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Woe to Those Who Harm

Truly, “Man is fearfully and wonderfully made.” He is a wonder to angels, a wonder to the universe; and he ought to be a wonder to himself. . . . The wreck of a world would be a disaster less shocking and direful than the eternal ruin and loss of such a being.¹

—L. B. Hartman, *Divine Penology*

Evil Is Not a Theory

The strongest saints and the strongest sceptics alike took positive evil as the starting-point of their argument. If it be true (as it certainly is) that a man can feel exquisite happiness in skinning a cat, then the religious philosopher can only draw one of two deductions. He must either deny the existence of God, as all atheists do; or he must deny the present union between God and man, as all Christians do. The new theologians seem to think it a highly rationalistic solution to deny the cat.²

We live in a world in which many ideas that were formerly presupposed about human life and society are being overturned. As G. K. Chesterton notes cheekily in *Orthodoxy*, however, human evil is stubbornly undeniable. It is both true and appalling that there are men in the world who are able to derive happiness from hurting animals. This fact is serious enough to prove Chesterton’s point. It is trivial enough, perhaps, to form the basis of a witticism. What remains unsaid, and infinitely more sober, is that there are people who are able to derive happiness from hurting other people.

Evil is not a theory. It was paraded brazenly across the world’s stage in the great wars of the twentieth century, and has been recently seen in the atrocities perpetrated by ISIS and Boko Haram. From rape and abuse, to enslavement and degradation, mankind is capable of shocking and diverse evils. Words like “wrong” or “error” simply do not convey either the depth of harm to the victims of evil or the malignity of those who perpetrate it. Daniel M. Haybron, Professor of Philosophy at Saint Louis University, writes,

¹ L. B. Hartman, *Divine Penology* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1898), 118.

² G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Company, 1909), 24–25.

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We do not employ the language of evil as freely as our forbears did. But call Hitler or the Holocaust evil and you are unlikely to arouse much disagreement. On the contrary: you will have better luck generating dissent if you refer to Hitler or the Holocaust merely as bad or wrong: "Hitler was a bad person, and what he did was wrong." As is often noted, such tepid language seems terribly inadequate to the moral gravity of this subject matter. Prefix your adjectives with as many "verys" as you like; you still fall short. Only "evil", it seems, will do.³

While the reality of evil is a concept every philosopher must account for in his worldview, evil is not primarily a philosophical problem but a moral and personal one. Many readers of this book would certainly name things done to them, or perhaps by them, as evil, knowing that no other language could adequately capture the moral force of these actions. Evil seems to touch us all, one way or another. It is strong and surprising, monstrous and malevolent. It is an ocean, irresistibly overpowering helpless victims who find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. It is a raider, appearing on the horizon without warning, its flag of death promising rape and ravage. It is a kraken, its powerful tentacles impersonally and indiscriminately crushing rich and poor, young and old, noble and common alike.

The twisted tyranny of human evil prompts cries for deliverance, as in the example of David:

Deliver me from my enemies, O my God; protect me from those who rise up against me; deliver me from those who work evil, and save me from bloodthirsty men. For behold, they lie in wait for my life; fierce men stir up strife against me. For no transgression or sin of mine, O Lord, for no fault of mine, they run and make ready. Awake, come to meet me, and see! You, Lord God of hosts, are God of Israel. Rouse yourself to punish all the nations; spare none of those who treacherously plot evil. Selah. (Ps 59:1-5)

"Deliver me from those who work evil." This cry for justice is a universal one. Is there a single person in all of human history who has not called out to his father, his king, or his gods to come to his aid at one time or another? An important truth concerning hell is that God hears. He hears, sees, and rouses Himself to avenge the oppressed. Hell is good because it communicates and secures the value of human life. Although it may seem highly counterintuitive to the western and modern mind, God cannot properly be said to care for mankind if there is no hell. Hell is God's vengeance upon those who have harmed His creatures.

³ Daniel M. Haybron, "Moral Monsters and Saints," *The Monist* 85, no. 2 (2002): 260, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27903772>.

As Long as It Doesn't Harm Anyone

The idea of “harm” is one that is very much in vogue. In discussions about morality and ethics, one very often hears that everything is permissible as long as it does not harm anyone. This harm principle can be traced to atheist John Stuart Mill, who in *On Liberty*, states, “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.”⁴ While Mill’s main purpose in making this statement was to limit the power of government, in our own day this seed thought has sprouted into a general moral maxim which is applied to individual ethics and leads ultimately to situational ethics. Interestingly, Mill’s harm principle, in the individual and moral sense in which it is now applied, is similar to another well-known ethical principle—the Wiccan Rede—which states, “An it harm none, do as ye will.”⁵ Mill’s principle and the Wiccan Rede share this foundation: they conceive of man apart from God. The humanist and the occultist both detach man from the governance of God and enthrone man at the centre of the universe.

