

Heaven, Hell and the Glory of God

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[0 : 00] All right, 1 Peter chapter 2. So put away all malice and all deceit and all hypocrisy and envy and all slander.! Like newborn infants long for the pure spiritual milk,! That by it you may grow up into salvation, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men, but in the sight of God, chosen and precious. You yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

For it stands in Scripture, Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame. So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

[1 : 33] Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. This is the word of the Lord.

I sort of realized half of us do that, maybe sometimes half of us don't, but don't worry. So you'll see on the outline, I want to begin by just addressing how difficult this topic is. Partly to justify the inadequacy of my talks, I have once again bitten off way more than I can chew.

But mostly, I want to start our weekend by talking about how difficult this topic is, because I think that as we approach it, maybe even more than any other topic, we need to consider, we need to consciously prepare our hearts to receive what God's word says about these things.

Roy's just said, and it's an illustration, I don't know who started it, but that talking about, thinking about the topic of hell is like staring directly at the sun. Of course, no camera can capture the intensity of it.

It's something we don't like to do and can't stand for too long. It's painful. It causes your eyes to well up. Thinking about the topic of heaven is much more delightful.

[2 : 57] But it's also fraught with difficulties, not least because it's just hard to wrap your head around heaven, isn't it? And that has led to all sorts of weird and wacky speculations. As you might imagine, I've been doing a lot of reading for this weekend, and there really is some strange stuff out there.

Be warned, when people get their imaginations going, they say all sorts of weird things about heaven. By the sounds of things, half the pastors in America regularly visit heaven on holidays and in visions and dreams.

But for many people, I guess we're all just too busy, busy, busy living our lives under the sun to feel like we have any time to look up and really consider it, to consider heaven and the glory above us. And yet, I think the topic of heaven and hell is also like the sun in another way, which is that God has ordained the sun to dominate our lives. Do you remember the sort of funny language in Genesis chapter 1 that the sun rules us?

The sun has been given dominion over us in Genesis chapter 1. Because what you do, what you can do and do in the sunshine is very, very different from what you can do at night. And all the seasons dictate, you know, dictated by the sun.

[4 : 12] Our lives are dominated by the sun. So that even if we can't look directly at the sun, always, we must, of course, do everything and look at everything else in its light.

And the realities of heaven and hell are the same. Over this weekend, I want us to try and stare at them for as long as possible. We can't always do that. But after this weekend, what I really want is for us to remember them, to have them burned into our retinas, as it were.

No, that's not a good image. But anyway, to look at everything else in our lives in light of them. If we are wise, we ought to let the realities of heaven and hell dominate our thinking.

We ought to hold up every aspect of our lives to the scrutiny of the sunshine. Do your hopes, fears, dreams, and aspirations line up with what God's word says about heaven and hell.

My kids wanted to tell me this week about all the things that they might do when they grow up. And I was trying to work out how to get them to think about their lives in light of eternity.

[5 : 27] I'm not sure I did a great job. But did you choose your job or your course in light of what God says about heaven and hell? I'm sure you've heard the old put down that some people are too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good.

But you know, the Bible and Christian history says just the opposite. It's actually those who are most heavenly minded and most cognizant of hell, I might add, who end up doing the most good in this world because they know how to make the best use of the time.

So brothers and sisters, who we marry or whether we marry, what we spend our money on, what we spend our time on, what we teach our children, how we treat our neighbours, money, politics, architecture, sport, the environment, whatever it is, you name it, heaven and hell ought to make a substantial difference to how you think about these things, to how you speak and how you act in every area of your life.

So have you held up your life to the scrutiny of heaven and hell? Have you brought your life out into the sunshine so that you're living in the light of these things?

Or are you really only doing what everyone else is doing? Does your life look a lot like the pagans around you? The people walking around who are of course oblivious to these things, basically ignoring heaven and hell and hoping it'll never happen or that it'll be okay because they're pretty nice people.

