

Hitler's Hell

Hitler's Hell

and Other Stories of Divine Justice

Winslow Parker

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All characters in these stories are fictional or, if real persons, their thoughts, words, and actions are used fictionally. Real persons are portrayed in a fictional future in which their true actions cannot be known, thus are entirely fictional.

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Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my late good friend and brother-in-Christ Chuck Andrus for his skillful first editing of this book. Any errors remaining were my attempt to improve on his edit—always a big mistake.

Dedication

For my wife, who is my exemplar of grace.

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What Is Justice?

Ancient Israel began its nationhood living by the code of "an eye for an eye." It was a vast improvement over the prevailing custom of ever-escalating violence: You wound me. I kill you. Your family kills me. My family kills ten members of your tribe. Your tribe annihilates mine.

Eye-for-an-eye justice breaks the cycle of violence, for I can only find vengeance within the boundary of my own wounding.

Jesus raised the bar of justice even higher. "Forgive those who hurt you. Love your enemies." His justice is unequal. It is a love-generated inequity between harm and response. When harmed, we harm not in response. We forgive and do good in return for evil, love the perpetrator.

An eye for an eye is the basis for U.S. justice. We execute, imprison, or fine those who harm others. Though it is an improvement on the ever-increasing vengeance-fed retribution of ancient civilizations, is it the best we can do? Should justice be retributive—that is, getting even? Could we do something better, something life-giving with our offenders?

These short stories are an attempt to portray Father in the light of His true character and to point the way toward a more humane earthly justice system.

Most Christians believe in the division of humanity into two groups—the saved and the lost. The saved go to an existence of

peace. The "lost" are either burned up or tortured forever in fiery torment. In these stories, rather than being retributive, vengeful, and vindictive, I portray God as an infinitely loving Father Who desires, and will have, the best for all of His children. He will not kill, or worse, torture eternally those whom He brought into existence. In harmony with this, I attempt to portray a hell that is restorative, healing, and mending rather than destructive or eternally painful. The product is a friend, a loving comrade, a fit eternal companion for Father and all humanity.

These stories are fiction, yet I believe they are true in the deepest sense of that word. I am not attempting to portray in any literal sense God's actual methods, His process of hell. Rather, these are allegories of His eternally planned outcomes for all humanity.

There are two outcomes. First, all will go through a hell, a cleansing, purifying, restoring hell. Death is not the end of choice or of change. Second, all humanity, without exception, will experience this cleansing and restoration. A subtext to all the stories is that evil, sin, tribulation, trial, pain, and suffering are not random or chance events. All that we consider "bad" has purpose, including The Fall. He is leading everyone on a predestined path back to Himself. He knows how to bring each of us into fellowship with Himself. He will succeed, for "All things are of, through and return to, Him" (Romans 11:36) and "My Word will not return to Me Void." (Isaiah 55:11)

Though the contemporary Christian culture does not accept these beliefs, both scripture and the extracanonical writings of the early church attest to their validity.

Could we but see the beauty of God's unfailing love and accept that His hell is restorative and not retributive, a dramatic change could sweep our justice system, our nation, and our religion. There are already glimmerings in the Restorative Justice movement, which partakes largely of the spirit of these stories.

If even one item in this book touches your heart, I am content.

This is my prayer.

Winslow Parker

February, 2020

I think of Hell as the very heart of GOD, where the light of His love shines so intensely, His compassion and healing are so clear, that any "sin," any "bad," any "wrongness" left us is literally burned out by the glory/light of the love of GOD.

From an email written by the late Mystic Blue, which is the email handle of the author of this quotation. Used by permission of the author.

JT's Hells-Terror in Sunday School

"...the gunman turned his weapon on himself and took his own life, ending the horror in the small upstate town. In other news..." The polished voice shredded the mist of my waking dream. So began the first morning of our earthly hell.

The phone rang. I fumbled for the receiver.

"Is your son's name JT?" a nasal voice inquired.

"Yes," I answered sleepily.

"Stand by for Mark Fitzgerald, please."

"What is your response to the death of your son," the famous news anchor asked, "and to the horror he inflicted in New York?"

"What do you mean?" I stammered.

"You haven't heard the news yet, then?"

Terror seized my heart. I reached for my wife's hand. His voice echoes yet, these many years later.

"No." My voice trembled.

With the zeal of a starving vulture gorging on a freshly dead corpse, he related the story. "Your son killed thirty-one children and two Sunday-school teachers this morning, then turned his gun on himself. He is presumed dead." The words etched themselves into the cold stone of my heart.

From the floor, the tinny sound of the famous man's voice became insistent. I replaced the receiver in its cradle, cutting him off in mid-sentence. Between gasps and wails, I related the story to my wife. Holding each other as shipwreck survivors cling to a life raft, we sobbed until exhausted.

The story stitched itself together over the next few hours, gleaned from news and FBI interviews. Agents forced us to watch the video, attempting to understand his motives. Views from multiple cameras followed his progress through the church.

Dressed neatly and appropriately for Sunday worship, he drew no attention. He made his way through the foyer, down a set of steps to the lower level. Opening a door, he stepped into a classroom. Children's voices sang "Jesus Loves Me." The song leader glanced at him as he entered, then returned her attention to the children. She was not alarmed. From a briefcase, he pulled a small automatic assault weapon.

I will not share the horrendous details.

Most people did not see these images. We did. Nothing will erase them from memory.

Over the next months, we endured hazing grilling from police and FBI agents. We received harassing phone calls from the media and curious friends. For a week we could not leave the house due to the gauntlet of dozens of reporters camped out in our yard. News vans choked the street, their motors running twenty-four hours a day.

Later, when the media and legal frenzy died down, we received saccharine-sweet insincerities from neighbors and fellow church members. Each was trying to gain a gossip edge over their rivals. We changed our phone number three times. When we returned to our congregation, it was to cold shoulders and a wide circle of empty seats. We left during the first hymn and never returned.

Most of our family abandoned us, wanting, perhaps, to distance themselves from the association of family name.

We lost our jobs. In the termination letters, phrases like "media attention," "disruption of office routine," and "excessive absenteeism" were prominent—one more rejection.

Our pastor came to visit us. He cleared his throat a couple of times, as if trying to dislodge an unpleasant morsel of food.

"You know how terribly sorry we all are for your loss," he said with deep insincerity. "I'm sure it must be doubly troubling to you to know where your son is right now."

My wife burst into tears and rushed from the room.

I cursed him from the house.

From countless repetitions thundered from his pulpit and Sunday school lessons, we already knew. We lived in the constant hell of knowing that JT was in hell.

Broken in mind and spirit, we despaired of life.

In home, church, and Sunday school, JT, too, had learned of hell. Through countless, endless repetitions, hell loses its power over most people. The psyche can only deal with terror for so long before it turns its emotional responses off.

Unlike the rest of us, JT seemed to take it to heart. He tried to follow Jesus ever more carefully every time the pastor preached on hell. We rejoiced at his increasing commitment.

Over time, as reason and realization dawned, we watched as fear morphed into anger, then blossomed into hatred of the God of hell. Fear meant to curb behavior became fuel for his rage.

After high school graduation, he left home, moving as far away from us as he could, to a tiny upstate New York village. He rarely contacted us, but when he did, his conversation rapidly descended into a rant against God, the church, and us. We could tell he was troubled, but he held a job and seemed to fit into the life of the community. We reined in our worries.

Our constant prayer, "Please let him accept You that he may be saved," fell on deaf ears.

Our hope crashed on that day of blood and terror. We buried him. In life, he knew no rest. Now his body rests as his soul cannot, for we know his fate.

We moved away, restarted our lives, and though the public has forgotten us in the haze of new media sensations, we cannot forget. In quiet moments, we relive, and in dreams, we experience afresh. In her sleep, my wife weeps. I hold her, my tears mingling with hers. At times, we envy those whose children died at our son's hands. Though they mourn their loss, at least they know that their children will not spend eternity in hell. We have no peace.

Oh, that he had not been born! Oh, that he had died in infancy. Oh, that He, from Whose Hand all came, had not created hell. Oh, that there was no God. Life would be sweeter for knowing there is nothing beyond. In the deepest recesses of my heart, I know my own destiny, for I too now hate God. My fate is the same as my son's.

Perhaps, one day, I shall have the courage to join him.
Judgment

A heady sense of power still coursed through my arteries. As if printed on my skull, the firm pressure of the pistol's barrel lingered. My finger still trembled, reliving the last ounce of pressure against the trigger.

I woke to light. The blood-spattered room, the flailing children, the screaming teachers, all faded into dim memory. There was light, only light. It felt as if light saturated my body, infusing it with transcendent peace. The clamor of hate and the tormented images were gone.

Raising my hands before my eyes, I saw that they glowed as if lit from within. Taking a step, I found firm ground, though light-saturated fog concealed everything.

Slowly at first, then more quickly, the fog cleared. Perhaps, rather, my eyes adjusted to the penetrating light.

A plain stretched before me to the horizon, flat, featureless, surreal. It was a twentieth-century artscape with meaning known only to its creator.

It began to morph. Mountains rose into the impossibly blue sky. As they rose, they were identical peaks, a child's repetitive drawing, sharp vertical angles in two dimensions. They morphed into three dimensions, differentiated, each its own unique arrowhead thrusting a snow-capped peak heavenward. The snow line, ruler straight, was the only constant.

I turned in a circle. I was surrounded by a range of mountains. Infinite sun-splashed color gradation pleased my non-artistic mind.

Smaller hills erupted from the bland surface closer to me, lending perspective. Artist though I am not, the effect was pleasing even to my untrained eye.

Smaller objects pushed their way through the irregular surface. Silver-green grasses, flowering bushes, and massive trees thrust through loamy soil, springing to their full height in seconds. Yellow-green spring leaves and rough brown bark perfectly framed distant mountain.

Birdsong filled the nearer woods with a glorious melody. It was music so beautiful as to make Beethoven, Bach, and Mozart hang their heads in abject humiliation. No melody imposed itself, but the effect was of complete harmony, ranging in scale from the deep thrumming beats of a male woodcock to the highest sparrow peeps. It washed over me, filling me with joy.

A well-trodden dirt path opened before me. I turned to look behind, but there was no opening. I began walking. There was no sense of time. The all-penetrating light did not change. I walked for what seemed like hours, some extinct internal clock attempting to impose itself onto this timeless place. I looked over my shoulder. The path closed behind me, propelling me forward. I did not tire. Neither thirst nor hunger interrupted my exquisite joy.

Without warning, the path opened into a glade. It was the very definition of that word. Flowers carpeted the open space in an irregular, crazy-quilt pattern. Huge trees encircled the open space, a blue sky its dome. Smaller trees and shrubs hid the bases of the larger trees, lending a safe sense to the space. Incongruously, two dead tree stumps opposed each other near the center of the glade.

Though I was not tired, it felt natural to sit on one of the stumps. For a moment, I sat, staring at the other stump as if awaiting someone.

As if on cue, something appeared, resting on the other stump. It was light itself, as if it was the source of all other light. It was not formless, but it had no distinguishing features, nothing to define it as a living being. It glowed, pulsing as if waiting for something.

"Welcome to hell," it finally said. "You're finally here, the place you've always dreaded and for which you hated Me."

"Hell?" I cried, incredulous. "This is hell?"

"Yes. This is your hell, your own personal, customized hell."

"My hell? My personal hell? Where is the fire?"

"You're in it," the voice said.

"It doesn't burn!"

"Not yet, but it will."

"Will it hurt?" I began to withdraw into myself.

"Yes, but not in any way you could imagine." The voice seemed to be smiling as it said this.

"Then my Sunday school teacher and my pastor were right."

"Yes and no. Their version of hell was literal, full of burning fire and imps with pitchforks ensuring you didn't escape your just deserts."

"I guess it is a bit different than what I imagined. A lot different." I paused, examining my senses for pain. "When does the pain start?"

"Are you not now experiencing it? Do you not yet feel it beginning to glow within you?"

Turning my awareness within, I asked, "You mean this feeling of confusion, of...um...regret?"

"Yes. It is beginning. It will become worse before it gets better."

"I thought hell was for eternity, that it never ends."

He chuckled. "I hate to disillusion you, although disillusionment is often beautiful. If you were looking forward to an eternity of being barbecued, you are going to be greatly disappointed."

I shuddered. "No, I think this is preferable." I paused again. "But hell is in the Bible, isn't it?"

"We'll talk about that later, but you may not think this is preferable," the voice said, "as you truly enter into the hell that is just ahead of you."

I screamed in agony. It was not an agony of nerve endings cauterized by fire. It was not the pain of cutting, rending, or burning. It was a pain of mind, an agony of spirit, which saturated my being. I knew my true self. I knew Him as He truly is. Words failed, thought fled.

Nothing can describe the horrific holy terror of seeing Him as He is. There is nothing so intense, nothing so utterly agonizing as being in His presence. An eternity of hell could not equal one fraction of that moment.

A furious wind blew through me, fanning the divine flames. Through the agony, I knew it was a holy wind, a divine hurricane of love. The flame doubled and redoubled, ravaging all that was flammable within me. I began to welcome it, reveling in its cleansing heat. It seemed to last forever. It slowly died. All that was flammable was entirely consumed.

That which I call my "self" was obliterated in the beautiful flame that is Him. I knew, as the pain diminished, that what I once considered my core was gone. A real "I," a self that was true self, emerged. Though I still knew who I was, I was now only purity, peace, and joy. My fear, my anxiety, my selfish desires, all gone, burned away as if they had never existed. A profound peace encompassed the entire universe, closing me in and holding me, warm and secure. It was as if I were drowning in the perfection of the most perfect day.

Flickering at the edges of memory were the thoughts and feelings of my former self, but they had no power to torment. Passionate tears of joy and renewal wet my face.

Arms enfolded me, cradled me against a warm, solid chest. The slow, solid beat of His great heart comforted me, the very source of His fathomless love. His gentle, loving, compassionate hand wiped away my tears. I quieted and began to breathe normally.

"That was hell?" My voice quavered.

"Yes, it was."

"Is it over?"

"Yes, but for a tiny fraction."

I trembled.

I heard the smile in His voice as He said, "It won't be for a while and, unlike this hell, it will be momentary. The joy will be well worth the pain."

"When...?" I started to ask, but knew instantly that it was unimportant. I rested in His arms, content to remain there for all eternity.

A question intruded. "What about what the preachers preached? What about an ever-burning, tormenting hell?"

"They're wrong. It's not your business to know their hearts as I do. When they face what you have, the realization of the pain and suffering they have caused will be much worse, for they affected the lives of so many. You're a good example. What you went through, the pain you experienced for killing those innocent babies, cannot compare. They, too, will be healed, but the burning of their theological wood, hay, and stubble will be more intensely painful than yours. Reality, the process of disillusioning, will be difficult for them. Their vaunted theological correctness, their superiority as teachers of the ignorant, their exclusivity will treble and quadruple their pain."

