

INTRODUCTION

SKELETONS IN THE CLOSET

God has some skeletons in the closet. At least, that's what many of us fear. Bones the size of tree trunks. Clothed in cobwebs. Decaying in the darkness. God's skeletons are big.

We say someone has skeletons in the closet when they're hiding deep, dark secrets that, if discovered, would drastically change the way we feel about them. "Growing up, we all thought Uncle Joe was such a great, fun-loving guy . . . until one day we learned he'd embezzled millions, had a string of affairs, and killed his business partner." Uncle Joe had some skeletons in his closet.

God's skeletons are those deep, dark doctrines we'd rather avoid. Hell. Judgment. Holy war. Those parts of God's story that, if we really took a close look at, we're afraid would radically change the way we feel about him. "We all thought Father God was so kind and good . . . until one day we learned he had slaughtered millions in his holy wars, damned those at judgment who'd never heard his name, and carted most of humanity off to his hellish concentration camp for vengeance without end."

Yep, God's definitely got some skeletons in his closet—or at least we think so.

The closet door is heavy. Stone-cold concrete. Six feet thick. Rusted, creaky hinges. Opening the door can be intimidating. We are faced with a dilemma: if we open the closet door, we might not like what we find. The God we thought good might be a fraud. The

Father we thought trustworthy, a felon. The Jesus to whom we gave our lives, a facade. If we pull these bones out of the closet and take a cold, hard look, the God we have come to love and serve might not be found worth loving and serving.

And deep down we know our faith couldn't handle the betrayal.
Best keep the door shut.

And yet, with the door closed we're left wondering whether God's goodness can really be trusted. Refusing to look boldly at the parts of God's story we fear intimidates us from following Christ without reservation and placing full confidence in his gospel. Our faith grows lukewarm and stale as we go through the motions of church services and verbal assent, while our hearts stay distant and unengaged.

The irony of our dilemma? If we open the closet door, we might not like what we find out about God. If we leave it closed, we might not like what we find out about ourselves.

Regardless, God's closet door won't seem to stay shut. Our culture is asking questions, from the latest Amazon best seller denouncing the brutality of God, to the most recent *New York Times* editorial lamenting the inherent violence of religion, to one of many conversations overheard at the local coffee shop on "why I could just never believe." This conversation is on our culture's lips.

And this conversation is on lips more intimate than just our culture's. Our family and friends are asking these questions. From that son who walked away from the faith, to that mentor who one day realized she no longer believed, to the spouse who can no longer join us at church without feeling hypocritical, and that friend in our small group who doesn't come around anymore. Our preference may be to keep the closet door shut, but there are many around us who seem less than willing to respect our decision.

And then, for some of us, there's that suspicion that surfaces as we lie awake at night, curious about the closet door. And what lies on the other side. Our culture, our loved ones, and even we ourselves are asking questions . . . and we're often left unsure how to respond.

Perhaps most surprisingly, God seems to *want* the closet door open. He doesn't accept our comfortable religion; he keeps sending prophets to churn things up. Jesus doesn't skirt the tough issues; he confronts us with them head-on. Scripture doesn't hide the challenging parts; it proclaims them boldly. We don't need a secret access code or crowbar to pry the closet door open; God himself keeps flinging it wide open and inviting us to look inside . . . as much as we may keep trying to swing it back shut.

We want that door shut . . . but God doesn't. Not only is he big enough to handle our questions, he wants us to bring them. God opens the door and invites us to look inside.

MY SKELETONS

I found God inviting me to open the closet door on topics like these early in my Christian walk. During my sophomore year in university, I had a radical encounter with God that turned my life upside down (or perhaps better yet, right side up). Soon after, I found myself excitedly sharing with a close friend in my dorm how Jesus' grace had transformed me and expected him to share in my joy, but was surprised when his first response was, "So, do you think I'm going to hell now?"

I wasn't sure how to respond. I hadn't even brought up hell; it wasn't something that was really on my radar. Taken aback, I blurted out something like, "I don't know. I guess that's God's territory. You'll have to take that up with him."

While in retrospect I think that was a pretty good answer (for reasons we'll explore later in this book), at the time I felt uneasy and insecure. Had I failed my test as a Christian? Was I *supposed* to tell him he was going to hell, in hopes of scaring him into the kingdom? What *did* the Bible say about hell? Would God roast my friend like a kālua pig over a burning spit forever? I didn't want that. And if that really was the way God worked, how did this mesh with the

radical grace and undeserved mercy of the cross I had encountered in Christ?

The Skeleton of Holy War

Next came holy war. I worked for a few months on a Navajo reservation, supporting a traditional community of impoverished indigenous shepherds fighting a land-rights case against a multibillion-dollar international mineral corporation. While there, I began learning more about the many injustices my country had perpetrated against the Navajo and other native peoples: the unending string of broken treaties, the massacres and forced migrations, the manipulation and coercion frequently used to get what we wanted for as little as possible in return.

