

## A Discussion of Questions Related to Evangelical Beliefs and Sayings Regarding Heaven, Hell, and Salvation

I have some questions.

I identify as an evangelical Christian but I have questions about some things I believe and I am ready to start asking them. Specifically, I have been wrestling through issues regarding hell and eternity, and I am writing to consider what I really believe on the subject. Although my employment at a Baptist church gives me pause before jumping out into the open, I suppose I'd say I'm in a spot where I want to depart from the traditional understanding of hell as eternal conscious torment. I find more and more reason to leave that understanding behind, reasons I want to begin to explore here.

First, a bit about me:

I was born into a wonderful, loving Christian family in western Canada, where I attended a Christian & Missionary Alliance Church for much of my youth. I attended college in Canada, married a girl from Iowa, went to seminary in Dallas, and now serve on staff at a Southern Baptist church. I grew up in a fairly conservative environment but have some liberal leanings and recently have described myself, with now maybe 90% sincerity, as a universalist.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps it's also helpful to say I consider myself to have received the unhindered blessing of God on my life. Given my family, upbringing, and experiences, I feel my life has been nothing but bliss and blessing, physically, materially, spiritually, and emotionally speaking, so much so that many times I have quipped, "I ought to be godly like Bill Gates' kids ought to be rich." I'm 37 years old, have a wonderful wife and 3 young and also wonderful kids.

I want to begin with the argument I hear most frequently related to hell; that is, that we need the threat of hell because without it people, even devout Christian people, would surely cast aside all that is not in their perceived best interests and pursue only the pleasure of their natural bent (sin and selfishness). One guy even suggested that he would let me serve the poor and clothe the orphan, while he would pursue consumerism and sleep in on Sunday. He said without the threat of an eternal hell then he could let me worship God and he could worship Satan and the result would be the same – we both would end up in the same place; we would both "get the same snow cone." People think the threat of punishment and the promise of

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<sup>1</sup> Later on in this essay I discuss some ideas around what I mean by "universalist," but my working definition would be: "a person who believes that eventually, ultimately everyone will be saved (ie. spend eternity with God) through and because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ." Also, outside of this essay I tend to use the phrase "ultimate redemption" more frequently than "universalism," because the term "universalism" seems to be problematic for many, although for me the two terms are interchangeable.

reward are necessary motivations, without which many would not pursue godliness. (Of course there are some people out there who don't believe in either heaven or hell and yet serve the poor and clothe the orphan. Be that as it may.)

My response to such thinking, however (and please forgive the tinge of facetiousness in what follows), is I'm not really worried about those people. If being convinced universalism is true will cause some to go off the deep end, so to speak, I'm okay with that. If people leave me to care for the orphan and the widow, or simply to carry more than my share of the load while they pursue comfort and ease, that's fine. I'll get my snow cone; they'll get theirs. I'll miss out on the pleasures of sin while they indulge. So be it.

Who I am worried about is the orphan. What about him or her? What about their eternal destiny? If our traditional evangelical understanding of heaven, hell and salvation is true then millions of orphans around the world and throughout history, whom I and others have tried to help, are doomed to experience eternal conscious torment. Our traditional evangelical view of heaven, hell and salvation cannot possibly lead us to believe all orphans will put their faith in Jesus Christ and have their names written in the Lamb's Book of Life. We can be sure there will be kids, born into terrible situations, who become orphans and live lives of pain, misery, heartache, loneliness, desperation, hopelessness and despair, and then die too young before heading straight to hell where they will be tormented for all eternity. (Forgive me. I'm not trying to be overly dramatic . . . okay, maybe a bit . . . but this *is* what we believe, is it not?)

So, a possible following question becomes, might all kids be saved? Yes? Then, at what age do they become accountable? On what day does their eternal destiny change from heaven to hell? What about an 18-year old<sup>2</sup> who was born into a terrible situation where he never knew love or acceptance, who was abused, passed from foster home to foster home, school to school, hungry, lonely, afraid. Pushed by desperation into a gang – finally a group who will accept him. Starts on drugs; gets into street fights. One goes too far and, the day after he turns 18, he is killed. Hell?

