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Forgive Me for Waiting so Long to Tell You This

by David Servant

FIVE

Built-In Punishment

I'm so glad you've read this far, because your life is about to be dramatically changed. In fact, your eternal destiny is going to be set on a different course.

Let's sum up what we've learned to this point.

First of all, God exists. That is obvious from looking at all He has created.

Second, God is powerful, great, intelligent, wise, loving and moral. That, too, is obvious from looking at creation.

Third, all of us know that selfishness is wrong because we are all born with a God-given conscience.

Fourth, all of us stand self-condemned before God because of our own judgments of others. We've criticized them for doing that of which we are just as guilty.

Finally, God is the personification of perfect love, and He *must* react when selfish acts are committed because He loves everyone equally. If He remained passive after witnessing injustice, then He could rightly be accused of loving the offender more than the offended. God, therefore, *must* punish those who act selfishly.

A lot of people have the idea that a loving God would never punish anyone, but you must see that just the opposite is true: A loving God *must* punish selfish acts.

Let's imagine that you are the parent of two children. One of your children is very good, and one is very bad. The bad one is always hurting the good one. In fact, the good one has bruises and open wounds all over his body.

You love both of your children, but does that mean you would never punish the bad child for striking the good one? Of course not! If you don't discipline the bad child, the neighbors will say, "The guy next door is a terrible parent. He must not love his child at all." Isn't that right? They'd accuse you of *not* being a loving parent! If you love the child that is being picked on, you'll discipline the selfish one. (And you'll punish the bad child because you love him, too, and don't want him to grow up to be a bully.)

God is no different, except that His love for us far transcends the love that any parent feels for his or her child. *How much more*, therefore, must God punish those who act

selfishly! If you believe that God is loving, then you have no choice but to believe also that He will punish those who are selfish. If He doesn't punish the disobedient, He isn't loving at all.

Payday is Coming

God's wrath upon evil is another one of those "self-evident truths." He's created a system that delivers automatic wrath upon those who act solely in their own self-interest, regardless of how others suffer. Everybody knows that.

Most drama that has ever been produced for television, the movie theater, or the stage, communicates a fundamental theme of good versus evil. Everybody hopes that the good guys will win and the bad guys will "get what they deserve," which they usually do.

In real life, not every conflict is resolved in one hour, nor are evil acts brought to immediate justice, but payday does come. Those who live by the sword die by the sword. What you sow, you reap. What goes around, comes around.

It's built into the system-selfish people suffer for their selfishness. Sure, some people seemingly "beat the system." They continue on their self-centered path for years. But ultimately, they fall prey to their own devices.

Take the adulterer once more. He has cheated on his wife. He's acted selfishly. What does he suffer? First of all, he automatically suffers a guilty conscience. That conscience was given to him by God. His conscience is part of the built-in system that makes God's punishment of selfishness self-evident.

Can you see it? People don't say, "I'm enjoying life so much because of my guilty conscience." No, they say, "I'm *suffering* with a guilty conscience." Their suffering is an indication of the built-in system God has designed to punish selfishness.

The selfish man who has cheated on his wife may also destroy his marriage and lose his children. Not only that, it may cost him financially over the years as he pays alimony and child support. He will suffer the loss of respect from his peers and other family members as well. Can you see that those consequences are all part of the built-in system?

Guilty Moose?

Think about this: God didn't have to create us as He did-in His image. We could have been created to procreate without marriage like the moose-with the strongest bull winning the sole privilege to mate with all the females. I know that sounds absurd, but not to a moose! That's the only way he knows to relate when mating time comes around. He doesn't worry about what will happen if he mates with ten females in one season. And why not? Because he isn't created in God's image.

All moose aren't created equal. Survival of the fittest rules their domain. When a bull moose mates with a female that another moose mated with last year, he doesn't have to fear what the adulterous human must fear. The reason? *Because that is how God designed it.* Do you see it? Punishment is built into the human society but not the moose society.

The adulterer also runs the risk of contracting syphilis, gonorrhea, or AIDS. Do you think the bull moose with multiple partners worries about those terrible things? Of course not. Why? Because that is how God has designed it.

