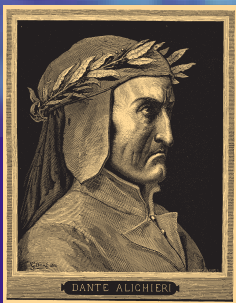


RAZING HELL



by Sharon Baker



I THINK AND JUDGE IT BEST FOR YOU TO FOLLOW ME, AND I SHALL GUIDE YOU, TAKING YOU FROM THIS PLACE THROUGH AN ETERNAL PLACE, WHERE YOU SHALL HEAR THE HOWLS OF DESPERATION AND SEE THE ANCIENT SPIRITS IN THEIR PAIN, AS EACH OF THEM LAMENTS HIS SECOND DEATH.

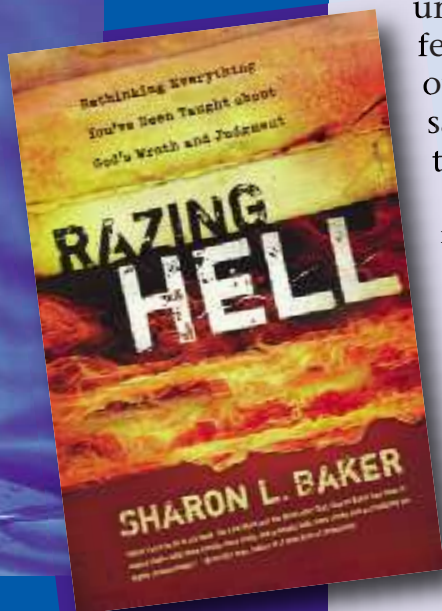
—VIRGIL, IN DANTE'S INFERNO, CANTO 1

Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.
—Revelation 20:14

Editor's note:

Careful readers of *The Plain Truth* know that while we absolutely insist on the centrality of Jesus Christ, and the complementary, core necessity of proclaiming God's amazing grace, we also stand against religious innovations however meritorious good religious folks may believe them to be. The widespread belief in an eternal torment in hell awaiting those who don't seem to measure up to religious values and ideals is one of the most treasured and revered weapons in the arsenal of Christ-less religion. The threat of eternal torment in hell is a club Christ-less religion uses to keep its followers in line—justifying this manipulative teaching by saying “it's for the good” of individual Christians. Holding the feet of Christians over an imaginary ever-burning hell is an effective religious contrivance—but is it true? Does the end (keeping people on the straight-and-narrow) justify the means (an incredibly monstrous lie)? We are grateful to John Knox Press, for its permission to reprint two excerpts from *Razing Hell*, Sharon Baker's formidable challenge to cherished religious dogmas about hell and the mythology that has grown to be so deeply believed. The first excerpt we share is from Baker's Introduction.

When I was twenty-six, I found out I was going to hell. Young, impressionable, and without a strong faith, I listened intently as the pastor of a church I was visiting described in graphic detail the torturous, unquenchable flames that would burn human bodies—including, I presumed, mine—forever and ever. He spoke of worms eating away at decaying flesh, total darkness without the presence of God, and worst of all, no release from those horrors for all eternity. I certainly didn't want to be one of those unfortunate many to feel the flames licking at my feet soon after leaving life in this world. So I took out the proper fire insurance and asked Jesus to save me from my sins and, therefore, from eternal torment in hell. Whew!



That was twenty-five years ago, and hell is still a hot topic. Almost 60 percent of Americans believe in hell. So do 92 percent of those who attend church every week. After that first shocking revelation about hell, I believed the pastor and never questioned its reality, its justice, or its duration. How many of us have grown up hearing about and believing in the existence of hell, a fiery abyss that eternally burns without destroying, tortures without ceasing, punishes without respite, where the only thing that dies is the hope of release or reconciliation? If the number of students and friends who come to me with questions about it serve as an indicator, most of us have cut our teeth on this picture of hell.