Or no, not all kids are saved. They are born into sin and until they repent and admit their need for forgiveness and redemption through the cross, they are damned. I'm not sure anyone wants to swallow that. Of course some reason from Scripture that all kids *will* be saved (King David will "go to" his child who died, Isaiah 7:15-16 suggests an age of accountability, Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me") but it seems to me the Scriptural support for such a view is unclear, and I've heard people argue it the other way around. To me those who say all kids will be saved

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<sup>2</sup> Other cultures consider adulthood to start at younger ages, which of course would make the discussion of kids and salvation even more difficult. Surely all of us know a 16, 17, 18-year old who it would be tough to describe as an adult.

(myself included) seem to believe so because none of us can fathom a God who would condemn innocent kids to hell for all eternity. But let's take that line of reasoning one step further, shall we?<sup>3</sup>

Let's consider another group. What about those who have never heard the gospel? If we believe God deals graciously with such people (ie. God saves them) then we need to ask how someone gets into that group? What qualifies someone as one who has never heard the gospel? What does it mean to, "hear the gospel," or perhaps, "have an opportunity to respond to the gospel?" What about people who have heard a version of the gospel but not the "real" gospel? What about that same 18-year old? Maybe he died past the age of accountability, but given the trouble and brevity of his life, might he qualify for eternity with God as someone who has never heard the gospel?

Or, if we say that God does not deal graciously with those people, do we really believe, as a friend of mine asked, that God condemns a billion Chinese to hell just because they were born in China? Of course we will respond by saying the lost is the reason the church ought to be reaching out. Agreed. There are a billion people in China without Christ and we need to go and share the gospel with them. Okay. But a million people in the world are going to die this week, and next week, and the week after that; and, unless we get to them in the next 3 weeks, the majority of them will die without faith in Jesus, without knowing what He has done for them. And many, or perhaps most, did not have, and will never have, the opportunity to respond to the gospel.

We might argue, then, that the church is not doing its job. We need to rally the church to reach the world. The church is so divided, so petty in its disagreements. The world is going to hell because the church isn't going to the ends of the earth the way Jesus command it to go. Again, okay. But isn't the responsibility of the revelation of Himself to humanity ultimately God's? Isn't building His church something Jesus is doing? Salvation is something God initiated; this is God reaching down to man. We do not believe God is not accomplishing His purposes because we are messing it up. He is going to accomplish what He wants to accomplish and He doesn't need us to do it. Don't we say exactly that in evangelical circles?

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<sup>3</sup> In the original and earlier versions of this essay I included this question without a footnote. However, the answer to it has been less obvious to most than I thought, so I wanted to include a brief explanation here. My point is this: we are willing to make a conclusion about God, or interpret the Scripture in a certain way on this issue, so that it lines up with what our own sense of justice tells us must be true - ie. all kids will be saved. A belief in universalism follows the same line of reasoning. Given the circumstances of life into which all of us fall, I cannot fathom a God who would condemn *anyone* to hell for all eternity.

Well, then, we will say God's "invisible qualities . . . have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."<sup>4</sup> Those people in China had creation to look at. They should have known . . . hold it! That just seems a little too easy for me to say. Spiritually speaking I'm sitting in my Ferrari in my mansion's driveway on the island I've purchased with my inheritance. No one would say I'm justified in asking why poor people are poor. "Those people are without excuse for being poor," I say as I head out surfing, "Everyone is born in the same world with the same entrepreneurial spirit. Those poor people had the opportunity to be rich but they missed it." (Overly dramatic and facetious again, I admit it.) Would we let Bill Gates's kids get away with that line of reasoning? Do we really expect people to see God's invisible qualities in creation when they are starving, some for food and others for love? Not that I don't think we see God in creation, but I would say I agree with Gandhi: "There are some people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread."