I thought of the radio preachers to whom I'd listened and the world-famous evangelist whose preaching on hell was so vivid that I trembled.

"Could you spare them?"

"Bless you for desiring their welfare, JT," He said, "but they need to experience their hell just as you have yours. Without it, they would never be happy here, never rejoice as you do now. Was it not worth it to you?"

"Yes indeed," I said.

"It will be for them as well. As you know Me now, they too will know Me."

"What about my dad? He told me stories at night about hell. He seemed to take great pleasure in telling me how hot the fire was, how it would hurt forever and ever."

"He thought he was helping make you a better person. To him, raising fear was better than the reality of everlasting pain."

"He was wrong."

"Yes, he was. You faced a hell that, unfortunately, is not all that uncommon among people of faith. Hell has driven more people to the insane asylum than the good Dr. Freud could imagine."

"Is he here?"

"Yes." He laughed. "He was quite surprised, I can tell you."

"I tried counseling for a while," I said.

"Yes, I know. Miserable comforters are they all."

I snuggled deeper into His arms. It felt good. Adult though I considered myself to be, it was comforting to rest in His embrace. I settled back into the circle of unseen arms, relishing the peace who is Father.

He held me for a long time, although without clocks or the movement of sun and shadow, it was impossible to know its passing.

"Does everyone go through this?"

"Yes, to one degree or another. Some get to know Me before, in the realm of time and space. They too need cleansing and healing, but it is of a different sort, a difference not necessarily of duration or degree, but of focus. Much of what you experienced has already been consumed from them. Even so, they have only a degree or two more of knowing Me than you did. There is still much food for the flame, even in those who were My most zealous followers, whom many called saints."

"You mean like Mother Theresa?"

"Yes, like her, and Paul, and Peter, and oh, so many others. They knew of and anticipated this fiery ordeal, gloried in it. They embraced it as it consumed their dross."

"What is dross?"

"It's anything that can be burned."

"Oh."

A comfortable silence enclosed us.

"Thank You," I said.

"You're welcome."

"Is this what Jesus went through?"

"No, not exactly. Yours was a burning of chaff, a pruning, a necessary but limited cleansing fire. There is another hell that consumes all. That was His hell. He went through it as you just did, but there was nothing to burn within Him. If he had not passed through it, your hell would have consumed you, body, soul, and spirit. He bore that part of your hell for you—the destructive hell."

"I'm so grateful."

"You can thank Him yourself."

I felt another pair of arms encircle me. "It was worth it to have you here," another voice said in my ear. "Welcome, JT, you who are among the ransomed of the earth. Welcome to our eternal joy." Restoration

Before, after, then, now, and all other time references have no meaning here, so it is difficult to use such terms. "Later" is the only word I can use, since it was after my first hell—the hell that cleansed me from my wood, hay, and stubble.

As I walked through another forest, birdsong filled my ears with harmony. I did not at first notice the insect undertone. My ears became more finely tuned, and I could hear the rhythm and drone sections of this multilayered orchestral composition. I have always enjoyed music, but human composition is nothing compared to the peace and joy of His creatures making melody in perfect harmony.

There is no death here. There is no bloody claw or tooth, no flight from or aggression against another being. Each fills its niche perfectly and completely.

An even happier sound began to invade my senses, the sound of laughing children at play. It soon became clear that they were on the same path as I. I stepped aside to allow them passage. In a moment, they were beside me but did not pass. They surrounded me. A tornado of childish laughter enclosed me. I could not count them, for they never stopped moving. Their happy chatter and boundless joy infused me with their own. They began propelling me forward, locking me into their encircling love.

We settled on a wide, sandy beach. Waves rolled, thundered, and shushed onto the sand. The children broke from me and dove into the water. I started to call a warning, then stopped, realizing they were perfectly safe here. Nothing of harm was in this place. They seemed a cross between porpoise and otter, so at home were they in the waves. They finally left the water and surrounded me again, pulling me to the sand with them.

Individual faces began to emerge. There was a red-haired freckled boy of three with his thumb stuck in his mouth. On the edge of the group, a tiny girl, hair as black as midnight, smiled shyly. An ebony-skinned girl, older and taller than the others, stared into my eyes. She smiled, a radiant smile, a smile to compete with breaking dawn.

"I'm Anika," she said. "We've been waiting for you."

"For me?"

"Yes, for you. This must be very puzzling to you."

"Yes, indeed. I've never had much to do with children, yet you all surround me as if you know me."

"Well," she smiled, "there was a moment when you did have a great deal to do with children, with us."

Sudden horror filled me with a dread of hearing, of knowing the reality she was about to reveal. I knew it without words.

She nodded. "Yes, it was we whom you killed that day. Count us. Thirty-one." She pointed to a spot just above her left eye. There was no mark on her smooth skin, but I had no doubt that she meant that was where the bullet had entered her head and snuffed out her budding life.

"Oh," I groaned, then screamed, "No! No! No! Oh, that I were dead, forgetful of all that happened."

"It is necessary," she said. "You have been through the hell of yourself. Now you must face the hell of consequences. We are the result of your troubled mind, the result of a terrible misapprehension of Him who is only love. In part, it was not your fault. That is what they taught you. In other ways, you were complicit in your own madness. We are here to heal you." She spoke with a maturity far beyond her years, using a vocabulary that sometimes stretched my understanding.

Solemn faces surrounded me. Each child captured my attention, and as each pair of eyes brought my focus to them, they pointed. Each spot, I knew, was their deathblow, their reason for being here. I rocked forward and back, a blind musician's rocking, as the reality sank into my soul. I groaned in an agony of regret. It seemed my heart would burst with sorrow. I wished it would burst and relieve me of this agony of pain. A fiery hell would have seemed a balmy spring day in comparison.

When each child had shown me their kiss of death, they pressed closer, surrounding me with the touch of tiny bodies. The fragrance of small, clean children filled my nostrils. They began to weep with me. They touched me, encircled me with their arms, kissed my cheeks and eyes. I fell forward onto hands and knees and pressed my face into the damp sand. Tiny hands smoothed my hair and patted my back. Their love and forgiveness washed over me in waves. Their response to me redoubled my pain.

I cannot say for how long I wept, mourning my violence against such perfect creatures. Another layer of self was ripped from me, revealing the ugliness buried beneath the hypocrisy of humanity. I saw myself at this deep place, selfish and self-pitying. I saw anger and bitterness that, harbored and cultivated, had set me on my murderous path. I saw my cherished resentment of life's inequities that had fueled my anger and alienation.

Finally, every seam of my soul ripped open, my very being crushed to pulp, I turned to face them.

"Forgive me, please," I asked of each.

Smiles and laughter broke over me. A light, a heavenly light, poured over us. I felt its healing and mending. They pulled me to my feet. They circled me in concentric rings, each moving in the opposite direction, dancing and singing with joy. They glowed as if, translucent, they contained a light source—which, of course, they did.

The song they sang is untranslatable. It was a song of love, of forgiveness, of triumph, of joy.

Then I understood. Until the time when their parents joined us, I was their caretaker, their parent. It felt as if I were the one needing parenting, but this too was a part of my hell—the burning of detritus and the creation of the new. How can I express the joy and gratitude of my heart? How can I praise Him who does all so perfectly? How can my heart bear any more love than it does for these children, these innocents whom I hurt so terribly?

Anika was my constant companion. She seemed to know, to understand beyond the other children. A wisdom flowed from her that dwarfed all other wisdom save that from the lips of Him Who is Wisdom itself. He taught her truly.

"Why are you and the children so happy?" I asked her. "I robbed you of so much, your childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. I stole your marriage, your children, your grandchildren."

We sat, surrounded by the other children whose busy fingers plaited crowns of flowers.

She seemed to turn inward for a moment, then smiled up into my eyes. "You stole nothing," she said. "Look at us. There is no sense of loss in any of us. Besides..." she said with a bit of teasing mystery in her voice. "Besides, there is the time of the restoration of all things."

"What do you mean? Isn't this heaven? Isn't life already restored? What else is there?"

"It's not for me to tell you," she said. "It's for you to experience when it arrives. You will know," she said with finality. "You will know."

She ran from me and joined her circle of friends, contributing to their merriment.

A lone figure approached the group. As it grew closer, it resolved into a woman. Her tear-stained cheeks bore witness to some vast sorrow. She broke into a run, entered the circle of children, and scooped up a tiny child.

"Emily! Oh, Emily!" She clasped the little child to herself and smothered her face with kisses.

The child drew back at first, then, seeing clearly the face of the woman, flung her arms around her mother's neck and sobbed with joy.

"I missed you so much, Mommy. I've got so much to show you and tell you." She leaned back in her mother's arms in order to see her face. She leaned in again and kissed her on the lips. "This is JT," she said. "He's been taking care of us until you got here."

The woman's face darkened, her eyes flashed.

"You," she said. "You stole my baby from me."

"Yes," I said, sinking to my knees. "It was I."

She raised her arm as if to strike. Emily said, "Mommy, don't, please. I have forgiven him. You must too."

"But he took you from me!" Her voice was shrill and harsh.

"But you have me now," said Emily simply. "You have me now forever and ever. No one can hurt me or you. Nothing can come between us." She spoke like a little grownup.

The woman's hand, clenched to strike, relaxed. She looked into my eyes, then smiled. "Yes, forgiveness," she said. "I forgive you as I have been forgiven. There was a time, though, when I would have murdered you."

"I would have welcomed it."

She sat at my side, holding Emily. The other children gathered around, asking for news of their families and touching Emily's mother, confirming her reality.

Emily's mother joined our band, going where we went. It was good for the children to have a woman with them. Even here, a woman's touch makes a great deal of difference to a child.

Then Abrah's father joined us. Our meeting was strained, for we men have more difficulty forgiving and being forgiven. He too joined our group, traveling with us as we shared stories of the time before and of our joy in the present.

Our Lord Jesus joined us on occasion. He tussled with the children, held them close, talked with them, and listened to their stories. He went swimming with us and showed us how to ride a whale's back up from the depths astride its blowhole. As it breached and exhaled, we shot high in the air, then splashed beside the great beast. The whale seemed to enjoy it as much as we did.

We sat listening to Jesus as He talked of things great and small. He shared His thoughts on His incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. Seeing through His eyes, we began to know more of the true nature of His sacrifice. We loved Him all the more.

Anika's mother joined us, the last of the children's parents. My heinous act bound us together, something that could never have occurred without it. I do not excuse my actions. I am grateful that He Who works all things, within Whom are all things, has granted such a glorious outcome. I deserved an end more in line with my own act.

A heavenly melody with sublime words continuously plays within my heart. Human language cannot sing the words. Earthly instruments cannot play the music. My ear has never heard such glorious sounds, such sublime words. I am content. Though a murderer, I am forgiven and cleansed, living with those whom I wronged. Truly, the lion lies with the lamb.

Restoration

Into this idyll a long trumpet blast sounded. It seemed to continue for an age. The children seemed to know its meaning and drew their parents and me toward the sound. Anika took my hand, holding her mother's hand with the other.

"It is the time of the restoration of all things," she said, excitement tingeing her words, her face glowing.

I cannot describe the ceremony, the pageantry. Here, all of humanity's ages conclude. All the eons of separation and alienation from one another and from Him end in complete unity. Now nothing is outside of His glorious restoration.³ Everything and everyone is reconciled. All is reunited and restored. All is recreated. All becomes its planned and purposed state. The infinitely higher understanding and wisdom gained in the rebellion is now complete. It was but a necessary prelude to this perfection. All is accomplished. Everything meets its perfect end in Him. He is the One from Whom are all things, through Whom are all things, and to Whom all things return. He is Himself this wondrous consummation. All hearts beat with one pulse of love, considering only the benefit of the other. He is, truly and finally, all things in all ways to all things. From the worst of all rebels to the saintliest of saints, all are cleansed and restored to their rightful place.

It is possible, in earth terms, that the rejoicing continued a billion years. I cannot say. Even now, spontaneous outbursts of praise and adoration break forth. We shall never cease praising Him Who wrought all this.

One by one, the children and their families separated from me. It seemed that they were rapidly growing into the adults they would have been had I not terminated their lives.

I was not lonely, I sought no one and nothing. I was content. Then, amidst the multitudes of humankind, I saw someone I knew.

"Noodles!" I cried, recognizing my childhood neighbor.

"Can't you ever forget that horrible nickname?" She smiled, belying her scolding words.

"Well, it certainly fit you then. I bet if we had noodles here, you'd be at the front of the line every time."

"You're right. I don't miss them, but I would certainly eat them if they were available."

She hugged me, and I was at a loss for words.

She looked at me and smiled. "Cat got your tongue?"

"Well, yeah, I guess so." I felt my face flush.

She took my hand, leading me on a path with which I was unfamiliar. Flowers carpeted the path, their crushing yielding sweet perfumes. Giant trees lifted their branches heavenward as if in constant praise. Birds, insects, and animals frolicked around us as if glad to have us in their domain.

"I must show you something," she said, after we had walked some distance in silence.

"What?"

She smiled a mysterious smile, remaining silent. We entered a glade in which a number of adults and children played and talked.

"Our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren," she announced with a flourish.

"But-but-that's impossible! I have no children. We certainly didn't have any children, much less grandchildren and great-grandchildren."

"That's where you're wrong," she said.

I stared at her slack-jawed. "I didn't think lies could be told in this place."

"It's no lie. They're ours. Or more accurately, they are those who would have been ours."

"I don't understand."

She pulled me to the ground and sat beside me, surrounded by those she claimed were our descendants.

"You know that we celebrated the restoration of all things."

"Yes."

"Well, let's go back to our childhood. I liked you when we were kids. I loved playing cops and robbers, climbing trees, exploring, and throwing snowballs at you."

"So did I. I mean, I enjoyed doing those things with you," I said, "but we were just kids."

"When we were in high school, didn't you like me even a little bit?"

"Yes, more than a little bit," I admitted, my ears again heating.

"And I you," she said matter-of-factly. "In truth, we were meant for one another from all eternity."

"But—"

She put her fingers to my lips, silencing me.

"You took a different path. You turned inward, became melancholy and withdrawn. You barely noticed I existed. As soon as we graduated, you moved away, far away. It took me a long time to find you. I finally did, though."

"You did? You found me? I thought I had covered my tracks pretty well."

"You remember that I wanted to be a detective when we were kids, right?"

"Yes. Oh, I see. You did become a detective?"

"Only to find you. And when I found you, I moved to the same town."

"Why did I never see you?"

"You were pretty much into yourself," she said. "It wasn't hard to change my looks enough to hide from someone who doesn't see anything at all. I even rescued you a couple of times."