[7 : 09] Okay, so this is an important topic but it is a difficult topic for a bunch of reasons. Firstly, again as Roy's already mentioned, most obviously it's difficult because it's so emotional.

On the one hand, the prospect of eternal life in glory is just so exciting that as I've already said, it does seem to get people's imaginations firing. But even more, I think, on the other hand, the terror of eternal suffering is overwhelming.

Now don't get me wrong, emotions are a very good thing and they're also very important for this topic. Healthy emotions ought to accord with reality.

And so these massive topics ought to get us very emotional. If heaven doesn't thrill you, there's something wrong with you. And if hell doesn't horrify you, then there's something wrong with you. Likewise, the thing that our emotions are very good at is responding to things quickly and kind of fueling things. Right, so we see a malnourished child and our hearts go out to them.

[8 : 19] Or we see a car swerving or a lightning bolt and our hearts start to race. And these instincts are very useful to us. Right, and they're right and good in their place. But then, of course, we need our thoughts to kick in to help us process our emotions and perhaps funnel them into some useful action or temper them and dampen them.

For instance, is a malnourished child on their way to heaven a more horrifying sight than a rich person on his way to hell? Emotions are not very good at judging between these two scenarios. Just by way of a little point of application along the way, I think for this reason, many people would be surprised to hear that we are sending a missionary to Austria. I mean, why does Austria need missionaries?

Austria is a rich Western country. Surely, missionaries are for poor, underdeveloped nations. I don't imagine most Austrians look like they need help.

And when Steph sends back her pictures, we'll all be horrified by them. But of course, Steph is going there and we're supporting her because Austria is a gospel-poor nation. And as comfortable and wealthy as the people there may be, their spiritual state is horrifying.

[9 : 36] If we could get a photo of their hearts, we would see that they are dead corpses walking around on thin ice above the fires of eternal hell.

It's terrifying, isn't it? You see, our emotions are good at helping us react instantly to things, especially things like images, things on the surface.

But very often, they need to be tempered and trained and channeled by slower, longer, more careful thinking time. Or to put it another way, emotions are good as slaves, but not as masters. Emotions are a bit like petrol, wonderfully helpful and powerful when under control and put to good use, but dangerous when out of control. Emotions are good as wind in the sails, but not as rudders. So we can't just let our emotions toss us to and fro. We need to let our thinking, our firm, settled, and hopefully biblical convictions be the rudder that guide us this weekend and all of our lives, actually.

[10:48] But secondly, this is a difficult topic because it's so personal. Right? Heaven and hell involves you and me and everyone we know or have ever known or will ever know real people, not just numbers, men, women, and children.

People we love and actually people we hate. People who have hurt us as well as people who have helped us and cared for us, right?

From the Hitlers and the Stalins of this world right down to the kindly grandmothers and the precious siblings. So this is not an arm's length discussion for any of us, is it? We all have skin in the game.

We have a deep-seated desire for justice, which is good, and compassion, which is good, and because we're sinful, we all have wayward, mixed-up desires for revenge or favoritism.

And of course, the preciousness of people, humanity, is emphasized in Scripture. People are infinitely more precious than silver or gold, than pets or plants, because in the beginning, God made us in his image.

[12:04] Paul says, we are God's offspring. We are by nature God's children, born to be in a special relationship to him, to know him, to honor and give thanks to him, to enjoy his creation with him.

God does not take pleasure in the death of any sinner. That's Ezekiel, chapter 33, verse 11. God desires all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth, 1 Timothy, chapter 2, verse 4.

And of course, the reality of this is most clearly displayed at the cross, where God stepped into our world and suffered in our place to rescue us from hell and open wide the gates to heaven.

The cross stands as a permanent reminder and a challenge to anyone who doubts it that God does care about the salvation of the lost. And I would say, actually, contrary to the Calvinistic teaching on limited atonement, although I've got a lot of respect for those who hold it, but that the cross is a grand display of God's love for every human being that has ever lived, not just those who will ultimately be saved.

