

## Let the Nations be Glad Lesson 5: Is God's Punishment of Sinners Everlasting?

### Rationale:

People's motivation for missions is directly correlated with its perceived urgency in their minds. The doctrine of hell is clearly linked to missions in that's people's understanding of it will influence the urgency they feel regarding missions.

### Purpose:

There are strands of evangelical thought that seek to soften the doctrine of hell because of a perceived unfairness or an emotional reaction. This lesson aims to give a fair consideration of these objections, expressed mainly in the words of the skeptic, while maintaining and affirming the truth that God's punishment, while horrible and everlasting, is fair and just and brings Him glory.

### I. Introduction

Teacher:

Brief recap of four previous lessons and introduce topic of this one.

Introduce Doug and Bill: Doug symbol of doublemindedness we can have as Christians and personification of some of the things I struggle with. Bill, sober, mature Christian who kind of personifies Piper

Doug is a skeptic but not some easily refuted strawman atheist. Has some teeth. Things he says might even seem reasonable. What's he here for? He's here for those of you who have been Christians so long you forget how shocking are the things that we believe. He's here to lull you out of complacency, wake you up to what it is you believe, that you might be roused to live more consistently with your profession of faith.

Sunday school, skeptic, no chance. You're here to see Bill win argument. No, here to apprehend truth, so listen and consider with the greatest seriousness. Very weighty topic and very heavy dialogue, and we're just going to jump right in.

### II. The Full Horrors of Hell

DOUG: OK, I'm going to start in an unusual place, and that is at the question, "What happens when we die?" Now this may come as a surprise to many people in this room, but there are other ideas about this besides the Christian point of view. Take the view of American poet William Cullen Bryant in his famous poem *Thanatopsis*.

*Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim  
Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again;  
And, lost each human trace, surrendering up  
Thine individual being, shalt thou go  
To mix forever with the elements;  
To be a brother to the insensible rock,*

*And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain  
Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak  
Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mold.*

When I was in high school, I was a naturalist. I thought that reality was comprised of only those things we could see around us in nature. Someone who was dead didn't know he was dead. There was just blackness, a loss of consciousness that would last forever. How can I put? Someone just died, and that was that. He became a brother to the insensible rock.

BILL: That's a fairly depressing thought, to think that we merely live and die and rot together with our pets. It makes for a rather meaningless world, doesn't it?

DOUG: Wait a minute there. Just because it makes you feel uncomfortable doesn't mean it's not true. Of course, it doesn't mean that it is either. The point is, let's not let our conception of truth be swayed by the prevailing winds of our emotions.

BILL: OK, You're right.

DOUG: I tend to agree with you that it's a depressing thought, but Bryant found a great deal of solace in it.

*The hills,  
Rock-ribbed, and ancient as the sun; the vales  
Stretching in pensive quietness between;  
The venerable woods; rivers that move  
In majesty, and the complaining brooks,  
That make the meadows green; and, poured round all  
Old ocean's gray and melancholy waste --  
Are but the solemn decorations all  
Of the great tomb of man!*

I never shared in Bryant's exultation. Such a fate seems awful to me. But Bill, I must admit that it is downright comforting to think of an eternal unconscious rest when the alternative is to think about eternal punishment in a place called hell.

BILL: I actually think I agree with you.

DOUG: I used to think Christianity was all about warm and fuzzy comfort until I read *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* by Jonathan Edwards. The imagery he uses isn't comforting, it's terrifying. Who can imagine Isaiah 63:3 where God pronounces judgement on the nations.

*I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood  
spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing.*

Edwards picks up on this imagery.