"That was you?" I asked, remembering one snowy night when a stranger had pulled up beside my wrecked car and kept me from freezing to death.

"Yes, and not just the time in the snow. Do you remember the car horn that blasted just as the two guys were about to beat you to a pulp?"

"That was also you, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"But I don't see how it is we have children. Did you, uh, did you get married?"

"No, silly. It's the time of restoration of all things. Didn't you know that restoration of all things includes all things that should have been as well as the righting of all wrongs, reconciling all and restoring all?"

"You mean..." My mind whirled in disbelief and hopeful joy. "You mean these are the children we would have had if we had been married?"

"Yes. The time of the Restoration of All Things restored all that would and should have been. In our case, that included the children we would have had and their children until the end of human time. It also restored those who were aborted or miscarried, whose lives began but ended early."

I gathered her into my arms and wept. This time, they were tears of joy. Truly, He restored the years of the destroyer, the time of the locust.

She introduced me to each in turn, from oldest child to youngest great-grandchild.

I am complete. An infinity of relationships, of knowing and being known, of discovery and infinite joy and love awaits me and mine.

My parents and hers? They are now with us as well. My father says that he was once determined to join me in hell, but now, seeing great-great-grandchildren, he doesn't know how he could have been so wrong. We rejoice together at the marvels of love worked out in and through and for us by the One Whose name is Love.

1 "The restoration of all things" Acts 3:21

2 Isaiah 11:6

3 Colossians 1:20

4 Romans 11:32

5 Romans 11:36

An Aborter's Hell

I was twenty-three the year I got pregnant. It wasn't planned. Master's degree in hand, buttressed by a diploma with the three Latin words Summa Cum Laude, I found entrée into a prestigious New York advertising agency. A year later, I became the youngest account manager in the agency's long history. I managed two significant accounts, brand names you would recognize if I told you.

Then, drunk as usual at a Friday night booze party, I gave in to the office pretty boy. It was before the time of the pill. Silly girl, stupid girl. We women are always the ones who pay the consequences, not the guys. They slink out in the morning, never looking in the rear view mirror. We suffer a lifetime of regret, a punishment by motherhood. Don't get me wrong. Being a mother was somewhere in my plans, just not then. I was on my way up. I was going to break the glass ceiling wide open.

Sheila, my girlfriend, took me to a back-alley abortionist. Luckily, my recovery was uneventful. Three days later, I was back at work. None were the wiser.

I gave the office Lothario a cold shoulder next time he rapped on my office door. "No, thanks. Your presence is not requested, required, or desired." He moved on to other game.

Empty womb, empty arms, empty heart remained.

I moved up the corporate ladder, and if I didn't shatter the glass ceiling, I at least slipped through a crack into the rarified atmosphere of a vice president's corner office. Manhattan sprawled at my feet. It seemed to worship me, small and insignificant as people appeared from the fiftieth floor.

In quiet moments, at times of introspection, my arms ached to hold that which I'd thrown away, flushed down a surgical sink. I wasn't religious. None of my family was. It wasn't guilt I felt, but rather a profound sense of loss.

I was the nose-to-the-grindstone employee, resented by others because I was always on task. I didn't chat around the water cooler and rarely went for drinks after work. I was too busy. Sixty-hour weeks kept me from feeling. Weekend work helped keep unwanted thoughts at bay. I dressed down to avoid male attention. It worked. I never married. Eventually, one of my few remaining friends convinced me to buy a lush apartment with my seven-figure income. It was merely more space through which to wander during long, insomniac nights.

I retired at seventy. They gave me a big party. I disappointed them by not smiling even then. I heard their whispered words: "Cold fish." "Corporate climber." "Ice queen." I couldn't care less.

At the farewell party, he who had taken advantage of me years before tried to make friendly with me. I slapped him. His jowls waggled under his chin and his wrinkles turned red, a clumsy parody of sunset on ocean waves.

Six months later, I died quietly in my sleep, alone in my apartment, alone in my custom-made bed. My housekeeper discovered my body five days later. They buried me without ceremony or mourners. My estate funded a charity dedicated to making adoption free to childless couples. My obituary was a mere two lines. The second line was, "She left no surviving family." True. I had killed him or her.

As spirit left body, I entered the cliché tunnel of light. There was no return ticket for me.

I have no estimate of time. I was suddenly in a cozy home, sitting in a rocking chair, looking into a lovely garden. I rocked. The chair squeaked just like my mother's. Memories flooded. I was a little girl held gently in her arms as she sang me a lullaby. Tears came to my eyes, ran down my cheeks, and dripped from my chin. Gentle tears turned into wracking sobs. My body trembled, a leaf in a violent windstorm. At the height of the storm, I felt a presence. With great effort, I lifted my head. Through tear-dimmed eyes, I saw an indistinct figure. Recognition dawned.

"Mother!"

"Yes, dearie," she said, "it's me."

She was never very good at proper grammar, probably because she had married at sixteen and never returned to school after I was born.

We embraced, my tears soaking her shirt.

"You're here, too?"

"Yes, I'm here, too. So is your father, but you'll see him later. This time is just for us girls."

I swiped my eyes with the back of my hand, snuffled a few times, wiped my nose on my sleeve, and tried to smile.

"You're sad," she said.

"That's an understatement. I haven't cried like that since—well, ever."

"Maybe I can help. I have a gift for you." She held out a previously unnoticed bundle.

I hesitated, uncertain.

"Take her. She's yours."

Hesitantly, I raised my hands to receive the tiny bundle. It was warm and soft, accompanied by a sweet baby scent. I opened the concealing blanket and looked into the face of my daughter. I exhaled a long breath, unaware that I had been holding it.

The touch of my breath on her cheek roused her. She opened her eyes and gazed into mine. They were my own eyes, brown with gold flecks. Her hair was brown and curly, like mine. She smiled. All the pent-up longing of my life spilled over. I wet her blanket with my tears. The entire time, she smiled at me, her murderer.

Her mouth began to pucker.

"She's hungry," announced my mother.

I looked at her, uncomprehending.

"You need to feed her."

"I—I have no formula, no bottles, nothing..."

"You don't need them," she said gently. "You don't need them."

It finally dawned on me what she was saying. I snuggled my child against me, rocking gently. Pent-up maternal feelings rolled gently into my soul as she nursed.

"Now you have to burp her," said my mother. "Here, let me show you how."

I named her Lilly Marie after my mother and grandmother. Full arms, heart full to overflowing.

Later, I met Him who draws all humanity to Himself. He took Lilly from my arms and rocked her. She looked into His face and smiled her most radiant smile. When He attempted to hand her back to me, she fussed, so He kept her.

The three of us walked and talked. He told me about myself. My longings and desires were an open book to Him. I thought my life had been wasted. He disagreed. "You are who I made you to be," He said gently. "So is Lilly."

The words sank into my spirit. How can one not love such a One as he?

1 Ephesians 1:11

Hitler's Hell

As is due me, thousands upon thousands stood at attention in rank and file before me, each clothed in the uniform and insignia of their rank and duty. Every gallery of the stadium was full. All stood, like the soldiers, at attention.

"This must be a dream," I thought. "I've not yet built such a stadium."

Millions of eyes were fixed on me, as is usual and required. No one shouted. None raised their arm in homage to me. None stamped their feet in rhythm to the beat of "Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!"

I began the chant. "Sieg Heil!" I raised my arm in rigid salute. The sound echoed into the distance without a response.

I shouted again, hungry for the adulation and fervor of the masses.

Nothing. All were immobile, as if carved from granite. Yet small movements betrayed life—the blink of eyes, the bob of an Adam's apple, an adjustment of position.

I again shouted the rallying cry of the Third Reich: "Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!"

No response.

Horror shook my very being. Standing not five meters in front of me, just below the stage on which I stood: ten, twenty, fifty, a hundred, a thousand, a million of the hated ones—the Juden. Stars of David were correctly sewn in place, each glowing with radiance beyond that of searchlight or sun.

"Seize them!" I screamed to the SS troops just beyond. "Execute them, or your lives will be forfeit."

No one moved. Smiles broke out on a few faces, the radiant sunlight of an inner joy.

I raged until spittle flew from my mouth. I was out of control, full of hatred and rage.

A song began in a distant gallery and spread rapidly through the throng. It was a song of peace and joy, drowning out my ravings.

Finally, I collapsed.

Someone knelt beside me. He lifted my head and held me close to his chest. He was one of that hated race, those who I believed had caused the troubles of the German nation and led to its defeat in the Great War. He cradled me as if I were a child.

"Get away! Get your filthy Jew hands off me!"

"You are safe now," he whispered.

"Safe? Safe? I killed millions of you. Am I now to trust that you will not harm me?"

"Yes," he said simply.

It seemed as if a dilemma were resolved, the final piece of puzzle fitting into place.

"I'm dead."

"Yes," he said again.

"Where am I?"

"In hell," he said.

"But I don't believe in—" I started to say.

"Belief or unbelief does not change facts."

"Where are the devils?"

He smiled. "They will face their own hell, but that is not your concern here and now. This is your hell."

I wrestled myself from his arms and stood.

"If this is hell, where are the flames? Where is the torture?"

"All in good time," he said. "Are you ready to begin?"

"Begin what?"

"Your hell. The sooner you start, the sooner it will be over."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Yes, you do. You can stand here as long as you wish. You can shout and rant all you wish. Not one of these standing here will ever respond in a way that is gratifying to you. They all love you, wish for your healing, will do anything to move you to and through your hell. But they will not, indeed cannot, pander to you."

"Who are they?" I asked, trembling as a horrific thought dawned.

"They are those you murdered, of course."

"What is my hell?"

"Your hell is to live each of their stories. You will feel what they felt, experience what they experienced. You will know the effects your words, your policies, the actions carried out by your minions had on every one of these people."

"But-but-there are millions of them!"

"Indeed," he said. "Millions and millions. Only here and now has there been an accurate accounting. But we have as long as it takes, for there is no time here."

I thought for a long time, then recognizing that it was something in which I had no choice, I nodded in assent.

"I was your first victim." His Star of David armband glowed with increased intensity. "It was 'Kristallnacht,' as you so aptly called it, the night of crystal. Broken glass, so much broken glass that it reflected and refracted the early morning sunlight, a field of diamonds. It was, in a macabre way, beautiful."

He paused and, slowly at first, his image blurred, and I saw through his eyes the bright shards of glass. I felt the cool of early morning and saw the bright glare of dawn. The terror of night lessened, but the uncertainty of the first day of a new age blossomed into my consciousness. The shattered plate glass window of his-or was it my?-clothing store lay scattered across the sidewalk and into the street. I experienced the death of his dream, fragmented like the glass of his store. Clothing ripped and shredded by the jackboots of my Stormtroopers littered the street.

A wave of confused anger overpowered me. Was it my emotion or his? The melding of experience and personality seemed incomplete. I found I could think and feel as both the victim and perpetrator, the store owner and Adolf Hitler. His feelings were superimposed over mine. I remembered the exhilaration of that first night. Mingled with the merchant's helpless dismay and hopeless terror, I felt the triumphal success and heady power that surged through me.

Anger rose in me. Protest sprang to my lips. I raised my fist against my humiliation and loss.

A brown-shirted man, only a boy, turned toward me, sneering. His fist smashed into my cheek. The hard earth broke my fall. Boots thudded into my chest and abdomen. I heard the crack of my ribs and nose. Steel spikes drove into my flesh. My blood pooled around me. One particularly heavy blow to my head turned my world dark. I woke into a new and beautiful place. The vision ended. I was again myself. He was once again himself.

I, Adolf Hitler, emperor of the Thousand Year Reich, knew. I knew the terror, the pain, the helplessness of this one other human being. I knew it to the bottom of my soul. I knew it in a way only those who have lived it can know. I retched, heaved, and felt the bile rise in my throat.

"My name is Anne," she said, "Anne Frank. I became quite famous after my death in your Bergen-Belsen death camp. Someone found my diary and published it. Millions read my personal adolescent anxieties and thoughts. Here and now, it doesn't matter. Then, I would have been mortified. It has served a grand purpose, making real and personal what I and millions like me went through."

Her experience became mine. I lived the terrifying silence when the warbling siren stopped in the street below our attic and the bullying of the SS troopers. Herded onto a cattle car, the long train ride with no comfort, sanitation, or privacy made the tiny attic seem like a palace. We lost all sense of human dignity. At the final stop, they divided women from men, old from young. They punched, kicked, and demeaned us. They slandered us with every vile word ever invented in the German language.

They packed a thousand women into a barracks intended for two hundred. I experienced the dehumanizing delousing showers, the too-thin clothing, the nonexistence of blankets, the menial, grueling work.

The day we all knew would come but never talked about arrived. They herded us into a room. "Showers," they said. There was the hiss of gas, then agonizing pain, seizures, gasping for air, sudden darkness, waking into peace and beauty.

I, Adolf Hitler, knew her terror, pain, and humiliation. I lived it, felt it to the core of my being. I, the Supreme Leader of the Deutsches Volk, the invincible Wehrmacht, the mighty war machine that was to have proven, once and for all, the superiority of the Übermensch, the Superman of Nietzsche's nightmare, knew the reality of its result. I trembled. I wept like a baby.

I fell to my knees before this Jewish teenager, clasped her around the knees and begged. I begged as the most servile beggar begs for a crust of bread. I pled for something I could not grasp. I knew in the depths of my spirit that there was a key, a means of escaping this madness, but could not discover it.

She smiled and laid her hand on my head, a gesture of pity, of empathy, of that thing which I so longed for.

He stood stiffly at attention before me. He did not salute as is required of my soldiers. He wore the uniform of an SS lieutenant with a properly affixed Death's Head insignia on his collar. He looked directly into my eyes. I knew him. His name was Jürgen Schweiger—the only SS officer who chose death over life. His story had filtered up through the ranks. It caused consternation and terror at every level of the SS and, if I am frank, to me as well.

He was the one man among all the millions who defied my cult of personality, who chose death over killing. Immediately, I ordered the deaths of all who were associated with him. I sent some to the Eastern front, where the merciless Soviet army chewed them up and spat out their corpses. Some, those closest to him, I ordered to be executed by firing squad. I could not risk this kind of rebellion. The Thousand Year Reich would have collapsed like a house of cards if it had spread. I could not risk that.

"I forgive you."

Then, as with all the other millions before him, I felt the jolt of transitioning into his experience. In him, now, I experienced the guilt and anguish of one whose conscience is tender

as he poured Zyklon B into the opening. I experienced firsthand the horror of knowing that, in moments, dozens would die a terrible death. I followed the logic of his thinking, knew his conclusion, felt his determination to rebel, to refuse participation and the realization of its consequences. I experienced his death, shared by those of the hated race packed tightly into the death chamber with him.

Forgiveness flowed from him into my spirit.

