

Welcome

Game of Thrones was a smash hit TV show - I know a number of you watched it. A big reason it became so beloved was because of its complex characters and unpredictability. In the first season, arguably the show's biggest villain was Jamie Lannister, also known as the Kingslayer.

Jamie is the eldest son of the wealthiest family in the 7 Kingdoms. In addition to being handsome, he's by far the best swordsman in the realm, routinely winning any contests he chooses to participate in.

As you might imagine, he's insufferably arrogant. Oh, and he's sleeping with his twin sister. His illegitimate son is heir to the throne. And in the first episode he tries to kill a child by throwing him out of a tower.

Yeah... he's awful.

So it's surprising when, by the third season, Jamie emerges as a fan-favorite character.

What happened? In short, he suffered.

Jame got captured in a battle, and then he ends up in the hands of some mercenaries who plan to ransom him back to his father. But remember - Jamie Lannister is the greatest knight in the Seven Kingdoms. One night, he almost gets free. The mercenaries realize that if the Kingslayer gets a sword in his hand, they can't stop him. So they do the logical thing:

They cut off his sword hand.

Whoa. That was one of those scenes that fans couldn't believe actually happened. It's like the villain who sets an elaborate trap for James Bond and walks out of the room, rather than just shooting him. Well, these mercenaries just BOOM. Off with his hand.

Without the one thing that made him better than everyone else, Jamie is humbled. He's helpless, forced to rely on a former enemy to stay alive. And it's in that helplessness he becomes vulnerable. We see beneath the arrogant facade and come to have compassion for the real human underneath.

I have to tell you - from a writing perspective, the transformation of Jamie Lannister feels like a magic trick. Even knowing how George R. R. Martin did it, it feels really powerful and special.

This is the promise inherent in great suffering - it can break us open and destroy all the walls we've built to protect that true self we all hide within.

What happened to Jamie Lannister is an extreme (very extreme) version of what we do when we put kids in time out. We're trying to strip away all the distractions and give them a chance to calm down, to reconnect with their true selves and get some clarity.

Now, obviously I'm not advocating we unhand unruly toddlers - even the especially headstrong ones.

But we're spending one last week exploring Christian notions of Hell, and I want to begin with a serious reflection on punishment and suffering (which can be linked, but are not necessarily). Because we think of both of those ideas when we think about Hell - it's a punishment for sin, and it's a place of suffering.

We're going to explore those ideas today as bracketed by God's eternal love. What is Hell if God is eternally loving? How might we find good news in the idea of Hell?

Message

This summer, we're putting *your* questions front and center. All spring, we collected your questions and we got dozens. We've grouped them all together and are working through them together this summer.

A couple of principles are guiding our series:

Here at Catalyst, doubts and questions aren't enemies of faith; quite the opposite. We think it matters that Jesus asked way more questions than he gave answers.

Secondly, we're not trying to settle questions here. The goal of this series is to create conversation, not consensus. These messages are the beginning of conversations. Not the end. Our goal is to ask better questions together.

For the last several weeks, we've been exploring questions that get at the nature of God's love for us. Last week and today, we're pressing into a space that is difficult because the Bible doesn't speak clearly on it. Let's look at the questions guiding us today:

What happens to our loved ones who don't know Jesus after death? Will we really never see anyone who passed before accepting Jesus in the new heaven and new earth? Is hell a thing? If there isn't a hell/still a chance we'll see loved ones again, what does that mean for evangelism?

If you love someone so much that you don't want to be separated from them between heaven and hell, could you tell God that you'd go with them to hell, or give them your place in heaven and you go to hell instead?

Last week, we were careful to observe that these questions point us beyond what the Bible addresses clearly. We don't know a lot about the nature of the afterlife - both Heaven and Hell. So we're taking some of what the Bible *does* say clearly and combining it with what we know about God's character, particularly as revealed in the person of Jesus.

So what *do* we know so far? Sonya reminded us that the Bible doesn't say much about Hell because it's much more concerned with life on *this* side of the grave.

And last week, we saw that God's love is more vast than we can imagine, that we'll be surprised by who is in God's kingdom.

But what about Hell?

I want to start with a reminder about God's character. Many of us have an unfortunate image of a God who delights in throwing sinners into Hell. Many of us had to read a so-called 'classic' sermon of American Protestantism, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" by the 18th century preacher Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was a slave-owner, so maybe we shouldn't listen too closely to his evaluation of God's character, given how comfortable he was with profiting from the enslavement of other humans.

No, I want to point us to some words from a letter toward the end of the New Testament. The writer is considering why Jesus hasn't returned to end injustice, why God's people are still waiting:

The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent. — [2 Peter 3:9](#)

Hear that? God doesn't want anyone to be destroyed. God wants *everyone* to repent. That includes the worst of the worst. Even the Caesars and Pharaohs.

To talk about Hell, I want to ask why God hardened Pharaoh's heart. You may remember a couple of weeks ago that we talked about how Empire is the natural end of human sinfulness - our desire to impose our will on the world, rather than trust God's way.

One of the first great empires in the Bible was Egypt. The Egyptians enslaved God's people, so God recruited Moses to be their liberator. You probably know this story - Moses requests an audience with Pharaoh and demands, on behalf of Yahweh, that Pharaoh free the people. Pharaoh refuses, so God sends a plague on Egypt - frogs, gnats, hail, darkness.