This uncoupling has the appearance of liberating and elevating man. Mill writes, “Individuality is the same thing with development, and that it is only the cultivation of individuality which produces, or can produce, well-developed human beings.”⁶ This perspective is remarkably similar to the occultist’s view of man—that fulfillment and value come through autonomy. Mill then applies his point by referring to those few people, “persons of genius,” who “should be encouraged in acting differently from the mass.”⁷ Here we begin to see the fault in his thinking.⁸ While the “harm principle” has the appearance of liberating the individual by throwing off societal and religious restraints, in practice it pits one man against another in a competitive scheme wherein the powerful and remarkable flourish, and the poor are victimized. What Mill surreptitiously couches in moral language, Satanist Alistair Crowley lays bare in all of its bent ambition: “We have nothing with the outcast and the unfit: let them die in their misery. For they feel not.

⁴ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, Wisehouse (Wisehouse, 1909), Kindle Locations 166, 177.

⁵ Hans Holzer, *The Truth About Witchcraft* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1969), 142. “THIS BOOK lays down a simple Code of Conduct. ‘Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.’” Aleister Crowley, *The Book of the Law*, Centennial (York Beach, ME: Red Wheel, 2004), 13.

⁶ Mill, *On Liberty*, Kindle Location 1058.

⁷ Mill, Kindle Locations 1074, 1112-1119.

⁸ Mill certainly means to put limits on the power of these exceptional individuals. The fault lies not so much with his designs, but with his presuppositions. The end result, unintended no doubt, is that people are freed from previous historical, religious, and societal norms, only to be more greatly oppressed by their own sins, other’s sins, and the spiritual forces of evil.

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Compassion is the vice of kings: stamp down the wretched & the weak: this is the law of the strong: this is our law and the joy of the world.”⁹

How different is the law of our Lord! He does not say, “Do no harm,” but “whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them” (Mt 7:12) and “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:39). In the language of Isaiah, this love is “to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless,” and “plead the widow’s cause (Is 1:17). This law of love is one that is grounded in the intrinsic value of man as a special creation of God, and has the Divine as its defender and prosecutor.

Restitution and Value

The value of mankind is an important consideration of the penalties of law, and thus, hell. In any matter of law or litigation, there is the idea of loss. In chapter 3 we considered that sin and crime are “un-things”—the privation of good and right. The punishment of the criminal or sinner is actually, and ultimately, a restoration. In that chapter we were mainly concerned with establishing the nature of wrongs. In this chapter we want to consider, more particularly, the victim’s point of view.

In human society, law has its beginnings as a means of protecting the rights and freedoms of families who live together. In order to protect citizens from constant chaos and vigilante violence, laws are needed in order to stipulate how injuries are to be dealt with. In the Mosaic law, accordingly, there is a set of basic case laws which can apply to many situations where one person harms another. Exodus 21:33-36 is one example:

When a man opens a pit, or when a man digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit shall make restoration. He shall give money to its owner, and the dead beast shall be his. When one man’s ox butts another’s, so that it dies, then they shall sell the live ox and share its price, and the dead beast also they shall share. Or if it is known that the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has not kept it in, he shall repay ox for ox, and the dead beast shall be his.

As we considered earlier, every penalty of law is first conceived as a debt. Hugo Grotius states, “Now in the eye of the law, every penalty is considered, as a debt arising out of a crime, and which the offender is bound to pay to the aggrieved party. And in this there is something approaching to the nature of contracts.”¹⁰ Penalties under the law involve the idea of recompense—of paying back the loss or injury—or using Grotius’ language, of fulfilling the

⁹ Crowley, *The Book of the Law*, II.21.

¹⁰ Hugo Grotius, “On Punishments,” in *The Rights of War and Peace* (Washington: M. Walter Dunne, 1901), II.20.2, <http://www.bartleby.com/172/>.

“contract.” Related questions include: “what is the value of what has been lost?” and “how can the victim be appropriately compensated?” The answers are not always easy. The intention of the perpetrator plays an important role, what is called in law “*Mens Rea*” —a guilty mind. There is also the issue of the public good in addition to personal injuries.¹¹ The variables which contribute to compensation and punishment are almost endless. Nevertheless, the punishment of the perpetrator must be in perfect equality with the injury done.

Exodus 21:23-25, the famous *lex talionis*, states, “But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.” Here, and in most systems of law in society, the principle of proportionality bears witness to a natural law imprinted on the conscience of man.¹² In his article “Natural Law, the Lex Talionis, and the Power of the Sword,” David VanDrunen states that we see this principle not only in older formulations of law, such as the *Code of Hammurabi* and Rome’s *Twelve Tables*, but “even into the second millennium A.D. in Anglo Saxon, Old Norse, and Icelandic legal cultures.”¹³ Whether or not one believes that a literal application of the *lex talionis* remains a fundamental or viable form of human justice in today’s society, the principle of proportionality is clearly established in it; every matter of crime and punishment necessarily takes into account the “value” of the injury or harm.

The Value of Man

What about those situations where the harm seems to go far beyond the economic? How would one measure the harm done to a child by his parents’ divorce? How does a society quantify the level of injury in rape or child abuse? How does an individual make appropriate restitution for theft when the most acute loss is not financial, but the family’s sense of security and safety? The only way to calculate loss is to first know the value of the “whole.” To calculate the harm of divorce, one would need to have some comprehension of the peace and well-being of a child who had an intact home. To calculate the harm of abuse, a society would need some idea of the security and peace of a loved and protected child. To calculate the harm of robbery, the one making restitution would need to take into account emotional duress and the value of a sense of security in one’s own dwelling. These questions point us

¹¹ See Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 4.1.

