

Majors And Minors | The Danger Of Extremism

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The appearance of Jesus on the Jewish scene was a dramatic collision between [grace](#) and spiritual performance. Jesus came preaching repentance and forgiveness for all people; not on the basis of their social status, their ethnicity, or their gender, but on the basis of God's generosity and undeserved grace (Mark 16:15, Luke 14:23).

"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." | John 3:16-17, NIV

Grace gives us what we don't deserve and cannot earn. This is why it's so frequently contrasted against the Law of Moses (the Torah), which still resulted in condemning every man or woman, no matter their sincerity or good deeds. Righteousness could never come by law-keeping, simply because it was impossible for it to be kept perfectly in its entirety.

Straining Out Gnats, Swallowing Camels*

Many of the conflicts that were initiated with Jesus came from the Pharisees, members of a Jewish religious party that flourished in Palestine from around 515 BCE–70 CE. The movement was marked by both a meticulous adherence to their interpretation of the Torah as well as their particular eschatological (end times) views.

The precise details of religious life were the Pharisees'

passion and the conflicts they engaged in were usually over minor issues such as fasting (Mark 2:18), sabbath keeping (Mark 2:24), eating with 'unclean' people (Mark 9:11), or attitudes towards civic duties, like paying taxes (Matthew 9:11) – all [performance-driven markers of supposed spirituality](#). They made uncompromising stands on matters of no particular spiritual importance, while issues of greatest significance were minimised or neglected.

The Pharisees 'majored in these minors', presuming that this kind of religiosity made them more spiritual and 'right with God'. In reality, they were actually inverting the spiritual values that God was really interested in, like mercy, justice, and [faithfulness](#).

They should have known better. God had already made plain to His people what He required of them. He'd already told them that He found the saccharine solemnity of their religious assemblies nauseating and the melodious noise of their songs infuriating.

"He has told you, O human, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" | Micah 6:8, ESV

"I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps, I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." | Amos 5:21-25,

Jesus called the Pharisees out on their hypocrisy in the gospel of Matthew, where he says:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.” | Matthew 23:24, NIV

The Pharisees could recite the law by heart yet they couldn't have said what the heart of the law really was. They failed to see or understand Jesus had no interest in setting up rigid religious and social guidelines for his followers. His focus instead was on majoring in the majors; the gospel and the significant agendas of the kingdom of God.

The Danger Of Extremes

Legalism takes different forms at different times and is often hard to pin down, manifesting itself in subtle ways.

There is much that can be said about legalism and the hypocrisy that arises from it. An emphasis on externals makes it very easy to fake what is really going inside. Promoting or insisting on conformity to these outward markers of 'spirituality' often results in people who may look spiritual on the outside but who are, in reality, suffering from deep inner turmoil and sin.

“I know of only two alternatives to hypocrisy: perfection or honesty. Since I have never met a person who loves the Lord our God with all their heart, mind, soul, and loves their neighbour as themselves, I do not view perfection as a realistic alternative. Our only option, then, is honesty that leads to repentance. As the Bible shows, God's grace can cover any sin, including murder, infidelity, or betrayal. Yet, by definition, grace must be received, and hypocrisy disguises our need to receive grace. When the masks fall,

hypocrisy is exposed as an elaborate ruse to avoid grace.” | Philip Yancey

The focus of this article, particularly in light of the global pandemic, is another issue that I believe arises from a spirit of legalism. This is the issue of extremism; when we begin majoring in the minors instead of majoring in the majors.

Right now, the world is being sharply delineated. Nearly as quickly as the virus has spread, so too has the chatter and the differing opinions about both the cause and the cure. There is an ocean of information and propaganda, together with an overabundance of access to information, some of it accurate and some of it not.

However, the most disturbing aspect of all this is the noticeable polarisation of people into two opposing groups; *them and us. And the church is not unaffected in this.*

We, the church, are being drawn into extremes, into focusing on external markers (*whether you believe covid is real or not, whether you choose to vaccinate or not...*). We're using these markers as some kind of external test of authentic Christianity and displaying the same misguided zeal for religious purity as the Pharisees of Jesus' day. We're gazing outward, looking for specks of sawdust in other people's eyes, instead of looking inward and paying attention to the plank in our own eye.

The dangers of this kind of religiousness – extremism – are as great a threat in the twenty-first century as they were in the first. As Philip Yancey comments, *“the spirit of law-keeping stiffens into extremism. I know of no legalism that does not seek to enlarge its domain of intolerance.”*

Our focus in this [global crisis](#) seems to have shifted away from our most basic and guiding principle: that is, to incarnate Christ in a darkened and impoverished world, and,

instead, Christians are showing themselves to be intolerant, judgmental, and divisive to those who think differently to themselves.

Not only that, we're being distracted from majoring in the majors; *the gospel*, and *the significant agendas of the kingdom of God*.

I think we must be careful, particularly right now, but in any circumstance, to ensure that the hills we're choosing to die on are the ones that have a cross firmly planted at their summit.

Majoring In The Majors: The Gospel + Kingdom Of God

While the global pandemic is certainly is a troubling and anxious time, I don't believe *our personal opinion* about it changes anything in relation to our right standing with God. Certainly, there are considerations around [our response to the crisis](#) which must be thought about in relation to our Christian witness, and these are convictions that each Christian must personally decide for themselves, in the light of scripture.