So I know this topic is personal to us, but we must always remember that it is personal to God too. God knows the value of the human person. But thirdly, I think the topic of heaven and hell is actually most difficult because Satan doesn't want us to believe in it.

[13:35] That's what I mean by the fact that it's a spiritual topic. Remember the lie Satan told Eve in the Garden of Eden? You will not surely die. In other words, it's a lie about God's judgment.

Don't worry, Eve. There'll be no negative consequences for your rebellion. In fact, there'll only be positive consequences, he says. God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you'll be like God, knowing good and evil.

Take, eat, eat. You can't lose. Of course, there are many ways in which this lie has been repeated and reframed throughout the centuries. In our own culture, there are numerous different versions of it, either denying or twisting the idea of God or of God's word or the idea of sin or sin's consequences.

I just want to focus our attention on one of those ideas this weekend, one particularly pervasive lie that is in our culture and it's what you might call secularism.

So I just want to spend a little bit of time on this. See, the word secular originally, actually, was a very Christian word. In the 14th century, it simply meant belonging to this age or this world.

[14:50] Have I got a dictionary definition on the... Yeah, Merriam-Webster. Secular means of or relating to the worldly or temporal. It implies, in fact, the next world, the next age, right?

Because there are things that belong to this world, temporary, earthly things, and they need to be distinguished from things that belong to the next world or the world above, right?

Heavenly, spiritual, eternal things. Marriage, for instance. My marriage to Catherine is a secular institution. I am married to Catherine, but only for this life, only in this age.

And that's because we have a better marriage that we're waiting for in heaven in the age to come. Our secular marriage, you see, is actually focused on pointing towards that better marriage in heaven in the age to come.

So it's a very religious, secular marriage, you see. In the 1850s, a group of English thinkers and activists came up with a new word that has caused considerable confusion.

[15 : 58] A bloke named George Holyoak coined the words secularism and secularist. So here's the Merriam-Webster definition again.

Secularism is indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations. Now, do you see the difference?

So secular is very Christian. Secularism is totally the opposite. Secularism is about excluding God. So essentially what Holyoak argued for was a completely non-religious worldview, a worldview focused purely on this age and this life.

We know exactly when he started using the word, actually, which is kind of weird. You know, that's not the case for most words, but he wrote down the kind of day that they started, that they coined it together as a committee or whatever it was, the day they published it.

And he wrote, next, he wrote, to this end, the name of secularism was given to certain principles which had for their object human improvement by material means regarding science as the providence of man and justifying morality by considerations which pertain to this life alone.

[17 : 21] Now, that sentence is very helpful, I think, in clarifying his position. You notice the four things he says. Secularism is all about human improvement by material means, the study of science, that's kind of man's domain, and justifying morality by considerations which pertain to this life alone.

And in a sense, you could apply that to the whole philosophy. It's all about considerations which pertain to this life alone. But in the end, see, with respect to morality, he doesn't want heaven or hell to come into the picture.

He doesn't want God, anything outside of the secular to come in. In terms of right and wrong, he only wants to judge morality by the kind of measurable differences that our actions make to human improvement in the here and now.

So I don't want to be too simplistic, but maybe you can see how secularism is going to be very close friends with humanism, putting humans at the center, materialism, only matter matters, scientism, science is the only reliable source of knowledge, and consequentialism, or a subset of consequentialism is utilitarianism.

The morality of something is determined by its effects, particularly utilitarianism, whatever brings the most happiness to the most number of people, the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people.

[18 : 53] Now, of course, Holyoke was himself an atheist, but actually, he was very keen to distinguish secularism from atheism, and I think that's just worth drawing out, because I think secularism is a far greater threat to any of us than atheism is.

So let me explain what I mean. See, atheism is about the assertion that there is no God. We all know that. But in other words, it's a fundamentally negative statement, denying something, the existence of God, and also, it's a definitive statement.

There is no God. You know, that's the facts. It's a truth claim about the spiritual realm or lack thereof. But secularism, on the other hand, is meant to be a positive idea, you see, about building a whole world view, an ethic focused on this age.