¹² For a full-length treatment see William Ian Miller, *Eye For An Eye* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹³ David VanDrunen, “Natural Law, the Lex Talionis, and the Power of the Sword,” *Liberty University Law Review* 2, no. 3 (2008): 945.

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to a more fundamental query—what is the value of a whole man? The Creator gives us an answer in the first couple chapters of the Bible. In Genesis 1:26–27 we read that

God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

As a whole, in his created and un-fallen state, man is not just flesh, but god-in-flesh. He is made after the picture and pattern of the divine. He is made to be king of the earth under the King of kings and to be steward of the great Sovereign. We have here a wondrous picture of man, but it is a picture with God at the centre, and man beneath Him. Where this relationship is not acknowledged, the perceived value of man will be drastically diminished.

It is important to note, however, that the incredible value and glory of man does not inhere naturally, but supernaturally. In Genesis chapter 1 we learn that all things were brought into existence by God’s mere word, except for man, who was created from the dust. What an ignoble beginning! It would be hard to envision how God could possibly communicate more clearly that we are nothing without Him. We were “formed of the dust of the ground” (Gn 2:7), and to the dust we will return (Gn 3:19). All the years of our life are like a mere dream or a sigh, and we are swept away in a moment like grass that flourishes for just a day before withering up (Ps 90). On account of God’s image in us and His purpose for our creation, however, we are raised not only above the earth, but above the beasts, and even, in a sense, above the angels (1 Cor 6:3, 1 Pt 1:12). And so David, marveling, cries out, “what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” (Ps 8:4).

The Imago Dei

Theologians have long disputed the exact nature of the image of God. There are three main schools of thought. The substantive view is that the image consists in the unique characteristics of humanity: rationality, will, spirit, or original righteousness. The relational view is that the image consists in man’s innate ability to relate to God and his fellow man, echoing the eternal interrelations of the Trinity. The functional view is that the image consists in his ability and purpose to exercise dominion for God over the world through procreation and the cultural mandate (Gn 1:28).¹⁴

¹⁴ Steve W. Lemke, “The Intelligent Design of Humans: The Meaning of the Imago Dei for Theological Anthropology,” *Meeting of the Southwest Regional Evangelical Theological Society*, 2008, 12. See also Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*

An extensive treatment of the *imago dei* is far beyond the scope of this chapter. Whether or not we can properly say that the image *consists* in one or more of these aspects, it is certainly true that each of these aspects is an important part of man. What is important for our consideration here, however, is that this image of God in man has not been completely lost.¹⁵ It may be tattered and tarnished, but it persists and gives value to every human being, a value far beyond what the humanist or occultist could imagine. The irony of their view is that, although they place man at the centre of their universe almost as gods, their universe, cut off from the one true God, is of such poverty that their “man” is necessarily low and inferior. They give him kingship in creation, but it is a rule of dust and ashes without the Divine breath within him. The Bible’s view of the greatness and value of man is infinitely greater than the humanist’s view, even though in the latter man is virtually worshipped. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes,

Man’s greatness is, perhaps, our supreme reason for considering the doctrine [of the image of God] at all. I am never tired of pointing out that to me one of the great tragedies in the modern world is man’s failure to realise this. That sounds strange in an age when man is worshipping man; yes, but what he worships is totally unworthy of the biblical conception. The real trouble in the world today is that man does not know who he is and what he is; he does not realise his own greatness.¹⁶

Some of the wisest pagans have also recognized the “heaven-ness” of man. Cicero states,

From which consideration we are bold to say that we possess a certain consanguinity and kindred fellowship with the celestials. And so far as we know, among all the varieties of animals, man alone retains the idea of the Divinity. . . . There exists therefore a similitude between God and man; nor can any knowledge be more appropriate and sterling than what relates to this divine similitude.¹⁷

Look Across the Courtroom

Man is a remarkable being. Only when we understand that he is made in the image of God and bears the marks of heaven are we able to make judgments about the harm done to him. And the Bible clearly states, as does the

(Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986). The image of God in man may be triadic: substantive emphasizing the Father, functional emphasizing the Son, and relational emphasizing the Holy Spirit.

¹⁵ Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 72.

¹⁶ David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible, Vol. 1: God the Father, God the Son* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 169.

¹⁷ Cicero, “On The Laws,” 1.

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conscience, that we have harmed others. When we look across the courtroom, as it were, and view “man” in his position as the plaintiff against us, what do we see?

Our accuser is rational. Man is capable of thought, volition, and judgment, and of weighing ideas and undertaking complex investigations into himself and his world. His mind is a veritable universe, the limits of which have not yet been fully probed or comprehended.