I will spare the reader the details of the thousands and millions of other lives I led, of the fear, anger, hatred, pain, and sorrow each person experienced at my hand. Some were relatively minor: a soldier's death on the Eastern Front, an English officer shot by my rifle in the Great War. Others, like Anne Frank, lived so much agony I could not bear it. But bear it I must. Were it not for a supply of strength from outside myself, I would have died, would have gone mad. I was sustained, much against my own will.

Finally, the vast arena was empty. I have no concept of passing time. It could have been an hour, a millennium, a thousand millennia. It was over, or so I thought.

Then a lone figure strode up the center aisle. He, as many of the others, was blood spattered. Unlike the others, he inspired no fear in me, no terror of living his life. I understood he was not one of my victims.

Then I learned he was my victim in a much more profound way. He is my Victim and Deliverer, my Divine Forgiver, Redeemer of all things lost, my Savior. He is the missing piece of myself. He fits perfectly into that void from which and toward which I ran my entire life.

"I forgive you," He whispered into my ear and pulled me, trembling, into His arms. "I forgive you," He said. I knew that this was the key, that every one of those whom I murdered forgave me.

"Please, please forgive me," I cried to the empty seats, to the vast parade ground in front of the stage. "Please forgive me." I wailed and wept.

The seats filled again. A wondrous chorus, a mighty anthem, such as has never been nor ever again shall be, poured from those millions of voices. It flowed from within hearts overflowing with forgiveness and love. It welled up from forgiven hearts, hearts cleansed of their own transgressions, their own destructive acts. Knowing forgiveness, they exuded forgiveness. It washed over me, a cloud, a wave, a tsunami of love. It buried me, drowned me, washed me in its purity.

He held me close through it all. He beamed as the thunderous music surrounded and enveloped us. "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain," and much more that cannot be spoken or sung in human language. It was my song of forgiveness and cleansing. It went on and on in a timeless paean of praise and worship. No longer was I its object. Now its object was He who brought us all together, whose own death at our hands made it possible to know and be known, to request and receive forgiveness.

I fell at His feet in adoration and worship, the greatest of sinners forgiven and whole at last.

Daiwik's Hell

"My story is so ordinary compared to all of yours." Daiwik paused, glancing at the six others gathered with him around the Flame. "If I'm not mistaken, JT, you and Charles were in what is now called the United States. Valerie and Alberto, you were from England? Adolf and Jürgen, you were in Germany?"

They nodded in agreement.

"It is a wonderful thing to hear your stories and how Father has brought each of you here. How good and wise He is to draw each of us to Himself through so many varied experiences. You have each spoken of your own personal hell on arriving here. Mine is quite different.

"I was born in Tamil Nadu, a major city in the Tamil region of southern India, in 1516 according to your calendar. My name is Daiwik, which means 'Grace of God' in Tamil. The god whom my parents referred to was not our Creator Father, but Shiva, one of the many representations of the Hindu pantheon. We worshipped him at our local temple. My grandparents and parents were devout Hindus, performing acts of charity and mercy, giving alms and supporting our local temple. My father worshipped there twice a day. He hoped I would become a priest.

"I grew up like most boys of my caste, carefree and spoiled. I thought little of religion, though it permeated every aspect of our culture. Ours was a vast and complex religion, built on personal achievement and doing and being good. I wasn't particularly bad, just mischievous, playing tricks on my younger siblings and making life miserable for my mother. In my teen years, I ran about the city and countryside with a group of my peers. We heckled the priests and beggars and stole small things from the marketplace. I had no thought for my future or for my place on the great wheel of Karma. It troubled me not in the least whether I would be reborn as a higher or lower caste or as an animal, snake, or insect.

"Everything changed when my favorite grandfather died. At certain ages, the death of one so beloved has a profound effect. I became very religious, attending the temple with my father and observing the rites and rituals of our religion. I offered gifts of rice and flowers and prayed deeply and fervently. I ensured that our home shrine always had food and that a fire always burned before it.

"I became increasingly aware of my unworthiness. There was a lack, a hole, a void that nothing I did could fill. I increased my devotion. The priests commended my father on raising such a devout son. They recommended that I study for the priesthood. He was pleased. But nothing satisfied the deep longing of my heart.

"The day I turned 21, I vowed to make a pilgrimage to the Ganges River. This act guaranteed that I would be reborn into a higher plane in the next life. I hoped it would give me peace in this one. In your modern measurements, the distance from Tamil Nadu to Hardwar is about 2,400 kilometers, or 1,500 miles.

"It was ten years before circumstances allowed me to begin my pilgrimage. I was about to be married to a young woman from the next village but wished to fulfill my vow before that day arrived.

I decided to increase my merit with an even more strenuous and tedious ritual. I began at my temple. Taking eight steps, I knelt, then prostrated myself full length on the ground. Rising, I took eight more steps and repeated the process. I begged for my food and slept on the hard ground at night, wrapped only in a thin cloak. During the fierce heat of the day, I dressed only in my dhoti, carrying my beggar's bowl and robe. I was filthy. My hair was matted and my body caked with the dust of the road. Counting the eight steps and stretching out on the ground became my life. I lost weight. I was exhausted, but despite the heat, hunger, and thirst, I persisted. Passing through cities, towns, and villages, I prayed at every shrine and temple. I began to feel holy and superior.

"Increasingly, the roads were crowded with other pilgrims. Begging food became a competition. At last the muddy water of the Ganges came into view. One hundred more rounds of ritual, ten, five, one. I took the eighth step of my last penitence and prepared to lower myself one final time. My fingertips would at last touch the holy water. I felt a pain in my chest. All went dark.

"My family never knew what happened to me. The people there threw my body into the Ganges River, the sacred flood.

"The darkness lasted but a moment. I opened my eyes into a glorious space. A magnificent golden temple rose in front of me. It was an exact replica of the temple of my hometown, but it was made of gold, not brick. Tentatively, I entered. I discovered that it was not a precise replica, for there were no images to our god. Through a door, brilliant light reached toward me. Walking on illuminated gold, I entered. It was massive. Far larger than my hometown temple, it seemed to be kilometers in all three dimensions. Though it was far away, I could clearly see a mighty throne, and seated on the throne, a Mighty One. As I entered, He jumped to His feet and, running swift as an arrow, stood in front of me. He paused but for a moment, then opened His arms and drew me to Himself. The moment seared itself into my mind. I wept. From Him flowed rivers of compassion and love. I knew Him to be the one I sought. Every step of my pilgrimage was a step toward Him.

"Later, he explained how unnecessary those thousands of steps were, that my own name, Grace of God, was the key to finding Him. In that moment, I knew this Being was all that I longed for. He was all that mattered in life and in death. I was truly and irrevocably forgiven, beloved of this unknown but real God. I knew true holiness, for it was not mine, but His. Deep in my spirit, I knew the true meaning of my name, Grace of God.

"That is my story, and that was my hell. It wasn't as painful for me as it was for all of you. It was merely a recognition of the reality of Him."

The Flame around which they circled grew brighter than the earthly noonday sun. None shaded their eyes, but looked directly into its depths.

"Daiwik, My beloved son, you please Me immensely, did you know that? Ignorant though you were, the seed I planted in your heart grew and continually reached toward Me. Though your pilgrimage was not required, your heart yearned toward Me. It was I who drew you. All is in My hand, and everything worked in you to bring you to Me

at the last. That is true for each of you, My friends, My beloved friends."

Each of the men knelt and bowed to the Father of all. The light dimmed.

"Adolf, Stephen, Richard, Charles, JT, Jürgen, thank you for hearing the story of His grace expressed through a heathen such as I. You were all so privileged to hear of Father in your lifetimes, especially you, Charles. I had no power as did you, Adolf, and did no brave deeds, as you did, Jürgen. I was ignorant, misguided, mistaught, and far from any source of knowledge about the true Father and His ways. Yet, in His grace, He saw fit to enfold me within His infinite love. My entire family is now here with me, and we rejoice together at His marvelous grace."

"So do we all," said JT. "It is boundless, endless, infinite in scope and duration. Hearing your story adds one more layer to our knowing and experiencing His goodness and grace. Thank you, Daiwik."

"Would anyone care to join my family and me in a feast of southern Indian food?"

The five men rose and worshipped the Father in breaking bread together.

Judah's Hell

I saw him, standing alone, staring into the River of Life, as still as a Babylonian statue.

"Judas."

He trembled visibly. "Will I never lose that name? Will it forever be my badge of shame?"

"Would you prefer Judah?"

"Yes, please," he said, turning to face me.

"How do you know me?"

"I've been looking for you."

"Another one wanting to heap condemnation on me?" Despair etched his features, and his shoulders sagged. "After what I did, I didn't expect to come into His kingdom," he said, spreading his arms wide. "But I certainly didn't expect to be shunned and vilified in this place."

"I'm not here to do either. I've always wanted to meet you. Of all the greats and not-so-greats in scripture, your story is of greatest interest to me. You were the most complex of all His disciples. Back then," I pointed over my shoulder as if the past were there, "I was a reporter. I wrote people's stories for others to read. I want to know yours."

A flicker of interest ignited briefly in his eyes, then faded.

"What could interest you in my story? I am the pariah of all pariahs, the scum of the scum of heaven. I betrayed Him. Oh, that I had not been born! Oh, that He had not brought me here to suffer eternally. This is truly hell, this place where all is joy and light and peace for everyone else. I am in constant torment. There is no refuge in sleep, for there is no sleep. No mind-bending plants exist into whose forgetful dreams I can escape. Above all, there is no death." Anger and bitterness saturated his words. "The inclusion of all humanity in His reconciliation is torture to me. I

am not reconciled but further alienated. Oh! Oh! Oh, why was I ever born?"

I stooped, filled a crystal bottle with the water flowing past us, inserted the stopper, and gently took his hand, leading him away. He didn't resist, uncaring of his fate. I led him to a high hill overlooking a vast portion of heaven. Across the river, in the far distance, the light from the Throne swirled and danced, multicolored ribbons shooting from within the central light. Sheets of color, shimmering incandescent veils, made the aurorae seem but the faint glow of a candle in comparison.

I sat and patted a rich cushion of grass. "Tell me your story." I unstopped the vial and offered it to him.

He declined. "Unworthy," he mumbled.

"It's delicious," I said after swallowing, "a complex blend of bitter and sweet, salt and tart. Like a blend of all the flavors of earth, plus many more."

He shook his head.

He was silent.

I waited. I have an infinity of time here. There are no deadlines, no cigar-chomping editor nagging for 500 words by deadline. This was for me, not for anyone else. It was my curiosity, my desire to know this reviled man.

At last, he began to talk. I won't share his story, for it is his to tell. It is a story of pain, rejection, disappointment, failure. The only brightness in all that darkness was the Choosing. The way he said the word lent the capitalization I have written. He straightened. His voice became clear, animated, and strong. He recounted the adventure of partnering with another disciple, entering villages where no disease remained when they left. He spoke of casting out demons. He spoke of the lightness and joy of serving others and the power that coursed through him as they traveled from town to town. Though uncertain before, he was convinced that this One was indeed the promised Messiah.

He took a long, shuddering breath. His eyes turned inward. "I was always a thief. No matter how I resisted the urge, I always yielded. He didn't make it easy for me. He appointed me treasurer of the band of brothers. Temptation was always present. I could feel the money bag slapping my thigh with every step. We took many steps." He paused again, withdrawing even deeper within himself.

"Tell me about that night."

Tears welled in his eyes, spilled down his cheeks, and overflowed onto his beard. They were not healing tears of sorrow, but bitter tears of recrimination, self-loathing, and guilt. Never before had I witnessed such profound grief.

Eventually, the tears slowed, then stopped. He wiped his face with the sleeve of his tunic.

"Oh, what is to become of me? My misery surpasses my capacity to contain it, yet I cannot die. Truly this is hell." His outburst ended in a protracted, morose silence.

"Do you remember what Jesus said at the table?"

"No."

"Shall I remind you?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know what power took over my mind. I couldn't resist. I had to do what I did. All the way to the High

Priest's home, my mind, my will, tried to turn my feet from their terrible errand. I could not turn, could not abandon my task. It was as if I were possessed. The paltry sum gave me no peace. When I led the rabble to the garden where I knew He would be, I could still not resist. My kiss betrayed Him and condemned me. I fled to the High Priest and cast the ill-gotten silver at his feet. It tinkled across the marble floor. Before the last coin toppled, I ran from the elegant room. I hanged myself. 'Cursed is everyone who hangs from a tree.' I know my Torah. Doubly cursed, I knew I was anathema to man and God, cast out of the camp, never to return. Lost."

He rocked in abject pain, tears again staining his cheeks. When he quieted, I said, "Do you still want to hear His words?"

"I'm not sure. I betrayed the spotless Son of God."

"I think it will be to your benefit to hear."

"Go ahead. It can't hurt any worse than it already does."

"First, you remember that He said, 'One of you will betray me.'"

"Yes."

"You remember that each of you asked if it was he."

"Yes."

"I'm assuming that you were terrified of being discovered, so I'm surmising you finally had to ask the same question."

"True."

"To which Jesus said, 'You have said it.' You knew then that He knew?"

"Yes, I did." His head fell even further.

"He then gave you a piece of bread torn from the loaf after He had dipped it in the bowl of wine."

"Yes. I was suddenly overwhelmed with the need to do what I had been planning. I remember far too clearly. I wish I could forget."

"What did He say to you as you were standing?"

"'What you are about to do, do quickly.'"

"And you did."

"Yes. To my shame."

"Do you remember what else He said?"

"Something about woe to him. It would have been better had he not been born. How true that is! If only I had died in my mother's womb."

"Do you see it yet?"

"No."

"Let me tell you what Peter said a few weeks later. All the disciples gathered together. Peter and John had just faced down the whole Sanhedrin. When they came back to the others, Peter nominated Matthias to take your place."

"Matthias? I wouldn't have picked him. He was a nonentity."

"Perhaps you're right. He was never again mentioned."

Judah's expression didn't change.

"Anyway, Peter stood up in the middle of the group. You know Peter: always the talker."

"Very true. He had a quick tongue."

"He stood up and said, 'Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus.

For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry.'"

"Peter said that?"

"Yes. See the picture?"

"Maybe. Hard to believe."

"Let me clinch it. Later, Peter and John healed a man who was born with deformed feet. It was in the Temple, so you can imagine that it caused quite a stir. The rulers and elders arrested them. They couldn't do anything because too many people had witnessed the miracle. They released Peter and John, who returned to the gathering. After they told their story, they all began praying and praising God. Great miracles followed, and the good news of Jesus spread like wildfire."

"Really?"

"Yes, and listen to what part of their praise said. 'For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.' You aren't mentioned by name, but Pilate and the High Priest would have been unable to do their predestined part if you didn't do what you did."

His face took on an expression of awe. "Can it be true?"

A figure settled next to Judah.