And in a sense, it's silent about the existence of God. So Holyoke believed that both atheists and Christians could be secularists. Right? He's saying, you can believe in God so long as you don't let your belief in God interfere with kind of anything that we're doing here.

You know, don't bring your faith into the public space. You can keep your faith at home or in church or whatever, but so long as faith doesn't get in the way of putting human welfare first, focusing on material means and material ends, trusting in science to bring progress, and judging morality by the consequences of one's actions in this life.

[20 : 26] Now, it seems to me that by and large in modern Australia this world view has prevailed. Again, I think atheism has not prevailed, but by and large secularism has.

In fact, I think most Australians see secularism as essential to the healthy functioning of a modern society, as if the heritage of our society is not Christian, but secularist.

So, they want Christian secularists or Muslim secularists or atheistic secularists, but they must be secularists. For instance, I heard Tom Holland on a podcast recently saying that the problem with Islam is that it is a totalizing world view.

Every aspect of one's life has to be governed by Islam, and this is why true, blue, authentic Islam is so fundamentally incompatible with Western secular states. I'm not up to the quote yet.

Thankfully, Christianity is not so totalizing in his view because Christianity has the idea of the secular. So, in this interview, which is from the New Humanist, he says, an obvious point of difference with Islam is that the Christ of the Gospels does not offer a blueprint for how an earthly Christian state should be run.

[21 : 43] There is a dimension of the spiritual and there is a dimension that is secular, that becomes hardwired into Western culture. Secularism is Western Christianity's greatest gift to the world.

Do you see how he doesn't know his history? Do you see how he actually confuses the Christian idea of the secular with the atheistic idea of secularism? Haven't we failed Tom Holland if he thinks that Christianity can be anything less than totalizing?

Love the Lord your God with half your heart? And I think that this same confusion has even crept in among Christians. In fact, I think it's wormed its way into my own heart and I keep trying to cut it out but I can't quite get at it.

Probably in yours as well. Secularism encourages us to compartmentalize our lives. In fact, secularism insists. Don't bring God into the office.

Don't bring God into politics. Don't bring God into art. Don't bring God into psychology or social work. No, it would be inappropriate to make business decisions or political decisions on what God thinks is right and wrong.

[22 : 59] I remember a governor down in New South Wales who was a Christian saying something like this. He was a Christian but he said, I won't govern as a Christian. You know, of course not.

That would be inappropriate. It would be unprofessional to tell people about the forgiveness and life and hope and joy that they can have in Jesus as if that might help them with their anxiety or depression.

You know, the psychologist's room is about CBT exercises and drugs but telling people they might need to think about the fact that they are made in God's image and therefore precious and that God sovereignly rules all things and they can trust him.

Apparently that has nothing to do with psychology. That wouldn't affect how you think at all or feel. That has nothing to do with social work. But I ask you, brothers and sisters, what is so unprofessional about that?

Wouldn't that make a huge difference to society if people really believe that? See, secularism encourages us to act as if these things aren't really true even though we say we believe them.

[24 : 12] In effect, the secularists are saying you can think like a Christian but you must live like an atheist. At least over here. At least nine to five. You can believe in a God if you like but just don't mention him here.

Don't bring faith into practical discussions about governance, town planning, education, immigration, employment, history, economics, whatever it may be. Instead of B, C and A, D, in here we talk about B, C, E and C, E, right?

Even though that is patently nonsense and what do they think started the so-called common era? Instead of creation, talk about nature. Instead of talking about truth and what you know, talk about your perspective and what you believe when it comes to religious discussions.

as I was in discussion with the university administrator who decided that chaplains should no longer be able to book spaces for free on the campus, she repeatedly told me that it's because UQ is a secular institution.

I think what she means is that it is a secularist institution. That we can believe in God, of course, but we should keep him inside the chaplaincy building.

[25 : 30] Or maybe you've noticed that Ironside, the school motto is keep the faith. I'm sure that when that was first proposed they were talking about the Christian faith, right?