Let's talk about another group: the mentally-ill. They are born into sin like the rest of us, and therefore, even though they don't have the mental capacity to exercise faith, are they doomed to spend eternity in conscious torment for their lack of it? Or, does God save them? Does their inability to comprehend the gospel mean God will be gracious and accept them into heaven even though they have not personally responded in faith to Jesus?

If we believe God does save them, then how does one qualify as mentally-ill? What measure of cognitive ability must be present in order for someone to be held accountable? What about someone who is not clinically mentally-ill but has some other disorder that impairs judgment or has a significant effect on their ability to perceive the world correctly? What about issues resulting from an abusive childhood, from years of trauma, heartache, loneliness, desperation and despair? What about that same 18-year old? Maybe he died past the age of accountability, maybe he did have an opportunity to respond to the gospel, but might he qualify for heaven on the basis of something that could be classified as mental-illness?

Or, what about the oppressed? More than once have I heard someone say that God is a God of the oppressed. But what does that mean exactly? Does it mean the oppressed are assured acceptance into heaven? And how does one qualify as a member of the oppressed? And if someone does qualify as a member of the oppressed, is it possible for them to lose that membership? What if the oppressed turn and oppress others? Could we not argue that all of us, in some way, are among both the oppressed and the oppressors? What percentage oppressed does one have to be in order to qualify for heaven?

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 1:20

I have heard it said that, from the perspective of the oppressed, the idea of universalism is similar to rehabilitating a serial rapist, putting him in jail and then releasing him and letting him live with one of his rape victims. Such a scenario, said one guy, wouldn't make sense in any universe. Except that type of thing does happen. In our universe. I recall a mother who lost both her husband and son at the hand of a killer. The mother ended up reaching out and befriending the killer and even serving as a mother to him. Maybe that seems crazy initially, but there is much within us that applauds that type of unselfish, gracious forgiveness.

What about someone guilty of a lesser crime than rape? Would our sense of justice allow for the possibility that any sinner could be rehabilitated in such a way that they could then live with the person they sinned against? But isn't the message of the gospel exactly that? Isn't God the one offended? And hasn't He invited the offenders to live with Him? Yes, universalism would allow for the scenario where rapist and victim live together, but a traditional evangelical view of heaven, hell and salvation allows for that scenario as well (surely some serial rapist has repented and trusted in Jesus), while also allowing for the scenario in which rapist and victim are tormented together in hell (surely some rape victim has not trusted in Jesus). And perhaps I shouldn't even mention the scenario, made possible by the traditional view of heaven, hell and salvation, where it is the rapist who ends up in heaven while the victim goes to eternal conscious torment in hell.

Some argue that Christian universalism is an elitist theology, one which the oppressed in the world cannot understand. However, such an argument seems to make the victimized and oppressed into their own elitist group. If God is on the side of the victims and oppressed in this world such that victims are guaranteed eternal paradise, and the oppressors eternal damnation, then not only are victims secure on their way to heaven, they also get to thumb their nose in the face of their oppressors, smug in the knowledge that the oppressors will get what's coming to them. Doesn't sound like the gospel message to me.

But surely by "God is the God of the oppressed" we do not mean that every person who qualifies as oppressed is guaranteed a spot in heaven. Surely a traditional evangelical view of heaven and hell and salvation would not lead us to believe that. So, by "God is the God of the oppressed," we must mean God cares about and works on behalf of the oppressed here on earth . . . which leads us back to the "get the same snow cone" argument. How can people who say universalism would cause them to abandon faith and pursue selfishness (because we all get the same snow cone in the end), in the same breath also credit God for His work on behalf of the oppressed here on earth? By their snow cone reasoning, God is wasting His time helping the oppressed, or at least any of the oppressed that will end up in hell.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, how can we really

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<sup>5</sup> This is another spot where earlier I did not include a footnote and now think it might be helpful to do so. My point is this: if our eternal destination is the only important consideration in life, such that some people would

say God is giving a “good gift” to the unjust by allowing the sun to shine down on them for what amounts to a split second when compared with an eternity of torment? Can that really be considered goodness or a gift?<sup>6</sup> If hell is not ultimately redemptive, then any “good” done to hell’s inhabitants before they arrive in hell is wasted.