Jesus is the only way to find right standing with God. The name of Jesus is the only means by which humanity can be saved. Jesus' performance, not our own, is what secures this extraordinary gift of grace. And in Jesus, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name, all in pursuit of His purpose.

This is what the Bible describes as *the gospel* and *the kingdom of God*. These are the major agendas that Jesus focused on and these should be our focus too.

The world is changed by our example, not our opinion. Our primary purpose and responsibility as Christians and,

collectively, as the church, is to point the world to Jesus. We do this, not by imposing our opinions or judging the world, but by *being salt and light*.

The significant agendas of the kingdom will be seen in lives that are surrendered to the guidance and leadership of God's designated king, Jesus. Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and earth, he becomes the first claimant on our affections, the motivating force in our decisions, and the final judge of our soul.

Therefore, we will also be on guard to avoid any kind of system that employs the use of 'formulas' and 'doctrines' to press good people of faith into conformity with a system instead of conformity to Christ. We will be on the lookout for cultures that promote or enable power posturing, performance preoccupation, unspoken rules, and a lack of balance.

And we will resist mindsets that seek to quantify authentic Christianity by anything other than a confession of trust in the saving name of Jesus Christ.

What Does This Look Like In A Pandemic?

The ability to exercise critical thinking is an important reality for every person, but, in the end, opinions must be formed by each person for themselves and never coerced or compelled upon us by others.

Christians may therefore see a situation in very different ways but this doesn't make them any more or less Christian than each other. It's important to understand that *unity as Christians* is based on our commonality *in Jesus*, not our uniformity of thought or opinion about *non-essential* topics.

Whether I think covid-19 was created in a lab, whether I think covid-19 is no worse than seasonal flu, or whether I think covid-19 is some kind of elaborate ruse enabling Bill Gates to digitally track the world's population through microchip-

carrying vaccines, doesn't make me *any less Christian* (although, arguably, at least one of those opinions infers I'm probably less adept in critical thinking than I should be).

How we *respond* or *behave* as Christians, however, is clearly set out for us in scripture and, in this, we should be united. The Apostle Peter, when encouraging the early church in their Christian witness in relation to the pressures they were under, had this to say:

- Keep your conduct honourable ([1 Peter 2:11-12](#))
- Respect and submit to authority ([1 Peter 2:13](#))
- Love earnestly and do good ([1 Peter 1:22](#))

What I think this looks like right now, in practical terms, is this; that Christians will be people of peace, kindness, and compassion. That we'll look for opportunities to do good and love others well. That we'll give no cause for the name of Jesus to be brought into disrepute and no opportunity for the kingdom mission of God to be thwarted.

That we'll have soft hearts and open minds, willing to listen and understand, rather than judge and disparage. That we'll realise that this time of trouble, at its core, is no different to any other crisis or trouble that Christians have faced and that, in all things, Jesus is over everything.

That we'll choose to not let our differences divide us, but instead, we'll be reminded of what truly unites us.

And that we'll be people who choose to major in the majors, those things that the world needs most; the *gospel of good news* and the *significant agendas of the kingdom of God*.

***The Jews had a law that forbade eating any flying insects that did not have jointed legs for hopping (Leviticus**

11:20–23), and in this, they were strictly observant. Because water could have insects and insect larvae in it, pious Jews were careful to strain the water through a cloth before drinking it. They did not want to accidentally ingest an unclean insect and thus violate the law. Jesus mentions this practice in His proverb and then contrasts it with a hyperbolic picture of gulping down a camel. In this way, Jesus accused them of taking great pains (straining out gnats) to avoid offence in minor things of little importance, while tolerating or committing great sins (swallowing camels) such as deceit, oppression, and lust. | [Got Questions](#)

Three Reasons I Don't Believe In Hell

Before beginning, I would like to acknowledge that discussing this particular topic may appear to be controversial and that you, the reader, may not share the views I express. This article is not intended to be offensive or divisive in nature, but rather to open a channel of respectful conversation about a subject that is deeply important to many people.

I have chosen some time ago to abandon a rigid position on issues or topics which are non-essential to the gospel, from which there is no possible room to move or breathe, and allow my questions and convictions to sit in tension with one another while my Christian life continues to grow and deepen.

What this means, in practical terms, is that I'm genuinely interested to hear from you, that I welcome engagement and even difference on many biblical subjects, including this one, and, while I express this to be my currently held position on this topic, I would hope I am still open to learning new things as scripture speaks to me and as I hear from others.

The following thoughts are expressed in that light:

The subject of *hell* has popped up in a few different conversations recently, and, while I tend to try to avoid speaking from a position of a negative ('*what I don't believe...*'), this doctrine is one that's never rung true for me.

I genuinely doubt the validity of the doctrine of hell or that it's an actual teaching of scripture. For many Christians, a requirement to believe in hell has been a deal breaker in their faith and, I think, for good reason. It's hard to reconcile the many elements of this doctrine with the picture the Bible paints of a good, good God.

In this article, I'd like to share three compelling reasons why I think the doctrine of hell doesn't biblically add up and why I think it's actually in opposition to the truth of the gospel narrative.

But Firstly, What Do I Mean By *Hell*?

Well, I'm referring to the (assumed to be) biblical teaching about the destination of the soul at the moment of death; either to heaven if you've 'done okay' or, alternatively, to hell, if you 'haven't quite measured up'. *Saints* go up. *Sinners* go down.