It's a quote from the Bible. Paul says, I've finished the race, I've kept the faith. But now what my daughters are taught is that we must keep the faith in humanity. It's all secularism, you see. Emptying out our language and our public spaces of all talk about God. Which is all to say that I think we've embarked on a pretty difficult topic this weekend.

It's an emotional topic, it's a personal topic, and it's a spiritual topic, the kind of thing that the devil doesn't want us to think about. And our secularist society keeps insisting shouldn't make a difference to our lives.

Okay, so where should we begin with this topic? We haven't begun yet. We're up to point two on your outline. I know some of you are shocked, but we haven't, have we? That was just the intro. The place to start is the glory of God.

[26 : 41] That's where we need to begin. And I only hope that it doesn't sound too cliched or formulaic. Many of you will know man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Okay, we've heard that before. But I really think, not just because it sounds profound or theological or something, but I really think that the glory of God is the key to the whole subject of heaven and hell.

And in fact, just to clarify the Westminster Catechism for a moment, right, I don't think it's wrong, but I think we need to be careful not to misread it. Man's chief end is to glorify God. In a sense, they could have stopped there, right?

Because God's glory is far more important than man's enjoyment. In fact, so much so that, as we saw in our Bible reading, God has a plan for some humans, some men and women to glorify Him not by enjoying Him forever, but by suffering under His wrath forever as they were destined to do. So until we understand the absolute priority of God's glory, we will never really grasp what heaven or hell is about. Remember, the essence of sin is that we all like to put ourselves at the center of the universe rather than God.

We don't care about God's name, we want to make a name for ourselves. We don't want Jesus to be the cornerstone, we want to be the cornerstone ourselves. And so sin has a way of distorting how we see both heaven and hell.

[28 : 12] We make heaven all about ourselves and we water down hell as if God would never treat humans this way. We sort of try and imagine it away because we can't imagine that God could possibly treat humans this way when we're so important.

In fact, do you know how hell is described in the Bible as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth? That phrase, gnashing of teeth, is really about ongoing, unrepentant stubbornness.

So that even when people are in hell, even when people believe in it, the Bible says they are not going to repent because our sin keeps telling us that instead of repenting and glorifying God and honoring Him and submitting to Him, no, instead, we should just get more and more angry that He doesn't see things our way, that He doesn't respect our self-importance.

So far as the Westminster Catechism goes, I think if this is a statement about our own personal kind of purpose and what that should be, then I think it's a good one. We should set our hearts on glorifying God and enjoying Him forever, and that's what I think the statement is about.

But if we misread it as a statement about God's purpose in creating mankind, then I think it will lead us astray. Instead, we might be better off memorizing question seven, which asks, what are the decrees of God?

[29 : 44] The decrees of God are His eternal purpose according to the counsel of His will, whereby for His own glory, He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.

Everything that comes to pass, God has foreordained and it's all for His own glory. And you know how the Westminster Catechism has little proof texts that go along with each question and answer. Okay, the references for this one are Ephesians chapter one and Romans chapter nine, so I thought we might just go there and check out whether these 17th century theologians got it right. So you don't want to turn to Ephesians chapter one.

In Ephesians chapter one, we read about God's glory in salvation. Paul tells us about God's plan from before the foundations of the world all the way to the fullness of time. He says in verse four that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.

And then in verse 10 he tells us that God's plan for the fullness of time was to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. That is, to make Christ the supreme ruler over all things, where nothing in Christ's realm is going to be out of place.

[30 : 57] Nothing in Christ's realm is going to be not just the way he wants it. And then in verse 11 we find out that God works all things according to the counsel of his will. Obviously that's where the

Westminster Catechism is quoting from.

What that means is that he is absolutely sovereign, reigning and working in and through all things, good and bad things, the big things and the small things in the world, to bring about this great end goal that he is seeking to accomplish.

And then dotted throughout the passage is the reason that God is working in all things, is the purpose behind this whole plan. It's in verse 6, verse 12 and verse 14.