Lisa did. We've been good friends for twenty years. We raised our kids together and grew up as Christians side by side. Lisa is one of those friends who often says what no one else dares to say or asks the questions no one else dares to ask. We talk on the phone often, usually about a controversial theological topic, and lately the topic has centered around—you guessed it—hell. An inquisitive and thoughtful student and friend, Brooke, asks troubling questions too. Hell bothers her, yet she lacks alternatives. She was raised in an intellectual and educated environment and thinks about things that normal teenage girls wouldn't give a second thought. Eric, a senior ministry major in college and a very



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bright student, hates hell too; but he just cannot let go of the ideas he has always been taught. He wants to work as God's servant, furthering the kingdom of God by winning souls to Jesus. And hell, as bothersome as it is to him, tends to make unbelievers listen. He wants to believe differently but fears the consequences.

The idea of hell haunts my friend Lisa and my students Brooke and Eric. Along with many others, they question the justice of it all—eternal punishment for temporal sin. They don't understand how a God, who is love, can send so many into eternal torment. They are not alone. As I began to study the Bible for myself all those many years ago, it staggered my senses to think of billions upon billions of people, the majority of all those who have ever lived throughout history's millennia, burning forever and ever in hell.

I teach theology at a Christian liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, and every semester a handful of students struggle with traditional Christian doctrines like hell. Yet other students get upset if they think I am trying to take hell away from them by explaining alternative views. They hate hell, but at the same time they

will deny what I am about to say, also objected to tampering with the doctrine of hell. When I asked her why, she said that these traditional doctrines brought her comfort in her old age.

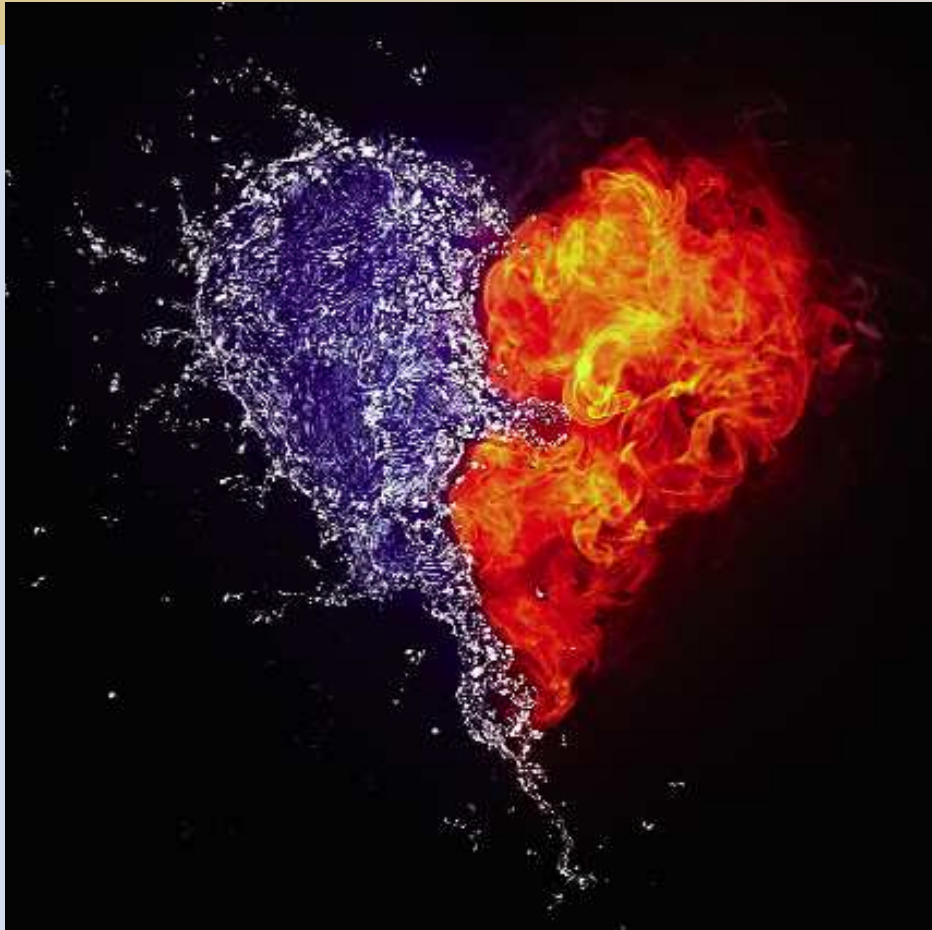
"Comfort?" I asked, a bit astounded. "How can the idea of billions of people engulfed in the flames of eternal torment be a comfort?" She couldn't put her finger on the reason. Now I know that my mother doesn't relish the notion of eternal punishment—at least for most people—and neither do most of us. For some reason,