The parameters for 'not quite measuring up' can differ greatly depending on who you might be talking to. Some would say that *anyone* who hasn't [received Jesus as Lord and Saviour](#) is outside God's salvation. Therefore, either by ignorance or purposed willfulness, they have rejected God and earned themselves a one-way ticket to hell.

This includes, for example, people living deep within the Amazon jungle (who have had limited contact with the outside

world and may never have heard the Christian message of Jesus Christ), those who may have been Christian once but have turned their back on Christ, those who have heard the message of Jesus but decided *no thanks*, as well as those who have engaged in various horrors such as rape, torture and mass murder during their lifetime.

Others are more uncomfortable with the thought of Adolf Hitler rubbing shoulders with good and sincere people (who, while they might not have been Christian, could hardly be described as having lived a 'wicked life'). Or those who, through no fault of their own, had never even heard of hell, let alone Jesus. It does seem a little heavy-handed a response towards people who were essentially clueless about the rules but were punished anyway. Hell, they therefore conclude, is only for the truly wicked; surely [God makes concessions for nice people?](#)

The traditional teaching of hell is that it's a place of both psychological and physical torment; an 'eternal lake of fire' where the wicked are perpetually burned for all eternity (decide for yourself who qualifies). This imagery was further elaborated on during medieval times by the artists who graphically displayed vile creatures eating flesh and devouring sinners in the place of torment. (These images, together with fragmented texts of the Scriptures, and the circulation of [apocryphal](#) books, led the medieval church into some strange and grotesque doctrines).

The period of history known as The Great Awakening (1730-1740) placed particular emphasis, as a method of conversion, on the horror that awaited the unrepentant sinner. Jonathan Edwards, a famous American congregational preacher of the time, described hell as a place where "God holds men over the flames in the way that one holds a loathsome spider over a candle. He speculated on how it would feel to have the searing agony of a burn drawn out through eternity. He told listeners that the ground beneath their feet was a rotten flooring over a blazing

pit, ready to give way in seconds.” (Bruce Shelley, Church History In Plain Language)

What Does Scripture Teach?

Psychologists today would no doubt have a field day with the profoundly damaging psychosocial and spiritual effects of this kind of preaching, dubbed ‘fire-and-brimstone’, but, more particularly, what does the Bible preach? Is this kind of reality really found in scripture?

Here are three reasons why I don’t think scripture teaches this at all:

1. Hell Doesn’t Fit The Gospel Narrative

One of the amazing aspects of the Bible is the consistency of its message and theme, from start to finish. It’s remarkable, given the reality of its varying authorships and the different time periods during which it was written, that the major theme of God’s sovereignty, rule, and purpose remains intact. In fact, affirming God’s sovereignty throughout the biblical record gives shape and purpose to the role for which humanity was created.

[The gospel narrative](#) is one that tells the story of Jesus, God’s only Son, and announces that he is both Lord and King. In him, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name, all in pursuit of His purpose (Acts 2:36, Romans 8:19-21).

But what is He saving people from?

The first book in the Bible, Genesis, tells us something important about our own history, and it sets the stage for the drama that subsequently unfolds throughout the rest of [God’s story](#).

It tells us, firstly, that we were created with purpose,

designed to be like God, to image Him throughout His good world and rule wisely and well on His behalf (Genesis 1:26).

Secondly, it tells us that instead of partnering with God in this purpose, we chose our own will, introducing the evil of sin into God's good world. The terrible consequence for the first humans, Adam and Eve, is that they were banished from the garden and from God's presence. Furthermore, humans became 'dying creatures', subject to disease, aging, and mortality. Dying became hard-coded into our DNA.

"You will sweat all your life to earn a living; you were made out of soil, and you will once again turn into soil." | Genesis 3:19, CEV

"Adam sinned, and that sin brought death into the world. Now everyone has sinned, and so everyone must die." | Romans 5:19, CEV

We are subject to mortality. Death is our great enemy; this is the consequence of disobedience, passed on Adam and Eve and received by all those who came after them.

"So then, as through one trespass there is condemnation for everyone, so also through one righteous act there is justification leading to life for everyone." | Romans 5:18

The gospel narrative tells of humanity hopelessly enslaved to sin and at the mercy of mortality (Romans 6:15-23). Far from the spiritual life God intended for us, we're incapable of saving ourselves or of overcoming death (Acts 4:12). The gospel, however, offers good news! : rescue, redemption and eternal life – God's own life, by the simple act of [giving allegiance](#) to His Son, Jesus, as Lord and Saviour (Romans 10:9-10).

The gospel confirms the biblical reality of a just but loving

God who is for His creation, who is not willing that any should perish, and who has actively worked to reconcile and transform us so that we can live the life of purpose for which He created us (2 Peter 3:8-10, John 3:16).

Hell – further punishment after death – simply doesn't fit the gospel narrative.

2. Hell Doesn't Fit The Character Of God

God is the God of promise, at whose Word the universe came into being and whose Word will never return to Him void, not accomplishing the purpose for which it was sent ([Genesis 1:3](#), [Isaiah 55:11](#)). His loving devotion endures forever. He is faithful, true, just, and all glorious ([Psalm 136:3](#), [1 Timothy 1:17](#)).