That little phrase, to the praise of his glorious grace. Right? To the praise of his glory, to the praise of his glory. In other words, of course, because God is at work in all things, then all credit must go to him.

It's like Romans chapter 11. Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways. For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counsellor or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?

[32 : 10] For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

The phrase, to the praise of his glory, is specifically about the fact that his glory, his majestic splendor, is to be admired, is to be adored.

It's to be delightful in your eyes. It will be delightful in the eyes of the saints for all eternity. Isn't he lovely? Isn't he powerful and brilliant and wise? Isn't he beautiful and holy and fierce?

This is why God made the heavens and the earth and why God made humanity and why God predestined us for salvation and sent his son to save us and ultimately will unite all things under his son.

It was all to the praise of his glory. No one else will get the credit. It's all to the praise of his glorious grace. And of course, Paul is not saying anything different to what we read everywhere else in the Bible.

In Isaiah chapter 43, for instance, God talks about why he's going to save Israel. And he says, I will say to the north, save them from Babylon, I will say to the north, give up, and to the south, do not withhold, bringing my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.

[33 : 36] Or again, most emphatically in Ezekiel 36, when God is promising the new covenant, promising the new covenant, he tells Ezekiel, therefore, say to the house of Israel, thus says the Lord God, it is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.

And then he spells out the new covenant, forgiveness, cleansing, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, etc., before returning to his theme. Why is God going to save his people? It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord God.

Let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confound of your ways, O house of Israel. Do you see the point? God's own glory is his highest priority because God's name deserves to be hallowed.

That's why Jesus tells us to pray for it is the number one thing. God's name deserves to be praised, to be honoured. That is ultimately why God saves us, for his glory.

That is what God wants us to pray for, for his glory. And God's people have always embraced and celebrated this reality. so that in Psalm 115, for instance, we read, Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

[34 : 54] Why should the nation say, where is their God? Right? Not to us. The natural instinct of all sinful human beings is to make it all about us. And I have to say this to my kids.

It's not all about you. I have to tell myself this. It's not all about you. We are naturally so turned in on ourselves. But life is about God's glory.

And one of the blessings of being set free from our sins is that we are finally set free from our obsession with ourselves. So that we can turn our eyes to God. And you know when you behold something spectacularly beautiful, it does make you stop.

thinking about yourself, doesn't it? In fact, often you stop thinking about everything else. You know, you see your bride walking down the aisle. You see your children playing.

You see a perfect sunset or a magnificent lightning storm. In my house, we've got a great view. And when there's a lightning storm coming across the golf course, we all just sit next to the door.

[36 : 01] And we turn all the lights off. And we just sit there and watch it. Right? When something so magnificent is in front of you. All the rest of life, including all its troubles and anxieties, just fade into the background.

That's how we were made to live. To enjoy God's glory. Not necessarily without all the other things. You know, but to enjoy God's glory displayed in everything he has made and everything he has ever done.

and to enjoy God's glory in our salvation. But what of God's glory displayed in his judgment? Right? It's clear from Ephesians chapter 1 that God's grace is glorious. That God is glorious in salvation. But what about in judgment? So now let's go to Romans chapter 9.

Remember Paul is discussing God's sovereignty in Romans chapter 9 trying to explain how the word of God has not failed and never does.

[37 : 02] And he brings up the book of Exodus. Why did God raise up Pharaoh? Romans chapter 9 verse 17. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, for this very purpose I have raised you up that I might show my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

So then he has mercy on whomever he wills and he hardens whomever he wills. God raised Pharaoh up. God raised up Pharaoh. Think about that phrase. That's saying, isn't it?

That God put him on his throne. God appointed him. Again, I think if we are to take God's sovereignty seriously, we must admit that God planned Pharaoh's life before he was born.

It's not just that God is reacting to Pharaoh or that it's contingent upon Pharaoh in some way. It's that God had this plan before Pharaoh was even born, before Pharaoh was on the throne, to raise him up and put him there.

