

Your Own Personal Hell By Katie Skurja

*Is there a literal hell where the depraved are punished after they die? If so, what is it like?
Is there a literal heaven where the righteous go after death? If so, what is it like?*

These are rhetorical questions that have been debated by sincere people who desire to be faithful to God for centuries. Though interesting to explore various interpretations, no one knows for sure because it is all speculation, whether we want to admit it or not. Whatever it may be in the afterlife, we can see with our own eyes the existence of heaven and hell here on earth.

What if heaven and hell exist, at least in part, here on earth? What if they exist inside your own soul? What if focusing on heaven and hell *out there* keeps us from attending to the heaven and hell *in our hearts*?

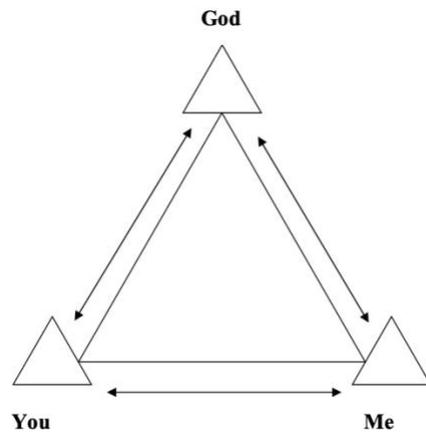
We don't have to look very hard to see hell on earth. History books, the news channels, prisons, and psych wards are replete with examples of the various kinds of hell in our midst. Since the beginning of recorded history, there has been weeping and gnashing of teeth among humans: jealousy, hatred, murder, debauchery, and every manner of evil has been perpetrated by humans upon other humans. The machinations of hell are not limited to any person or people group; evil can and does find its way through the heart of every human. It is no respecter of persons.

It can be a bit harder to spot heaven on earth, especially in the internet age of instant access to worldwide news. Unfortunately, uplifting stories do not make great click bait. Driven by the mantra *if it bleeds, it leads*, major news outlets profit from juicy tidbits of divisive news that fan the flames of hell. Inundated by such darkness on a daily basis, it can be tempting to hunker down and pray for this life to end so that we can get on with the business of heaven.

Yet...Jesus prayed "thy kingdom come, *on earth* as it is in heaven."ⁱ

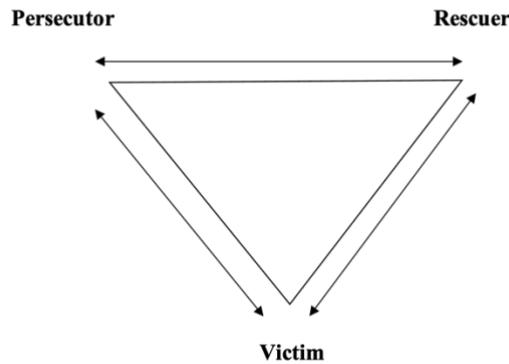
It seems that Jesus is calling *us* to bring about heaven here on earth. What if we are also responsible for bringing about hell on earth? What if when we are busy participating in the ways of hell, we are not able to see heaven among us, much less bring it about?

Before we look at the ways of hell, let's consider what bringing about the *kingdom on earth as it is in heaven* might look like. In summing up all the law and prophets into two simple commands, Jesus gave us some guardrails for bringing about the kingdom on earth: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.ⁱⁱ Here is a simple diagram to represent these two commandments:



In this diagram, there is a theme of three: God is triune in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the You and Me of humanity are triune images of spirit, soul, and body; *and* we are created for relationship with God, self and other. In this model of the kingdom on earth, there is only one God and thus only one true judge. If we start the gospel story with Genesis 1, we will affirm all humans have significance, value, worth, and dignity by virtue of the fact of being created in the image of God. After creating us *mere mortals*, God’s judgment is this: very good.

We are all image bearers created to shine the Light of Christ into the world. Nothing or no one is meant to take the place of God as judge or the source of our significance, value, worth, and dignity. To do so is to fall into idolatry and makes us a victim, serving the wrong master. When we take the role of either savior or judge over others, we make ourselves little gods in an inverse kingdom. This kingdom is meant to steal, kill, and destroy, causing us to be bound up by a hell on earth.



Known as the Drama Triangle in the therapeutic world, the beginning of this inverse kingdom can be found in Genesis 3. As prototypes of all of humanity, Adam and Eve are tempted to believe they are victims of a mean God who is holding out on them by not letting them be like God. In wanting to be something other than what they are created to be, they fall into self-judgment. What God judged to be *very good*, a human created in the image of God, is now *not good enough*. In turning to the other for significance, value, worth, and dignity, hell on earth is ushered in. This “first gavel” moment set the

stage for generations to come; we came to realize how easily a gavel fits in the human hand. We have pounded away at each other ever since.

While the kingdom of God operates by the two simple rules of *Love God and love your neighbor as yourself*, the inverse kingdom plays by a different set of rules: fear, blame, control, and manipulation. It is a shame generator. While the kingdom of God levels the playing field of humanity in terms of worth, value, and dignity, the inverse kingdom creates dominance hierarchies based on judgements of good/bad, in/out, us/them. It is a zero-sum game. The triune union of God, self, and other is unraveled into a dog-eat-dog world of striving, shame, and a deep sense of separation.