And like a black eye in the middle of it all was Manifest Destiny, a prominent ideology of the nineteenth century that drew upon Old Testament imagery of Israel conquering Canaan to justify US expansion throughout North America. This gave a sense of God's redemptive blessing, even mandate, to the atmosphere that fueled the broken treaties, the massacres, and the expulsion of native peoples to the barren, unwanted, and isolated islands of the reservations.

It's bad enough to say, "We knocked you down." Something much more to say, "God gave us the punch." Talk about adding insult to injury: America's historic declaration that God was driving the train that ran over native peoples.

As I lived with the Navajo families, I wondered about the spiritual impact this ideological blow had left on their communities. How many struggled to receive the love of Christ, or even see it clearly, in light of the historic failures of our witness? How many, when even considering Christianity, lived under a crushing sense that the Christian God was against them *as* native people? And all this led me to wonder: What the heck *was* going on with holy war in the Old Testament? Why *did* God tell Israel to take out Canaan? Did I really want to follow a God who commanded his people to conquer and destroy the indigenous inhabitants of the land?

My gut was telling me I'd rather side with the Navajo.

The Skeleton of Judgment

And finally, there was judgment. During my junior year, I had a summer internship on the border of Burma and Thailand. I was working with a Thai organization fighting the trafficking of young girls into the sex trade. Hundreds of girls in the community had been trafficked—and local leaders had decided enough was enough.

They established a successful alternative school for at-risk girls, with rescue-rehabilitation services and community development initiatives to help address the issue. They sacrificially gave their time, energy, and resources, and courageously put their lives on the line to end the tragedy in their community. Death threats and attempts had been made on the lives of some of the leaders. I was proud to call them friends and work alongside them.

On Sundays, I would walk an hour to join the only church I could find in the area. The worship, sacrament, and fellowship were extremely powerful and meaningful, but after the services the Thai pastor would repeatedly ask me, “Why are you out there working with the Buddhists? You should be here helping me build the church!”

To be honest, I hadn’t considered that the people I was working with *were* Buddhist, or at least I hadn’t considered it directly. I suppose most of them were, in a cultural default sort of way, not in a blatant evangelistic sort of way, like monks in a temple or something like that. But Buddhist or not, they were my friends. And I admired them. They cared sacrificially and generously for the flourishing of God’s world, and even if we saw the world in radically different ways, I was honored to work side by side with them.

I asked the pastor, “Is there anything you are doing to address the trafficking of children in your community that I could come to work alongside?” He answered, “This is a tragedy in our community, but it is more important that we focus on saving souls so that on Judgment Day they can go to heaven.”

His words reminded me of a missionary I heard speak earlier that year at a campus group I attended back home. He painted a gruesome picture of billions of lost souls around the world “heading to hell in a

handbasket” (his words), unless I and others like me heeded the call to head overseas, like him, and become missionaries to intervene in their impending doom, to get them to “pray to receive Jesus” so they might avoid being found on God’s bad side at the great final judgment.

I found myself angry at this depiction of Judgment Day. Was it really so simple as “Christians go to heaven and everyone else goes to hell”? Was my role as a witness to Jesus’ sovereign authority and saving mercy really centered around getting people to pray a magic prayer? Was stopping men from raping children really secondary to saving souls? Were all my Buddhist friends (whose generosity, courage, and sacrifice put me to shame) really bound for judgment predominantly because of the time and place into which they were born, while this Thai pastor and visiting missionary (who both came across to me a bit closed-minded, arrogant, and self-righteous) were destined for salvation simply because of the “which religion are you?” box they would check on a questionnaire? Could I really bear the massive weight that the eternal destiny of billions around the world was riding on my wee, tiny shoulders?

I had encountered the grace of Christ in a radical way, but these were the skeletons I was afraid were lurking behind God’s closet door: hell looked like a torture chamber; holy war looked like imperial conquest; judgment looked like a racist farce.

But I heard God’s voice in the midst of it all, inviting me, beckoning me, challenging me, to open the closet door. To not be afraid to ask the questions. To bring them to him. I had a sense that something special was waiting on the other side of the questions—an intimacy to be found just beyond the apparent darkness.

And gradually, the picture began to change.

I began reading the Bible.

CONFRONTING THE CARICATURES

I had read the Bible before, but I was reading now with new lenses. I had questions. I wanted to know what the Bible had to say about

them. And as I read, I found something strange happening: the Bible didn't freak me out. It actually inspired me. It didn't talk about these topics the same way many people, including church people, talked about them.