Our accuser is emotional. Man is moved by desires and impulses which are relational in nature. He is capable of caring for those he has never met, of being moved to tears through literature or music, and of forever speaking and singing about love. Augustine marvelled, “Man himself is a great deep, whose very hairs Thou numberest, O Lord, and they fall not to the ground without Thee. And yet are the hairs of his head more readily numbered than are his affections and the movements of his heart.”¹⁸

Our accuser is moral. Man has a conscience and with regard to good and evil is both capable and culpable. There is moral fibre in his being and moral weight in his actions. There is a sense of “ought” within himself that he cannot shake, the laws of nature bearing witness to his soul of his heavenly origin and divine obligation.¹⁹

Our accuser is spiritual. Man is capable of communication and fellowship in an invisible world. He was created to walk with God and enter His most holy place (Gn 3:8, Ps 23:6). Eternity is put into the heart of man (Eccl 3:11) and, though he be told by dictators and Darwinians that “there is no God,” he cannot erase the stubborn sense of the spiritual within his soul.

Our accuser is immortal. Man’s physical death belies an eternal existence in either delight or destruction. He is like his Creator in that his soul is imperishable and his years will never end. “In distinction from the brute,” writes Berkhof of man’s original state, “he possesses a life that transcends time and already contains within itself a pledge of immortality.”²⁰

The smallest child is a marvel of glory and beauty. The most uneducated man is capable of complex mental computations. The most wicked reprobate still acts in ways that encompasses more moral good than any brute beast. From the least to the greatest, from the youngest to the oldest, from the most

¹⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, 4.14.22. I am thankful to Hartman (*Divine Penology*) for calling my attention to this quote.

¹⁹ See chapter 15, “Moral Obligation” in Hartman, *Divine Penology*.

²⁰ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1938), 675.

foolish to the most learned, man is a wonder. And because of this fact, every human being is worthy of the greatest honour, respect, and freedom.

Crimes Against Mankind

And what are the crimes for which we are dragged before the judge to face our accuser? Here we must tread carefully because we are prone to tremendous bias. At times our conscience speaks truthfully about the harm we have done to others, but often we minimize the injuries we have committed in order to justify ourselves.

Let us continue from the opening pages of Scripture to Genesis 9, where we read the second instance of divine law in Scripture. The worldwide flood of God's judgment has abated and, like Adam before him, Noah and his offspring are given a dominion mandate. The similarities are significant, but there is at least one major difference: man may now eat the flesh of the beasts (although not their blood). Concurrent with this concession, God stipulates that neither man nor beast may kill a human being: "And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man" (Gn 9:5).

Some crimes are so great that the only equitable punishment is death. Murder has not been the only capital crime in the history of humanity, but it is the prime example. It is the easiest to equate under the law as a life for a life. While this may be true justice within human society, it still falls short, however, of ultimate justice. For whether a criminal murders a single person or hundreds, the greatest possible punishment is the same—his execution. There is, furthermore, no payment large enough that the loss of his victim's life could ever truly be compensated. Psalm 49:7 clarifies the matter: "Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life." Law-makers have long recognized the anomaly of capital punishment. In *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel observes, "Although in requital we cannot venture upon equality of details, the case is different with murder, to which death is necessarily due. Life is the total context of one's existence, and cannot be measured by value. Its punishment, therefore, cannot be measured by value, but must consist in the taking of another life."²¹

Execution for Temptation

"Life . . . cannot be measured by value." We need to keep this in mind as we consider another statute in the New Testament, Luke 17:1-2, where Jesus tells His disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one

²¹ Hegel and Dyde, *Philosophy of Right*, 94. See also Blackstone, *Comment. Laws Engl.*, 4.1.

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through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.” There are three points of comparison between this statement and the law given to Noah in Genesis 9:5: the crime, the punishment, and the victim. Firstly, while the crime in the capital punishment text (Gn 9:5) is murder, here it is “merely” tempting or causing another to sin. This distinction ought to be frightening because, although most have never committed murder, all have at some point tempted another person to sin.

The second point of comparison is the punishment. We might assume that the divine punishment for temptation would surely be far less than that for murder in the world of men, but it is not. Jesus states that the person who causes another to sin would be better off if they were executed! Capital punishment, pertaining merely to the body in this world, is nothing compared to eternal punishment in hell. Lastly, and to emphasize the point even further, Jesus states that this will be the consequence for those who cause to sin even the “least” human being—a child.²² Economically and functionally speaking, children are the least valuable human beings.²³ And yet, just as in Exodus 21:22-25 where, regarding even an unborn child it says, “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,” so also Jesus states that even the “least” among men are of great enough value that if a person so much as tempts one to sin, their punishment will greatly exceed execution.

The reason that temptation carries such a seemingly inordinate punishment is because of sin’s effects. The Bible teaches us that sin brings death and destruction (Rom 5 :12). It mires the mental processes and darkens the understanding (Eph 4:18). Sin destroys the spiritual connection with a Holy God (Col 1:21-22) and breeds disunity between the spirits of men (Ti 3:3). A single sin is enough to make someone a law-breaker and rebel in the sight of the Divine Judge (Jas 2:10) and is thus a sufficient reason to sentence a person to eternal torment. Every kind of grief, misery, pain, affliction, difficulty, punishment, and evil can be traced to sin. Those who have tempted others to sin, therefore, have caused irreparable and grievous harm to a being created

²² The parallel passage in Matthew 18:5-6 is more explicit that the “little ones” are indeed children. However, it is possible that Jesus used this and similar expressions as a figure of speech for believers in some instances, an approach which may have been appropriated by John (Mk 10:24, 1 Jn 2:1).