Neurologists and psychiatrists tell us that the left and right sides of the brain think like a predator and prey respectively.ⁱⁱⁱ When we consider being created in the image of God, this makes perfect sense. Christ, who is *the* image of the unseen God, is both Lion and Lamb. When these two sides work together without judgment as we see in Christ, neither side operates as predator or prey. “But what about Jesus on the cross?” you might say. “Wasn’t he prey then to the predators who killed him?” Though victimized, Jesus was not their victim. Victim is an identity rooted in the inverse kingdom of hell. In what seems like a very calm and matter-of-fact way, Jesus told Pontius Pilate that he chooses to lay his life down.^{iv}

In taking on human flesh and stepping into the triune relationship of God, self, and other as one of us, he showed us how to accept the fullness of what it means to be human, both Lion *and* Lamb, without acting like *either* a predator or prey.

When we deny our humanity, dwelling in the inverse kingdom of hell, we will invariably act out in the various ways of predator and prey. On the predator side, it’s the realization that we can all be vicious and have the capacity for evil. Before you protest your innocence, let’s remember scripture says if we have hatred in our hearts, we are guilty of murder.^v On the prey side, it’s the recognition that we are finite, vulnerable, and weak.

By not judging being human as something to be despised, Jesus showed us how to bring about the kingdom and stay out of hell. Though he was unlawfully accused, betrayed, and tortured, Jesus cried out from the cross before taking his last breath, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they have done.”^{vi}

In the Christian confession of faith, Jesus then descended into hell and set the captives free.

He emptied hell.

And yet . . .

We continually repopulate our personal hell with those we have judged as weak, bad, or unworthy of being forgiven; it is filled with those for whom we cannot or will not declare, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they have done.”

Deep down in the dungeon of the soul, each of us has our own personal hell where we keep those who we are viewing from a human point of view, not from God's perspective.^{vii} This can include anyone playing the various roles in the inverse kingdom, whether we see them as persecutor, rescuer, or victim. It includes all those we are not seeing through the Light of Christ.

Locked up inside of us are the unforgiven: those who have hurt us, abandoned us, betrayed us, and have failed to love us in various ways. Chained up along the dungeon walls are the abusers, molesters, and those who have committed unspeakable crimes.

Our personal hell not only contains those we have deemed unworthy, but anyone we are still seeing from a one-dimensional point of view – those we pity, obsessively worry about, and those we feel it is our job to rescue. In our deluded sense of self, we are addicted to putting on the superhero cape and playing savior to the poor souls we see as victims of the *real* villains – anyone who disagrees with our point of view. By donning the garb of superhero, we blind ourselves to the fact that we are acting a part in a drama written in hell. The plot twist is predictable – you will also play the persecutor and victim in upcoming scenes.

During a deep time of prayer, after the revelation of this inner hell, I went on a search and rescue mission for those I was holding in the dungeon of my soul. There were the usual suspects of those who had hurt me, betrayed me, and abused me. As I encountered each one, I was overcome with compassion as I brought them to God. I did not want them in my hell. I was shocked, however, to find my younger son crouched in the darkness. Aghast to see him there, I asked God, "Why? Why is my Spencer here?" I sensed God saying, "Because you are worrying about him in a way that I am not. You are not seeing him through my Light." The truth of that statement pierced my heart.

For many years, this beautiful son of mine has been in prodigal journey. Countless times, I have fretted for his safety, prayed for him, and released him back to God. Little did I know that when I saw him as a victim, I was relating to him through hell. The revelation of this brought me to tears. Hastily, I brought him out of my hell and into the Circle of Light, Love, and Truth of the Father, Son, and Spirit. There I asked God how to pray for my son. I saw myself putting warming blankets around him and I prayed for the Light to penetrate his darkness.

In the following days, my soul was expansive and filled with hope. I found myself relating to Spencer with a newfound freedom, both in person and in my times of prayer. Several few weeks later, he mentioned that "it felt like someone was looking out for him." He got a job and found a healthier place to live. When I commented how it seemed the darkness had lifted from him, he said, "I have turned over a new leaf. Maybe a whole bunch of leaves."

It can be tricky to understand the difference between relating to someone as a victim (loss of agency, fragile, broken, lost, delinquent, abused, innocent victim, incapable of change, pathetic, etc.) and having compassion for the ways a person has been victimized. The difference, however, is crucial in the process of keeping our hell empty and bringing about heaven on earth.

At this point in our human development, it seems to be common knowledge that behind every bully is a scared, insecure child. I often say, *the bigger the bully, the bigger the baby hiding behind it.*

What is not obvious to most these days is the fact that there is a bully hiding behind every victim. The bigger a person plays the victim card, the bigger the bully hiding behind the scenes. Remember the predator and prey sides we all have? The bully/predator is hiding its prey side, while the victim/prey person is hiding its predator side. Neurologists tell us the prey side of the brain is *stronger*! It is a case of the sheep in wolf's clothing vs. the wolf in sheep's clothing respectively.