God made him who he was. And then God hardened his heart, even as he hardened it himself. But God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he might display his power in him.

[38 : 21] Obviously that means his power in overcoming him. His power in judging him. And actually several times in the book of Exodus God talks about getting glory over Pharaoh and all his hosts.

In other words, it's not as if Pharaoh's hard heart was some kind of obstacle to God's plan or some kind of spanner in the works or God came up with a plan to kind of work around it or, you know, turn it for good at the last minute.

No, it was actually a big part of the good plan. God hardened Pharaoh's heart precisely for the fame of his own name. precisely so that he might get glory in judging Pharaoh and saving his people from the clutches of Pharaoh's wicked hands.

So Paul asks the question, probably the question we're all asking if you're listening, verse 19, you will say to me then, why does he still find fault for who can resist his will?

Good question, isn't it? But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, why have you made me like this?

[39 : 34] Has the potter no right over the clay to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy which he has prepared beforehand for glory?

So Paul frames his argument here as a series of rhetorical questions. Question number one, but who are you, O man, to answer back to God? The answer is obvious, isn't it?

No, you can't. You shouldn't do that. The very idea is preposterous. Question number two, will what is molded say to its molder, why have you made me like this?

No, of course not. What a ridiculous idea. We know the difference, don't we, between a lump of clay and the potter. Do we expect our crockery to talk back to us?

You know, I didn't want to be a ramekin, I wanted to be a vase. Question number three, has the potter no right over the clay to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?

[40 : 43] Yes, of course he does. One of the things I find most interesting about this verse is the way Paul frames it in terms of God's rights. Right?

The potter's rights. We are often obsessed with human rights and our rights, this particular human. And there is a goodness to that.

Right? There's no suggestion ever that God would treat his creatures unjustly or unfairly. But Paul is not so focused in this passage on our rights, but on God's.

On the rights of the potter. Have we ever ever stopped to wonder about God's rights? And if all we are is clay pots, right?

Dusty vessels, we were made from dust. Then what obligations does God have to us? Does the potter have to answer to the clay? Does the potter have no rights over the clay?

[41 : 44] Surely, he can make some pots for honourable use. Glorious vases to be put on display, to be admired. And he can make some pots for dishonourable use.

Chamber pots, slop buckets, I don't know. Of course God has the right to do that. Question number four. What if God, desiring to show his wrath and make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy which he has prepared beforehand for glory?

Now this question is a little bit longer and it's not quite so simple, is it? Let's just work through it slowly. First of all, notice, before he gets to the punchline, he has a couple of premises. Paul assumes as the premise of the question that God would want to show off his wrath and make known his power in destroying the wicked.

So it's not that God only wants to show off his mercy and that showing off his wrath is sort of a necessary evil. In fact, it's precisely the opposite. God wants to show off his conquest, the conquest of good over evil.

We were just singing, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah. You know the word hallelujah only occurs four times in the New Testament. They're all in Revelation 19, maybe Revelation 18 and 19, I can't quite remember.

[43 : 11] Remember how all the saints in Revelation 19 are crying out hallelujah. Why are they crying out hallelujah? Because God has judged the great prostitute.

Hallelujah. Salvation and glory and power belong to our God for his judgments are true and just for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.

Hallelujah. The smoke from her goes up forever and ever. That's because the saints all know, don't they, that judgment is a good thing.

Judgment, anger, not a bad part of God's character, not an embarrassing attribute that he tries to keep hidden away. So that is Paul's assumption here as he leads up to his question.

He starts with that assumption. What if God desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?

[44 : 17] Right? So if the first clause is about God's motives, the second clause now is about God's actions. Right? About what God has done. He has endured with much patience. Right?

He has not unleashed his wrath quickly. He's not hot-tempered. He's not unleashed his wrath quickly upon the vessels prepared for destruction. Notice again the word prepared must mean something like predestined.

There are pots prepared for destruction and pots prepared for glory. Right? Originally made for something. But God has been patient with the pots prepared for destruction.

why, so now we come to the punchline, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy which he has prepared beforehand for glory.