The Psalmist declares the wonder and worthiness of this Eternal God, who is clothed in light, who stretches out the heavens like a tent, and who walks on the waves of the sea ([Psalm 104:2](#), [Job 9:8](#)). All of creation bows in obeisance to His majesty, for all things, owe their existence to Him ([Psalm 104:30](#), [Psalm 6:4](#), [Psalm 96:11](#), [Luke 19:40](#)).

God proclaimed both His Name and character to Moses, the great deliver of Israel [during the Exodus](#), stating:

“The Lord – the Lord is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth, maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But he will not leave the guilty unpunished, bringing the consequences of the fathers' iniquity on the children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation.” | Exodus 34:5-9, ESV

The Psalmist also writes often and extensively about the innate goodness of God:

“For the LORD is good; His steadfast love endures forever,

and his faithfulness to all generations.” | Psalm 100:5, ESV

“The LORD is good and upright; therefore He shows sinners the way.” Psalm 25:8, CSB

“The LORD is good to all; His compassion rests on all He has made.” | Psalm 145:9, BSB

There's a lot to unpack in all those verses. Yet perhaps the overwhelming take-home point is this: God is just. He's not vindictive or biased and He doesn't show favoritism based on our social status, gender, or nationality. In fact, He is generous-hearted and gracious, even to those who are His enemies.

Jesus demonstrates this in His famous sermon on the mount, where he sets out the characteristics of those who would be children of the kingdom. He shows that choosing to behave in this way is simply imitating the characteristics of their Heavenly Father:

“You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. For He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward will you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what are you doing out of the ordinary? Don't even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” | Matthew 5:45-48, CSB

This aspect of God's graciousness – His undeserved love and favour to humanity – permeates every aspect of the gospel narrative, giving it weight and power. Because He is just, He

wouldn't overlook the sin of the world. But because He is also gracious and good, God sent His Son into the world, to suffer under the hands of wicked men, so that humanity could be rescued from the curse of sin and death (Matthew 16:21, Isaiah 53:4-6). In His goodness and in His justice, He made arrangement for sin to be absorbed and absolved, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

God is not a vindictive sadist. It simply doesn't fit the character of a good and gracious God to punish people by "holding them, like a loathsome spider, over a flame for all eternity." I would have serious concerns about other aspects of God's character if I truly believed He is capable of sustaining such indefinite torture, even to those I might consider deserving of such a fate.

Interestingly, during the time when kings ruled the nation of Israel (926BCE – 586BCE), Israel engaged in the practice of child sacrifice by fire to the pagan god Molech, a practice they had absorbed from the nations they had previously conquered. God considered this to be a great evil; it was completely abhorrent to Him and something which he had expressly forbidden (2 Chronicles 33:6, Jeremiah 32:35, 2 Kings 21:6).

The doctrine of hell, in its many terrifying forms, perhaps tells us more about the capability and cruelty of human imagination than the reality of what occurs at death.

Hell – as a place of fiery, eternal torture for the wicked – simply doesn't fit the character of God.

3. Hell Isn't Found In The Bible

Well, it is. But not in the way you think.

While the word *hell* is certainly found in some of our English translations, it's usually a translation of the original Hebrew word *she'ol* (שְׁאוֹל), and on the remaining occasions,

three other Greek words (*hades* (αἴδης), *gehenna* (γεέννα) and *tartarus* (ταρταρώ)).

It's translated by the King James version as *hell* 54 times, however more accurate translations like the NASB or NIV show the word *hell* only occurring between 13–14 times, all of which are found in the New Testament. The Hebrew word *she'ol* is translated in other places as 'grave' and 'the pit' and the more accurate translations tend to translate it in this way ([Genesis 37:35](#), [1 Kings 2:6](#), [Job 17:16](#), [Isaiah 14:11](#), [Ecclesiastes 9:10](#))

The English word *hell*, comes from 'helan', meaning 'to conceal'. It conveyed no thought of heat or torment but simply of a 'covered over or concealed place.' In the old English dialect, the expression "helling potatoes" meant, not to roast them, but simply to place the potatoes in the ground or in a cellar (Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged).

Here's a brief overview of the original words:

She'ol

She'ol was understood, by Jewish writers, as a place of stillness and darkness to which all the dead go, both the righteous and the unrighteous, regardless of the moral choices made in life. In *she'ol*, one is cut off from life and from God.

"For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun" | Ecclesiastes 9:5-6, ESV

"Humans and animals come to the same end—humans die, animals die. We all breathe the same air. So there's really no

advantage in being human. None. Everything's smoke. We all end up in the same place—we all came from dust, we all end up as dust.” | Ecclesiastes 3:19–20, The Message

She'ol is used throughout the Old Testament and is derived from a word meaning *hollow*, the place under the earth where all previously living things rest in eternal, silent repose, without knowledge, consciousness, or reward.

“Since she'ol in the Old Testament times referred simply to the abode of the dead and suggested no moral distinctions, the word ‘hell,’ as understood today, is not a happy translation.” – Collier's Encyclopedia (1986, Vol 12, p.28)

Hades

In the [Septuagint](#) (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) and throughout the New Testament, the translators used the Greek word ***hades*** (ᾍδης) in place of the Hebrew word *she'ol*, translating with the Jewish concepts of *she'ol* in mind – a place where there is no activity – rather than the mythology of Greek concepts. This can be shown to be the case as they expressly use *hades* as an equivalent for *she'ol*, both in the Greek translation and also where they are quoting passages from the Old Testament (Hebrew text). One example appears below comparing [Psalm 16:10](#) with [Acts 2:27](#) (where the former is being quoted by Peter the Apostle):

“For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.” – [Psalm 16:10, ESV](#)

“For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption.” – [Acts 2:27, ESV](#)

With one exception, mentioned further below, the word *hades*, in all appearances in the New Testament has little, if any,

connection to afterlife rewards or punishments.