²³ This ought not to be a remotely offensive statement, but I suspect it will be to some. We live in a day in which equality is one of the highest virtues, and statements that even hint at inequality are repudiated. There is a very easy way to prove the point, however: by referral to birthrates. If children were more highly valued in economic and functional terms, people would be having far more of them. It is precisely because of their lack of economic and functional value that more parents in “advanced” societies do not have more children.

in the image of God. This conclusion at least partly resolves a common objection to the doctrine of hell. Weighing how a person might be subject to an infinite punishment, Andrei Buckareff and Allen Plug state in “Escaping Hell,”

A person may cause infinite harm by performing a single action if he causes infinite harm to a person of finite importance, or he might cause harm to a person of infinite importance (any harm to a person of infinite importance is an infinite harm). The only way to cause an infinite harm to a finite person is to cause that person to go to hell. Any other harm would merely be a finite harm. An infinite regress looms if hell exists solely to punish people for causing others to be sent to hell. It would be better, in this case, for hell not to exist because it would then be impossible for any person to cause infinite harm to another finite person.²⁴

The inference in Jesus’ statement in Luke 17:1–2 is *exactly* as Buckareff and Plug state: by tempting a person to sin who does actually sin, we are complicit in an offence whose punishment is an infinite harm to them. We will consider in chapter 8 that sin is also “harm” against a person of infinite importance, and that this is the most important measurement of offence and injury. This greater point, and others in the chapters to come, will answer the potential challenge raised of “an infinite regress.” For now, we will keep our eyes fixed on man and the harm that God states we have caused him. And God states that we are guilty if we have tempted even the least human being to sin and will incur an eternal punishment if we are not pardoned. It is as if we have arrived at the courtroom to hear the charges against us, but instead of a misdemeanor charge we are charged with a capital offence, and our very lives are quite unexpectedly on the line.

Breadth of Harm

The charge of having harmed our fellow man may be far more serious than we expected, but it is also wider in scope than we may have expected. Imagine arriving at the courtroom, and, instead of seeing a single plaintiff, there are ten plaintiffs, or a hundred, all seated behind the plaintiff’s chair, each one claiming that our one offence harmed them to the degree we have considered.

The presupposition in the “do no harm” principle is that the results of our personal behaviour and choices are significantly contained. Is this true? Do we exist as solitary actors, largely unrelated to most of the other characters in this human drama? The Scriptures suggest otherwise. In the story of the patriarchs of Genesis, the sins of one generation spread like poison to

²⁴ Andrei A. Buckareff and Allen Plug, “Escaping Hell: Divine Motivation and the Problem of Hell,” *Religious Studies* 41, no. 1 (2005): 39–54.

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subsequent generations.²⁵ In the law of Moses, sanction is given for the community execution of members who grievously sinned so that iniquity would be both expiated *and* contained.²⁶ In the account which follows David's rape of Bathsheba and treachery against Uriah, there is both treachery and rape within his own house (2 Sm 12:11). Sin's diffusion and spread is taught in the New Testament as well. Jesus told the disciples to beware the leaven of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (Lk 12:1), a metaphor Paul also used in his instructions to the church at Corinth about how to handle sexual sin in their midst (1 Cor 5:3-6). While we may possibly realize that sin brings about death, we far too often conceive of sin as akin to a pistol or rifle, its destructive power focused and relatively contained. In reality, sin is more like a chemical weapon, seeping into niches and fissures, infecting and inflicting great harm far beyond the place of the weapon's impact.

The interconnectedness of man is being discovered in a variety of modern disciplines. In *Connected*, doctors Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler powerfully demonstrate the contagion of human behaviour within social groups. In one example, the authors tracked the spread of obesity over many years in a particular community. Drawing from a very unique database, they were able to rule out causes of homophily (people of similar weight tending to mutual relationships) and confounding (common exposures to forces which caused simultaneous weight gain). Rather,

variation by nature of the friendship tie is . . . what we found. If a mutual friend becomes obese, it nearly triples a person's risk of becoming obese. Furthermore, mutual friends are twice as influential as the friends people name who do not name them back. And finally, people are not influenced at all by others who name them as friends if they do not name them back.²⁷

In the same chapter, the authors give far more sober examples of the same peer-contagion principle: a teen group-sex epidemic which took place in Rockdale County, Georgia in 1996 and various suicide contagions.

In addition, modern genetic research is unearthing new data about the breadth of familial relationships—evidence which mere decades ago would be considered science-fiction. In *Identically Different*, geneticist Tim Spector demonstrates that behaviour can change the expression of one's

²⁵ See Robert R. Gonzales Jr., "Faults of Our Fathers: The Spread of Sin in the Patriarchal Narratives and Its Implication," *Westminster Theological Journal* 74, no. 2 (2012): 367-86.

²⁶ A few examples include Dt 13:5, 17:12-13, and 21:21.