Judah looked up sharply. "Lord?"

"Yes, Judah, it is I."

Judah sat up straight, fell on his face, and worshipped. He uttered incomprehensible sounds, sounds of pleading, of terror, of contrition.

Jesus touched him on the head. "You are forgiven."

Judah suddenly quieted. After a moment, he raised his head. Jesus leaned forward, lifting him to his knees, then stood, raising him with Him. He gathered him into His arms. Judah wept uncontrollably.

I do not know how long it lasted. Time is not the same here. It could have been an hour or a millennium. It was time enough.

"Was I truly meant to betray You?"

"Yes. You know that I chose you that day on the road."

"I remember."

"I chose you from among all Israel to be My betrayer."

"Why me?"

"Everything you faced, everything you did, prepared you for your life's mission. Nothing was wasted. All pointed directly to that meal, that betrayal. Without it, without you, I would not have died. Without My death, all humanity would still be in the misery of death. You played the pivotal role. You were the capstone of all humanity's hatred against God. What you did, all did. You were a symbol, an allegory of what every other human being would have done had they been you in that moment."

"Really? But Peter and Jo—"

"They each had their parts to play. Peter abandoned and denied Me. John hung around a little closer, but still far enough to run if he needed to. They all abandoned Me."

A look of wonder settled on Judah's face. "All? Even Peter?"

"Yes, but of them all, you were the most important."

"Me? But I hanged myself on a tree. I was doubly cursed."

"Yes, but doubly necessary for Our plans to work out correctly."

Judah tilted his head back and laughed. It was a mighty laugh, a deep, earth-shaking belly laugh. He wiped his eyes, then broke into more gales of laughter.

"You got it!" said Jesus.

Jesus held His hand out to me. I handed Him the crystal flask. He gave it to Judah and said, "Take this. Drink all of it. It is My blood, the blood of the New Covenant, shed for you, to take away all your sins, including that of betraying Me."

Judah reverently took the flask, tipped it to his mouth and drank. His Adam's apple bobbed in rhythm with his swallows. He emptied the flask. Once again, he dropped to the ground in front of Jesus, worshiping.

"You took the bread and wine at that great supper. You were included in the New Covenant with the other twelve. You were never excluded, never sent out of the camp. This water of life confirms what was always true. You are, and always were, My beloved disciple."

Jesus knelt beside Judah and raised him to his feet.

"Come. You must meet our Father."

Without a glance at me, the two of them began running toward the River. They plunged in, swam across, then ran toward the Light. Every so often, they slowed and skipped like little children. Judah's laugh floated back to me, silvery on the air.

I relaxed onto the grass. What a joy is mine, to find and open the eyes of those whose hell it is to think themselves beyond His love and grace.

1 Acts 1: 23, 24

Steven and Richard in Hell

"oops, pardon me. I didn't see you standing there."

"So it's dark for you, too?"

"Yes. Pitch black. Can almost feel it. Why do you ask?"

"I was born blind so had no sense that this place was dark. By the way, do you know where we are? The last thing I remember is standing up from my desk chair. Now I can't find it. You weren't in my office either."

"Let me assure you, it's as dark as a cave."

"Wish I had my cane. Make it easier to explore. May I ask your name, sir?"

"Of course. How rude of me. I'm Richard."

"Are you the famous biologist? The one who wrote so much about evolution?"

"Don't know about famous, but I've done some publishing."

"I read your article a couple of months ago in Biophysics."

"Yes, that was mine."

"Brilliant. Great work in melding biology with physics."

"Thanks. Kind of you. If you're reading Biophysics, you must be a scientist, too."

"Yes. I've done some publishing, too. Mostly in physics and astrophysics journals. I'm Steven, known mostly for my astronomical theories."

"You're the blind physicist. I've read about you. Can't figure out how you do it."

"This is weird. I think I'm seeing something. When you see, is it like...well, kind of, um... I don't know how to explain it. Sort of like touching something warm?"

"Yes, maybe that would be one way to describe it."

"Well, then, turn around and tell me what you see."

"By gosh! It's a bright light, indeed. It's a miracle that you can see!"

"Shush, don't say that too loudly. Never know who might be listening. Never did believe in such things myself, but this does test my assumptions a bit."

"It's beautiful. All those colors merging and entwining within themselves."

"I had no idea. That's color?"

"Yes, all the colors of the rainbow blending together. Spectacular. I've never seen such color. It's...it's a sea of color, twisting and coiling back on itself and within the other colors. Wish I had a camera to record this. What a phenomenon!"

"I wonder what physics is at work here?" Steven mused. "This has to be the most incredible scientific find of all time. Move over, Newton and Einstein. Can't wait to publish on this. Physics will never be the same."

"I wonder if it's alive, if it's some stage of our past or, more likely, our future. Maybe this is the ultimate end of evolution, pure energy," said Steven

A chuckle, melodious and deep, as if bells and harps were playing the full range of a Haydn symphony, came from deep within the shapeless light.

"Welcome, Dr. Steven. Welcome, Dr. Richard. Welcome to hell."

"Hell? But I don't believe in hell," cried Richard.

"Well, what you believe isn't always what is."

"Hell?" asked Steven, "This is hell? Where's the fire?"

"I am the fire."

"Who are you?"

"You haven't figured that out yet?"

"Uh, no, not really. Are you something of our evolutionary future?" asked Richard.

"In some small sense of that word, but not as you mean it. I'm also your past, come to that."

"What do you mean?" asked Richard.

"One of my favorite rebels, whom you know as Paul, said it this way: 'Of Him, through Him, to Him are all things...' He was right, of course, that all things originate in Me, all things happen through Me and return to Me. In that sense, I am your past, your present, and your future. You ask if I am some final future evolutionary stage in the long progression of life. I am not. I am life's beginning, necessity, and destiny."

The voice paused as if considering. "You're probably curious about the coincidence of both of you being in this strange place at the same time."

"Yes, indeed," said Richard. "Rather strange, I'd say."

"I brought you both here at the same time to thank you and reward you for your years of diligent service in my cause. In fact,

I brought you at the same time since I want you, two of the preeminent scientists of the latter twentieth century, to share in the experience. You, Steven, were a famous physicist, and you, Richard, were one of the premiere exponents of biological evolution."

"You say that in the past tense," Steven said.

"You haven't figured it out yet? Not to put too fine a point on it, you're dead. You both died in your sleep last night. Both from a heart attack, both at 12:01 a.m. GMT. There's quite a buzz in the media today about that coincidence, I tell you."

"Dead?" asked Richard.

"As a doornail," replied the voice, "though I never figured out why a doornail is deader than a rock, but human speech is so wonderfully creative. Rather a reflection on My designs for you all, if I do say so Myself. I brought you both here at the same time, knowing that each of you would appreciate it more in the presence of another scientist of equal caliber."

"You said you brought us here as a reward for good and faithful service. If you are who I am beginning to suspect you are, then you either didn't understand what I was saying, or you have an odd sense of reward," said Richard.

"I know you hated Me. In actuality, you hated the straw god set up by those religious folks who taught you as a child. Rejecting that image of Me was actually the most rational and wisest of choices you could have made. In rejecting that image of Me, you were free to fulfill My will and plans for you and the world. You played right into My hands, so to speak. I am, as you will soon understand, nothing like what they taught you. I too would reject Me if that were Me."

"So you are God?" asked Richard.

"Yes, I AM the I AM of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Moses and David and Jesus. In the flesh—though more accurately, in the spirit."

"Oh. Shouldn't we be taking off our shoes and bowing down before You?" asked Steven.

"All in good time, when you have passed through your hell."

"You keep saying..." said Steven.

"You're both full of questions. Such good scientists, always asking, wanting to know."

"Universe, be!" the voice boomed out across the immense emptiness.

A vast panorama appeared around them. The sun blazing in its glory, the circling planets, stars, galaxies, nebulae, all moving in perfect synchrony, wheels within wheels.

"I can see all the way to the edge of what we knew as the oldest galaxies," cried Steven. "There are no supernovae, no asteroids, no rings around Jupiter. Is this the way the universe was supposed to be?"

"Yes. You're seeing it as it was at the moment of creation. Wait till you see what's next."

Suspended in the void, they looked down on a shapeless, cloud-enshrouded planet.

"Light, be!" There was light. The clouds parted, revealing a vast, troubled sea. The planet turned once.

"Sky, be!" The vapor lifted from the water, opening a vast, airy environment.

The world turned again.

In quick succession at the dawn of each new day, the light said, "Land, appear! Plants, be! Water and beasts, be!" Each appeared in turn.

The light settled onto a riverbank. Turning over the sod, the light scooped red clay from the wounded earth. He molded the lump of clay. In seconds, a perfect man lay before them, still and silent.

"Adam?" asked Richard.

"Yes, Adam the First."

"Who was Adam the Second?" asked Richard.

"There was no second Adam, only the last Adam. It's a mystery you will begin to understand the longer you are here. For now, my clue to you is this. He was born of a virgin. Chew on that for a while."

The three gathered around the perfect, inert body were silent.

"I was wrong, wasn't I?" said Richard. It was more of statement than a question.

"Yes, you were."

Great sobs wracked Richard's body. He fell to the ground, wailing. A moment later, Steven joined him. Their tears wet the perfect creation at their feet. Memory surged and ebbed within. Each denunciation, each denial of His existence tormented them. Pride melted in the furnace of self-condemnation.

Finally—and whether after moments or eons, neither could say—their tears abated. In unison, they collected their wits and knelt, bowing to the light.

"Too long I fought against You," said Richard.

"No, it was just right," the voice smiled. Colors became brighter, more pronounced. "You have both been good and faithful servants. You accomplished My purposes in the earth. You were both lying tongues to those who wished to believe a lie, who wanted an excuse to live their lives without Me."

"Oh, how I regret. If I'd only—" said Richard.

"There are no if onlies," said the voice. "There is only the working of My will within you and through you."

"You mean You intended us to preach falsehood?" asked Steven.

"Yes. Now you will see things from My perspective. You will know how all things fit together, how you were My beloved sons, carrying out My decisions, My plans in the world."

"This was hell?" asked Richard.

"Yes. You have confronted your life and your beliefs. You now know forgiveness. You now know Me. I am the fire of hell, a cleansing fire, burning away from you all that is in rebellion against Me. We are reconciled; we are friends. Welcome home, My sons."

The light became translucent. It hovered over the still form. They watched his chest rise. The light moved away. Color suffused the body. The eyes fluttered and opened. Breath followed breath, and the figure sprang to its feet. Seeing the light, he knelt. "My Lord and my God."

Romans 11:36

Billy's Hell

"My, oh my! Isn't this nice. Even more glorious than I imagined!" His soft Southern accent lingered even here.

"Let me show you more," said his angel guide.

"Yes, please. It's so wonderful that my heart is full to bursting."

His guide smiled. "You've seen nothing yet. You have an eternity of discovery, and it's only been moments in your time."

"These trees are so beautiful. Nothing like them on Earth. Look at that waterfall. Wow! Look at the feathers on that bird."

"Actually, we never tire of looking at them, nor will you."

"Is this the River of Life?"

"Yes, and there is the Tree of Life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations."

"I never quite thought of it this way, but isn't the term 'the nations' shorthand for unbelievers?"

"You're beginning to get it."

"Where is the Lake of Fire?"

"That's on the tour. It's actually the last stop."

"I thought Father would be the last stop."

Billy's angel smiled and nodded. "Pretty much."

They walked in silence, Billy's eyes flitting from wonder to wonder.

"When will we see Father?"

"Soon. Can you sense the brightness growing?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact."

They entered a giant doorway and began to walk across a glass paving. Within the glass, flames of infinitely varied colors flashed and danced. At first, it appeared to be random, then, gradually, a vast synchronized interplay of fiery color wove intricate patterns under their feet. The air was charged with energy, as if a bolt of lightning were about to strike. Sweet odors wafted around them, sometimes dark and mysterious, sometimes light and playful. A vast chorus began to weave spellbinding patterns of sound-words indistinct, lost in the vast ocean of harmony. Throughout Billy's body, completely new sensations coursed along heretofore unknown neural pathways. Senses beyond all senses bombarded him in a constantly changing rhythm.

"Here we are," said Billy's angel. "From here, you walk alone. Just walk into the Light."

Billy hesitated for a moment, glanced at his companion, then turned resolutely toward the Light. It doubled and redoubled in brightness and intensity as he approached. It resolved into tongues of fire, intricately interwoven, infinite in color and pattern.

He paused.

"Don't be afraid, Billy. I've been looking forward to this meeting for a long time." The voice paused. "Your time, of course, not Mine."

Uncertain for the first time, Billy didn't know whether to fall on his face in worship or keep walking. He chose the latter.

"Me too," he finally said.

"You've been on a long journey, for humans," said the voice. "Now it's time."

"Time?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"Time to face your hell."

"Hell? But I've believed in Jesus since I was a child. I thought—"

"Yes, I know what you thought. Remember Who I am. You had a lot to say about hell, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course. Jesus talked a lot about it, too. That's why I focused on it. Fear won many to You."

There was a long pause. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course. Fear is a great motivator."

"Did you never read what My Son's favorite disciple wrote?

'There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.'"

"Yes, but isn't hell just another aspect of Your love?"

"There is nothing but love in Me. How can love send someone to burn forever?"

"I did begin to see that and modified my theological position. I taught that hell was separation from You, an unending, never-satisfied quest for You."

"Yes, and you said that I wished for all men to be saved, if I am quoting you correctly."

"Yes, of course."

"Is there anything that can resist My will?"

"Um, no, I suppose not."

"How then can anyone resist My will?"

"I just assumed..."

"Yes, you and most other preachers, especially you who were evangelists. Thousands came to Me because of your preaching, but millions more turned away, disgusted, terrified, appalled that I could and would do such a thing, be such a God."

"I—I—"

"You must know something, Billy. It is going to be very painful for a while."

"You mean I have to go to hell?"

"Yes, for hell is My own heart. I am the consuming fire. I am hell itself. I am the Lake of Fire you used to love to hold before your terrified audiences."

"I didn't—"

"Yes, I know. You never heard the real gospel. You preached a false gospel. It sounded wonderful. Many came to Me. But after a short while, most left and never returned. Worse were those who, so terrorized, fell into depression and despondency. Some killed themselves. Did you know that?"

"I didn't know."

"Come, Billy, did you never think even for a moment about what you were saying? Did you never sense the terror, the horror of what you were saying about Me? According to you, I am a monster, an infinitely sadistic monster who tortures those who don't know Me. Did you never suspect, even once?"

"Well, I did read a book once, Hope Beyond Hell, which was quite good. That's when I modified my theological position. But you already know that."

"Ah, Billy, you were so steeped in your ways, in your theology, that you couldn't see what was right in front of your eyes. I am love. Love casts out fear. Fear has no place in any methodology to bring people to Me."