The best equivalent understanding, which most modern translations use is '*the grave*'. The context of the verses in which this word is used support the Jewish understanding of *she'ol* as a place of silence and inactivity to which all those who die are consigned.

The exception, as noted above, is Luke's parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31), in which the rich man finds himself, after death, in hades, and "in anguish in this flame", while in contrast the angels take Lazarus to "the bosom of Abraham", described as a state of comfort.

A parable is a type of analogy – a succinct, didactic story written in prose or verse, designed to illustrate one or more instructive lessons or principles, and is never intended to be interpreted literally. Additionally, it would be problematic for an entire theology to be built around one specifically non-literal section of scripture; or even from several parables put together. "*Parables should never be used as sources of doctrine, but rather we take doctrine as a norm for interpreting the parables*" (Tertullian).

This passage, in my opinion, therefore shouldn't be considered to be literally describing aspects of an afterlife, including hell: that is, a place of eternal fiery torment *because this is not what scripture teaches elsewhere* Nevertheless, it is certainly an fascinating passage, intended to illustrate some lesson or principle and therefore requires an interpretation of some sort.

Gehenna

Another Greek word that has been translated as *hell* in some translations is 'Gehenna'. It appears twelve times in the New Testament and is actually a Greek compound, derived from the Hebrew words *ge* and *hinnom* or the "valley of Hinnom"; a proper name which literally means valley of the son of Hinnom.

Gehenna is actually the word that Jesus uses in the New Testament and [you can read more about what Jesus really said about heaven and hell here](#).

The valley of Hinnom is a deep narrow slice of earth just outside the city of Jerusalem. Also called Tophet, or 'the valley of dead bones', it already had a long and disturbing history by Jesus' time. Firstly, as mentioned earlier in this article, in the early days of Israel's kingdom, it was the place of idolatry and child sacrifice, by burning alive with fire to the pagan god Molech (2 Kings 23:10).

Later it was used as a place where rubbish, filth, and the carcasses of beast and men alike were disposed of. Fires were kept constantly burning to consume the valley's refuse and to prevent contamination. In the days of Jesus, the highest mark of ignominy that could be inflicted upon a person was a criminal's burial in the fires of Gehenna.

Gehenna is a literal place of perpetual burning; *but it was in Israel, not in a subterranean underworld*. Therefore Jesus' meaning when warning of Gehenna was quite different to what might be understood by *hell* today. The theological implication of Jesus' words is likely this: that the consequences of unrepented sin in our life will lead to the finality of death and, by inference, the complete and utter annihilation of existence.

Just as the fire of Gehenna burned indefinitely, completely obliterating any trace of whatever was cast into it, so is our existence in death, without the salvation that is to be found in Jesus. Extinction of not just of our physical body, but of our life, our soul, our spirit, the very thing that makes us *us*. *All of us*.

Again, the theological implications point to the need for and provision of [a saviour, the hope of the world](#); the very core of the gospel narrative.

The translation of Gehenna to *hell* is actually a mistranslation. More correctly, it should have been transliterated into English (ie it should read 'Gehenna' on every occasion) and left in its proper form for the reader to interpret.

Tartarus

Used in 2 Peter 2:4, this Greek word actually occurs nowhere else in scripture.

“For if God did not spare messengers having sinned, but having cast [them] down to Tartarus with chains of deepest gloom, delivered [them], having been reserved to judgment...” 2 Peter 2:4, LSV

Tartarus was considered in Greek mythology to be the great abyss, situated far below *hades* (the grave). Together with the context of this verse, the use of this word suggests a particular and specific meaning. Some kind of *imprisonment* is implied, certainly, but no sense at all of fiery torment or torture. In fact, the verse suggests that judgment (of who and what kind isn't stated) is still yet to come.

Certainly, there are questions raised by these passages – the parable of Lazarus for example. What does it mean? What lesson are we intended to take from it?

And what is Peter referring to in his letter? Who are the messengers He refers to? What was their crime? And why is this Greek word found here, yet used nowhere else in scripture?

It's not my intention to discuss these at any length in this particular article, only to comment that I don't believe these single instances are compelling enough evidence for the doctrine of hell, particularly when compared alongside all of scripture as discussed earlier in this article.

Again, as with Gehenna, *Tartarus* should have been

transliterated into English and left in its proper form for the reader to interpret.

What I've Concluded

While scripture certainly has much to say about what happens *after life* and why, it's a markedly different story than perhaps we've been led to believe.

Scripture tells us that we're all bound by mortality, a one-way, downhill journey from cradle to grave, where life – all aspects of *living* – cease. This situation is permanent and final (Genesis 3:19, 2 Samuel 14:14, Psalm 103:15-16, Romans 5:12, Romans 8:20-28).