People who say they don't believe a loving God would punish sin need to open their eyes to reality. Sin is being punished every day. It's built right into the system. Even medical science now tells us that the selfish emotions-such as hatred, bitterness, and

jealousy-make our bodies more susceptible to disease. This is more evidence of the fact that God is judging and will judge all sin.

The Bible, in even stronger terms than I've used, asserts this self-evident truth:

For the wrath of God *is* revealed... (Romans 1:18a; emphasis added).

Notice it said "*is* revealed," not "*is going to be* revealed." Yes, God's wrath is *going* to be revealed, but the apostle Paul's point in this passage is that God's wrath is being revealed *right now*. Let's keep reading:

For the wrath of God *is* revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them....but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened...

...For this reason God gave them over to *degrading passions*; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, *men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error* (Romans 1:18-19, 21b, 26-27; emphasis added).

You don't need to read the Bible to know that homosexuality is wrong. All you need is a basic understanding of human anatomy, and you can easily figure out that males aren't meant to have sex with other males. *That is self-evident.*

Still, men and women in their rebellion toward God will disobey His self-evident laws and ultimately suffer the built-in consequences of their actions. This ought to be especially obvious to our modern world that has been plagued by the AIDS epidemic.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not self-righteously condemning homosexuals because I, too, have rebelled against God's self-evident laws. I, just like you, have disobeyed my conscience, committing many acts of selfishness. And like you, I've suffered the built-in consequences for my sin.

What Does This Mean for You and Me?

It is obvious for several reasons that God is holy and that He punishes selfishness. What are those reasons?

First, because He *must* punish selfishness if He is a God of love, which He is.

Second, because we can see God's built-in system of punishment-it's part of the structure of our reality.

And *third*, because the Bible confirms what our reality teaches us: God is just and holy, and He *does* and *will* punish all sin. In fact, the Bible has more references to God's anger, fury, and wrath than statements about His love.

What does that mean for you and me? It means that if we have committed any act of selfishness, we must be punished. To what degree must we be punished? Are the built-in punishments that are part of our everyday reality sufficient recompense for our selfish acts?

First of all, we must take into consideration *whom* we have offended. We have offended the Creator of all things, the One who is before all time, the all-powerful and all-knowing God.

Second, we must take into consideration the terrible nature of *our sin*. Few of us fully understand how hideous selfishness really is. In God's eyes it is the ugliest, most vile thing there is. It proudly seeks its own well-being, vainly climbing higher while it uses people who are created in God's image as stepping-stones. It is opposed to God's very nature because, as the Bible states, He is unselfish love (see 1 John 4:8).

Third, we must consider *how much* God loves the ones against whom we've acted selfishly. More than we can understand, God loves those people whom we've used or neglected or judged or hurt. If God let us off easy, then we could conclude He must not really love the people who have suffered because of us.

Fourth, we must take into consideration that God is the epitome of perfect morality and perfect justice. The moral Judge of the universe *must* deliver the full recompense of His broken law, otherwise He is not a righteous Judge.

What does the Bible say concerning we who have passed judgment upon others while at the same time leading lives characterized by selfish ambition? Again, please read for yourself:

Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. And we know that *the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things*. And do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment upon those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that *you will escape the judgment of God*? [Now Paul is writing about God's future judgment.] Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?

But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart *you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath* and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are *selfishly ambitious* and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be *tribulation and distress* for every soul of man who does evil... (Romans 2:1-9; emphasis added).

When the apostle Paul writes about future tribulation and distress, it's obvious he means what the Bible calls *hell*.

Hell Described

It seems that fewer preachers are mentioning hell any more, but Jesus can never be classed with them. Because He loved His listeners and didn't want them to spend eternity there, Jesus warned them of hell quite frequently.

In the Gospel of Matthew alone, I've counted thirty-eight direct or indirect references to God's future judgment and hell.¹ Let me share a few with you. In Matthew 18:8-9, Jesus said,

“And if your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the *eternal fire*. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out, and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into *the fiery hell*” (emphasis added).

Is it really Jesus' intention that we cut off our hands and pluck out our eyes if they've caused us to sin? If everyone took this command literally, we'd all be blind, lame, and crippled! No, Jesus was using a figure of speech we call *hyperbole*, that is, exaggeration for effect.