What about forgiveness? Love your enemies? Do good to those who hate you? Do not repay evil for evil? Is that not the foundation of the gospel? God loved us when we were His enemies. Yes, God says, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord,”<sup>7</sup> but can we not love our enemies and at the same time trust that God will avenge, repay, and set things right with the world? Can we not trust that God will set things right without necessitating that our enemies are tormented forever in hell? Can God not bring justice and ultimately save everyone?

The Scripture tells us, “We love because he first loved us.”<sup>8</sup> The Scripture makes an analogy of the love between husband and wife and the love Jesus has for the church, His bride. The Scripture says we give good gifts to our children and, even more so, God will give good gifts to us. When we demonstrate love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, we are demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit, qualities the Spirit of God produces within us. Romans 2 tells us we have His law written on our hearts, our consciences bearing witness. We are made in God’s image, we have the Holy Spirit within us to convict us of sin and guide us into truth. We are being transformed into the image of Christ with ever-increasing glory. We reflect Him. He is making his appeal through us. We are in so many ways *like* God, representatives of Him in the world. So how it is that, in this one area, we are so completely *unlike* God? Most of us, believers or not, would not torture anyone, for any length of time, no matter how bad the offense.<sup>9</sup> Eternal conscious torment surely goes against our sense of justice, especially for those of us taught by Jesus and the Holy Spirit to love our enemies. Time and again I hear people admit as much: God’s justice is different from our own, so that even though eternal conscious torment doesn’t line up with our definition of the words “good” and “just” doesn’t mean that it is not in line with God’s sense of justice. Except how is it

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abandon any pursuit of godliness if it would not affect their eternal destiny, then, to be consistent, those people cannot credit God for any work He may do on behalf of the oppressed here on earth if that work does not positively affect the eternal destiny of the oppressed.

<sup>6</sup> See Matthew 5:43-48

<sup>7</sup> Romans 12:19

<sup>8</sup> 1 John 4:19

<sup>9</sup> I still haven’t looked it up but I want to say there is something in international law against the use of torture.

that our concept of love and grace line up so closely with what we believe about God while, at the same time, our concept of justice is so far from it?

In response I've heard it argued that we cannot possibly fathom how grotesque our sin is to God. The distance between us and an ant doesn't begin to compare to the distance between God and us; our sin deserves eternal conscious torment. This is the just punishment for our sin. Maybe. But I find that hard to swallow. I can swallow annihilationism<sup>10</sup> . . . sort of. If I see an ant, which has "offended me" (or even not), I would be justified, most would agree, in stepping on that ant and killing it. Such action would be acceptable given my position in the world relative to that of the ant. However, if I took the ant and subjected it to the worst possible torment I could imagine I would be labeled sadistic. If I did it to a dog, I would be thrown in jail. And, whether I squashed the ant or tormented it, I can't see how I could claim to have loved the ant and genuinely desired for it to be in perfect relationship with me. I could have chosen not to squash the ant, no? We're like God in so many ways and yet so unlike Him in our sense of justice? Seems curious.

Some people seem to think that if you take away hell, you lose Jesus, you lose the Scriptures, and you lose any hope of things being set right. But could it not be that universalism doesn't lose Jesus but in fact makes Jesus *more* necessary? That He is the atoning sacrifice not for a select few but for everyone?<sup>11</sup> And you could make the "lose the Scriptures" argument the other way around, could you not? What about verses that seem to suggest everyone will be saved?<sup>12</sup> How do those verses fit into an eternal conscious torment perspective? And is eternal conscious torment really necessary for any hope of things being set right? Could not annihilation suffice? And if so, could not then some sort of restorative punishment provide justice for the victims (i.e. right the wrongs), while also offering ultimate hope for everyone?