Death is not just the enemy of life itself, but also thwarts the purpose for which humanity was created. Even the noblest of men or women soon pass from the world's stage, their personalities and achievements more often than not fading from memory. *"No wisdom of man or rebellion can deliver new life out of death."*

But the perfect human was promised to come, one who would bear the sin of the world and who would wage war against sin and death in his own body (John 1:29). Through his perfect life, his willing sacrifice, his dishonorable and painful death, and his glorious resurrection, all of humanity were promised that rescue would come and that death would be overturned. Jesus was going to build his church and not even the *gates of the grave* would prevail against it (Romans 8:3, Matthew 16:18).

"He [God] has revealed this grace through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has abolished death and illuminated the way to life and immortality through the gospel" | 2 Timothy 1:10, BSB

The gospel narrative is the story of God, in Jesus, saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people

for the glory of His name, all in pursuit of His purpose. Those who believe in Jesus will live, even if they die, for Jesus promises that he is not just the light and life of humanity but the resurrection itself (John 11:25, John 3:16).

The traditional doctrine of hell finds no place in this narrative, nor does it fit the character of a good and gracious God, nor can it actually be found in scripture.

Instead, the final pages of the Bible close with the great conclusion promised as part of Jesus's reign, once He has put all His enemies under His feet, that the last enemy to be destroyed will be death itself (1 Corinthians 15:26): *"Look, God's dwelling is with humanity, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. **Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more because the previous things have passed away.**"* (Revelation 21:3-4, CSB)

"The angel showed me a river that was crystal clear, and its waters gave life. The river came from the throne where God and the Lamb were seated. Then it flowed down the middle of the city's main street. On each side of the river are trees that grow a different kind of fruit each month of the year. The fruit gives life, and the leaves are used as medicine to heal the nations.

God's curse will no longer be on the people of that city. He and the Lamb will be seated there on their thrones, and its people will worship God and will see Him face to face. God's name will be written on the foreheads of the people. Never again will night appear, and no one who lives there will ever need a lamp or the sun. The Lord God will be their light, and they will rule forever. ([Revelation 22:1-5, CEV](#))

In The Shadow Of The Empire

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

Christianity in the first century was a spiritual explosion, fueled by the reality of the resurrection of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Unlike the Jewish community, who lived and worshipped largely by themselves, Christians were active evangelists, eager to share the good news about Jesus with all who would listen. They preached Jesus everywhere, not just as the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, but as Lord, Saviour, and King; over and above Caesar.

Initially planted in the soil of Jerusalem, the gospel message soon spread rapidly beyond Israel; throughout Judea, Samaria, and the rest of the Mediterranean world. In as little as just over 10 years after Jesus' resurrection, Christianity had already reached as far as Rome itself. As Jesus had promised, his disciples were to be his witnesses, even to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8, Acts 2:41-47).

The area of [Asia Minor](#) was a huge melting pot of ethnicities and also one of the [first areas to flourish with converts to the new religion of Christianity](#). It was also part of the expansive [Roman Empire](#), at the height of its glory, and was therefore subject to Roman law and Roman customs.

Living in the shadow of the Empire would prove a difficult tension for Christians to navigate. No longer [giving allegiance to Caesar](#) as 'Lord of the earth' but instead confessing that this title belonged to Jesus Christ, how were they to behave as people *in the world but not of it*?

As *citizens of heaven*, did the laws of Rome no longer apply to them?

And, as *people of the kingdom*, how were they to live out the values of the kingdom in the society around them? Were they justified in using force to make *the kingdoms of this world the kingdom of the Lord and Christ*?

These are all important questions, not just for those in the first-century church but for every generation of Christians who have come after them.

How should Christians conduct themselves, living in the shadow of the Empire?

A Letter From Peter, An Apostle Of Jesus Christ

The importance of the way a Christian behaves so as to be a credible witness for the gospel is a significant principle emphasised throughout the New Testament. It's a [theme picked up by Peter the Apostle](#) in his first letter to the early churches (1 Peter 1-5).

Discouraged by the persecution they were suffering because of their faith, Peter writes to the early churches throughout Asia Minor to encourage them and to provide wisdom and counsel in their response to the pressures around them and in their life of Christian witness.

Keep Your Conduct Honourable

Firstly, Peter urges them, *keep your conduct honourable*. They are holy people, [called out of darkness](#) into God's marvellous light. Walking in the light means [walking humbly alongside God](#), doing justly and loving kindness. Deceit, malice, hypocrisy, slander, drunkenness, sensual living; these are all fruitless deeds of darkness (Ephesians 5:11) and Peter encourages the church to choose differently, to live exemplary

lives in their neighborhoods so that their actions will refute pagan prejudices (1 Peter 2:11-12).

They had been [born again](#), by the living and imperishable Word of God, new creations guarded through faith for a salvation that would one day be revealed to all. Demonstrating lives that paralleled what they preached would witness to the truly supernatural power of the gospel and its ability to effect transformation.

Respect And Submit To Authority

For the Lord's sake, Christians were to show respect to all people and, particularly, to those in authority. They were to be model citizens, subject to every human institution (1 Peter 2:13). As Jesus the master had made clear during his earthly ministry, *render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's*.

Their allegiance to Jesus wasn't an excuse to engage in illegal behaviours, disrespect of their masters, or dishonour of the Emperor or his delegates. *Pay your taxes, submit to the laws of the land, pray for those who have the rule over you*.

They were to treat their service to the Emperor, their master (if they were a slave), and indeed each other as service rendered to the King himself.