"Oh. Were the annihilationists right, then?"

"No, of course not. That is just a shorter hell. Can you not see that all humans are My children? What human father would destroy even one of his children should they run away from home, reject their father, even murder him? No real father would do that to the child he loves. How can that be true of Me?"

"Then you mean...?"

"Yes. One day, I will win all humanity to Myself. Death isn't the end of choice. When all know Me as I am, all doubts will be allayed, every heart's rebellions opened to the light and eliminated, every lie exposed by Truth. I will not force anyone, but I do know the key to every heart. I know what causes rebellion, apathy, and doubt in every mind. The love revealed in My Son conquers all. It is He, suspended between heaven and earth, who draws all humanity to Me. It is His body, pierced by every man's spear, that reveals Our love to every individual."

"Oh. Then we were all wrong?"

"Most of you."

"Would that I could tell them how wrong I was."

"You will have that opportunity, Billy. Your hell is just this. You are to feel the terror, the horror, of all those you turned away from Me and those who came to Me serving Me from fear, not love."

"My hell?"

"Yes. You began to feel it as you came close to Me. It will get worse before it gets better. But as you enter this time of cleansing fire, know that I am with you."

Billy's face contorted in terror. At the same time, he felt arms surround and hold him. He felt loved and protected while, at the same time, an overwhelming fear invaded him. He screamed in agony of mind, experiencing the pain caused by his spoken and written word. Faces and situations flitted across his mind's eye. Friends, enemies, and thousands of nameless people told their stories in great detail. Billy's soul cringed under the load of guilt.

Finally, the fiery ordeal ended. A new sense of life flowed through him.

"You are good. You are gracious, O Lord God. You raise the lowly and cast down the mighty. I have sinned and claim that blood He shed for me and for those whom I turned away from You. May I meet them? May I express my regrets?"

"Yes, of course. They are anxious to meet you, too. You are forgiven in My Beloved, and they have already forgiven you."

Billy leaned into the light and rested his head against a very humanlike chest.

"I am undone," he said.

"Yes, Billy, you have endured the Lake of Fire. Your wood, hay, and stubble are consumed. You now know My forgiveness and my love. One thing more. All the time you were preaching such terrible things, you were doing My will."

"What? How can that be?"

"All My purposes are met in all that happens, for I work all things after the counsel of My own will."

"I begin to see."

"Is not your heart freer knowing Me in this way?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Then you have the answer. Go meet those whom your life touched and learn from them about Me. You are no longer teacher, but taught; no longer preacher, but auditor."

Billy sat at an ornate picnic table facing a man whom he remembered well—his first convert.

1 Revelation 22:2

2 1 John 4:18

3 1 Peter 2:4

4 Revelation 20:14, 15

5 1 John 4:8

6 1 John 4:18

7 Colossians 1:19, 20

8 1 Corinthians 3:11-15

9 Ephesians 1:11

Fran and Sue in Hell

I saw her before she saw me. Pulling her roller bag behind her, she strode with the easy grace I remembered so well. Her face transformed into a broad smile when our eyes met.

"Oh! It's so good to see you after all these years," Sue cried. Tears coursed down her cheeks, smearing her makeup.

My expression mirrored hers. We hugged.

"Well, roomie, I hope we don't wait so long next time to get together again," I said. "Dinner first? Dan is taking care of the kids, so we're officially on the town."

"I still think it's hilarious that your names rhyme. Fran and Dan. Dan and Fran. Was that what attracted you to each other in the first place?"

"No, of course not! It was love at first sight."

"Oh, okay. Love, then rhyme."

"Yep, that's pretty much the way it was."

A comfortable silence filled the space between us.

"Dinner, then?"

"Sounds good. Could we go to Gilliard's Pizza, for old time's sake?" Sue asked.

"Sure. Haven't been there in years. We could drive through the campus afterwards."

"Oldest ones here," muttered Sue as we settled into a booth.

"Remember how we mocked the old folks who came in when we were students?"

"Now we're them. They're doing it to us, now," she said, nodding toward a table of undergrads.

"We've earned it, I guess."

"Still do the anchovy thing?" Sue asked with a hint of sarcasm.

"Yep. Never outgrew them. Guess we'll have to have a Half-and-Half, if they still have it. Oh, here it is. Still number seven. You still want pepperoni on your half?"

"Of course! What else is there?"

We ordered and sipped our drinks.

"Hasn't changed much. Look! Isn't that Antonio himself?"

Turning, I said, "Well, by gosh, it is! Wonder if he'll remember us."

"Doubt it."

Just then, he glanced up, smiled, and waved at us. He waddled toward our table and said, "Well, if it isn't Fran and Sue. Been a long time."

"Do you remember the name of every coed who ever entered this dive?" asked Sue.

"Nah, just those who gave me a bad time. How have the two of you been? You can see things are the same here. Well, except that I'm a bit balder."

He doffed his chef's hat. Balder he was, indeed.

"Better get back to the kitchen before the boss catches me talking to two pretty women. Kinda jealous, if you know what I mean." He winked.

After he left, I asked, "How was your flight?"

"A bit bumpy on the way in, but overall good."

"No kids yet?"

"No. Don't think that's going to happen for us." She sighed. "Something to do with low sperm count, as far as we can tell."

"Sorry, Sue. You could have my rug rats every other weekend if you want."

"I would if I lived closer. Fred's job pays too well to make it feasible to move right now."

Another comfortable silence settled between us.

"Let me ask you a question, Frannie."

"Sure, ask away."

"A while back, on the phone, you said you were getting into religion or something."

"Yeah. We're both happy that we've found a good church with a good pastor and lots of activities for us and the kids."

"What got you onto that track?"

I smiled. "Serendipity, I guess. One day we were driving down Halliday Street. You remember? The one that goes into downtown?"

Sue nodded.

"It was Sunday morning, and cars were turning into the driveway of a megachurch. It's huge. Suddenly, Dan just slowed and turned into the parking lot.

"What are you doing?" I shouted.

"Always wanted to see what goes on in one of these places. Now's as good a time as ever."

"We're not dressed for it," I said, looking for an excuse.

"Don't think it matters. Take a look."

"We were dressed much like them—jeans and T-shirts.

"Oh, okay," I grumbled under my breath. "Come on, kids. This will be a first for you, too."

"They were warm and welcoming. We sat on the last pew in order to be close to an exit, just in case. We loved the music, the spontaneity of the crowd, and when the pastor spoke, we were both touched in a place we didn't know existed. We've been going ever since. We're considering being baptized, in fact. Becoming real members."

"Interesting," said Sue. "We've been attending a small church, too."

"You?"

"Well, why not? If you can, why can't I?"

"You were such a hard-core atheist, being a science major and all."

"I guess we all grow up eventually."

"Hey, tomorrow's Sunday. Why not come with us?"

"Well, uh, guess so. I don't think the theology will be the same, but what the heck... Sure, let's."

The next morning, Sue asked, "What should I wear? We're kind of formal at our church, you know, dresses and all."

"Whatever you like. Most wear jeans, like I said, but some dress up. Whatever makes you comfortable."

After the church service, I apologized. "Sorry for the sermon. It was a bit heavy. Hope her hellfire and brimstone message didn't offend you."

"Well, I'm no biblical scholar, so can't argue anything about that. It is a bit scary to think that if we hadn't just happened to accept someone's invitation to come to church, we would burn in hellfire forever and ever. That seems a bit harsh."

"What does your church teach on what happens after this is all over?" I motioned with my hands, indicating the earth and all history.

"I think we believe that those who don't accept Jesus or who reject Him outright will be burned up. Seems that I remember the pastor quoting a text that the righteous will walk on the ashes of the wicked."

"Oh, a sort of shorter hell?" I laughed.

"I suppose so," she admitted.

The days passed quickly, too quickly. We caught up on what each knew of mutual friends from college, shopped, took the kids to the park, had a birthday party for the youngest, and stayed up too late talking every night. We both felt the joy of renewed friendship.

"What time do you need to be at the airport tomorrow?" I asked.

"Flight takes off at 11:50 a.m., so I should probably be there around nine."

"Okay. I'll drop the kids at the babysitter at 8:00, and we can just go from there. Might be a bit early, but we can sit for a bit and chat before you have to brave the TSA line."

"Sounds like a plan."

The next morning, we continued our rambling conversation as I merged onto the freeway.

"Could we plan to get together sometime and include our families?" she asked. "I would love to spend more time with your kids. They're precious." Her voice was wistful.

"You don't have them twenty-four hours a day! But I will admit they're cute, and I love them to death. We don't have to worry about school schedules and all that yet, so pretty much any time."

"How about Christmas? Fred takes two weeks off around then. Normally, we head south to get out of the Portland rain for a bit. This year, we could come here, if that would work. Look out!" she screamed.

Tires squealed. Horns blared. Metal smashed into metal. Then a terrifying silence.

"Are we dead?" asked Sue.

"Well, this ain't Kansas."

"Look over there," Sue said, pointing at a concrete-block building. "Looks like some state office building to me."

"Let's go see what it's about."

When we arrived, I opened the front door. Several nondescript grey government-issue steel desks filled the room. All of them but one were empty. A receptionist typed at that one desk.

Looking up, she asked, "May I help you?"

"Well, yes, um, we don't know where we are or what we're supposed to do. Can you help us?"

"Of course! That's what I'm here for. What are your names?"

We supplied them.

She peered at a computer terminal after typing our names. "Oh, yes. The freeway pileup a few minutes ago in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S.A. We've been expecting you. Have a seat," she said, indicating uncomfortable-looking plastic chairs. "Stan will be with you in just a moment."

"Can you tell us what this is all about?"

"No, sorry. That's above my pay grade. I just check people in. 'Scuse me. Someone else is here. Need to check them in. Stan'll be here in just a moment."

As we settled into the chairs, we looked at each other.

"This is weird," Sue said.

"Indubitably. Weird isn't the half of it. If this is heaven, where are all the shining angels and cherubs, all that sort of thing? Are they going to assign us a cloud now?"

"Maybe that's it, the right fit, so you don't get decubitus on your backside from sitting for eternity." She giggled nervously.

A door opened on the opposite side of the room. A man appeared in the doorway, frowning at a clipboard. "Fran Johnson? Sue Engles?" He peered around the room, eyes settling on us. He smiled.

We rose together and walked toward him.

"Hi. My name is Stan. I've been assigned to get your paperwork out of the way and give you an orientation to this place." His arm spread in a flat arc, indicating everything in general and nothing in particular. He pointed at two chairs in front of another grey metal desk, then seated himself in a swivel chair behind it.

"Let's see," he said. "Yep, that checks out. Mm hm. Okay, I think all is in order. Just review the form to make sure it's all correct, then sign at the bottom."

"What're we signing?" asked Sue.

"Oh, these are your induction papers. They confirm your identity and give us permission to grant your admission ID."

"Where are we?" she asked, a bit irritably.

"Don't you know?"

"No!" we chorused.

"Well, he said," leaning back in his chair and folding his hands behind his head, "I guess there's no reason why you should know. Most people don't when they get here, but I thought that since you both went to church, you would figure it out on your own. I shouldn't take things for granted, should I?"

"We're both newbies at church and don't know much, I'm afraid," said Sue.

"Then let me be the first to welcome you to hell," said Stan, smiling.

"Hell?" we cried, again in unison.

"But I thought—I thought we got out of hell because we accepted Jesus as our Savior!" I spluttered.

"Or avoided annihilation," added Sue. "Was it all a lie, a trick to get our money for the pastors?"

"No, no, not at all!" Stan relaxed, his brow unfurrowed, and a light danced in his eyes.

"Let me begin at the beginning. 'A very good place to start,' as a song from my youth on earth went."

We glanced at each other out of the corners of our eyes—our eye-rolling glance.

"You see, there is and there is not a hell," he continued.

"That doesn't make sense," I said.

"It will. Bear with me a bit. Most churches teach that there is an ever-burning hell for those who don't accept Jesus at some time during their lifetime. Either they didn't hear about Him, or they ignored Him, or even worse, rejected Him. Those are what we call the 'freewillers.'" He chuckled at his own joke. "In other words, you have the choice to defeat God's will for your salvation. You can also choose your eternal destiny by neglect. Never hearing about Him also dooms you, if you believe what they say. This would, of course, mean that most of humanity would spend eternity in a torture chamber by choice or by chance.

"Let me assure you, our Father is absolutely, unconditionally not like that. Many other churches believed that some were predestined to heaven, others to an ever-burning hell. These are the predestinators. In other words, it is Father's choice to barbecue most of His children forever because He decided beforehand who would and who wouldn't burn. Again, that's definitely not our Daddy."

"But I heard that those who didn't confess the name of Jesus would be burned up," countered Sue.

"That would be a shorter hell, for sure," said Stan. "It's still an eternal punishment for just 70 or so years of sinning. That's not very fair, and that is equally untrue about Father. He wills that all shall be saved. Can anyone resist the will of Father?"

"I suppose not," I said. "He's all-powerful, isn't He?"

"You're right. He will have His way, for He is irresistible and all-powerful."

"That makes it sound like He's arbitrary and coercive," said Sue.

"That's not what I mean at all. His love, once truly heard, seen, and understood, is irresistible. When the human heart is set free from the lies and circumstances of rebellion, it knows that all else is worthless compared to living within His love. He is all love, and love finds its way around any obstacle of the heart. His love is not coercive or arbitrary, but winning and wooing. It's the old saying, 'Love conquers all.' Love is gentle, kind, considerate, patient, never gives up, endures all things. It cannot be defeated, for every human was created to respond to love, especially that of Father. It will win the heart of the most stubborn of sinners. He knows what experiences to bring to us, what words, what acts of love. In my case... Well, never mind. Let's just say that I was one of His hardest nuts. He finally broke through, though, to my eternal gratitude. Now that, ladies, is good news indeed!"

"You mean that we're all predestined to be saved?" I asked, puzzled. "That doesn't seem fair either. After all, I went to church every Sunday, paid a tithe, and helped out in the kids' Sunday school. Why should others get in who never did any of those things? I worked my butt off on some Sundays, while those others sat home on the couch and watched TV!" My face flamed with anger.

"We get to the crux of the matter right away, I see," said Stan. "That's what hell is for."

"I thought you said there was no hell!" Sue almost shouted the challenge. "This is one mixed-up place. First it's one thing, then the opposite of that. How can it be both hell and no hell, or annihilation and no annihilation?"

"I'm just getting to that point," Stan said patiently. "It's more like this. Both hell and annihilation are partly true. There is a hell—"

"There you go again," muttered Sue.

