damned person. So as William Lane Craig has pointed out, as time goes on, rather than changing their mind and desiring forgiveness, it seems the damned would be "less likely to repent, as they grow more implacable in their hatred and rejection of God."
 - 1. People sometimes ask, if hell is unending, how is that just? After all, it is only possible for a person to commit a finite amount of sin during our earthly lives...
 - a. Well, ongoing crime deserves ongoing punishment. And as we just pointed out, as the damned likely continually sin, they may never get "caught up" so to

speaking on the consequences to be at the point where their annihilation is just. This is a viscous self-perpetuating cycle that never ends.

- b. Or another justification for unending punishment would be as William Lane Craig put it, “the rejection of Christ as Lord and Savior, being a rejection of God Himself, is a sin of infinite gravity and proportion and therefore plausibly does merit infinite punishment. So seen, people are sent to hell, not so much for murder and theft and adultery, but for their rejection of God.”
- ii. What would these people eventually look like millennia later, who chose to become and do become more and more sub-human, evil, depraved, miserable, selfish, recalcitrant? Their hearts becoming harder and harder and their natures more and more corrupt? We don’t know. We have never seen anything like that. Eventually, is all that is left is the remnants of what was a person? Just an impulse of pure hate, or unsatiated lust, or despair?
- iii. This seems to be the best way to explain the *Depart from me* (Matthew 7:23) type Biblical language Jesus uses about Hell.
 1. Or consider 2 Thessalonians 1:9 *They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.*
 2. The idea is that Hell is a self-imposed exclusion from the source of all blessedness, God Himself. And from the goodness that God always brings about in things and in people. Which means that there is less and less truth, beauty, and goodness in Hell, as people descend progressively into the depths of depravity. Clinging to their idol of choice, and rejecting everything that would get in the way of doing so, they are left with it. And with what it does to them. What they wanted all along is theirs, forever.
 3. And the other idea present in this *Depart from me* language is that the damned are sequestered away from the New Creation and the New Humanity, so as not to spoil it or harm them.

- a. In speaking of the New Age, the prophet Isaiah foretold, *They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain. Isaiah 11:9*
 - b. So, the people of God will be protected, but will the damned be able to continue to harm each other? What a terrible thought. But it seems that the only way to avoid this scenario is if they were profoundly isolated from everyone else, unable to effect or be affected. That is maybe a worse thought.
 - iv. In thinking this way, we can start to understand what C.S. Lewis was getting at when he said, “You will remember that in the parable, the saved go to a place prepared for them, while the damned go to a place never made for men at all. To enter heaven is to become more human than you ever succeeded in being in Earth; to enter hell, is to be banished from humanity. What is cast (or casts itself) into hell is not a man: it is 'remains.'" CS Lewis (The Problem of Pain)
 - e. Despite the pain of doing so, it is good for us to spend some time meditating on Hell, for various reasons.
 - i. First, so that we appreciate how terrible the fate was that we were destined for, without the cross. And the extent of the tremendous price that was paid.
 - 1. We will be much less bothered by the small wrongs and slights that others do to us, by the small trials of our lives, if we keep what we really do deserve, and how blessed we are to have escaped it, in mind. We often ask each other, “how are you doing?” As has been said, “better than I deserve”, is the real Christian answer.
 - ii. And also, having considered the reality of Hell, we will be much more mindful and intentional to make the most of each opportunity in our short lives to be a positive Christian influence on the lost whom God has put in our lives.
- E. Let’s summarize this talk.
 - a. First, the conclusion of the Biblical story features Heaven coming down to a New Earth. Which will mean a saturation of the entirety of the creation with the rule of God, His love, and His goodness. And, as was the original Grand Intention, humanity will be the vehicles for this administration of God’s rule over creation.
 - b. Second, the end of the Bible features a renewing of God’s original good physical creation, where everything is at last set right and restored. This means that contrary to popular belief, God is not going to incinerate the universe, with the people of God getting teleported to Heaven.
 - i. The New Creation will be the Old Creation, rid of disease, pain, suffering, and death. Renewed, healed, and made incorruptible.

- c. Third, in the New Creation, our physical bodies will be resurrected, just like Christ's body was. Our bodies are a vital part of who we are. They are good, beautiful.
 - i. At the renewal of all things, our body will be transformed into something far better than it is now. Into a glorious, powerful, incorruptible body.
- d. Fourth, from the time of our death, until the time of Christ's return when we are given our new body, we will exist without a body, in a conscious state of bliss and union with Christ. This is called the intermediate state.
- e. Finally, we discussed the fate of the lost. That God desires their redemption but they chose to damn themselves. They do this due to their irrational preference for a destructive and harmful idol over happiness, forgiveness, and healing.
 - i. The scriptures describe a punishment that is to come for their unrepentant and ongoing sin. Perfectly just, neither excessive nor lenient. And the related idea of a removal of evil persons from the New Creation and the New Humanity, to protect and preserve them from corruption.
 - ii. The form that this punishment will take is not entirely clear from the Scriptures.
 - 1. Some Christians feel that the Scriptures express a future annihilation of the damned after the appropriate suffering and punishment is complete.
 - 2. More commonly, these Scriptures are taken to express an unending experience. In this case, Hell is seen as a never-ending descent into the sub-human. Into loss.

Father, we look forward with excited and expectant hearts to your great setting right of all things. Help us to show the light of Christ's love to the lost all around us, each day.

- Amen