

Foreword

“Ron Hobbs should go to hell.”

That was my fervent theological conclusion as a small boy growing up in northern Ontario.

As a precocious five-year-old literally fresh off the Cunard Line boat from England and starting grade 1 in northern Ontario, I had a difficult time connecting with my new Canadian schoolmates. Small, and with an impossibly thick West Country accent, I was an attractive target and immediately made sport of by the available bullies. (I am not kidding about “immediately”: I was attacked on the schoolyard leaving for home on my first day.) Chief among the tiny thugs who loomed large over my life, however, was Ron Hobbs—two years older and much, much bigger.

Ron, in the inscrutable providence of the *deus absconditus*, lived in the house directly behind mine. I had to cross through his family’s yard to walk the mile to the elementary school we both attended. Ron quickly sized up the situation and concluded he could have a great deal of fun lying in wait for the little English boy at various points along the route. Perhaps he could jump me immediately upon my setting foot in his backyard. Perhaps he could hide along one of the paths in the woods we used as a shortcut between our suburban bungalows and the school. Perhaps instead he could guess that I would take the long way around, via the road. In as close to an actual cat-and-mouse game that two boys could play, however grimly, I was pursued by this nasty creature for two years.

Yes, two solid years. My parents possessed many good qualities, but responsiveness to the worries of their first-born son, when his younger sisters were more obviously vulnerable and demanding, was not among them. So it was two full years before the elder of my two younger sisters, having watched me get pinned down on the asphalt yet again and get my face punched by Ron Hobbs yet again, told my mother tearfully that

she was afraid for me. Roused now to action, my parents spoke to the Hobbses and, decent people that they surely were, the bullying stopped.

Before it did, however, and from time to time thereafter, I devoutly wished Ron Hobbs in hell. He had made every morning's walk to school and every afternoon's walk home an exercise in terror. I spent hours at night and during class frantically considering which route today might help me elude him. I comforted myself on particularly bad days with the teaching I received from my evangelical Sunday School teachers about hell: Ron Hobbs would surely go there, and he couldn't get there fast enough for me.

How long, however, should Ron be kept there? Being a child of lively imagination, as I went to sleep one night—and I couldn't have been older than eight at the time—I tried to imagine what it would be like to exist in total darkness and in terrible pain *with no hope of it ever ending*. It took a little while to compose the experience in my mind, but then suddenly it was real. And it was horrible. And I have never forgotten it. Indeed, I can summon up at will now the icy grip on my throat of abject despair. *"Forever" is a long time.*

I hated Ron. Let's not resort to euphemism. I wanted him punished. Even as a boy, though, I thought, *Not forever*. How could "forever" make sense? Ron made two years of my life pretty bad, so my intuition was, and is, that *someone* needed to make that right. And if a long stretch of significant suffering is the way to make such things right—as the Bible, and many of the world's religions, assert—then Ron should suffer accordingly.

But forever? That seemed both illogical and unworthy of the God I had known, especially in the face of Jesus. God was frighteningly just, to be sure. There was no sugar-coating in my Sunday School! But he was *just*, not vindictive; scarily fair, yes, but not mean. So the teaching I received of the damned being sustained by God to endure unending torment seemed incongruous to me. And when I was a teenager reading science fiction and thriller novels by the boxload, the figure of the brilliant torturer who found clever medical devices to keep his victim alive and conscious for yet another round of torment struck me as devilish, not divine.

To this day, I have wondered why Christians prefer—as many seem to do—believing in eternal conscious torment (ECT). Now, I understand hatred. I understand vengefulness. And these natural reactions to evil rose in my heart into a whole new register when I discovered as a man that someone I loved had been abused as a girl, and frequently, by her

parents. It was all I could do to resist hatching my own real-world plot of death preceded by exquisite suffering for these wretches. But even then, even in my darkest musings, I never approached wishing them eternal conscious torment. It just didn't make any sense. At some point, a sinner has suffered commensurately with the evil he or she has done, and that is that. No?

Not, it is sometimes said in reply, if you're dealing with the glory of God. For God's glory is infinite, and God's goodness is infinite, and God's love is infinite, and so any sin against all those infinities must entail infinite suffering.

I have studied just enough mathematics, however, and quite a bit more theology to be suspicious of "infinities." Infinity often messes up math equations, and I have found it certainly messes up a variety of theological discussions as well. Well-meaning Christians often use "infinite" when they should say "great" or even "perfect," such as when they refer to God's patience. Thank God that God's patience is *not* infinite! If it were, justice and peace would be infinitely deferred. No, we need to beware of using "infinite," and even more of *equating* "infinities" as if we are speaking of the same things just by putting "infinite" in front of each element.

Yes, God's goodness has no limits. He is, as the philosophical theologians sometimes put it more carefully, *maximally* good. God's power is also maximal, as is God's wisdom, and love, and so on. God is as good and as great as good and great can be. But to sin against this superb and supreme being does not thereby bring down upon your head the entire weight of God's glory. Any sin, however small, separates one from God, yes. Only the righteous can ascend God's holy hill, yes. Nothing impure can enter the kingdom of heaven, yes and amen. But this appropriate binary language (in/out; good/bad) is not sufficient to deal with all that must be dealt with in the question of the just deserts of human evil.