however, we feel that if we start tinkering with one traditional doctrine, our entire belief system may cave in around us. Some of you may feel that the authority of the Bible is at stake. But this doesn't have to be the case. As long as we base our tinkering on sound biblical interpretation, we won't find ourselves sliding into heresy. In fact, we may actually develop theological and biblical ways of thinking that are more consistent with our image of God as a loving creator who desires to liberate us from sin and evil. So together, in conversation with others like Brooke, Lisa, and Eric, we will search for an alternate and biblical view of hell. And we aren't alone in this search.

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...I am very concerned about remaining faithful to Scripture; but I'm even more concerned about remaining faithful to the God of love, who desires the salvation of all people (1 Timothy 2:4),



Many others have gone before us who just couldn't harmonize the knowledge of the love of God through Jesus with the image of God as a merciless judge who sends billions of people to hell.

Although no formal doctrine of hell existed in the early church, some of our ancient church fathers sought to correct ideas of eternal punishment with their interpretations of Scripture. Irenaeus, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and Gregory of Nyssa strenuously and publically objected to notions of hell that depict God as an angry judge, waiting to throw the wicked into eternal torment for temporal sins. They held the work of atone-

ment through Jesus Christ worthy of such high praise and having such significant value that they believed redemption in Jesus' name would continue on to the last judgment and beyond.

They couldn't believe that God would limit the opportunity of salvation to the temporal realm, especially if the possibility for repentance remained an option even after the death of the body. For these venerable old saints, eternal hell could not be an option for a God of love, the God who through Jesus Christ died to reconcile *the world* to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19).

If the idea of hell haunts your dreams and disturbs your sleep, if you ever wonder at the justice (or injustice) of it all or about the God who deems it necessary to send the majority of humanity, beloved humanity, created in God's image, to burn there forever just because people found themselves raised in the wrong faith or had never heard of Jesus, this book is for you. Or if you grew up in a tradition that either dismissed hell as a malicious myth or did not talk about hell at all, you will resonate deeply with the content of this book. It may open up new ways for you to think about God and what awaits us when this life comes to an end.

Hell should evoke nightmares; it should stir our hearts to abhorrence, plague our minds with questions about its legitimacy; and awaken in us a sense of injustice. It did so for Lisa, Brooke, and Eric, and it does so for me and always has. Hell haunts me deep down inside, where I fear to tread and fail to admit uncertainty lest ripples of doubt disturb my secure little world of faith, lest someone find out and think me less Christian and more heretic. Brooke, eyes wide with apprehension, said, "We don't dare talk about it!" I say it's time we do. We all need a safe space to contemplate tough issues, to consider our questions, and to give heed to our doubts; here is

that space. We will talk about our troubles and questions concerning hell, but we will also discuss alternative views, different ways of thinking about hell that are consistent with a God of love, justice, mercy, and compassion, who desires the salvation of all creation (1 Timothy 2:4).