If I can lump evangelicals (I am one) together for a minute, I think we are inconsistent. We say God loves everyone and desires for all to be saved, but we also say He doesn't choose to save everyone even though He could.<sup>13</sup> We say everyone is born into sin and deserves damnation, but we also find loopholes so God doesn't seem unjust. To me, either we need to believe in and

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<sup>10</sup> Annihilationism is the belief that those apart from Christ are not tormented forever but are simply annihilated. They cease to exist. The punishment of hell is eternal in its finality, not in its duration.

<sup>11</sup> 1 John 2:2

<sup>12</sup> Colossians 1:15-20; Romans 5:12 – 21; 1 John 2:1-2; 1 Corinthians 15:12-58; Philippians 2:9-11

<sup>13</sup> I'm not quoting verbatim, but I had a seminary professor describe election in the following manner: "Humanity is a mass streaming toward hell and God comes alongside like Superman and picks off some, letting the rest continue on their chosen path." Such a God doesn't seem to me to desire the salvation of everyone. Or maybe His cape is only so big. (Again, forgive my facetiousness.)

(can I say) tolerate a God who, in His perfect sense of justice, condemns to hell everyone who doesn't personally respond in faith to the gospel – including children, the mentally ill, those who have never heard, and the oppressed – or we need to say that God, in His infinite justice and love, gives due consideration to the circumstances of life, which give some people a great chance to know and believe in Him and others virtually no chance at all, and that such consideration causes God to accept into heaven some people who have not responded in faith to the gospel, or causes God to give some people post-mortem opportunity to respond in faith to Christ. And then, if we're willing to go that far, it's not much farther to say that all of us are affected by the circumstances of life; we all look at things through the lenses of our genetics, experiences, surroundings and influences. We all "see through a glass darkly,"<sup>14</sup> and maybe God takes that into consideration. And if He does, maybe He might just even save all of us.

We can't have our cake and eat it too. Either the Westboro Baptist Church folks have it right and there is a small group of like-minded people (the Westboro 20, or the Southern Baptist Convention 20 million)<sup>15</sup> who somehow have the corner on the right interpretation of the Bible and it is them, and only them, who will be saved.<sup>16</sup> Or, we've got to be willing to say that God's grace extends beyond our understanding of it, extends beyond our own (can we admit) narrow interpretation of Scripture. None of us understand things perfectly. No one has had a perfect opportunity to respond to the gospel because the world is imperfect – by our own doing, granted, but that is precisely why God sent Jesus, to undo what we had done.

Could it not be true? Might God ultimately redeem everyone? Is universalism not possible? For the orphan, the oppressed, the mentally-ill, those who haven't heard, that same 18-year old, even for you and me, I hope it is. I would even say I believe it is.

A few other comments I would like to make:

First, I want to say that I don't think hell doesn't exist, only that it's not the end, although I would confess I really haven't thought or studied enough on this point. Nor do I believe people

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<sup>14</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12

<sup>15</sup> I don't want to unjustly compare the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) to Westboro Baptist Church, or in any way disparage the SBC. Even though I am wrestling through, and perhaps calling into question some beliefs it would hold, I am a part of the SBC (which is why I use it as the example) and I love its people and mission. I condemn the harmful and hateful ideology of the Westboro Baptist Church. My point is only that whether 20 people or 20 million people, it's still only a small group that, to some degree, whether hatefully or lovingly, believes it has the right interpretation of the Bible.

<sup>16</sup> I had another seminary professor who said he thought there will be fewer people in heaven than we think, which seems to me reflective of a "corner-on-the-truth" mindset. I want to believe the opposite – that we will be amazed how far God's grace has reached.

are saved other than through Jesus and His death and resurrection. Again, universalism arguably makes Jesus and His death *more* necessary, not less.<sup>17</sup>

Second, just because I would say with 90% sincerity that I'm a universalist doesn't mean I plan to ride the universalist horse or proudly wave the universalist flag, even if I get to 100%. I don't know that it's necessary, or even wise, to make this an issue about which I ought to convince others. For me it is good for a number of reasons (my view of God, my hope for eternity, hope for those for whom life is not much more than pain), but although I see ways in which a broader embrace of universalism would be beneficial, I don't know that it would be helpful for me for be its champion. Although, as of the most recent revision of this essay, I'm re-thinking that assertion. Maybe I need to be its champion . . .