*If you cry to God to pity you, he will be so far from pitying you in your doleful case, or showing you the least regard or favor, that instead he'll only tread you under foot; and though he will know that you can't bear the weight of omnipotence treading upon you, yet he won't regard that, but he will crush you under his feet without mercy; he'll crush out your blood and make it fly, and it shall be sprinkled on his garments, so as to stain all his raiment.*

BILL: I can't agree more that hell will be a terrible place. I remember reading in the same sermon Edwards saying:

*You will know certainly that that you must wear out long ages, millions and millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains.*

DOUG: I can't imagine such an eternity of horrors. Sometimes, I will have this terrible recurring thought cycle in which I think about dying and immediately protest that it can't be true, but in the realm of objective reality, I know I will die. I can't imagine the thought cycle in hell. "O this torment can't be forever, but it is. O this torment can't be forever, but it is." Ezekiel writes in verse 18 of chapter 8:

*Therefore, I will deal with them in anger; I will not look on them with pity or spare them. Although they shout in my ears, I will not listen to them.*

This idea that an eternity of wailing shrieks will forever go unanswered is chilling to me. Even the most lamentable and dolorous shrieks will be in vain. This will actually happen to people, maybe to me. Now tell me, Bill. As a Bible-believing Christian, is this really what you believe?

BILL: Oh, as much as I would like to relieve your fears, I fear hell will be much worse than even this imagery. I don't think we can conceive of an eternal separation from an infinitely loving and good God, the giver of all life. I don't think we can imagine a hell of eternal conscious torment. It may be a special grace of God that we are unable to do so. I know of no one who has overstated the terrors of hell. I wish this wasn't the case, but I have it on the authority of Jesus that it is. He used pretty horrid imagery himself. Take Mark 9:47-48

*It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and thrown into hell where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.*

Jesus laments the betrayal of Judas in Matthew 26:24

*Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.*

I fear that this is the case for all those who remain under God's judgement. Their fate is such that they will think it were better had they never been born.

### **III. Is Hell Eternal?**

DOUG: OK, I think we've all gotten the picture by now. I was afraid that as a Christian you'd try to soften what you really believe in the interest of making Christianity more palatable to me. I appreciate that you have acknowledged and verbalized as best you can the full horrors of the place. It's now from this shared starting point that I will build my argument. Now I'm going to start by venting my initial emotional reaction to such a teaching. Emotionally, I find the concept of eternal conscious torment intolerable. I do not understand how you, as a person who actually believes this, can live coherently in this world without either cauterizing your feelings or cracking under strain. But before we address my emotional reaction, which is my primary objection, I want to explore this on a more intellectual or theoretical level.

Now I find it interesting that not all evangelicals share your position that hell is a place of eternal conscious torment. I mean, even someone as well-respected as John Stott will oppose you. After all, he reasons, people only live on this Earth and therefore only sin on this Earth for a finite amount of time. Isn't an eternal punishment disproportionate to a finite life of sinning? I bet you didn't expect me, a skeptic, to cite John Stott. I bet you expected Ayn Rand or someone like that. I certainly am cunning aren't I?

(Note: Since the writing of this dialogue, John Stott has apparently modified his views to return to an orthodox, Biblical view of punishment in Hell. This should be kept in mind, though we have chosen to keep the document as originally written.)

BILL: Oh you're just so clever Doug. In fact, John Stott is not the only evangelical who holds this view. It's becoming more and more popular. Clark Pinnock also forcefully expresses this position. He says,

*It does not make sense to say that a God of love will torture people forever for sins done in the context of a finite life. The fire of God's judgement consumes the lost... God does not raise the wicked in order to torture them consciously forever, but rather to declare his judgement upon the wicked and to condemn them to extinction which is the second death*

DOUG: But you've already read the words of Jesus where he says the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. How does this fit in with the Pinnock's conception of annihilation where he says first fire, then nothing? Now presumably, if hell were not eternal, the worm would die and the fire would be quenched. The focus on eternal duration is confirmed in Matthew 18:8 where Jesus calls it the eternal fire.

BILL: Exactly, and there are many more Scriptures which in my mind completely discredit the annihilationist view. As one example, I'll just read Revelation 20:10:

*And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet were and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever*

There could be no stronger expression for eternity in Greek than the word used here.

DOUG: Ah, but Stott would say that the beast and prophet referred to are symbols of hostility to God and not actual people.

