

erasinghell

what God said
about eternity, and the
things we made up

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ERASING HELL
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[The author has added italics to Scripture quotations for emphasis.]

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Preface

I wrote this book with my friend Preston. I recruited his help because he can interact with issues at a deeper level than I can. His expertise in language, history, and the New Testament has helped tremendously in our effort to be thorough and precise. Preston studied first century Judaism for his doctorate and has published many works in this area. We thought it would be a good partnership since we have different gifts, but similar convictions. As we wrote the book, we decided to write it with one voice (Francis's). Truth be told, the majority of research was done by Preston.

While Preston and I wrote this book, it could not have been completed without the meticulous help of many in our community. First and foremost, Mark Beuving, who contributed many hours to editing, correcting, and re-writing sections with precision and care. Also, many staff at Eternity Bible College and Cornerstone Church in Simi Valley set aside precious hours to read through early drafts. Thank you Joshua, Spencer, Yvonne, Todd, and Matt. Your comments were invaluable. I also solicited the help of many scholars, who combed through the book, or portions of it, to make sure my interpretations of Scripture were sound. These scholars include Dr. Timothy Gombis (Grand Rapids Theological Seminary), Dr. Tremper Longman III (Westmont College), Dr. Joseph Dodson (Ouachita Baptist University), Dr. Simon Gathercole (Cambridge University), and Dr. Scott Hafemann (St. Andrews University). Although I didn't intend this to be a "scholarly" book, its subject matter demanded the utmost caution when handling the biblical text. I am therefore grateful for the close inspection it received before going to print.

However, no matter how many human filters we solicited to purify the words of this book, it's still fallible. Because of this, we have included many direct quotes from Scripture. Read the Scriptures we've quoted as truth directly from the mouth of God. Pause and meditate deeply on the verses whenever they arise. Those words are ultimately what God wants you to cherish and embrace.

Introduction

If you are excited to read this book, you have issues.

Do you understand the weight of what we are about to consider? We are exploring the possibility that you and I may end up being tormented in hell. “Excited” would be the wrong term to use here. “Necessary” would be more fitting.

For some, this discussion will open up old wounds. It certainly does for me.

The saddest day of my life was the day I watched my grandmother die. When that EKG monitor straight lined, I freaked out. I absolutely lost it! According to what I knew of the Bible, she was headed for a life of never-ending suffering. I thought I would go crazy. I have never cried harder, and I don’t ever want to feel like that again. Since that day I have tried not to think about it. It has been over 20 years.

Even as I write that paragraph, I feel sick. I would love to erase hell from the pages of Scripture.

How about you? Have you ever struggled with hell like I have? Do you have any parents, siblings, cousins, or friends, who, based on what you have been taught, will end up in hell? What a bone chilling thought. Until recently, whenever the idea of hell—and the idea of my loved ones possibly heading there—crossed my mind, I would brush it aside and divert my thinking to something more pleasant. While I’ve always believed in hell with my mind, I tried not to let the doctrine penetrate my heart.

But I reached a point where I could no longer do this. I could no longer acknowledge hell with my lips while preventing my heart

from feeling its weight. I had to figure out if the Bible actually taught the existence of a literal hell. How great would it be if it *didn't*? Then I would be able to embrace my grandmother again someday.

So I decided to write a book about hell. And honestly—I'm scared to death.

I'm scared because so much is at stake. Think about it. If I say there is no hell and it turns out that there is a hell, I may lead people into the very place I convinced them did not exist! If I say there is a hell and I'm wrong, I may persuade people to spend their lives frantically warning loved ones about a terrifying place that isn't real! When it comes to hell, we can't afford to be wrong. This is not one of those doctrines where you can toss in your two cents, shrug your shoulders, and move on. Too much is at stake. Too many *people* are at stake. And the Bible has much to say.

Who Should I Believe?