²⁷ Nicholas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler, *Connected* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 108-10.

genes, and that these changes can be passed down through multiple generations. He states,

The most important lesson that we've learnt is that you can change your genes, your destiny and that of your children and grandchildren. It really does matter what you do to your body, and importantly what you grandparents did to theirs many years ago. They may have faced stressful situations like famine or sickness that couldn't be avoided, but perhaps you might face life choices like quitting smoking, going vegetarian, or changing your bacterial gut flora. These could influence your life and possibly several generations.²⁸

While some of Spector's examples here are amoral, grievous sins like sexual abuse and early childhood neglect (particularly maternal neglect) have also been shown to leave their marks on victims in such a way that their effects continue to the children's children (Ex 34:7).²⁹

We have little comprehension of the wide effects of our sins. They are not mere pebbles in a pond. The swell of our sins travels out into the wider world and wreaks havoc in ways we may never know. The society of man is a giant web of interconnected relationships through kinship, geography, time, and perhaps through more mystical ways as well. The general rule of sin is not containment, but contagion. We affect each other in a myriad of ways that we do not yet fully comprehend, but hurt always begets hurt, harm always begets harm, and hell always begets hell.³⁰

An Involved Judge

If this breadth of sin's harm were all, it would be enough to drive the strongest man to his knees in fear, but there is more—there is also a Judge in the seat of justice who will prosecute men for the harm they have done. This Judge acts in complete accord with His divine laws, bringing about punishment in exact equilibrium to the offence. In the judicial acts of reviewing the charges, weighing the testimony, giving a verdict, and pronouncing the sentence, He is completely impartial. Unlike human judges, the Divine Judge will not be moved or affected emotionally so that He acts contrary to wisdom, justice, or law (Dt 10:17-18).

²⁸ Tim Spector, *Identically Different: Why We Can Change Our Genes* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2014), 294.

²⁹ Spector, 130-52. Allan N Schore, "All Our Sons: The Developmental Neurobiology and Neuroendocrinology of Boys at Risk," *Infant Mental Health Journal* 38, no. 1 (2017): 15-52.

³⁰ I mean this statement in the sense that entities always produce after their kind (Mt 23:15, Gal 6:7-8).

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In acknowledging this fact, however, we can fall into another error: that God, in His role as Judge, is impersonal. The law is not an agent or actor, but an instrument. It is God Himself who brings about the punishment, and He does so as one who has a personal interest in the victim, for the victim is His precious creature. Speaking of God's wrath, R. V. G. Tasker states,

It is inadequate to regard this term (wrath) merely as a description of "the inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe" or as another way of speaking of the results of sin. It is rather a personal quality, without which God would cease to be fully righteous and his love would degenerate into sentimentality.³¹

God the Creator has a personal stake in His creatures. Any evil done to them rouses Him, as Judge, to personal vengeance on their behalf. Anthony Hoekema goes so far as to say that the one who hurts a human being "hurts God himself—the God who was reflected in that individual. To touch the image of God is to touch God himself; to kill the image of God is to do violence to God himself."³²

Pleading the Cause of the Poor

The Bible repeatedly describes how God will avenge Himself on behalf of the downtrodden of society—those who are harmed by those people more powerful than they. Concerning the socially disadvantaged, Exodus 22:22–24 states, "You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless." Concerning the poor and oppressed, Proverbs 22:22–23 enjoins, "Do not rob the poor, because he is poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate, for the Lord will plead their cause and rob of life those who rob them." Concerning the sheep of His own pasture, Zechariah 11:17 warns, "Woe to my worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock! May the sword strike his arm and his right eye! Let his arm be wholly withered, his right eye utterly blinded!"

Hell is good news for the oppressed, disadvantaged, and powerless of society. It communicates to the victims of evil that their lives matter. They are regarded by their Creator—He takes a personal interest in defending their cause and bringing about justice for them. This is precisely the point of Jesus' parable about the beggar Lazarus, which in Luke's gospel immediately

³¹ R. V. G. Tasker, "Wrath," in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. R. W. Wood et al. (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1996). See also his more lengthy treatments: "The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God," *Themelios* 26, no. 2 (2001): 4–17; "Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God: Part 2," *Themelios* 26, no. 3 (2001): 5–21.

³² Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 16.

precedes His “millstone” warning about those who cause others to sin (Lk 16:19–30). It is beyond any objection that justice is not always complete in this world, but a day is coming when God will balance the scales of justice for the beggar against the baron.

One of the greatest obstacles to the doctrine of eternal punishment is that we are too rich and care too little for the poor. Surveying the literature on hell, one notes that those who raise the strongest objections to it are prosperous, modern, middle- to upper-class Westerners. In what amounts to a kind of intellectual bigotry, they perceive their motives to be for the greater good but undermine the very hope that the underprivileged so desperately need. In *The Reason for God*, New York Pastor Tim Keller relates an after-service discussion with a woman who found the idea of a judging God offensive.

I said, “Why aren’t you offended by the idea of a forgiving God?” She looked puzzled. I continued, “I respectfully urge you to consider your cultural location when you find the Christian teaching about hell offensive.” I went on to point out that secular Westerners get upset by the Christian doctrines of hell, but they find Biblical teaching about turning the other cheek and forgiving enemies appealing. I then asked her to consider how someone from a very different culture sees Christianity. In traditional societies the teaching about “turning the other cheek” makes absolutely no sense. It offends people’s deepest instincts about what is right. For them the doctrine of a God of judgment, however, is no problem at all. . . .