As you read, be assured that I have no intention of doing away with hell. I can't. I have too high a respect for the authority of the Bible as God's Word. And we do find references to fiery judgment and eternal punishment in the Bible; we'll talk about those in detail later. So I am very concerned about remaining faithful to Scrip-

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ture; but I'm even more concerned about remaining faithful to the God of love, who desires the salvation of all people (1 Timothy 2:4), whose grace is exceedingly abundant beyond all we can think or even ask for (Ephesians 3:20), and who loves enemies, even the Hitlers, the Idi Amins, and the Osama bin Ladens of the world (Matthew 5:43-48; 1 John 4:8). Our traditional views of hell as a place of eternal punishment where

unbelievers dwell in undying flames contradict this image of God. This concerns me greatly.

I am also concerned about the good news, God's good news, the good news about God's *grace*. Our traditional focus on hell as an evangelistic tool does not genuinely communicate the very heart of the gospel. If we receive Jesus as Savior because we want to escape the eternal fires of hell, we miss the entire point of the good news.

What *is* the point, you may ask? We'll discuss it in the last chapter; but suffice it here to say that salvation has almost everything to do with transforming the world for God's glory and little to do with eternal destination for our personal comfort. So in writing this book, I hope to reconsider our image of God and, as a result, to rethink our traditional views of hell and to shift our motivation for evangelism away from avoiding doom and gloom to truly preaching the good news of God's grace and living as an active member in God's kingdom.

Editor's note:

With Sharon Baker's Introduction in mind, we now must skip over many of the well-researched, penetrating questions she has about the idea of eternal torture in hell. While there were many other portions of her book we considered for a further excerpt, we felt that "Judgment Day in a Hypothetical Hell" (beginning on page 115 of her book) might best serve you, our readers, and perhaps encourage you to purchase a copy of Razing Hell for further study.

Judgment Day in a Hypothetical Hell

Picture a person who has committed much evil in his life, someone who rejected Jesus while living, someone who may have abused a spouse or child, or a person who perhaps committed terrible acts of terrorism against innocent people. Imagine a person, any person, whom you would like to see get what's coming to him (or her)—and it's judgment day. For the sake of the illustration, let's call him Otto: an international leader who has launched preemptive wars and terrorized nations with his arrogant dominance, leading to the death of thousands upon thousands of men, women, and children. He prepares to go into the presence of God. His attitude

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smacks of rebellion, anger, and hatred because he knows the time for payback has arrived. He just knows that God is going to judge harshly and throw him in eternal torture as punishment, and he hates God for it.

Otto comes into the throne room of God. Glaring flames of fire, so bright and hot that he cannot see, confront him. His anger and rebellion turn to sheer terror. He moves closer to the flames, and as he does so, he realizes that the blazing fire is God.

The closer he gets to God, the more deeply he feels, not God's hatred or judgment, but God's love. It is a love of such magnitude that, with its abundance, it acts as wrath, judging him for his deficiency, and with its purity, it serves as a hell, punishing him for his depravity. God's love and mercy, both acting as judgment, are so extravagant, so abundant, so incomprehensible that they completely overwhelm Otto. Then he hears a voice from the fire. He does not hear, "You evil, vile murderer! I am going to get you now. Revenge, punishment, and torture forever and ever!"

Instead, he hears God say with sorrow forged from love, "I have loved you with an everlasting love. But look at your life; what have you done?"

Totally undone by God's unorthodox approach, Otto falls to his face, still afraid but with his hatred replaced by remorse. As his life flashes before his eyes, he sees all the victims, mothers crying for lost sons, children begging for the return of their murdered fathers, the eighteen-year-old boy dying alone on the battlefield, crying for his mother. Otto hears their screams, sees their bloody and battered bodies, listens as they cry out for mercy. And he knows he gave none. Yet here he stands in the fire of God, receiving what he never

gave. He looks to his right and sees his victims. Still in the fire, God makes him go to each one and lay his hand upon their hearts. As he does so, he feels all of their pain, all of their disappointments, all of their fear, and knows that he has caused it all. Within the crowd of victims, the last one he has left to touch, he sees Jesus.