BILL: Fair enough. But just five verses later in Revelation 20:15, John writes that those whose names are not written in the book of life are thrown into the same lake of fire. Again, I'll read Revelation 21:8:

*But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all the liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur*

But I think the proof text of what I'm saying is Matthew 25:46 when Jesus talks about separating the sheep from the goats.

*Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.*

Here, eternal punishment is the analog to eternal life. To call one into question is to call the other into question.

DOUG: And no one seems to have a problem with the idea of people spending eternity with God in heaven. It seems like if Stott were consistent he would say that heaven is nothing more than a particularly blissful long weekend.

BILL: But he doesn't which is precisely the point. Scripture clearly presents hell as a place of eternal conscious suffering just as it presents heaven as a place of eternal joy. Traditionally, Christians have derived their views of God's justice from the Word of God. But more and more, evangelicals seem to be submitting to "what makes sense" to their own moral sentiments. Heaven "makes sense," and so it is found to be acceptable. Hell does not "make sense" and so it is found to be objectionable.

#### ***IV. Is Hell Fair?***

DOUG: I do see your point Bill, but I also see Stott's point that hell seems so unreasonable. Presumably, the Christian would say that our moral sentiments are God-given. Perhaps a teaching that so offends our moral sensibilities should call into question our current interpretation of the verses. Anyway, I think his argument is a good one. If

someone sins horribly for 70 years, it seems to me like 70 years of punishment is in order. Tell me how can you defend eternal punishment for a finite number of sins, no matter how contemptible they are?

BILL: Doug, this is a centuries-old argument, but Stott and Pinnock disregard the essential thing that Jonathan Edwards saw so clearly. The essential thing is that degrees of blameworthiness come not from how long you offend dignity, but from how high the dignity is that you offend. I won't do justice to Edwards' argument, but I'll go ahead and quote him:

*The crime of one being despising and casting contempt on another, is proportionably more or less heinous, as he was under greater or less obligations to obey him. And therefore if there be any being that we are under infinite obligation to love, and honor, and obey, the contrary towards him must be infinitely faulty.*

*Our obligation to love, honor and obey any being is in proportion to his loveliness, honorableness, and authority...But God is a being infinitely lovely, because he hath infinite excellency and beauty...*

*So sin against God, being a violation of infinite obligations must be a crime infinitely heinous, and so deserving infinite punishment...The eternity of punishment of ungodly men renders it infinite...and therefore renders it no more proportional to the heinousness of what they are guilty of.*

Do you see what Edwards is saying here? God is infinitely valuable. To reject him makes one infinitely culpable. Therefore, infinite punishment is a penalty fitting to the crime.

DOUG: OK, that kind of makes sense.

BILL: You kind of see this same kind of reasoning in the book of James in verses 10-11

*For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.*

James doesn't see sins as discrete transgressions against a list of do's and don't's. Well, how can someone guilty of only one sin be guilty of breaking the whole law? James isn't talking of some kind of moral domino effect that if you're degraded morally in one area it will leak over to other areas of your life. Rather, the connection lies not in the actions, but in the person who is offended. Sin is a rejection of God's authority, indeed of God Himself.<sup>1</sup> This is a Biblical understanding of sin, why it is so grave, and why it does call for such punishment. The vision of God in Scripture is of a majestic and Sovereign God who does all things to magnify the greatness of his glory for the everlasting enjoyment of

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<sup>1</sup> Dever at Founders Conference

his people. And the view of man is that man suppresses this truth and finds more joy in his own glory than he does in God's<sup>2</sup>. This is indeed rebellion of the highest order.

DOUG: And so you're saying I should be careful of any kind of fairness argument because I might get what I ask for. I remember reading in the Edwards sermon we've referenced so many times that:

*The wrath of God is like great waters that are dammed for the present; they increase more and more, and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given....The waters are continually rising and waxing more and more mightily; and there is nothing but the mere pleasure of God that holds the waters back...and if God should only withdraw his hand from the floodgate, it would immediately fly open, and the fiery floods of the fierceness and wrath of God would rush forth with inconceivable fury.*

Fairness would be for God to simply remove his hand from the floodgate this instant, and we'd all be washed away. Is this what you're saying?