When you tell your child, “I must have called you a thousand times before you finally answered me!” that is a hyperbole. You use a hyperbole when you want to make a strong point.

Jesus had a particularly strong point that He was trying to make, and that is, “Hell is such a terrible place, it would be worth cutting off your hands and feet and plucking out your eyes to stay out of it.” That tells me *hell must be a very horrible place*.

Notice that twice in the above-quoted verses, Jesus described hell as a place of fire. One time He referred to it as an *eternal fire*. In the Greek language, in which the New Testament was originally written, the word translated *hell* is the word “gehenna.” All of Jesus' listeners knew exactly what He was talking about when He used that word.

Gehenna was the name for the gigantic heap of garbage in the valley of Hinnom that was just outside the gates of Jerusalem. The constant dumping of Jerusalem's garbage there fed perpetually burning fires. The rotting refuse and rancid smoke were nauseating, and what the flames didn't consume, maggots and worms fed upon. According to Mark's Gospel account, Jesus went on to mention those worms:

“And if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than having your two hands, to go into hell, *into the unquenchable fire, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched*” (Mark 9:43-44; emphasis added).

Jesus loves us, which is why He is so strongly warning us of the ultimate recompense for our sin. *Hell is a place of eternal, unquenchable fire*. The people who end up there will be punished eternally, just as Jesus also said:

“Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the *eternal fire* which has been prepared for the devil and his angels’And these will go away into *eternal punishment*, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:41, 46; emphasis added).

On another occasion, Jesus described further miseries that the unsaved will perpetually suffer:

“So it will be at the end of the age; the angels shall come forth, and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; *there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth*” (Matthew 13:49-50; emphasis added).

Some may object, saying, “I don’t believe God would punish anyone eternally!” Those who make such a statement don’t understand *Who* it is they have offended-the God of the universe.

Neither do they fully comprehend the terrible nature of their lifelong selfishness.

Neither do they realize how much God loves the people against whom they’ve committed selfish acts.

Neither do they understand God’s perfect morality or justice.

Neither do they take into account the incredible mercy that God has shown them all their lives as He has patiently waited for them to repent of their selfish ways.

Neither do they consider how God has repeatedly warned them of their terrible fate through the built-in punishments they have experienced for their selfish acts-namely, a tormenting conscience and all the negative repercussions that result from sin.

Hell on Earth

The temporal suffering that we undergo only serves to warn us of the eternal suffering we will undergo if we continue our selfish lifestyle.

People who say, “I think that this life is all the hell there is,” are at least partially correct. The same God who built temporal punishments into the structure of our reality is the same God who will cast the unrighteous into hell. When we suffer for our sins on earth, we are experiencing a little bit of what hell is all about.

Finally, it really doesn’t make any difference what anyone thinks. All that matters is *what God has said*. If God says there is an eternal hell where people will suffer eternally, then that’s how it is. It makes no difference what anybody thinks, and no one has any right to judge God.

As God Himself said through the prophet Isaiah:

“Woe to the one who quarrels with his Maker-an earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth! Will the clay say to the potter, ‘What are you doing?’” (Isaiah 45:9).

Most importantly, the person who says he thinks that God would never send anyone to an eternal hell has failed to take something else into account: that God has provided a way whereby every person can escape the punishment he deserves.

In fact, the price for the provision of that potential escape has been paid by God Himself-who endured incredible suffering in order that mercy might be shown to us.

That is what the next chapter is all about. That is the chapter for which I’ve been preparing you. Hopefully by now, you are more than ready to respond to the best news any ear has ever heard!

“For God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all. Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Romans 11:32-33).

Endnote

1. See Matthew 3:7, 3:10-12, 5:20, 5:22, 5:29, 7:1-2, 7:13-14, 7:19, 7:21-23, 7:26-27, 8:12, 10:15, 10:28, 10:33, 11:22, 11:24, 12:32, 12:36-37, 12:41-42, 13:30, 13:41-42, 13:49-50, 15:13-14, 18:6-9, 18:34-35, 21:41-44, 22:7, 22:11-13, 23:13-15, 23:33, 24:21-31, 24:37-42, 24:48-51, 25:11-13, 25:30, 25:41, 25:46, 26:24