In twenty years of doing inner healing prayer work with people who have experienced unspeakable pain in their lives, not once has God related to them as a victim. Is there recognition of the pain and victimization? Compassion? Absolutely abounding grace and compassion. But victim is an identity in hell – a place lacking the dignity, value, and worth God has bestowed on us as Light Bearers.

Thus, we are agreeing with hell when we see someone as a victim. We are not seeing them through the Light of Christ nor are we participating with bringing the true Light into their darkness. Only in the Light of Christ can we see the multi-dimensionality of a person, creating space for new possibilities.

In the inverse kingdom, the role of persecutor is acted out by wielding a gavel, the role of rescuer is acted out by wearing a superhero cape, and the role of victim is acted out by ensconcing oneself in a fragile China doll outfit.

This three-part play of persecutor, rescuer, and victim can also be acted out in a monologue of *me, myself, and I*. All of us have parts we have judged and locked away in the dungeons of our soul. For some, it is the young child part we long ago rejected because it caused trouble by being too trusting, too silly, or because it was taken advantage of by another. Perhaps you cast your child to hell because it costs too much to be vulnerable. Sometimes the child, our inner prey, is banished to the dungeon in hopes of keeping it safe from the pain of the world. In doing so, we lose touch with our humanity and the power of our vulnerability.

For others, it is the predator side that is banished to hell. Though it may seem like a righteous thing to do on face value, by doing so we are also cutting ourselves off from our power, voice, autonomy, and choice. In doing so, we create a power vacuum that other predators will fill, allowing the cycle of victimization to continue. We also convince ourselves that we no longer have the capacity for evil, unaware that our inner predator has the ability to shape-shift in myriad of ways.

There is a special place in our personal hell for the monsters, the truly evil, and the unredeemable. Depending on your political persuasions, your deepest dungeon may have Trump or Biden, Anthony Fauci or Steve Bannon, or the whole crew of either Fox News or CNN. Deeper still is the place where despots such as Hitler, Stalin, Mao Tse Tung, and others are held.

Though we may not be consciously aware of it, keeping these people and the undesirable aspects of our humanity tucked away in our dungeons makes us feel safe and in control. “At least I am not *that bad*...i.e. evil, weak, stupid, lazy, needy, crazy, out-of-control, mean, controlling, toxic, hateful, etc., etc.”

This personal hell of ours requires us to wield the gavel of judgment against ourselves and others. But as it turns out, we make horrible gods. There is a catch to playing a part in this cosmic drama of the Imago Dei Ministries- Copyright © Katie Skurja -2022 - Revised 2.23.22_version 3.0

inverse kingdom. It is written in the fine print we fail to pay attention to when we sign on dotted line: When we judge, we are tied to that person or part of self through judgement and darkness.^{viii} We end up cooperating with darkness instead of living in and through the Light of Christ.

Because we are all connected as image bearers, the Light that is in all,^{ix} what we do to one, we do to all, including ourselves.

Jesus said, "Where two or more gathered in my name, there I am in the midst."^x His name is not a magic incantation (...*In Jesus' name*...). It is a state of being. In Light. In Love. In Forgiveness. It is in the kingdom of heaven on earth. Holding people in our personal hell is the antithesis of living in his name.

Take a moment to drop down into the dungeon of your soul to see who is hiding in your personal hell. Who are you holding in there? What are the charges?

Bring them before Christ on the cross, standing in front of him. How does Christ look upon them? Which ones are excluded from the statement, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they have done?" Which ones does he banish back to hell?

Are you willing to lay down your gavel? Can you let Christ be the judge? Are you willing to take off your superhero cape and let Christ be the savior? Are you willing to step out of the restrictive China doll suit in order to let God heal the pain and darkness underneath?

Keeping our personal hell empty is not a one and done exercise. Our superhero cape has a life of its own and does not easily stay in the closet. Time and again, our fingers will itch to pick up the gavel, even if to our own demise. When we get hurt or offended, we will be tempted to slip back into the fragile China doll outfit.

Take the next step.... Bring the residents of your hell into the Light, the Circle of Trinity. See yourself and the *others* standing before Jesus. What do you notice? What does he want to say or do?

Let's make it our business to bring about heaven on earth, refusing to participate in the divisive ways of hell on earth. By standing side-by-side with our brothers and sisters (all human beings) before God, we will come to trust that the Light really is more powerful than darkness.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

ⁱ Matt. 6:10

ⁱⁱ Mark 12:30-31

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtf4FDlpPZ8>

^{iv} I lay down my life....

^v 1 John 3:15

^{vi} Luke 23:34

^{vii} 2 Cor. 5:16

^{viii} Matt. 7:1-3; Luke 6:37-42; Romans 14:1-12; Romans 2:1; John 8:7; 1 Corinthians 4:5

^{ix} John 1:9

x Matt. 18:20