BILL: Yes, I guess I'm saying that the thing we should be losing sleep over is our own forgiveness. After all, if I truly love God more than anything else, then apart from the cross I should get mad at him for forgiving sins, because it calls his own justice into question. Imagine Nathan approaching David after he had slept with Bathsheba and had Uriah killed, and imagine this was in the presence of Uriah's father, and David said, "Yeah, you're right, the baby's mine, I murdered Uriah, but I wrote Psalm 51 and I'm sorry." And Nathan says, "The Lord will take away your sin."

DOUG: And if I'm Uriah's dad, I'm screaming, "Absolutely not!" This is a reproach to the justice of God. This is a reproach to His righteousness. You can't get off just by saying you're sorry

BILL: Exactly. Romans 3:25-26 captures this:

*God presented [Christ] as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate His justice, because in His forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*

Forgiveness of sins is utterly unthinkable in light of God's justice, that is apart from the cross of Christ. No one loses any sleep thinking about how close God came to blaspheming himself by calling His justice into question in forgiving even one sin, though the Christian who claims to love God above all else should.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Piper p. 127 LN BG

<sup>3</sup> Piper at Founders Conference

DOUG: I know you're going to shoot this down quickly, but I must bring it up because it is another view which has been held by prominent Christian thinkers; most popularly by George MacDonald. You also get hints of this strain of thinking in the writings of C.S. Lewis, though I'm not sure he would entirely agree with this view. MacDonald argues that hell is nothing more than an extended means of self-atonement and sanctification.

*Punishment is for the sake of amendment and atonement. God is bound by His love to punish sin in order to deliver His creature: He is bound by justice to destroy sin in His creation.*

This thought that all sin will be destroyed, but that all creatures will be delivered and brought to glory is a very attractive alternative view.

BILL: It's a nice thought, but it has no grounding in Scripture. We've already seen that Scripture clearly teaches that over and above sin being destroyed, sinners themselves will be brought to ruin. In Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:26, Abraham says to the rich man:

*And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.*

Clearly, there is no repentance in hell.

## **V. Our Emotional Response**

DOUG: OK Bill, When we're talking about this subject so clinically and abstractly, what you say is completely reasonable. I find myself agreeing with you most of the time. I could probably make those same arguments just as well as you have. In fact, come to think of it, since the guy who writes my lines is the same guy who writes yours, I could certainly make all of those arguments equally well. We get our information about God and His action in human history not from our own speculations but from God's Word. What we learn about eternal punishment in Scripture meshes well with His revealed character, specifically His holiness, His justice, and His zeal for His own glory.

Now I know you're going to say that my emotional reaction is no guide for truth, and that I can't wish hell away if it actually exists, but nevertheless my biggest objection to hell is emotional. On a theoretical level, I am in agreement that God should punish sinners eternally in hell. But then when I think of this actually happening, why I scarce can see how I could live coherently with such a belief. I mean, John Stott also asks the question. Bill, as someone who holds such a belief, how do you avoid either cauterizing your feelings or else cracking under the strain of the burden.

BILL: Before I answer, I'd like for you to elaborate a little more about what you're getting at.

DOUG: I guess I'll start here in the physical realm alone. I look out over the vast panorama of human history, which reads like one great tragedy. I read somewhere that 90% of all things humans have built or created have been destroyed in war. The 20<sup>th</sup> century has been one giant bloodbath, from the genocides executed by Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot to the even more recent disasters in Rwanda, Sudan, and Kosovo. And then there are the natural disasters. I think of the flooding in Nicaragua and Guatemala this last fall that completely wiped out entire villages and buried people alive in a great sea of mud. I consider the extent and scale of human suffering in this world, and I can hardly bear it. I can relate to Ivan in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* who bases his entire argument against the existence of God on the suffering of just one child. How could a good God let such suffering happen? This is the problem of evil.

