

What If Jesus Was Serious...About Justice?

Week 7 ~ Chapters 39-45

Chapter 39 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then God's Judgment Is Not The Same As Hell

I have not mentioned this during this series, but as is obvious, Skye has little doodles/illustrations at the beginning of each chapter. Hopefully you've found them helpful. I think the picture at the beginning of this chapter is particularly enlightening/clarifying.

Skye makes this observation about the preaching we find in the New Testament, *"The coming judgment of God and the establishment of justice were part of their gospel preaching, but hell was not."* (page 189) Hmm, what are we to make of that?

Skye concludes this chapter and reviews earlier chapters, *"We have already seen that dismissing judgment and wrath because of our culture's discomfort with these doctrines is not faithful to the Bible, but overemphasizing a medieval caricature of hell that is not found in the Bible is equally unfaithful."* (page 190)

- *When you think of heaven and hell, what comes to your mind/imagination? How Biblically accurate is that image/understanding?*
- *What do you think someone needs to understand regarding judgment, heaven, and hell in order to have a good understanding of the Christian faith?*
- *What do you think gets underemphasized, overemphasized, or distorted on the subjects of judgment, heaven, and hell? What would you like more information or clarity on?*

Chapter 40 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Not Everyone Will Experience Life With God

In this chapter Skye briefly describes the appealing idea of "universalism". It's a commonly held belief/idea, even if people don't know that was the name for it. Skye draws universalism into question, as did C.S. Lewis, as did/do many, many others. I suspect some reading this lean that way or find it appealing too. But is it accurate?

Here might be an interesting exercise (either as a thought experiment or as a group activity). Describe your belief/understanding on this subject. Then back it up...why do you hold that belief? (FYI...with something like this we need to be able to appeal to something beyond ourselves and our preferences.)

- *Here's a question to get you thinking...if universalism is true, what do we need the church for (or what's the point, purpose, role of the church)?*

Chapter 41 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Not Everyone Will Receive The Same Reward Or Punishment

“Everyone intuitively understands that justice, by definition, must be proportional. Our human justice systems employ this principle imperfectly, but God’s justice does so with perfection.” (page 198) In this chapter Skye makes a case for proportionality...both in reward and punishment. This ought to spur some interesting conversations...

- *Is proportionality something you’ve given much thought to as applied to the afterlife? (Or, as you reflect on this chapter, how convinced are you that proportionality is important? Explain.)*
- *What do you think about the idea that maybe not everything will be “equal” (as we tend to imagine it) in the next life? How can it be good and yet perhaps not equal?*
- *How motivated are you by reward? How motivated are you by the fear of punishment?*

Chapter 42 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Hell Isn’t Just A Place On Earth

The word translated as “hell” in the New Testament is the word “gehenna”, as Skye points out. And while it could refer to a literal place, a valley outside Jerusalem that functioned as a garbage dump, it also metaphorically “...references the Jewish belief in a place of divine punishment...” (page 205) In context, the metaphorical interpretation is the only one that makes sense. It’s important, again contextually, to understand that this connects to Jewish beliefs of the time.

Interestingly, this word is only used about a dozen times in the New Testament, and about half of those times are in the Gospel of Matthew...the Gospel that was written for a Jewish audience. Additionally, hell/gehenna should not be confused with Hades or Sheol which are references to the abode of the dead.

(This chapter really pairs with the next, so I’ll save questions for after the next chapter.)

Chapter 43 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then God’s Justice Is Undying, But Those Who Face It Are Not

Both minimizing and maximizing the doctrine of hell can be affected by “motivated reasoning”, which in turn is fueled by “confirmation bias”. Or to say it all more simply...we see what we want to see; we believe what we want to believe. So the more interesting and telling question to ask ourselves is, “Why do I want to believe/not believe this or that?” Is it because I’m seeking truth, or am I motivated by something else? And if so, what is that?