The Christian life wouldn't always bring blessing, and the persecution and suffering they were currently experiencing were proof of this reality. Yet Peter encourages them to look to the example of Jesus himself, who demonstrated that the kingdom of heaven advances not through power and might, but through missions of mercy, kindness, and humility and, ultimately, through suffering.

The greatest suffering of all brought about the greatest victory for all (1 Peter 4:13-14).

Love Earnestly And Do Good

They were to love each other earnestly. This was the defining mark of those who belonged to the King and it was how the world was to know they were his disciples.

Given to hospitality, they were to love with open hearts and generous lives. They were to live bright and unafraid: remembering that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it. They were to entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while continuing to doing good to all and especially to those of the household of faith (1 Peter 1:22, Galatians 6:10). *Love and do good to others just as Jesus has loved you. By this, all people will know you are his disciples.*

Early Christianity found particular expression through philanthropy; care for the poor, widows, and orphans, for those brethren who had been imprisoned or condemned, and particularly for brethren, who due to poverty, could not afford an honourable burial. The early church would often provide services for such persons, believing care in death as well as life was an active expression of love. The early Christian insistence on caring for those *made in the image of God* transformed the ancient world.

In The World But Not Of It

“The Christian ideal is not freedom from work, but strength to do it; not freedom from temptation, but power to overcome it; not freedom from suffering, but joy in an abiding sense of the Father’s love; not absence from the world, but grace to make the world better for our presence; not holy lives driven from the world, and living apart from it, but holy lives spent in the world and leavening it.” – Ellicott’s Commentary For English Readers.

Like our early Christian brethren, we too continue to live in

the shadow of the Empire. We too must wrestle with issues of allegiance, to show submission to those institutions and ordinances which have authority over us, yet not be conformed to this world in the process.

We may think this requires us to limit our interaction with the people around us or remove ourselves 'from the world', but this isn't what scripture is concerned with. It's the ruler of this world who is our enemy, not those who are enslaved to him; those who, like us, have also been made in the image of God. They, too, desperately need the presence of Jesus in their lives, whether they know it or not and our Christian witness in this current world is vitally important.

Jesus' prayer for his disciples was not that God would take them out of the world but that He would protect them from the evil one. We must not be conformed to the image of the ruler of this world, nor choose his way, a path that only leads back to darkness (John 12:31, 1 John 1:5-7). Jesus prayed for the protection of his followers, knowing we are left in this world for a specific purpose; to witness to the power of his saving name. "*You are the salt of the earth,*" he said, "*you are the light of the world*".

Our commission is to live and work, to love and forgive, to mourn, trust, despair and hope [alongside and together with](#) our unbelieving neighbours and friends, all the while telling of the faithfulness of a good God and the hope found in the gospel message.

Our lives – our everyday, mundane, messy, uncomfortable, terrifying, joyful, and thoroughly human lives will be the greatest witness of all to the hope that lies within us.

How we conduct ourselves, as we live in the shadow of the Empire, is still just as relevant and important today as it was for our first-century brethren.

As Christians, we're now citizens of a spiritual city whose

builder and maker is God, people of a heavenly kingdom, living out the values and ideals of [that kingdom](#) in this earthly life.

Yet we're also still literal citizens of the countries we live in. We still retain all the privileges that citizenship affords, together with the responsibilities it holds. *Because we have given our primary allegiance to Jesus and, for the Lord's sake, we're to continue to submit to the laws and ordinances of the countries in which we live.*

Christians have a greater not lesser responsibility to do good and model appropriate citizenship. We don't get a leave pass to flout the regulations and laws passed by those in authority, just because we're 'not of this world.' *"It is God's will that by doing good, you might cure the ignorance of the fools who think you're a danger to society. Exercise your freedom by serving God, not by breaking the rules."* (1 Peter 2:13-17)

Yet, there must be a disclaimer at this point. We also have a responsibility – a greater responsibility, it can be argued – to model the values of the [kingdom of heaven](#). This responsibility often highlights issues of injustice, prejudice or inequality which may exist both within the church and without, issues to which God is adamantly opposed and therefore we also should be opposed.

The Atlantic slave trade, which operated between the 15th and 19th centuries, might never have been abolished, had it not been for the public agitation of those who spoke vocally against a legally sanctioned practice and campaigned tirelessly for its elimination.

Two distinct laws passed in Nazi Germany provided the legal framework for the systematic persecution and resulting genocide of millions of Jews, demonstrating that sometimes doing what is lawful isn't the same as doing what is right.

And in our own country of Australia between 1910 and 1970, at least 100,000 Aboriginal children were forcibly removed – stolen – from their parents and families as a result of various government policies, leaving a legacy of loss and trauma that persists today. The pain inflicted on an entire people through separation and forced assimilation was enabled by governmental law, regardless of the reality that it was morally repugnant to do so.

As Christians, the law cannot be our ultimate moral guide. Slavery was lawful. The holocaust was legal. Segregation and apartheid were legally sanctioned. Many of today's laws are created to protect corporations rather than people. Simply put, the law does not dictate our ethics. God does. | Craig Greenfield

[God's values have the final word in our actions](#) and this may mean, at some point, our choices or actions put us in conflict with the culture around us or the laws of the country in which we live. *We submit, until, for conscience sake, we can no longer submit* (Acts 5:29, Exodus 1:7).