Jesus talked about hell and judgment in a way that was radically different from not only my atheist friend in the dorms, but the Thai pastor overseas and the visiting missionary on campus. Where they brought confusion, Jesus brought conviction. Where they inspired hubris, Jesus inspired hope. The Bible talked about holy war in a way that didn't justify my country's treatment of native peoples; it systematically critiqued and confronted it. It actually seemed, in a strange way, to offer hope to oppressed and marginalized communities—like those of my indigenous friends—around the world. There was something profoundly different happening here, even if I couldn't yet put my finger on precisely what it was.

In the fifteen years since then, I have come to believe that our culture's popular understanding of these difficult doctrines is often a caricature of what the Bible actually teaches and what mature Christian theology has historically proclaimed.

To Laugh At, To Live By

What do I mean by a *caricature*? A caricature is a cartoonlike drawing of a real person, place, or thing. You've probably seen them at street fairs, drawings of popular figures like President Obama, Marilyn Monroe, or your aunt Cindy. Caricatures exaggerate some features, distort some features, and oversimplify some features. The result is a humorous cartoon.

In one sense, a caricature bears a striking resemblance to the real thing. That picture really *does* look like President Obama, Marilyn Monroe, or your aunt Cindy. Features unique to the real person are included and even emphasized, so you can tell it's a cartoon of that person and not someone else. But in another sense, the caricature looks *nothing* like the real thing. Salient features have been distorted, oversimplified, or blown way out of proportion. President Obama's

ears are *way* too big. Aunt Cindy's grin is *way* too wide. And Marilyn Monroe . . . well, you get the picture.

A caricature would never pass for a photograph. If you were to take your driver's license, remove the photo, and replace it with a caricature, the police officer pulling you over would either laugh . . . or arrest you. Placed next to a photograph, a caricature looks like a humorous, or even hideous, distortion of the real thing.

Similarly, our popular caricatures of these tough doctrines do include features of the original. One doesn't have to look too far in the biblical story to find that hell has flames, holy war has fighting, and judgment brings us face-to-face with God. But in the caricatures, these features are severely exaggerated, distorted, and oversimplified, resulting in a not-so-humorous cartoon that looks nothing like the original. All we have to do is start asking questions: Where do the flames come from, and what are they doing? Who is doing the fighting, and how are they winning? Why does God judge the world, and what basis does he use for judgment? Questions like these help us quickly realize that our popular caricatures of tough biblical doctrines are like cartoons: good for us to laugh at, but not to live by.

But the caricature does help us with something important: it draws our attention to parts of God's story where our understanding is off. If the caricature makes God look like a sadistic torturer, a coldhearted judge, or a greedy génocidaire, it probably means there are details we need to take a closer look at. The caricatures can alert us to parts of the picture where our vision is distorted.

One of my hopes for this book is to place the caricature and the photograph side by side, so we can ask which is appropriate to laugh at, and which to live by. To let the comparison between the two drive us deeper into the gospel.

The Bigger Picture

So how do we begin confronting the caricature and reclaiming the photograph? There are two main methods we'll be using. First, we'll be placing these topics back within the storyline in which they

make sense. I've found that our caricatures often arise when we as churches are telling central elements of the bigger story wrong, in ways that differ significantly from the Old Testament and New Testament storyline.

Stories are important. They make sense of the people, places, and plots within them. If we get the broader story wrong, we'll be rightfully confused when the people, places, and plots within them don't make sense anymore.

Let me use an analogy. My daughter has a puzzle of children playing in the forest. Within the forest, the smaller puzzle pieces of the children fit smoothly—the pieces are the right shape, size, and color. But she also has a puzzle of sea creatures in the ocean. Now, if she tried to fit the children inside the bigger picture of the ocean, or the sea creatures in the forest, she would be very frustrated. The pieces wouldn't fit; colors would be different, the characters wouldn't make sense, and the edges would need to be trimmed or the pieces crammed on top of each other.

They were made to fit as components in a different bigger picture.

Similarly, I've found that our frustration with tough topics like hell, judgment, and holy war often arises because we try to fit them into the wrong bigger picture. If our bigger picture of heaven and earth's relationship is significantly off, then we are going to have a hard time making sense of how a smaller subtopic, like hell, fits into it. If our storyline of salvation is severely distorted, we are going to be confused understanding the appropriate place of judgment. If we miss God's radical critique of our world's empires and their unholy wars, we will have a hard time recognizing the radical distinction of why and when God goes to battle.

So, in the chapters that follow, we will spend time framing these topics back within their bigger pictures. When we reclaim the biblical story of God's reconciliation of heaven and earth, the subtopic of hell starts to fall naturally into place again. When we reclaim the biblical story of God's purpose to bless, reconcile, and heal the nations through his international, multiethnic kingdom, the subtopic

of judgment against those forces that stand opposed to this kingdom begins to come into clearer focus. When we reclaim the biblical story of God's identification with the weak against the oppression of the strong, the subtopic of holy war begins, again, to make more sense.