Functionally, I think many of us are universalists anyway. What universalism gives us is the freedom to focus on a person's point of need rather than trying to convince them to believe a certain set of ideas just to avoid eternal punishment.<sup>18</sup> And of course focusing on a person's point of need is what the church (my church) does to a large degree anyway: ESL classes, marriage seminars, Dave Ramsey meetings, etc. We reach out to people at their point of need, ultimately, we might say, with the hope of pointing them to the difference God can make in their life and leading them to faith in Christ. However, if our baptism numbers say anything, at least in comparison to the number of people attending classes, seminars and meetings, it doesn't seem like we're making all that much headway in that regard.

Not that the set of ideas, the belief, the acceptance of Jesus as one's Savior is not important. I still say Jesus is of ultimate importance! What people need more than anything is to realize there is a God who loves them, cares about them, and sent His Son to redeem them. People need to know they are important, valuable, special, worthwhile not because of what they have, where they live, who the world says they are, even who they think they are, but because the God of the universe loved them enough to sacrifice Himself on their behalf. And as they realize that, it will change the way they look at and think about the world, it will change their perspective on God, it will affect the way they look at others and, maybe most importantly, it will change the way they look at themselves. People are on a desperate search for meaning, purpose, and significance, which is only found, I believe, in a recognition and acceptance of the God who made and loves them, and who demonstrated that love in Jesus.

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<sup>17</sup> Let me admit as well that I realize this essay is mainly philosophizing. At the time of its original writing I had not done much Scriptural research or other reading on the subject. Since that time I have done more of both, and while I find myself increasingly convinced of the validity of a universalist perspective, I'll include that research in my writing at another time.

<sup>18</sup> I admit the phrase "believe a certain set of ideas" doesn't come close to describing that to which Jesus is calling people, but the way we present the gospel at times makes it seem like that's all we want people to do.

Third, I would say I appreciate the mystery. That is, I really don't know. None of us do. We understand the world, God, ourselves, the Scriptures, salvation as best we can and that's it. Ultimately we are not doing much more than throwing ourselves on God's mercy and trusting Him to do the right thing. So, even though I would say I believe God will ultimately save everyone, I admit my belief is more hopeful than it is certain; but I think, if we were honest, we would all admit the same about whatever we believe.<sup>19</sup>

A traditional view of heaven and hell and the gospel leads us to point people to Jesus and to trust in Him for salvation.<sup>20</sup> In our evangelical tradition this demonstrates itself in phrases like "the sinner's prayer," or "prayed to receive Christ," or "accept Jesus as your Savior," all of which I have no problem with, except that their intent is to lead people across a line that is ultimately unclear. Neither you, nor I, nor anyone can say with certainty that someone is or is not saved. Everyone exercises faith the best they can, as best they understand it and, in the end, we are trusting God to take whatever faith we have. If mustard-seed faith is enough to move mountains, the tiniest inkling of faith must be sufficient for God to grab hold of us. In the end we are but throwing ourselves on God's mercy and trusting Him to do the right thing, the loving thing, the just thing. A traditional evangelical view of heaven and hell and salvation leaves us ultimately uncertain anyway;<sup>21</sup> there's a mystery there no matter which way you slice it, so I want to throw myself and others on God's mercy enough to think that He can and will, in the end, save everyone.