- *In your experience, have hell and divine judgment tended to be minimized or inflated? What are the dangers of each?*
- *How have you seen the fear of hell/divine punishment used to motivate people?*
- *What other other areas (spiritual, cultural, political, etc.) might you/we be affected by motivated reasoning?*

Chapter 44 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Not Every Human Soul Is Immortal

A few weeks back Pastor Cindy mentioned in her sermon that we all approach Scripture with a particular lens or built-in assumptions (typically inherited by our culture, family, education, etc.). That is a VERY TRUE statement. In this chapter Skye brings to the surface a prevailing assumption most of us carry (consciously or unconsciously)...and that is the immortality of our souls. The question then becomes, is that a Scripturally-based assumption, or did we pick that up elsewhere?

- *What has shaped your understanding and imagination of the afterlife? Where do those ideas come from? (Do you even know?)*

Chapter 45 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then "Eternal Punishment" May Not Mean What You Think

Skye, obviously, takes exception to the idea of Eternal Conscious Torment (as do I). He leans toward what is known as “Annihilationism” (as do I)...and you’re welcome for the big, fancy theological word...because who doesn’t like big, fancy theological words to throw around in conversations 😊. Also obvious is that not everyone thinks/feels the same way on this topic. (I’m sure by now we all know better than to expect everyone to agree on everything.)

But friends, I must stress, the goal of the Christian life is NOT to have all the right stances or to hold all the right doctrinal positions. (Though being right is always better than being wrong...and being wrong can be hurtful to us and others...the reality is no one is or will be right about everything.) Rather, the goal is to KNOW God...to be in relationship/communion with the Giver and Source of Life. There is certainly nothing wrong with considering the afterlife, and our relationship with God most certainly informs our understanding of it and our hope for it. And it’s a worthy topic of conversation.

- *What is death? How do you understand it?*
- *How much thought do you give to the afterlife? How does our understanding of the afterlife affect our understanding of justice?*
- *What message or ideas regarding the afterlife have you picked up specifically at funerals? Do you think those ideas/messages are generally accurate or more geared to comfort the grieving? (That’s not to say they can’t be both...I’m just curious about your experience of them.) On that note, what do you want said at your funeral?*

(Friends, I feel compelled to offer a personal note on this final section of the book—Reward & Punishment...chapters 39-51—which will be our final two weeks of this series. Personally, when it comes to anything future-oriented...such as end times views or questions regarding the afterlife...I find it best to hold such things, or my understanding of such things, loosely. It seems to me that’s a more humble posture to take. God is good and can be trusted. Our focus, time, attention, and effort are best directed in faithfulness and obedience in the present, not speculating or, worse yet, dividing over things we cannot know with certainty. I appreciate

Skye's prodding to question our assumptions, as it helps us to hold our opinions more humbly, which is the posture Jesus instructs us to take. The future will take care of itself and is in God's hands.)

Soul Training Exercise ~ Read & Research

The ability to read is a great gif, and yet can easily be taken for granted. You've probably noticed that we read together as a church family as a regular practice. Sometimes we read Scripture together; sometimes we go through books (like this one). And we will continue to try to strike a healthy balance.

There has been a bunch of articles and research around how much less people are reading today than in the past. College professors are having to change their syllabi to accommodate students reading less and at a lower level...even at schools like Harvard. A recent cover story in *The Atlantic* asked whether the age of reading is over. Some are saying we are a post-literate society (that doesn't mean illiterate...rather that people are turning to short-form video, audio, and digital media as opposed to long-form text and deeper reading). People are rightfully wondering how this will form us as a people/society.

Reading...like, say, a book, requires that we slow down. (One of our recurring spiritual exercises is slowing down.) Research shows that reading strengthens brain function and slows down cognitive decline, reduces stress, and increases empathy...among many other benefits. So, friends, reading will be a continued practice for us as a church family. Additionally, this week's reading may have wandered into topics you're not well-read in. When that happens, it's a good practice to do a little more research before just accepting or rejecting what one author says. Our minds are a gift, so let us exercise them...and a good way to do that is through reading. May reading become a constant and comforting companion.

Read & Reflect on... (these are the scriptural passages Skye has at the end of each chapter)

- Matthew 10:26-42
- Acts 17:22-31
- John 12:44-50
- II Peter 3:8-10
- Matthew 11:20-24
- James 1:12-15
- Matthew 5:21-26
- Isaiah 66:15-24
- Mark 9:43-48
- Genesis 3:17-24
- Romans 6:20-23
- Matthew 25:31-46
- II Thessalonians 1:5-12