When confronted with the reality of this suffering, I have two responses. On the one hand, I try to open myself up to the reality of this suffering and internalize it and let it move me. Again, we as humans are challenged to really feel the full extent of global suffering, even if we limit ourselves to the physical realm. How can one truly consider it without being moved to tears? Anytime I do this, I feel an overbearing sense of guilt for being so callous toward other people's sufferings and for doing so little to alleviate them.

At the same time, there is so little I can do about it. I then feel a bitterness against God for giving us all such a heavy burden to carry. This bitterness drives me away from God.

Most of the time, I live in denial. It may not be a premeditated denial, but it is an effective one. I suppress these thoughts and live as if they're not true because I can't live coherently in light of them.

BILL: Doug, I am glad you can be so honest about these feelings you have. It shouldn't surprise us that in a fallen world there will be a significant element of tragedy, but at the same time it strikes us as creatures made in the image of God as so unnatural. The book of Romans tells us that fallen man has this endemic tendency to suppress truth that is uncomfortable. In many ways, this is one of the most challenging things about being a Christian. A Christian is called in all things to live in what I like to call an absolute and unmitigated reality. As Christians, we do not live in denial. In many ways Christianity is all about opening ourselves up to painful and uncomfortable realities. We do not shrink away from them. We stare at them unflinchingly with the help of God's grace.

As uncomfortable as a contemplation of the full extent of physical suffering is for you, (and I don't want to make light of what you're saying) I think an even more uncomfortable thought is the absolute reality of our own sinfulness, and our ultimate accountability to a holy God. Didn't the Psalmist write, "Where can I go from your Spirit? And where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there." Denial and this impulse to hide from reality are endemically within each one of us. It is hard enough for us to even articulate the depths of our own sinfulness let alone really believe it. But then we are called not only to accept our own sinfulness, but also to accept God's judgment of this sin-- to agree with God that it is offensive, disgraceful, and deserves to be punished with the harshest of

penalties, no less than the eternal deprivation of all things good beginning with their source being God Himself. To me, this is the most difficult uncomfortable reality to embrace.

DOUG: And this leads me right into what I was going to say next. I started in the physical realm just to make the point that even if we limit ourselves to suffering in this world, I am completely overwhelmed by the suffering in it. But now with your Christian understanding of the world, you have added another layer of reality. You have compounded my problem 100 times over. I'll try to illustrate this with a story. I was in England, watching a documentary about starvation in Africa. As I was watching the footage, I was struck with grief as I watched an emaciated human being, crawling around on his hands and knees in a parched desert looking for scraps of food. His condition was crying out for divine intervention. How could a good God watch one of his creatures suffer so? How could he watch as he literally wasted away there in the desert? How could he allow the vultures to circle overhead, anticipating the moment when they could make their approach? Now, I would like to find comfort in contemplating his destiny in the next world where there will be no tears or suffering. But your Christian theology does not allow me any comfort for that man if he has not trusted Christ. Instead, it tells me that he has sinned and is therefore destined for punishment. And this punishment is not a one-time thing but is eternal. It will not end. As miserable as his existence has been here on Earth, he is destined for misery that even he cannot imagine. There will be no rest for him, as he is going to a world where there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth. Now, this is intolerable to me, and I don't see how it isn't for you, and I'm only drawing out the implications of your theology. Tell me I don't have a right to quarrel with God over this. And my question for you is, if you're not going to go into denial, how can you possibly deal with such a reality? How do you not literally crumble underneath the weight and burden of it?

BILL: First, I must say that as reasonable and seemingly right your argument is, you still do not have any right to quarrel with God. He is more loving, just, and merciful than you can imagine. We'll touch more on that later. In response to your question, I do not live in denial. I do not resort to escapism.