Why, I concluded, should Western cultural sensibilities be the final court in which to judge whether Christianity is valid? I asked the woman gently whether she thought her culture superior to non-Western ones.³³

The Lazaruses of this world need the personal vindication of God against their oppressors. Modern detractors would do well to consider that their decrying of hell likely has more to do with their wealth than their wisdom.

Are the Victims Different from the Perpetrators?

Someone might object at this point that these principles seem opposed to the universality of hell for those who have not repented of their sin. Will all the poor and underprivileged go to heaven? What about those who have been both subject to oppression and have oppressed others? Surely this group would comprise a significant proportion of mankind? It ought to be clear by now that God weighs the deeds of *all* men. When the Scriptures speak of groups like “the oppressed” or “the fatherless” and put the Divine Defender on their side, it is a generalization that ought to cause those on either side of the social divide to put their trust in God and not in themselves. Every person

³³ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), 74–75.

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has been both victim and perpetrator a hundred times over. God does not draw an arbitrary line with the more oppressed on one side, and the more oppressive on the other. Each person will be judged for his own sins.

We see this principle in the example of how God uses nations and groups to bring about temporal judgment in the world. In Isaiah 10:1-3 we see that Israel had made widows their spoil and the fatherless their prey. In order to punish Israel, God uses the nation of Assyria: “Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets” (v5-6). One might assume then that Assyria, being an instrument of God, is exempt from punishment in harming Israel. We are told, however, that Assyria goes beyond the bounds of God’s prescription (v7-11), and in response to Assyria’s pride, God’s anger is roused against her.

Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it, or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it? As if a rod should wield him who lifts it, or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood! Therefore the Lord God of hosts will send wasting sickness among his stout warriors, and under his glory a burning will be kindled, like the burning of fire. The light of Israel will become a fire, and his Holy One a flame, and it will burn and devour his thorns and briers in one day. (v15-17)

God as Judge will always punish sin according to His immutable and perfect law. Everyone who harms one of God’s precious creatures will himself be harmed by God.

What Is the Proper Response to Evil?

In the movie *The Patriot*, Mel Gibson plays the character of Benjamin Martin, a widower with seven children, and a war “hero” from the French and Indian War.³⁴ Knowing from personal experience the evil and barbarity of war, he votes against a levy supporting a new Continental Army, certain that it would provoke war against the British, a war that would negatively affect communities and families. In spite of his opposition the tax is approved, and his eldest son joins the army against his wishes. Repeatedly Benjamin acts neutrally in the war in order to protect his family, but eventually his eldest son is captured by the British and is led away to be executed. The second eldest, confusing his father’s inactivity for cowardice, tries to free his brother and is shot in the process, dying in Martin’s arms.

³⁴ An important part of the plot is that although Martin is noted for his previous exploits by his peers, his own conscience plagues him for atrocities he committed in the war.

In spite of all his efforts, death has come to his family. Martin is roused to vengeance and grabs from a trunk the tomahawk he had used infamously in the French and Indian War. He tracks down the unit escorting his eldest and, with the help of two younger sons armed with muskets, they kill the entire British company except for one who lives to relate the story to the British commander. In a particularly sober scene, the last British soldier attempts to flee from Martin, but Martin pursues him, strikes him down and, mounting his body, proceeds to inflict blow upon blow in unremitting vengeance, even after the man is dead. His young boys look on in horror as the man they know to be a kind and benevolent father drenches himself in the blood of his enemy. Later that night, as Martin tucks the two boys into bed, we see their disparate reactions to the horrors of the day. One says resolutely, "I'm glad I killed them. I'm glad." The other refuses even to speak to his father and turns away.

A sober and gruesome part of the story, the depiction is clearly of a man not only *moved* by emotion but also *bent* by it, impelled into actions that, if not immoral, are at least unseemly. While by no means a perfect parallel to God as Judge, this picture of a vengeful father raises an uncomfortable but important question—what kind of emotional response is appropriate for a man avenging his son's murder? In his *Treatise on the Anger of God*, the church father Lactantius argues against those "who represent God as being without emotions."³⁵ Using an example from Cicero, he writes,

What if those things were done which are spoken of by Cicero? "For I ask, if any head of a family, when his children had been put to death by a slave, his wife slain and his house set on fire, should not exact most severe punishment from that slave, whether he would appear to be kind and merciful, or inhuman and most cruel?"

The answer, of course, is that the father would be "inhuman and cruel." Lactantius continues, applying the same thinking to God;

But if to pardon deeds of this kind is the part of cruelty rather than of kindness, it is not therefore the part of goodness in God not to be moved at those things which are done unjustly. For the world is, as it were, the house of God, and men, as it were, His slaves; and if His name is a mockery to them, what kind or amount of forbearance is it to give up His own honours, to see wicked and unjust things done, and not to be indignant, which is peculiar and natural to Him who is displeased with sins!³⁶

³⁵ Lactantius, *A Treatise on the Anger of God*, 16.

³⁶ Lactantius, 16.