"Patience, patience. We've got all eternity to get this figured out. Five o'clock never comes here," he said with a grin. "Let me start again. There is a hell and there is an annihilation. Notice that I said, 'a hell' and 'an annihilation.' What you were taught, that there is an ever-burning hell or that there is a total annihilation, are both incorrect in degree. There is a hell, but it is only a hell of sufficient duration to accomplish its task. There is an annihilation of that which is destructive, divisive, and alienating in you. In reality, hell and annihilation are one and the same thing. Hell annihilates all that is not of Father in you. It is cleansing, remedial, healing, consoling. It is what love is and does. It is the very heart of Father. Some call it the Lake of Fire. After all, scripture says that God is a fire, a consuming fire."

"You mean that we have to go through fire?" I shuddered. "No thanks."

"In that case, you have no part in Father. Without passing through the fire that is Him, you cannot exist within Him."

"Won't it hurt?" Sue shrank into her chair, terror etched on her face.

"Not in the sense you think. It's not physical. It's not really emotional, either. It's more the anguish of giving up something that is precious but harmful. Did either of you smoke, then give it up?"

"I did," Sue admitted sheepishly.

"Wasn't that a kind of hell when you quit?"

"Oh, yes indeed."

"The difference is that Father's hell is not painful, not a withdrawal kind of pain. It's more a giving up that which you hold nearest and dearest about yourself. It's a dying to self and becoming alive to Father. Let me assure you, it is more than worth it. It's like living on beans and rice all your life. You can't imagine life without those two staples. Then, when first introduced to fruit, vegetables, and meat, you're not sure you want to give up what you're used to. But once you taste a ripe strawberry, a crisp stalk of celery, or a perfectly done steak, you will never return to that bland diet."

"You have a point if it's true," said Sue.

"It's true. I can vouch for it personally. I've been through it. It was the most glorious of all experiences—the loss of that which was broken within me." He turned inward for a moment, lost in introspection, remembering. He glanced at each of us. "Ready?"

"Could we go together?" asked Sue, taking my hand.

"Of course. That's how He planned it. He brought you here together because He knew the depth of your friendship."

"What about my kids and my husband?" I wept deep, wrenching sobs.

"They will be sad-broken, in fact. Both of your husbands are just now learning of your deaths. Your children are too young to completely understand, Fran, but Father holds them in His hands. Nothing happens that is outside of His perfect plan. That may sound trite at the moment, but I assure you, it is true. The sorrow and pain of earth are merely the means to what He planned for you and them. They will be different because of the loss of their mother and wives, but it is all woven into the tapestry of who they will become. It will be a blessing in the long run. They will be grateful."

Silence swirled between us.

I sighed. "I suppose we need to get it over with, since it's inevitable."

"You need not fear it, for you will be changed. You will discover that it is the most beautiful and wonderful of all experiences. Ready, then?"

We nodded.

He pressed a button on his desktop.

A buzzer sounded somewhere deep within the building. Almost instantly, a woman appeared at the side of his desk.

We were startled, as she hadn't come through the door.

"You'll get used to it," chuckled Stan. "This is Serena. She will take you to Him."

Serena led us along a corridor that opened into an immense room. In the center of the room, a Light glowed and pulsed. A voice so melodic as to surpass all earthly music called out. "Sue, Fran! Welcome! Thank you for coming."

We fell on our faces in terror and worship. Warmth enveloped us. It was as if the softest of silk cradled us, yet we felt firmly supported. All of earth was gone, forgotten in the glory of the

reality of Reality Himself. Our selves seemed to disintegrate, integrating with Him, a sensation that lingers even now.

"That is Me, invading and burning away all that is not of Me," He said in answer to my unspoken question. "What I am, you are, in part, becoming. All that is not Me is burning away. The wood, hay, and stubble, the unproductive, destructive parts of you, are being consumed so that only the gold and silver will be left."³

"I am no longer myself," Sue said later.

"Me neither."

"But I am still me."

"Same here. I know I'm Fran, remember my life, still know you, yet there is something profoundly missing. It's missing something I don't miss, if that makes sense."

"Yes, I know what you mean. I've never felt such peace, such contentment, and such energy. I feel like I could climb Mount Everest. Without oxygen!" said Sue.

"Well, if we are where I think we are, you probably can," I said. "You could probably do it with one hand tied behind your back, hopping all the way on one foot."

"But I really don't want to do that. It seems like wasting something precious, something glorious, something profound."

"I think I know what you mean. I don't know how long it lasted, not sure time is relevant here, but at one point, I felt like I was dissolving. Maybe that's what a caterpillar feels like in the cocoon?"

"Yeah," Sue said. "For me, the intensity was in the feeling of love. Good as my marriage is—I mean, was—it was a mere sliver of a shadow of this love. This was a steam bath of love, love that filled every pore and every cell. I can still feel it. It's a part of me now."

"Yes, I agree. Does it feel to you like you've been unmade, then remade?" I asked.

"Hmm. That's a good way to think about it. Still me, yet somehow the real me. No, let me say it this way. It's like being remade into what I should have been, would have been if all were perfect."

"I like that. Better description."

"If that was hell, give me more of it!" she exclaimed.

"You have only to ask," said a voice behind her.

She whirled around, facing a man she knew instantly to be Jesus.

"What?" she asked, then blushed. "Err, should I fall at your feet or something?"

"No need," He laughed. "Most times, we're pretty informal here. If you are moved to fall at My feet, fine. If not, just walk and talk with Me. I am in all places at all times, so My time is yours. In fact, you are within Me at this very moment, for all things are always within Me."

"Maybe I'll understand that conundrum someday," Sue said. "But right now, I am so grateful to You for what You did for me, for us." She included me in her generalization.

"It was My pleasure. I knew the joy of this moment before I went to the cross. Your gratitude sustained me, knowing that what I was doing would ensure our time together."

Sue knelt, weeping. He placed His hands on her head, then raised her to her feet, embracing her. He extended His right arm to me and drew me into their embrace. We stood that way for a long time, mingling tears, laughing, whispering half sentences that the other two instantly understood. We were home.

1 Malachi 4:3

2 1 Peter 2:4

3 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

4 1 Timothy 2:10; 4:9, 10

5 Revelation 22:14, 15

6 Hebrews 12:29

7 Acts 17:28

8 Ephesians 1:11

9 Acts 17:28

Pharaoh's Hell

I began to suspect, when walls of water collapsed on me, that I was no god. I and the army of Upper and Lower Egypt were crushed and drowned.

"My son, my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."

As I was still muzzy from dying, I suppose, the words made no sense to me. If I was son, then who was father? The voice didn't resemble my own father's. His was cool, aloof, royal. This voice was warm and tender, a voice that drew me in, cradled me, loved me. Not since leaving my mother's rooms in the palace at six had I had any such sense of love. I opened my eyes.

All was light. Though we rarely saw rainbows in Egypt, my magicians could produce them in certain circumstances. I was unprepared for the light that was rainbow itself. Rather than arching, it twisted around and within itself, colors mingling, blending, producing infinite variations from the basic seven colors. It was a glorious sight, infinitely absorbing, worthy of long contemplation.

"Welcome, my beloved son," the voice said again. "I've looked forward from all eternity to this moment, when we meet face to face."

"Who are you?"

"I AM all that I AM. You knew me as Yahweh, the God of Israel."

"You destroyed my Egypt!" I cried out, enraged. "There is nothing left, not a single green tree, not a stalk of wheat, not a cow or sheep. Worst of all, you took my son, my heir, my dynasty."

If a voice can smile, His voice did. "Actually, it was the other way round. It was you, your resistance, that broke Egypt. Let's not quibble. It was in My plan and was necessary both for Egypt and Israel that your power be crushed."

"But I am the Pharaoh of Upper and Lower Egypt, the lord of the Nile, the son of Ra. The life of my people is in my hands. I am"—less certain now—"or was, the god of Egypt. Our gods are all-powerful: the Nile, Ra, the sun—"

"Well, a tiny bit of that was once true, though I think I made a few pretty good points against your gods."

I trembled deep in my spirit. The solid ground of all my beliefs shook and shifted, threatening to collapse. I stood straighter, tensed my muscles, ready to do battle.

As if reading my mind, the voice said, "What battle can flesh wage against spirit? Even your religion came to that conclusion."

"But Egypt has lasted for a thousand years and will last another. How can you argue against such success?"

"Yes, that I well know. It was I who brought power to Egypt's first monarch. It was always I who chose her rulers, raised them up, brought them low. It was not the might of armies, the cunning strategies of generals and kings, or even luck. It always was and always will be I who work these things by My own will and for My purposes. Let's take you, for example."

"I came to power by my own cunning! It was I who assassinated my brother and seized the throne. It was I who coerced the generals of the armies of the Upper and Lower Nile to support my kingdom. I did it." I pounded my chest with a clenched fist. "It was all my doing."

A melodic chuckle came from within the light. "Weren't you surprised when your brother so readily agreed to attend your banquet?"

"Well, yes, a little. He was wary of me from the time I came to manhood. He knew I was ambitious and desired to reign, even though I was the younger."

"I changed his mind. He didn't plan to attend, suspecting that he was in danger from you. He came and you poisoned him. Right?"

"Yes, that's exactly how it happened. But it was I who convinced the generals to support me against my other siblings and a couple of pretenders. That wasn't easy."

"No, it was difficult and dangerous for you. But did you notice that they all changed their minds at once and that the pretenders fled into Canaan?"

"Well, yes. Your doing, I suppose?"

"Here's something even better. You remember the plagues?"

I shuddered. "How can I ever forget? No nation on earth has suffered such devastation in so many forms. Your doing, too, I assume?"

"Of course. Did you notice the pattern?"

"No."

"Each plague was against one of your gods. Snakes swallowed by Moses's snake. The River Nile, one of your chief gods, turned to blood, abhorrent to you Egyptians. The frogs..."

"I get it, I get it. You attacked my gods to show how impotent they are against you."

"Exactly. Now, think about it. Each time a plague fell on you and your kingdom, you almost decided to give in and let those pesky Israelites go. Right?"

"Well, yes, I suppose."

"Yet you changed your mind. Even, toward the end, when your counselors begged you to send the Israelites out, you 'hardened your heart,' as Moses later wrote. Didn't that trouble you a bit at the time—the logic of giving in and yet making the illogical choice?"

"I remember the feeling of conflict, of wanting to get them out so the plagues would stop, yet finding a deep well of resistance in the depths of my being."

"That was Me."

"You?"

"Yes. You see, you were working out My will. Think of it this way. If Egypt's gods, the gods of the most powerful nation on earth, could not resist Me, how then could any other nation hope to do so?"

"I guess I see what you mean. I was the example."

"You and your nation and your gods, yes."

"But you say you—how did you put it?—you hardened my heart. How is that fair?"

"If you had followed your own inclinations and let them go, let's say at the third plague, Egypt would have recovered quickly. You could attribute the misfortunes to some error in an incantation, a fault in a priest. But if I led you through to the bitter end, then there would be no doubt."

"But why that scurvy little ragtag band of slaves? Why were they so important to you that you would destroy my beautiful Egypt for them? They were slaves, after all, expendable!"

"True, they were slaves, but not expendable. I'm not going to go into all their history just now. Suffice it to say that I chose them for a very specific purpose. May I reveal something to you which very few know, even here?"

"Will it hurt?"

"No."

"Okay."

"This world is not as it will someday be. There was a time when all was perfection. Then, in My own plans, it became what it now is—violent, troubled, terrified. You know, for you yourself participated in it."

"Yes, I see that now."

"Someday, a man will appear, born into the people you call ragtag. He will change everything. He will absorb all this pain and sorrow into Himself. He is the real Son of the Real God. You, my friend, are an imposter, claiming to be the son of the sun. This One, this true Son, will rescue the whole system from itself. He will draw all humanity to Himself, and all will turn to worship Me, the creator and sustainer of all things. I am He who raises up and brings low, who sets up kings and humbles them in the dust. But not for no purpose. All is in My grand plan to bring all of you back to Myself, elevated above all that you could have been without this troubled time. Do you see how you and your nation entered into My plan? You were the launching pad for the nation that is, at this moment, being formed in the wilderness of sin. They are a troublesome lot, always will be. Yet through all their tribulations, their rebellions and backslidings, there will come prophets who will point the way to Him who is the savior of the world, the true Son of God."

"You were a pivot in this grand plan. You were essential. I set you up for just this moment. You died in a deluge of water, but your death is far from insignificant. Though you will have no monument, no tomb, no extravagant pyramid to mark your resting

place, though you will not be embalmed, you will be remembered and honored through all eternity for the role you played in My purposes and plans. Can you accept this?"

I, the Pharaoh of Upper and lower Egypt, the proud ruler, Son of Ra, brother to Osiris, ruler of a vast and rich empire, fell on my face before this God of all Gods, the creator and sustainer of all humanity, the true River of Life that overflows with life-giving water. It is to Him that I give all honor and glory. I am humbled in the dust. I cannot lift my eyes to Him. I am content to lie prostrate before Him as long as He gives me life.

Hands lifted me, pulled me into the Light. I am a Son of the Great and Only God, Yahweh of Israel. I am adopted into His family, now His loyal servant. I resisted. I perished in my resistance. But He has revealed His purposes in me. It is an honor I do not deserve, but it thrills my heart all the same.

My soldiers no longer obey me, for we are equals before the Majesty of Yahweh. I no longer crave their obedience. We worship together, a band of brothers, recreated in His image, dwelling within Him, rejoicing in His goodness and love.

We are sons of the only true God. There is no higher honor.
1 Based on Exodus 1-14

On the Hell of Self-Murder

I woke from an alcohol-induced haze and liquid courage enough to slam my car into a bridge abutment. Multihued flames surrounded me, but there was no pain. Suspended in and buoyed up by fire, I attempted a step. It was like walking on a cushion of air. I wondered at the absence of demons and screams of tormented souls. "No one will believe me," I thought, trying to believe it myself.

"Welcome, Driscoll," a voice whispered. "We've been waiting for you. Your place is prepared."

Terrified, I cried out, "Where am I? Who are you?"

"In hell, of course. I am the hell you so dreaded. How does it feel?"

"Um, well, it isn't exactly as I'd imagined it. This isn't what the preacher described last Sunday."

"No, it's not. He is ignorant and blind. He lied to you, though he doesn't really know it. He only echoed his seminary professors."

"If this is hell, are you the devil?"

As beautiful as a well-tuned bell, a deep, joyful chuckle vibrated within and around me.

"No. I'm afraid you have the wrong guy, My friend."

"Who, then?"

"Do you remember the text your pastor harped on for so long last Sunday?"

"You mean the 'Lake of Fire' text?"

"The very one. That lake is not a place. It is Me."

"Not sure I'm following you."

"I AM the One you call God. I am the Creator of all things and the Destroyer of all that is unhealthy and destructive within you. Hell is coming home to Me, to dwell and be consumed in the fire that is Me."

I shuddered, terrified suddenly of this Voice. Would hell be less terrifying?

"Are you sending me to hell?"