DOUG: But how can this be? It is my contention that a world in which there is hell is utterly intolerable for someone who loves people. I mean, if I am to believe what you believe then it means that my old college roommate or the 12 year old I coach basketball, if he has not trusted Christ, will go to hell when they die. O that I could be comforted in a belief that they or that man in Africa will merely rot and decay in the ground. Once I have caught a glimpse of this Christian stuff, I now have no trouble exulting with William Cullen Bryant. *Thanatopsis* becomes soothing and comforting compared to gazing unflinchingly at a world with hell.

I come to church, and all I see are happy, smiling people. Do they rejoice in their own security as people destined for heaven? Well surely this is selfish, even despicable. Can I be rescued from a raging ocean and then be infinitely happy in my own salvation? Surely, this joy will be tempered a great deal were I to look back at the hopeless drowning

masses. Surely, joy in my own salvation cannot sustain me when millions around me are perishing.

You see, if I truly open myself up to this reality which you profess, I shall be perpetually despondent. As Stott says, I will crack under the strain. As a lover of people my heavy-laden heart will never jump again for joy. I will never be able to laugh again. That is, unless I live my life in denial of this reality, and I am convinced that despite what you say, you do this and most Christians do as well. Is depression and despondency, or else denial, the inevitable endpoint of Christianity? How can it not be? If hell is indeed a reality, then surely it overwhelms all other realities, and in light of it being real, how can anyone who loves people live coherently?

BILL: O how I wish the writer of this had made you a toothless straw man. I cannot say much in response to your objections. All fallen human beings will certainly share them because we love ourselves more than we love God. Mother Theresa's greatest fear was that she loved people too much, for an unhealthy love of people (and unhealthy is a strange modifier for the word love) will inevitably drive us away from God for exactly the reasons you so effectively draw out.

Let me only say that were it not for the cross I might agree with you. If God merely observed all of this from a watchtower in the sky, and never lifted a finger because he didn't want to get His hands dirty, I might side with you. But I believe in a God who has not stood idly by. I believe in a God (and I believe this is the one of the most profound thoughts in all of Christianity) I believe in a God who has willingly chosen to suffer for His children.

I wish more Christians did feel as intensely as you do the great tragedy and waste that is the whole course of human history. We should feel it with every ounce of fiber in our bodies. And then when we compound the physical tragedy with the spiritual tragedy, it is indeed a burden much too heavy for any of us to carry. We could not bear it for one moment.

DOUG: But if you're not going to bear it, then you must live in denial.

BILL: On the contrary Doug, let me continue so you can see where I am going with this. First, there is incredible comfort in this present tragedy in following a God who has chosen to suffer with His Creation, for we know that He identifies with us. Sin, death, starvation, tragedy, they strike us as unnatural and foreign. They fill us with grief. Jesus experienced this same grief over the death of a friend, and the Scriptures tell us that even though He was later to raise Lazarus, Jesus wept. I believe that these were not crocodile tears. Jesus wept at the tragedy of the fall. Death is an unnatural end for creatures made in the image of God. Indeed, God has laid eternity in the hearts of men. We were created to spend eternity with Him.

Christianity is accompanying Jesus in the Garden as he sweats drops of blood, anticipating the hell he is about to go through, as paradoxically on the cross, God was

separated from God. If hell is unnatural and counterintuitive to us, then how much more so for God? A throne of glory is the rightful place for the Son of God, not a crown of thorns and a cross of judgment.

Can we imagine the infinity of suffering that Jesus endured on the cross? It wasn't infinite in duration, but perhaps (and I am speculating here), it was an infinite amount of suffering compressed into a finite amount of time. His suffering was infinitely dense, much as scientists say at some point in time all the matter in the universe was compressed into an infinitely small volume. This must have been the intensity of suffering Jesus underwent on the cross, for it is said that he died for the sins of all who would repent and believe in His name.