After each plague, Pharaoh agrees to let the people go, but then changes his mind. Each time, the scriptures tell us that "Pharaoh hardened his heart."

Well... not each time. In three of the first nine plagues, the Bible says this:

But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart once more, and he would not let them go. — [Exodus 10:27](#)

This is a phrasing that strikes us as troublesome. After all, it sounds like Pharaoh was ready to give in, and God decided he wasn't done torturing Pharaoh.

But that's not what the Hebrew phrase 'harden his heart' means. The idiom doesn't mean 'change his mind' - it has more of the sense of 'stiffen his spine'.

In other words, what the Scripture is telling us here is that Pharaoh *relented*, but he didn't *repent*. He didn't agree that Yahweh's vision of the world - one in which there are no slaves and everyone gets to flourish (not just Pharaohs) - is the good world.

He was just afraid of Yahweh's power. So he gave in. But he didn't repent.

And Yahweh wasn't only interested in the liberation of Yahweh's own people. Yahweh was committed to the liberation of *Pharaoh* too. Yahweh loves Israel *and* Egypt.

So when Pharaoh got scared, Yahweh stiffened his spine. God gave Pharaoh the courage to do what he really wanted to do - continue to profit off the exploitation of other people. (Remember from a couple of weeks ago - God's wrath is giving us what we want. This is what God does for Pharaoh here.)

Pharaoh's empire-building, enslaving, oppressive ways ultimately lead to death for those Pharaoh enslaves but also for Pharaoh and his people.

God tries nine times to liberate both Israel and Egypt. But nine times, Pharaoh refuses to turn from his empire-building ways.

So God finally says, "No more. I cannot allow you to continue to oppress and do harm in the name of your evil vision."

Scripture invites us to understand these times when God hands us over to the consequences of our choices not as God getting exasperated and giving up on us, but as a form of discipline. God hopes that perhaps when we see what our desires bring into the world, we will turn from them and turn to God in faith.

As the preacher in Hebrews reminds us:

God's discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness. No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way. — [Hebrews 12:10-11](#)

Can we pause here for a moment? I think it's worth meditating on a God whose love is big enough to encompass both the victim and the victimizer, a God who loves us all enough to work for our collective liberation!

Song

So what does this mean for Hell?

Many Evangelical churches describe Hell as “eternal, conscious torment.” It's a barbaric, brutal idea - that the just punishment for a lifetime of sin is torture *forever*.

But this idea contradicts the biblical understanding of God's punishment - remember the preacher in Hebrews said God's punishment is restorative, not retributive.

In other words, the purpose of God's punishment isn't to even cosmic scales, but to help us grow and learn. To bring us to a place of repenting.

But what happens to those who refuse to repent? What of the Pharaohs who in the depths of their hearts don't *want* to relinquish their thrones?

Scripture tells us a day will come when God says, “Enough is enough.” The prophets looked forward to this day as the Day of the Lord. The day when God separates those who follow the self-sacrificial way of Jesus and those who follow the others-sacrificing way of Pharaoh and Caesar.

This is the vision we receive at the end of the Revelation, when we see the ultimate fate of the devil and the beast (which is the embodiment of that Empire-building impulse in humanity):

Then the devil, who had deceived them, was thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur, joining the beast and the false prophet. There they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

And I saw a great white throne and the one sitting on it. The earth and sky fled from his presence, but they found no place to hide. I saw the dead, both great and small, standing before God's throne. And the books were opened, including the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to what they had done, as recorded in the books. The sea gave up its dead, and death and the grave gave up their dead. And all were judged according to their deeds.

Then death and the grave were thrown into the lake of fire. This lake of fire is the second death. And anyone whose name was not found recorded in the Book of Life was thrown into the lake of fire. — Revelation 20:10-15

In the End, God will not allow the devil to deceive humanity. In the End, God will not allow some exploit others for the good of the few. God will condemn evil, empire and death itself to a lake of fire for eternity.

And some will choose to go with them. Some would rather burn than share. The 20th century apologist C. S. Lewis wrote famously of Hell:

“I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the inside . . . they enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self-enslaved: just as the blessed, forever submitting to obedience, become through all eternity more and more free.” C. S. Lewis.

But the burning question: is that forever? Can they repent, even in the lake of fire? (It's worth noting that the Revelation says the devil and the beast burn forever, but doesn't make a similar claim about the people who follow them.)

Is it possible that when God gives those pharaohs and caesars and everyone who follows them what they want that they might come to regret their sin? Could they at some point even come to a place of repenting of their sin and turn to God?

Would God gladly welcome them into the kingdom of Heaven, even then?

Friends, we don't know. The Bible is silent on such matters.

But we do know that God is not willing that anyone should be destroyed. God wants everyone to repent and find the life God created us for.

And I for one hope God gets what God wants. Don't you?

Examen + Communion

All that's required to sit at Jesus' table is a willingness to approach.

When in the last week have I allowed myself to experience God's love for me and for others?

What in the last week has hardened my heart towards the world God loves?

What in the coming week might harden my heart to the world God loves?

How can I remain open to God's Holy Spirit this week?