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Lactantius causes us to consider an important and most unexpected truth about God—His personal and passionate vengeance is evidence that He is not “inhuman and most cruel” but “kind and merciful.” It is not only His justice which moves Him to brandish His weapon of wrath against wrongdoers but also His compassion and love.

The One Just Man

God is wrathful. This truth has largely been forgotten in our wealth and worldly wisdom. There is good news, however, for those who have harmed others: God is also merciful, and His “mercy triumphs over judgment” (Jas 2:13). In order to offer a merciful pardon to a race which has spent itself harming its members, God the Father sent His one and only Son, a person of righteousness and justice. Isaiah 42:1-4 reads,

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law.

This just servant, Jesus Christ, never harmed His neighbour. Not once did He injure, belittle, or oppress another. Nor did He ever tempt anyone, not even a child, to sin. But not only did He do no harm, He fulfilled the much higher law of love. The Golden Rule states, “Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them” (Mt 7:12), and this Jesus did, to the fullest. Jesus the just voluntarily laid down His innocent life in order to save the guilty. In order to be the Saviour, however, He had to become the victim of injustice. First Peter 2:22-24 speaks of His remarkable response to the injuries done to Him:

He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

He who came to rescue slaves bore scourges upon His back (Is 50:6). He who came to raise up the poor was betrayed for a paltry sum of silver (Zec 11:13). He who came to restore the image of God in man had His appearance marred “beyond human semblance” (Is 52:14). In order to restore man’s kingship, He wore a crown of thorns (Mt 27:29); in order to restore man’s dominion, He was condemned by the governor (Mt 27:26); in order to restore man’s dignity, His nakedness was displayed for all to see (Mt 27:35).

There may seem to be an incongruity between the justice of God and His willingness to send His beloved Son to the cross. In eternity this incongruity will evaporate when the Son is fully rewarded, as we will consider further in chapter 10. In the meantime, however, there is a certain value to the sense of injustice we may have in beholding the suffering of Christ: it ought to prevent us from thinking that hell is unjust. Rather, the objections many raise against the “injustice” of hell demonstrate their presumption of mercy and the low view they have of Christ’s sufferings to save them from the punishment of sin. Why does the burden of justice seem more weighty looking down into the pit of Hell than up to the hill of Golgotha? The “injustice” of that dark afternoon at Calvary ought to far eclipse the “injustice” of the dark flames of hell. And one day it will.

First Peter 2:23 states that Jesus “continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” And He was not disappointed. The Father raised His Son from the dead and installed Him at His right hand in glory as King over all the earth (Rv 1:5). There He waits patiently for His final vindication, when His enemies will become a footstool for His feet (Acts 2:35), and “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him” (Rv 1:7). One day every eye will see the Lord Jesus for who He is, not only as a man made in the image of God, but the Divine Son who is the radiance of God’s glory and “the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb 1:3). Those who once regarded Christ merely according to the flesh, persecuting and oppressing Him, will “regard him thus no longer” (2 Cor 5:16). And on that day all men will see true man revealed in the Last Adam, the firstborn over all creation.

Immortal Horrors or Everlasting Splendors

The problem of man’s evil is one that faces us all. How many horrific stories are there of abuse and neglect, of childhoods so full of misery that to behold even one of these days would make most men weep? The result of that harm is beyond measure: the inability to form “normal” relationships, ongoing emotional turmoil and distress, and the transformation of the most mundane activities into difficult tasks. In light of lives such as these, God’s justice is sometimes questioned; “How can you believe in a good and powerful God when He allows such harm to His creatures?” There are answers to that question, and they revolve around God’s eternal purposes.³⁷ For the moment, however, we will consider the even greater problem that arises if we deny a personal God.

³⁷ We will consider these eternal purposes further in chapter 9.

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If there is no God, there is no future vindication for the victim *at all*. The victim's "destruction" is definitive. His ruin is unalterable. Weeping has lasted for his life's night, and there is no awaking to a joyful morn (Ps 30:5). If there is no God, there are no laws which have been broken, no injuries which need redress, no lawmen to apprehend the perpetrator, no lawyer to plead the case, no jury to hear the truth, no judge to render justice, no prison for the criminal, and no place that is finally safe. People can play philosopher all they want, but if God and hell do not exist, evil wins. And it will be the weak who will suffer from their extinction.

But there is a God. He dwells in heaven and sees all that is done on the earth. He has made man in His image, and we are at this moment helping men either to heaven or hell. No one has captured this truth quite like C. S. Lewis:

The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.³⁸

Hell is good because it is God's full and final vindication of the value of man. It is indeed "a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses," and those who have helped their neighbors to become "immortal horrors" instead of "everlasting splendours" will answer to God's vengeance. Rev. John Richardson writes, "The doctrine of hell is not about where and how people are tormented for the entertainment of gods or demons - though it must be admitted that this theme has fascinated generations of artists and authors. Rather, it is about justice, but justice being done to everyone, for everything, for ever."³⁹

³⁸ Lewis, "The Weight of Glory."

³⁹ John Richardson, "'Hell' Is about Justice for Everyone, for Ever," *The Guardian*, March 14, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/mar/14/hell-divine-justice>.