DOUG: Bill, these are nice thoughts and all, but they're not really helping me much here. So Jesus suffered too. Well, that identification helps me some, but in a different way it almost makes the situation worse. This makes for an even more tragic world in which even God Himself suffers infinitely. I mean, how am I to find any sort of comfort in such a messed up world? That was noble of Jesus and all, but now this seems unjust that He was made to suffer as well.

BILL: Hold on, I'm getting there. You see, the story ends with one resounding triumph. The curtain is torn, the tomb is empty, and we instantly know that the battle has been won, for the battle belongs to the Lord. You see, as great as the present tragedy is, and we both agree that we cannot bear it, a great triumph overshadows it in the resurrection. At the cross, mercy proceeds from judgement. At the cross sin and death are made a spectacle. Where O death is thy victory, Where O death is thy sting? It's not that the seriousness of sin is now reduced. The pain and suffering and tragedy of this world remain ever before us, and the resurrection does nothing this side of heaven to quell the terrors of a contemplation of hell. Rather, the fact of the resurrection so overshadows them. In heaven the riveting experience of being in the presence of God will utterly obscure them.

DOUG: So I see where you're going. Just as I said earlier that the reality of hell so overwhelms any other reality that I could not avoid being despondent, now you are saying that the incredible reality that is the triumph of the resurrection so overwhelms the reality of hell that even in light of it, a Christian cannot avoid being joyful.

BILL: Exactly, Chesterton has said that "man is more himself when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial. Melancholy should be an innocent interlude, a tender and fugitive frame of mind; praise should be the permanent pulsation of the soul." Now you mentioned earlier how callous it would be were Christians joyful merely because they were saved, for a contemplation of the vast multitude of the unsaved should plunge them into a deep melancholy. While Christians are joyful in their own salvation, this is not where their joy ultimately rests, though many speak as if this is the case. Rather, their joy rests in knowing and loving an infinitely loving God whose love for mankind was clearly demonstrated on the cross. It is in the final victory of this God that Christians rejoice. In many ways, life on this planet is incomprehensible. But even in

this, I find I can trust in the character and provision of a God who is both good and sovereign.

DOUG: So you're saying that a Christian need not live in denial to be joyful. I must not ignore the tragedy of this world. I must somehow live with that picture of the African child ever before me, for he is a symbol for tragedy in my mind. But I must do so without becoming bitter by carrying its burden. I must give the burden of the world's suffering back to Christ, for it is a burden He has already chosen to carry. Only His shoulders are broad enough to carry it.

BILL: Jesus said "take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." In the meantime, there is no middle of the road, lukewarm, even-keel Christianity. That is not an option. The joy of the resurrection does not in any way cancel out the tragedy of crucifixion. Rather, they both exist absolutely in their fully amplified states. They are two extremes held in tension, though the joy of the resurrection is always stronger than the sorrow of the crucifixion. Though immediate pain and sorrow may overwhelm us at times, we must look past them to a God who has chosen to suffer in our place. In doing so, a warm joy will fill our hearts to accompany that deep sorrow. In us, as in Christ, joy and sorrow must coexist, but joy must rule, for sorrow has been conquered by He who has had His fill of it.

## ***VI. Relation to Missions***

DOUG: Wow, that's a beautiful thought, this pulsation of joy that doesn't cancel out tragedy but rather overwhelms it. Such a joy I am sure can only be found in loving a creature with God's perfections. But you know, if I look at my life honestly right now, I just can't relate to loving and esteeming God so much that I would hate my mother and father in comparison. That's really what we're talking about here isn't it? I have a grandfather who to my knowledge does not have saving faith, and apart from an amazing miracle wrought by God will not have it when he dies. The only way I can accept this reality unflinchingly is if I love God more than this kind old man who used to buy me ice cream and tell me funny stories when I was a child.

BILL: Isaiah 66:23-24 is a remarkable verse.

*From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me," says the Lord. "And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched"*

I think what this is saying (and Edwards agrees with me), is that those in heaven will actually witness God's retribution against sinners, and far from causing the saints grief as they witness this torment (even if it is their loved ones who are being tormented), this fierce execution of justice will cause them to fall down and adore the great power and

majesty which has wrought this awful spectacle. They will rejoice that this act has brought God glory.