"Oh, my beloved friend, you are in hell already. Don't you see the fire?"

"Yes, but it doesn't hurt."

Again, His chuckle reverberated within me.

"Most get it wrong, I'm afraid. They mean well, but they interpret the writings of the prophets and the words of My Son in a way that gives them power over others. Think of it this way. Didn't the terror of hell keep you on the straight and narrow for a long time?"

"Yes."

"Priests and preachers, popes and prelates, all discovered that their flocks were more compliant when they believed that their particular church was the only path to Me. If they kept their parishioners terrified of an eternal torment, they sinned less and kept the church coffers full."

"So, no hell?"

"Not exactly. Remember the Lake of Fire. But there is definitely no eternal hell."

"You mean I won't burn forever?"

"Let me ask you a question. Did the police in Portland, where you lived, shoot people if they drove five miles an hour over the speed limit?"

"No."

"Why then would I condemn a child of Mine to eternal torment for sinning? Your courts tried to keep the punishment somewhat in balance with the crime, right?"

"Yes, I suppose so, although many times, justice depended on the color of the skin or the wealth of the person accused."

"Yes, yes, but I'm not talking about that kind of inequality. I'm talking about justice based on the balance of crime and punishment."

"You mean the punishment fits the crime?"

"Exactly. You were gay, right?"

"Yes. That's why I...er...did what I did. A couple of weeks ago, our pastor preached about homosexuality. He said it was a sin especially offensive to You. He said that fathers should break the wrist of their boys who 'have weak wrists.' Being gay has tormented me my whole life. I cringe when my friends laugh at a guy kissing a guy. Some say that they should all be shot. I just couldn't bear it any more, my inability to change, the condemnation from pulpit, friends, and family."

"How little they understand. My friend David said, 'I was wonderfully knit together in my mother's womb.' Did I make a mistake in your case? Did I drop a stitch when I should have purred? Are you not just as carefully made as I made the man who thought my thoughts after Me?"

"When you put it that way... It sounds like You're saying that You made me gay."

"Exactly. I could have added a drop of a certain chemical during your gestation, and you would have been attracted to women, not men. I didn't. As a result, your sexual attraction was to other

men, as if you were female. You sought love and acceptance where your mind and your heart were."

"You mean there was a reason for my being gay? Were they all wrong, the preachers, my parents, my friends?"

"Yes to both questions. We'll talk more later about how you served My purposes, but for now, just take it on faith that you were planned from eternity past to be who you were."

"Oh, my God, how wondrous are Your ways! I cannot fathom this. How my life would have been different had I known!"

"There was purpose even in the misery you suffered, and in your suicide, too."

"I can't believe it, though I desperately want to."

"Getting back to your original question, let's assume that being gay and that every homosexual thought and act was a sin. Let's further assume that for each homosexual act or thought, I must measure out some arbitrary punishment. How much punishment should I give you? How many years?"

"I have no idea."

"Come on, give me a number. Five years, 50, 50,000, 50 million?"

"Well, to make it interesting, let's say 50 million."

"Fair enough. So let's say there are 10,000 events for which I punish you for 50 million times each. That totals 500 billion years. Is that eternity?"

"Not even close."

"So we can say that all of your sins of that kind don't total eternity. How about if we throw in all the rest of your sins?"

"I don't know how many that would be."

"Would it equal eternity if we could put a number to it?"

"Well, probably not. No, it couldn't, because eternity is infinite and my sins are not."

"Exactly!" I heard the smile in His voice. "Let's do a bit of Greek."

I groaned. "I flunked Greek twice. Once in undergrad, and once in seminary."

"Never fear, this is just a bit of Strong's concordance."

"Well, okay."

"Did you ever look up the word 'sin' in Strong's?"

"Not that I remember."

"Let me quote its definition for you. It's G0264, if you want to check it for yourself."

"I'll trust you to quote it exactly."

He chuckled. "Thanks, I think. Anyway, it means 'to miss the mark.'"

"You mean, as in shooting at a target and missing?"

"Yes, exactly. If sin is merely missing a target, being a poor archer, should I condemn you and all humanity to death or eternal pain?"

"Doesn't seem fair."

"You've got it."

Something melted within me, something hard and cold, something resistant and rebellious. I wept.

When I had quieted, He said, "Now let's talk about purpose. Why would I want to punish you at all?"

"Well, You're a holy and just God. You have to punish those who disobey you to vindicate your holiness."

"That makes me so sad. If you had a child and she wrote on the wall with a crayon, would you hold her hand to the burner of the stove? She missed the mark, after all."

"No, of course not! I'd be a monster."

"Why would you think you're better than Me?"

I was thunderstruck. Why indeed? How could I, a mere mortal, think I was more compassionate than the God of love? I fell on my face. "Do to me according to Your will and Your goodness." I wept again.

My body trembled with heart-wrenching sobs as the realization of His love surged over and within me. I drowned in His love, knew His infinite compassion and mercy. I transformed from a crawling caterpillar into a creature designed for the sky. No pain overwhelmed me, only joy and blessed relief. The fire didn't fade, but now I danced in harmony with it. There was no sense of passing time.

Finally, I felt arms around me, folding me against a mighty chest. I heard His heartbeat, felt His warmth.

"Welcome home, My beloved son. I've longed for this moment from all eternity past. It's so good to have you here."

Then I was at peace, am still at peace, content to dwell within His everlasting arms. He is that for which I searched, longed for in all the twinings of body that never satisfied. As the poet said,

Naught satisfies thee,
Which satisfies not Me.³

How true.

1 Revelation 20:14, 15

2 Psalms 139:13

3 Ephesians 1:4, 5, 11

2 "The Hound of Heaven," a poem by Francis Thompson (1859-1907), who lived a profligate life but knew the grace of his heavenly Father.

The Hell of Adam the First

"Do you have regrets, Adam?" Eve asked.

"Yes, of course. I regret my rebellion, mostly. I remember those first few years, the sweet communion we had between us and with Father. They were simpler days, days of wonder and days of ever-expanding knowledge. Especially sweet were those evening conversations with our Lord. I miss them."

"As do I. I've regretted every hour of every day the part I played in our downfall. I see the ruin of so many of our children and grandchildren, from Cain to Philoma, our youngest. If He had revealed the future to us, perhaps we would have been wiser and made the better choice."

"Now, dear, don't begin to do the blame game again. You made that fatal choice, and I willingly went along. It was I who broke the covenant with Him,¹ not you. He covenanted with me before you were taken from my side. You were included, of course, being taken from within me, but it was I who accepted the terms of the

covenant. I've thought long about this. I am to blame for all the misery that came upon us and our posterity."

She buried her face in the bend of his neck. "Oh, my beloved, how shall I live without you? How can He part us? Could we not go together?"

"He has told me that I go before. Perhaps it is because He made me first. I do not know. But time moves on quickly. Your time will come soon, and we will have eternity together."

She held him close, tears wetting his shoulder. He sighed his last breath.

I woke in a familiar but unremembered place. I was filled with a deep joy but knew not its cause. A great sense of expectation flooded my mind. I searched the trees and stared out over vast plains.

"What am I looking for? Or, better, for whom am I searching?"

Recognition dawned slowly. It was the place of my first waking. There, in the riverbank, the ragged red scar from which I was taken. It flooded back. I staggered under the burden of years, the bitterness of loss, and the pain of death. Now I knew some of the true cost of my failure. There the fateful tree stood, fruit gleaming in invitation. There the other tree, the tree from which life flows. And I, I had chosen the wrong tree.

I sensed a Presence just behind my right shoulder. Turning, I saw Him, my Creator, my Sustainer. I fell on my face at His feet, weeping onto them. He let me stay but a moment, then grasping me under my arms, He lifted me into His embrace. He held me thus for a long time, long enough for all the pain and sorrow, the misery and pain I had caused, to evaporate into the joy of Him.

He held me at arm's length, staring into my eyes and smiling the most wonderful smile. "Welcome home, My son. I've been expecting you. Come, walk with Me, as we did in those early days."

We did. Neither of us said a word, just walked, hand in hand. With the memory of nine centuries, I looked upon that place of beauty and innocence with new insight. I realized my loss. I recognized my complicity in its loss and degradation.

"You feel it," He said, "the deep sorrow of your failure."

"Yes."

"You know the pain of separation from our face to face conversations, the loss of direct communication."

"Yes, that too."

"You know, don't you, that I never once left you, that I always walked beside you?"

"Yes. I sensed You continually there. I heard your voice guiding and directing, comforting and cajoling."

He smiled. "You see, Adam, My son, you were always within My will."

I stopped, paralyzed. My mind churned, putting bits and pieces together, reorganizing all that I knew and all that I had experienced. "You mean...?"

"Yes, I mean."

I stared at Him, astounded.

"You mean—you mean, there was purpose in all that? In what we did?"

"Absolutely. Father and I planned this from all eternity past."

"What? How, I mean..." My voice faded into silence. "But, then... Then You are responsible for all that misery and anguish? All that pain?"

"Yes. I accept that accusation. I hear your anger and accept it. It is to be expected. But let me explain, please."

"I suppose," I said. "But I thought You were all good."

"That I am."

"And all knowing and all wise and all strength."

"Those, too. Let Me start back before you were formed on that riverbank." He gestured at the gash in the earth from which I had been taken.

"You were perfect when I formed you. Every cell of your body."

"Cell?"

"Sorry. I forget that you know nothing of your inner workings. The cells are tiny bits of life that, taken together, many trillions of them, make up your body and brain— that is, what and who you are."

"Um, I guess..."

"Anyway, from the smallest bit of you to your whole self, I made you perfect. You were entirely fit for life in that world. I could not have made anything better. You were in Our mind from time out of time. We knew you then as We know you now. Though you were perfect, you were incomplete."

"Incomplete? I don't understand."

"We're getting there. You were incomplete only in your inability to truly understand My, Our, great love for you. You took Us for granted. But you could not understand Us. That is why you wanted to take the shortcut to godlikeness that you did. It was planted within you to desire that, for that is your end goal in Our plans for you."

"So we took a shortcut to get what we thought we wanted and played right into Your hands? But why? Was there not some way we could have avoided the pain and sorrow of that life and still reached Your goal for us?"

"No, not really. You see, you could never have known Our grace, Our infinite love for you, the wonder of and fulfilment of Our plan for you, without suffering. You had to know what it is like in order to fully come to know and trust Us. You must know what it is to be turned away from Us in order to desire to return to Us."

"Maybe I'm beginning to see. Just a bit, anyway."

"Look at it this way. If you and Eve had not taken this course, would you have ever truly grown up? Did not the pain and suffering make you into humans who knew their need of Us?"

"That it did."

"Does it help to know that?"

"Indeed, it does."

"Do you remember what I said to you as I revealed the consequences of your taking the other road?"

"Which one?"

"The one about a seed of a woman."

"Yes, I remember, but I don't understand it."

"A quick biology lesson. From you, there comes a seed that will come to be known as a sperm. From Eve comes something called an

egg. Together, they combine into a tiny cell that will eventually grow into a new human being."

"Ah, that's what sex is all about."

"Well, not all. Don't discount the joy and pleasure of sex that I built into the system."

"True, true."

"Anyway, without a sperm, no baby results. But someday... Someday, I will be born into the human family."

"You? But you're—you are God."

"There is no other way. Someday, as I was saying, I will be born, but without a human sperm. The 'seed of a woman,' which I foretold in that little prophecy."

"Being born into the human family, how will that help us get out of the dilemma?"

"You remember, don't you, that I explained that we were entering into a covenant when I told you about the two trees? It was a to-the-death covenant. That means that if you broke the covenant, you would have to die."

"I did die."

"That's not the real death. The death that you should have died was a different death, one that would have lasted forever."

"Oh."

"You were the head of the human race, right?"

"Yes, if I understand it correctly."

"That means, in covenant language, that what you do, what you choose, affects all of your children, and theirs, and theirs, as long as humans are born. So you see, in breaking that covenant, you condemned all of your children to the same fate."

I wept, sorrowing at my selfishness.

"Don't weep. There is a solution. I will keep the covenant when I come to earth, many hundreds of years from now. I will keep it perfectly. I will not break it. Therefore, I will become a second Adam, actually the last Adam, for there will be no others after me."

"But what about the penalty for breaking the covenant?"

"Let me show you."

My eyes suddenly beheld the most gruesome sight of my life. A body hung, suspended between heaven and earth, on a tree hewn into a shape designed to hold that body. Then I recognized Him. It was He who stood before me.

"You will do it!"

"Yes. That death that you and yours will never suffer, I will suffer for you. And it will be enough. All will be delivered, all brought under the covenant of the Last Adam. You and your rebellion will be subsumed into Me, the perfect Last Adam."²

I fell on my face once again, worshipping as if I had never worshipped before.

"How can you do this?" I asked as He once again raised me to my feet.

"That is love, that is My grace, which We show to you that you may truly become the human We intended you to be. My suffering will be for the healing of the nations, all of your offspring, all of those who descend from your and Eve's bodies."

"My Lord and My God."

1 Hosea 6:7, Genesis 2:15-24
2 Romans 5

Appendix A

For more information about hell, eternity, universal salvation, and other topics covered in these stories, please go to www.tentmaker.org

You will find hundreds of pages of information.

Appendix B

Some Supporting Scriptures

Jesus Christ, the Savior of all men, especially those who believe.

1 Timothy 4:10

Jesus claims, through Paul, that he saves all men—that is, all humanity. In some special way, he also saves believers, though Paul does not elaborate on what that specialness might be, but it is not exclusive of all humanity.

"Behold, the Lamb of god, who takes away the sin of the world." John 1:29

Sin is what separates us from God. If the Lamb, Jesus, takes away the sin of the whole world, then nothing separates the whole world from Him.

"...through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven." Colossians 1:20

If Jesus' death reconciled all things in heaven and on earth, nothing is left out—all things are reconciled, all things, including all humans, are at peace with God.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." John 3:16, 17

Jesus came to save the world, not condemn it or us.

"For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." Luke 19:10

He not only came to seek, but to save. If He doesn't save all, then His mission of seeking the lost is a failure.

"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." 1 John 2:1, 2

Whatever "propitiation" is, it obviously means our salvation, our forgiveness from sin. Then John throws in the rest of humanity as well: "the sins of the whole world."

"First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." 1 Timothy 2:1-

Is it possible that anyone or anything can thwart the will of God, who wills all to be saved?

"For this reason also, God highly exalted Him (Jesus), and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Philippians 2:9-11

Forced confession is not to the glory of God. Therefore, this is a willing, joyful bowing down in recognition of being saved.

About the Author

Winslow Parker lives with his wife in Portland, Oregon, where he is retired from his work teaching other blind people how to use computers. Together they have two children and three grandchildren. He enjoys his grandchildren, writing, and woodturning.

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