Again, I think functionally we're all universalists. If we really believed people are on their way to hell, if we really believed most people around us every day were doomed to be in conscious torment for all eternity, if we really believed salvation is guaranteed by a moment-in-time decision, one people could make by saying the sinner's prayer; if we knew with absolute certainty that we could push people across the line of faith and knew that once they crossed it their salvation was assured forever, then I think we would do nothing else but try to get people across that line. Door-to-door evangelism is all we'd do. Feeding people, caring for the poor,

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<sup>19</sup> In *Surprised By Hope*, N.T. Wright makes the following statement, with which I would agree: "All this should warn us against the cheerful double dogmatism that has bedeviled discussion on these topics – the dogmatism, that is, of the person who knows exactly who and who isn't "going to hell" and of the universalist who is absolutely certain that there is no such place or that if there is, it will, at the last, be empty." Well said. I don't know for certain; no one does. However, I would say that if I am to adopt a position, I believe universalism (as I have described it) to be the view most consistent with the character and nature of God, with a faithful reading of Scripture, and with the best and highest ideals of tradition, reason, and experience. Said Archbishop Lazar of the Canadian Orthodox Church in the movie *Hellbound*? "We don't know, but we presume the love of God is greater than all things."

<sup>20</sup> Not that universalism doesn't lead us to point people to Jesus. It certainly does! Jesus is of ultimate importance!

<sup>21</sup> Again, I do think, if we're honest, there is a measure of uncertainty in all of us, whatever we believe, but I know we could have a discussion about assurance, His Spirit testifying with our spirit that we are God's children, examining yourselves to see if you are in the faith, etc.

healing the hurting wouldn't matter. If the connection between this world and our final destination in the next hinges exclusively on that line of faith, then nothing else makes any difference.

It seems to me salvation is just not that simple, or maybe I should say not that narrow. God's work of redemption is worldwide, applying even to creation, which is groaning in anticipation. The hurting and discouraged matter to God; the poor and lonely seem to have His attention. The rich are able to enter the kingdom because, "nothing is impossible with God."<sup>22</sup> Even those who were crucifying Jesus received from Him, "Father, forgive them . . ."<sup>23</sup> Maybe it'll take hell for them to come to their senses, for them to have the faith to receive that forgiveness, but apparently Jesus' death is sufficient, and (I want to believe) effective, for them as well.

Finally, I want to say I don't think most people are serious when they say universalism would cause them to abandon anything but the pursuit of their own selfishness. Or maybe they're serious but somehow I don't think they really would. Obviously I'm not in anyone else's shoes and of course I can't speak for them, but I have my doubts anyone would really do it, at least not for very long. The pleasures of sin are not all they're cracked up to be when compared to a life lived according to the principles of God's word. They're just not.

So I can't speak for anyone else, I will speak for me . . .

While I do believe no one has a perfect opportunity to respond to the gospel, I think mine is about as close as you can come. I grew up with every material, spiritual, and emotional blessing. I have never known hunger or need, have never known rejection worthy to speak of, have never felt unloved by those closest to me. I have never doubted God's love for me because I never doubted my parents' love for me. I am part of a family that has demonstrated to me the unconditional love of God and I enjoy wonderful relationships with my parents, my brothers and sisters, my wife, my kids, my friends and those around me. My upbringing and experiences – the unhindered blessing of the Lord on my life – have given me every confidence to deal with people and circumstances in a positive way. I have learned to give and receive forgiveness. I am peace with God and with myself. I am content with what I have and with who I am.

I have had occasion to try the pleasures of sin and I will admit they are at times pleasurable. But I would also say I would not trade for anything what I have gained in this life in a relationship with God through Jesus. A commitment on the part of my parents to the principles of God's word, which they passed on to me, has put me in a great position. Abandon who I am and what

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<sup>22</sup> Mark 10:23-27

<sup>23</sup> Luke 23:34

I have for the pleasures of sin? No way! Not even if universalism is true. Not even if atheism were true! Sin seems enticing and I'll admit I give in sometimes but as one who has received and experienced the blessing of the Lord in great abundance, I say the pleasures of sin do not compare.

Well, that's it. Those are my thoughts. I hope they are, in some way, helpful for the overall discussion and I look forward to someday putting them out there for others to consider. Again, I admit I don't really know. I'm just doing my best to think through these issues and would welcome any comments anyone else has who is in an honest pursuit of the truth.

May God bless you and keep you; make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you; lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Amen.