DOUG: I certainly cannot relate to that, and I fear I never will. I mean, I find it so hard to love someone invisible and seemingly so distant with such fierceness. How can I not take my grandfather's side in this? Sure he's not perfect, but how could I ever be joyful in his ruin because it brings greater glory to some entity I oftentimes struggle to even believe in. I fear this betrays a heart that is far from God because I love my grandfather more than I love God.

BILL: I am not saying it is easy to develop the perspective I am talking about. But I think it may be a pretty good litmus test for anyone who would call him or herself a Christian. A Christian must necessarily migrate toward this kind of God-centeredness. That's been a theme which has been hammered at over and over again in this Sunday School class. God must have the supremacy in all things. God did say to the Israelites that "Thou should have no other gods before me." I could say this in a nicer way, but your grandfather is your idol right now, and I'm sure that your self-love is even stronger than your love for your grandfather. Both should pale in comparison to your love for God.

DOUG: Those words sting, but they are accurate. And I begin to see why such a God-centered perspective is so important. Were I to believe in hell as you do, I would be strongly tempted to become a missionary purely out of a concern for other people's welfare. But I would be fruitless. Why? Because I myself would feel bitterness toward the God who has handed down their sentence, and it is this God who is their only hope. If I don't love Him, what do I have to offer?

BILL: Doug, your heart for other people is commendable. Christians could learn a lot from what you have to say and the honesty with which you confront these issues. Sadly, an objective belief in hell without a fierce love for God and His glory revealed most incredibly in His work on the cross, must make for a mind-numbing, almost inconceivably miserable subjective experience. If you love God little yet believe objectively in hell, then you cannot afford to love other people much if you are to stay sane. If you are to avoid going crazy, you must either live in denial, or else you must become hardened to other people to the same extent that you are hardened to God. We are not to compensate for a lukewarm love for God by loving other people less. Rather, we must seek to love God more. The only joy that can overcome the harsh reality that people will suffer eternally in hell is a joy that finds its ultimate satisfaction in the manifold perfections of a glorious God.

Now, I'm not asking you to love other people any less, though I tend to think you probably love other people a lot less than you think you do. But I am asking you to love God more. And the incredible thing is, as your love for God grows, your love for people will grow as well. As His glory becomes more clear to you, you will be able to more calmly gaze at the full extent of human tragedy without being driven to despair. And you will have a great gift to offer them in the love of God.

I will pray that God will fill your heart with a love for Him, and that from this love will overflow a deep and intense love for other people both inside and outside the church. I will pray this for all of us, that we would be motivated in our missionary task by a deep love for God. The plight of the lost, and we have seen that their condition is most urgent, the plight of the lost must motivate us, but apart from a deep love for God and His glory, which must be an overarching motivation, we will only become embittered. Love for God will cause us to become lovers of souls, and lovers of souls we must be. May our affections be the same as that of Samuel Davies, whose love for souls was surpassed only by his love for his glorious and condescending Lord.

*And, oh! can I help loving souls? Why does not my heart always glow with affection and zeal for them! Oh! why am I such a languid friend, when the love of my Master and his Father is so ardent! when the ministers of heaven are flaming fires of love, though they do not share in the same nature! and when the object of my love is so precious and valuable! The owners of those souls often do not love them; and they are likely to be lost forever by neglect. Oh! shall I not love them! shall not love invigorate my hand to pluck them out of the burning! Yes, I will, I must love them. But ah! to love them more! Glow, my zeal! kindle my affections! speak my tongue! flow my blood! be exerted all my powers! be, my life! if necessary a sacrifice to save souls from death! Let labor be a pleasure: let difficulties appear glorious and inviting in this service. O thou God of Love! kindle a flame in this cold heart of mine, and then I shall perform my work with alacrity and success.*

May this be true in the lives of individuals in this church. May we be lovers of God and lovers of souls.