Right? In other words, God's patience matched by his eventual wrath is ultimately going to show off his mercy to the saints in heaven more clearly.

[45 : 22] Let me put it another way. I don't think we know how angry God is with our sin. Have you ever been so angry that you have been holding in so much rage you thought you might explode?

What Paul is saying is that when we see the fierce and terrible wrath of hell then finally we are going to understand just how much anger God has been holding back in his patience.

And then we will see all the more clearly how merciful he has been to us and how dazzling are the riches of his glory that he has bestowed upon us that we don't deserve.

all right so time to wrap up. As we close I want to return to that opening illustration about thinking about heaven and hell and how it's a bit like staring at the sun.

And I've got a silly pun there glorious sunshine but it's a serious point. What I want us to see is that really when we are thinking about heaven and hell what we are staring at is the holy, holy, holy character of God.

[46 : 44] The reason the doctrines of heaven and hell are so hard to behold is because God's character shines so brightly through them. Can I say that again?

The reason the doctrines of heaven and hell are so hard to behold is because God's character shines so brightly in them that it's almost unbearable. Like the people of Israel gathered around

Mount Sinai, do you remember, who could not bear to hear God speak. It's too much. We are sinful and weak and there is no way for us to cope with these things apart from our mediator. But when we are perfected through him, when we're not just thinking about glory but we're actually seeing it and we're beholding God face to face, we shall be like him. And then we'll finally understand it. Finally, we'll understand that heaven is not about us. And hell is good. The picture in Revelation is of God on his throne and the Lamb effulgent in all glory. Surrounded by multitudes of worshippers. One of the most perverse ways that we try to make everything about us is by distorting religion. So that even religion ends up being about us. [48 : 08] In the most outrageous cases we make idols that resemble human beings. We imagine gods that are just like us. But even among Christians we have this tendency to make the gospel about ourselves.

And in our evangelism we try to attract new people with a gospel that is all about them. And then of course when they get to church they come for themselves. church going is all about what I can get out of it.

How much I'm enjoying it. Church is about whether I feel connected. Whether this place is helping me practically find peace or meaning or whatever it is. Even serving others becomes about expressing myself.

Not serving God or doing what people actually need but making sure I'm on the music team or up the front. See these things are all distorted versions of good things.

That's why we get away with them. But they are twisted by the fact that they're all man centered. Now church and heaven are connected. See in the same vein we imagine that heaven's going to be all about me.

[49 : 13] Me, me, me and not about God. A bloke called Randy Alcorn writes about this kind of problem. He's talking about the various heavenly tourism literature that you can read about.

He says, this is a portrayal of a heaven that isn't about God and our relationship with him but only about human beings and our relationships with each other. A heaven where humanity is the cosmic center and God plays a supporting role.

The Bible knows nothing of this pseudo heaven. Heaven without God would be like a honeymoon without a groom or a palace without a king. Samuel Rutherford said, O my Lord Jesus Christ, if I could be in heaven without thee, it would be a hell.

And if I could be in hell and have thee still, it would be a heaven to me, for thou art all the heaven I want. To be with God, to know him, to see him is the central irreducible draw of heaven.

And of course it is. So as we embark on this difficult topic together this weekend, above all we must keep the glory of God front and center in our minds, if we don't, then inevitably we will distort both the doctrine of heaven and the doctrine of hell.

[50 : 32] By making heaven all about us, or by downplaying hell, because we don't like it. Because human beings are too important to ever go there, or whatever it may be.

all right, let's pray. All glory be to you, Father.

We pray that you would impress your word upon our hearts and minds this evening and help us to live in the light of these things. things. We honour and adore your glorious character.

We pray for the ways that our sin turns us inwards, distorts our vision of heaven or hell. Please have mercy upon us and rescue us. Help us to behold your glory ever more clearly each day, that we might be more like you and more bold and mission-minded in our lives and more ready for when these glorious realities impress themselves upon us once and for all.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.