The Covid-19 Pandemic

For Christians, times of trouble are opportunities to test and prove our own conviction; that there is One God who rules over all things and that we remain confident that He continues to do so, even through trouble and difficulty ([Psalm 103:19](#), [Daniel 2:21](#), [Ephesians 4:6](#)).

While the early Christians faced very different times of trouble than we do today, comparable only perhaps by how we choose to respond, our faithful response is no less necessary than theirs.

The ongoing crisis of Covid-19 is a troubling and anxious time. The most recent reports regarding the virus are particularly concerning, causing fear for many people,

especially the elderly and vulnerable in our communities. Whilst we shouldn't be ambivalent about what's going on around the globe, we also need to be measured in our response and very careful not to be contributing to or escalating the level of panic that people may be experiencing.

It's extremely disturbing that Christians would contribute to misinformation regarding both the virus and associated treatment options, particularly in the social domain. Many, in reality, are unlikely to be qualified to actually comment from a medical perspective, yet this doesn't seem to prevent them from offering advice, suggestions, criticisms, or conjecture on the subject.

Verified medical information shared in responsible ways is helpful; unfactual, fear-inducing conspiracy theories are not. By all means, discuss the situation with those around you but choose to do so in responsible ways, with a view to banishing exaggerated fear.

Neither is it appropriate for Christians to participate in acts of disrespect or civil disobedience of those in authority, whilst current regulations don't directly contradict God's directives. We ought to instead continue to pray for wisdom and guidance in our own personal choices as well as for those in the difficult situation of accessing risks and making decisions on behalf of our nation.

Christians also have both a responsibility and a privilege to point the world's attention to the One who is still in control of all. We can choose to positively redirect the conversation, to comfort people's hearts and try to settle their fears, whilst still acknowledging the gravity of the current pandemic and assist in supporting practical measures to combat it.

There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God (Romans 13:1). We are to seek their welfare, to speak evil of no one, to respect the

government and be law-abiding. If it is possible, as far as it depends on us, we're to live at peace with everyone. (Titus 3:1-2, Jeremiah 29:7, Romans 12:18).

We need to continue to pray, worship and connect in all the ways that are possible to us right now. Most of all, we need to continue to point the people of the world to Jesus, who told his much-loved followers: "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. Trust in God and trust in me also" ([John 14:1](#)).

Convictions + Conduct

Our convictions and conduct go hand in hand. What we say and what we do must show itself to be in agreement.

"We don't believe something by merely saying we believe it, or even when we believe that we believe it. We believe something when we act as if it were true." | Dallas Willard

If we believe that God is King of all the earth and remains sovereign still, then we must act in such a way that confirms this truth to the watching world.

We are to be thankful for those in authority and especially at a time like this, those in healthcare, who risk their own lives to treat and save others ([1 Timothy 2:2](#)). We need to remember to pray for them and assist where we can.

We ought to show responsibility in following the direction of the government and officials, acknowledging measured concern for the situation we all find ourselves in and abiding by recommendations for the good of everyone ([1 Peter 2:13](#)). Now, more than ever, is the time to show consideration and restraint and to lead the world by example. It is not the time (or ever!) for Christians to display greed or selfishness but to consider those who are our neighbour and to love them, as ourselves ([Romans 13:8-10](#)).

And, particularly, it is vitally important to consider those who are weak and vulnerable amongst our communities, who have always found a special place in God's heart ([James 1:27](#); [Psalm 68:5](#)).

We have opportunity right now, to remind the world of a good, good God, who is actively seeking to overthrow the effects of sin in the world and restore humanity to full relationship with Himself.

Even here, in times that seem very dark, God is still busy making all things new.

I first wrote about [the Christian response to the pandemic](#) over a year ago, when things had really started to impact our communities. We've seen a lot happen around the world in that time and, recently, it seemed as if Australia had finally gotten a handle on things and life might be returning to normal.

I confess, I've not personally felt any real sense of fear throughout this situation until very recently, when the various mutant strains became more contagious and seemingly more virulent. The recent restrictions in Sydney give cause for concern and Covid-19 now feels very much on our doorstep. I had to intentionally take time this week to remind myself of my faith, my conviction that God is sovereign still and that the wind and waves still know His name. Through it all, my eyes must remain on Him.

At the same time as this was occurring, three events impacted me personally and I felt compelled to again write about the situation.

One was several shares in one week on social media of what can only be described as 'doomsday' commentaries; fear-inducing and based in theory, not fact.

The second was the illegal, unmasked gathering/protest that occurred in Sydney, which was also shared on social media (whether to criticise or congratulate I couldn't say for sure, although it did appear to me to be in support of the protest).

The third was two different statements from Christian pastors within a denomination stating this: that if you chose to vaccinate, you weren't faithful, and, that if you didn't choose to vaccinate, you weren't faithful. In my opinion, this kind of religious pressure, criticism or coercion about a very personal choice is completely irresponsible and amounts to spiritual abuse, especially from those in a pastoral position.

I was reminded again of the relevance and importance of the Christian faith in our world, to provide hope, comfort, and assistance to those who are struggling, fearful, or angry. And I was reminded of the example left for us in God's Word, which seems to have an answer for every situation, of those in the early church who lived in the shadow of the Empire and navigated the same tensions with faithfulness and steadfast hope. We can learn a lot from them.

Pictured: Sculpture of Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, Emperor of Rome 24 January AD41 – 13 October AD54