When he places his hand on Jesus' heart, he not only feels the pain, sorrow, and the disappointment he has caused Jesus; he also feels the unconditional love that Jesus has for him, Otto. All the while the fire of God burns, devouring Otto's wickedness and evil deeds.

Lest you think he gets off too easy, this is hell for him. With gnashing teeth and uncontrollable weeping, his heart breaks, and he cries out in utter remorse, in unmitigated repentance, knowing he can never undo the damage he has caused. Seeing his repentance and the unendurable and seemingly unending pain he feels as the fire burns off the chaff of his evil deeds, the victims are vindicated. The one thing victims most often wish for is that their offender feel

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remorse and know the terrible pain he has caused them. Otto's immense remorse and pain at the knowledge of his sin against them satisfy this need.

George MacDonald, one of my favorite theologians, explains the pain of the fire, which I call "hell," saying that "the fire of God, which is His essential being, His love, His creative power, is a fire unlikely in

its earthly symbol in this, that it is only at a distance it burns—that the further from Him, it burns the worse." The farther a person stands from God in that day, the more pain the fire causes as it burns away the impurities. Otto doesn't get away with murder; he doesn't get to take a walk without suffering any consequences. He burns in God's eternal fire. The more he burns, the closer he gets to God, until finally he stands next to God, purified, free from sin, and ready to hear God's words.

Then Otto hears God say, "I forgive you. Will you be reconciled to me and to those you have wronged?" Barely able to answer, Otto nods his head in utter disbelief. Much to his astonishment, God asks Otto's victims to draw near to Otto and to put their hands on his heart. As they touch him, each one feels Otto's pain, his fears, his disappointments; they can hear his cries as a child, know his shame as an adult, and understand who he was as an evil ruler. Themselves forgiven and embraced by the love of God, they extend that same kind of grace to Otto, forgiving him his sins against them. At last Jesus stands before him, touches Otto's heart, and says, "I have loved you with an everlasting love, and I forgive you. Will you enter into my kingdom and be restored to God?" And Otto accepts. He has been judged by the fire of love; he has walked through

the fire of God's wrath; he has been purified by the fire of God's mercy. He receives forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration, and he enters the kingdom of God, tested by fire, forgiven by grace.

The possibility exists, however, that Otto does not accept God's offer of restoration, or that after the testing by fire, nothing remains of him at all. Nothing. In

order to preserve human freedom, which God gave to us at creation, we must allow for the possibility that some people will still reject God. The fire does not eliminate the gift of human freedom.

Those who say no to God's yes, however, end up in the "lake of fire," which annihilates them—another topic reserved for the next chapter.

"I love the story!" Brooke said when she heard it. "But doesn't he get off too easily in this hypothetical hell? Shouldn't he suffer just a bit to make up for the suffering he caused other people?"

"Well," I asked her, "what if Otto had made a deathbed confession and received Jesus as his Savior a minute before he died, after which he is ushered into God's kingdom. Couldn't the same be said in that scenario? And yet Christians aren't traditionally troubled by that notion."

"Oh, right. I get your point," she said quietly.

"You see how wrapped up we are in the traditional sense of justice as retributive? But when God serves justice, the goal becomes reconciliation and restoration. God's justice doesn't demand retribution in which Otto must suffer a certain amount in order to pay back his victims for the harm he caused, but instead truly seeks to restore relationships in love."

"I like that," Brooke conceded. "We see justice in a whole new way. It's going to take some getting used to!" □

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HELLBOUND?

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If God is our pure, all-loving creator, can he really turn his back on sinners and allow them to suffer for eternity in hell? Where did this vision of hell come from? Is it possible we've got hell wrong? Or are recent challenges to the traditional view merely an attempt to avoid the inevitable? "Hellbound?" is a feature-length documentary that seeks to discover why we are so bound to the idea of hell and what our views on hell reveal about how we perceive God, justice, the Bible and, ultimately, ourselves.

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