Ron Hobbs treated me much, much worse than did every other child in that school. My intuition is that he therefore deserved much, much worse punishment than did they. Isn't yours the same? So of course, it seems to me, there must be degrees of punishment exactly proportioned by "the Judge of all the earth" to the degrees of transgression.

"But God is infinitely good," one hears in response, "and so there are no degrees of sin. Once you've sinned against God, you deserve to suffer forever." Really? Pick your favorite horrible villain, from history or from fiction: No one deserves to suffer any less than does he or she? Isn't

there something wrong with any theological “equation” that ends up with “Caligula/de Sade/Hitler/Stalin = your friend or relative who decided, for whatever reason, not to accept God’s salvation”? At least, don’t we *hope* that there is?

That is the question I want to pose in this foreword. In the book that follows, there are chapters upon chapters of high-quality argument: exegesis of Scriptures, logical deductions, inferences to best explanations, metaphors and thought experiments, and more. I’ve never seen such a book, in fact, that piled up such a rich array of reasons to hold to a particular theological idea. But these resources won’t do the reader any good who doesn’t have any desire to change his or her mind, who *prefers* to think of ECT as the right way to think about judgment and hell.

So I ask you to consider this basic question: Wouldn’t it be *great* to be able to believe that God did not keep the damned on a spit, rotating forever in the flames of eternal hellfire? Wouldn’t it be a *relief* not to think of the saints getting on with the joyful business of the Age to Come without expending considerable energy trying not to think about their loved ones writhing in everlasting agony? Wouldn’t it be *reassuring* not to have to try to bend one’s mind and, worse, one’s heart into a shape that could somehow give glory to God for afflicting people forever, that could somehow call majestic what seems obviously monstrous?

Don’t get me wrong. And don’t get these authors wrong. Ron Hobbs should go to hell. If he didn’t repent of his sins and receive the stupendous gift of salvation in the sufferings of Jesus Christ on his behalf, then he is every bit the vicious little predator he seemed to be way back then, and hell is precisely what he deserves. He ought to pay for every moment of misery he inflicted on me, to the last drop.

Even more important, of course, is the offense of sin against God. God is offended and offended against by sin, and sin must be dealt with thoroughly on God’s behalf as well as on any of ours. But some Christians seem to think they must be zealous on God’s behalf and require the worst punishment they can imagine. We must be careful, to paraphrase Bonhoeffer, not to be more judgmental than God.

I don’t want to believe in a God who keeps Ron Hobbs in the fire any longer than his sins warrant—do you? And how much suffering does it take to make up for two years of bullying? Or, in the case of my beloved friend, ten years of abuse? A lot, yes. A horrible lot. But not an eternity of it. There is only so much evil one can work in a human lifetime. Infinity

just seems immediately, and wildly, out of proportion to a finite amount of sin, however large and virulent.

Now, maybe, of course, the traditional view of ECT is right. If it is, if ECT is truly what the Bible teaches, then I'll do my very best to believe it and teach it. I won't like it, but that doesn't matter: I love God and I trust him above my own reason and experience and moral intuition. Despite whatever might be the theological sophistication I have acquired over the years, if the Bible says it, I'll believe it, and that settles it.

But if I don't *have* to understand the Bible that way, . . . if I don't *have* to believe in eternal conscious torment, . . . if someone or, even better, a group of reputable someones can make a powerful case for a view of God's justice that seems proportionate to human evil . . . and not stretching out infinitely, then why wouldn't I rejoice to be granted this alternative?

Ten years or so after Ron Hobbs stopped besetting me, I had moved to another part of town, had hit puberty pretty hard, and had worked out enough to play football for my high school team. One night, inside our local hockey arena, I was walking along during an intermission munching a snack, and I nearly bumped into a much smaller fellow about my age who seemed strangely familiar. I stopped. He hadn't noticed me, as he was smoking a cigarette and staring out onto the ice as the Zamboni cleaned it for the next period of play. But I stared. It was Ron Hobbs. Menace of my childhood, now within striking range—and I was four inches and thirty pounds bigger than he was.

And I felt, looking at that small teenager forlornly looking off into space, that *God* should deal with him, not me. God would know what to do with him. God would save him, if he would be saved, and punish him rightly if he wouldn't. And what I still thought, as I thought when I was small, was that Ron Hobbs didn't deserve an eternity of hopeless pain. God was perfectly wrathful, but not insatiably bloodthirsty. And I have certainly been glad in the subsequent decades to find an interpretation of Holy Scripture that does not require me to believe in a God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ that was actually fiercer about Ron Hobbs than I was.

This book will give you the grounds to believe in an entirely good, entirely righteous God who knows the difference between small sins and large ones, between awful little sinners and awfully big ones, between pa-

Foreword

thetic foolishness and satanic malevolence—and who judges each aright.
Why wouldn't you want to rejoice in such a theology?

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