So we will spend time reclaiming the biblical story from its distortions, reframing these topics back within that story, and demonstrating the difference this makes. The beauty of this method is that dealing with these topics can give us fresh insights on not only these questions, but our faith as a whole. It can provoke paradigm shifts that help us look afresh from new angles at the bigger picture where our vision has been distorted.

Pulling out the skeletons can be more than just an exercise in cleaning closets; it can give us a fresh appreciation for the house as a whole.

In the Trenches

The second way we will be confronting the caricatures is by demonstrating the practical relevance of these topics today. Often, we think of these matters as more relevant to a fairy-tale world, with dragons and monsters, kings and magic trees, fiery furnaces and epic battles. Fairy tales are fun, but for another world, right? As I will seek to demonstrate, these topics are much more at home in our everyday world than we might think. They speak powerfully and profoundly to day-to-day life in our modern society, with all of its most pressing needs and wildest hopes.

In the chapters that follow, we will explore issues as wide-ranging as sex trafficking and genocide, American democracy and Third World dictatorships, modern suburbs and social media. We will travel to places as diverse as Nigeria, China, and my hometown of Portland, Oregon; from Boston high-rises and the heights of the global economy, to Brazilian cardboard shanties and displaced slums in the developing world. We will explore the cultural longings embodied in our fairy tales, and the historical longings embodied in our war stories. We will have respectful conversations with Buddhism, Islam, and atheism. We will visit history from World War II to the European colonization

of the Southern Hemisphere to the ancient Roman Empire. And on the way, we'll deal with pedophile priests, cancer surgeries, pub rockers, home makeovers, and unruly wedding crashers.

Buckle your seatbelt; we're in for a ride.

The tough topics we'll explore in this book are, I have found, powerfully and profoundly relevant to life in our contemporary culture. Though the imagery can sometimes look like the stuff of fairy tales, it speaks to the everyday realities, deepest needs, and wildest hopes of life on this ol' spinning rock we call Earth. My conviction is that we approach these topics best when we approach them not as detached observers in ivory towers, looking for complex, mathematical solutions to abstract, intellectual problems, but rather as soldiers in the trenches, searching for meaning in the midst of a war. I hope to demonstrate that, when properly understood, these are not just pieces of the Christian faith we can learn to live with; they are profound plotlines in the story of the whole we (literally) cannot live without.

And when they are properly understood, what central message do they give us?

GOD IS GOOD

God is good. That is the central message and driving theme of this book. Not just a little bit good. Not just partially good. Not just sometimes good and sometimes not. But extravagantly, mercifully, gloriously, better-than-we-can-ask-or-imagine good. There is a refrain one can often hear in churches that proclaims loudly and boldly, "God is good—all the time!" That is the refrain of this book. Even in the tough topics—perhaps especially in the tough topics—all the time, God is good.

In the chapters that follow, I will seek to demonstrate that God's goodness is continuous with, not contradictory to, these tough topics of hell, judgment, and holy war. Indeed, that it is precisely *because of* God's goodness, not in spite of it, that these topics arise. When

properly understood, these doctrines can enhance, rather than detract from, our vision of the glorious goodness of God.

As we shall see, not only does God not have skeletons, God himself is good *in his very bones*: not just in what he does, but in who he is; not only in his actions, but in the architecture of his character, the beauty of his being, the depths of his divine affection for the world.

This book is divided into three parts: “The Mercy of Hell,” “The Surprise of Judgment,” and “The Hope of Holy War.” Mercy, surprise, and hope are probably not characteristics most of us today would associate with these doctrines. But I believe strongly, and will argue in the pages ahead, that these are central features, key attributes, and driving characteristics of these topics when placed back within the overarching context of the biblical story.

Though this book is divided into three parts, it is written as a whole. Skipping chapter 1 to jump into chapter 2 or 3 could be confusing. We will be building themes in each section that are picked up and developed further in the following sections. Together, these themes are envisioned as something like a symphony, harmonizing with one another, building upon each other, and rising to a crescendo at the climax that proclaims loudly, boldly, and clearly the one central message of this book: God is good.

While I’ve written this book for the many people who wrestle with these topics, there is also, in a strange way, one other person I’ve written this for: myself, fifteen years ago. These are the things I would share with myself if I could go back, the insights I’ve found powerful, the paradigm shifts these questions have provoked that have revolutionized the way I look now at not only these questions, but my faith as a whole. While writing this, I’ve often envisioned myself now sitting across the table, talking with myself back then. These are the things I would share. And at the heart is this: God is good.

Does that sound too good to be true? Too farfetched for reality? Then let’s grab hold of the handle together, open that old closet door, and find out.