Part of me doesn't *want* to believe in hell. And I'll admit that I have a tendency to read into Scripture what I want to find—maybe you do too. Knowing this, I've spent many hours fasting and praying that God would prevent my desires from twisting Scripture to gratify my personal preferences. And I encourage you to do the same. Don't believe something just because you want to, and don't embrace an idea just because you've always believed it. Believe what is biblical. Test all your assumptions against the precious words God gave us in the Bible.

There are many things that I believed and practiced for years, only to change my views after further study of the Bible. I've learned to be okay with saying, "I think I was off on that one." While this is

humbling and difficult, it's better than continuing to believe something that is inaccurate.

For example, I was “initiated” into the American church when people urged me to pray a prayer to “receive Christ” so I wouldn't burn in hell. After years of leading others down the same path, I changed. I now speak against this idea of simply praying a prayer as fire insurance—I just don't see it anywhere in Scripture.

I was also taught that the Holy Spirit no longer empowers our lives with miraculous deeds, because these “ceased” long ago. For many years, I discouraged people from pursuing the supernatural. After further study of Scripture, I now believe that the Spirit can heal the incurable, accomplish the impossible, and ignite believers to do greater works than Jesus (John 14:12). And I urge people to believe the same.

I have distanced myself from traditional forms of “church” in pursuit of what I believe is more biblical. I don't believe God wants our church life to be centered on buildings and services. Instead, God wants our churches—whatever specific forms our gatherings take—to be focused on active discipleship, mission, and the pursuit of unity.

At one point, I even sold my house, quit my job, and left the country because I didn't want any of my comforts to hold me back from pursuing God wholeheartedly. I wanted to follow God wherever He led me.

Why do I tell you all this?

I'm not going to hang on to the idea of hell simply because it's what my tradition tells me to believe. And neither should you.

Let's be eager to leave what is familiar for what is true. Nothing

outside of God and His truth should be sacred to us. And so it is with hell. If hell is some primitive myth left over from conservative tradition, then let's set it on that dusty shelf next to other traditional beliefs that have no basis in Scripture. But if it is true, if the Bible does teach that there is a literal hell awaiting those who don't believe in Jesus, then this reality must change us. It should certainly purge our souls of all complacency.

As we roll up our sleeves and dig into the topic of hell, it's important that you don't distance what the Bible says from reality. In other words, don't forget that the *doctrine* you are studying may be the *destiny* of many people. Hell should not be studied without tearful prayer. We must weep, pray, and fast over this issue, begging God to reveal to us through His word the truth about hell. Because we can't be wrong on this one.

Let God Be God

But this book is actually much more than a book on hell. It's a book about embracing a God who isn't always easy to understand, and whose ways are far beyond us; a God whose thoughts are much higher than our thoughts; a God who, as the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of all things, has every right to "do," as the psalmist says, "whatever He pleases" (Ps. 115:3).

God has the right to do WHATEVER He pleases.

If I've learned one thing from studying hell, it's that last line. And whether or not you end up agreeing with everything I say about hell, you must agree with Psalm 115:3. Because at the end of the day, our feelings and wants and heartaches and desires are not ultimate—only God is ultimate. God tells us plainly that His ways and thoughts are

infinitely higher than ours (Isa. 55). Expect then, that the Scriptures will say things that don't agree with your natural way of thinking.

This is why we need to pray. We need to ask God to help us think rightly about hell. Before you read this book, I ask that you pray. Seriously. Pray. I'm the type of person who never does what a book tells me to do, and maybe you are too. But I ask you to make this one exception. Pray before you read this book. The following is the gist of the prayers I prayed as I journeyed along in the writing of this book. It's also my prayer for you as you wrestle with this important issue:

God, I want to know what is true. I know I have cravings that sway and distort my ability to reason. You promise that Your Holy Spirit will guide me into all truth. I pray that He will now. I don't want to be wrong. I don't want to be deceived by others or myself. You alone possess all truth, and I want to be on Your side. Give me eyes to see and ears to hear. Give me courage to live and speak what is right no matter the cost. I don't want to believe anything about You that is not true. Amen.

