

## Jesus' Teaching on Hell

In the face of all of the ongoing problems and stresses in our world, you might wonder why we would bring up the topic of hell. The answer is we are doing the life of Jesus, and he often spoke of hell. He thought it was an important part of Christian discipleship to take the reality of hell seriously. Some might think the biblical doctrine of hell is especially difficult for modern people, but the truth is it has always been difficult. In the very early days of the church around the year 392, a famous preacher named John Chrysostom spoke about hell and said, *"Yes, I know a chill comes over you on hearing these things. But what am I to do? Ordained as we have been to the ministry of the word."*<sup>1</sup>

Here's a similar quote, The English author Dorothy Sayers wrote:

There seems to be a kind of conspiracy, especially among middle-aged writers of vaguely liberal tendency, to forget, or to conceal, where the doctrine of hell comes from. One finds frequent references to the "cruel and abominable medieval doctrine of hell," . . . But the case is quite otherwise; let us face the facts. The doctrine of hell is not "medieval": it is Christ's. It is not a device of "medieval priestcraft" for frightening people into giving money to the church: it is Christ's deliberate judgment on sin . . . one cannot get rid of it without tearing the New Testament to tatters. We cannot repudiate hell without altogether repudiating Christ.<sup>2</sup>

*So, let's ask, what does Jesus teach us about hell? The first and most basic thing we can say is that Jesus teaches us that...*

### **I. HELL IS A PLACE OF TRAGIC SUFFERING.**

What stands out in this story in **Luke 16** is the contrast between these two men before and after their deaths. Just as Lazarus is raised from his sufferings on earth and comforted, so the rich man, who had many comforts on earth, is in anguish in hell. **Verse 23** says he was in *torment*. In **verse 24**, he says he is in *anguish*.<sup>3</sup>

#### **A. To take Jesus seriously is to accept two things: *both* the reality and the mystery of hell.**

**1. We have to accept the reality of hell.** The two most common words for hell in the Bible are *Hades* and *Gehenna*. *Hades* is the word

used here in **Luke 16**. It was the Greek word for the realm of the dead, but Jesus mostly uses it to refer especially to the place the *unsaved* dead go instead of heaven. *Gehenna* referred to the *Hinnom* Valley south of Jerusalem. It was a garbage dump. It was a place of rot, worms, and smoldering fires. By the time of Jesus, it had become a picture and reference for hell. In **Mark 9:47-48**, Jesus said, *And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, 48 where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."* Jesus talks about hell like this. He never tries to *prove* it is real. He informs us of it. He warns us about it. He never shows any indication that the reality of hell requires him to prove the goodness or love of God. He does none of that. But he undeniably says hell is a real place of tragic suffering.

*So we have to accept the reality of hell, but...*

**2. We also have to accept the mysteries of hell.** This story is not designed to make clear what is almost certainly incomprehensible to us. One of the most basic rules of biblical interpretation is to pay attention to the context of the passage. In **Luke 16**, Jesus tells two stories. Each story begins with the same word-for-word opening: *"there was a rich man."* The point of each story is to show us that our experience in this life *can be* dramatically reversed in the next life, and therefore we should live this life in light of the afterlife. The first story is called the parable of the dishonest manager. In light of the parallel opening line and the same main point, this story of the rich man who went to hades should also be understood as a parable. That doesn't take away from the reality or the suffering of hell, but it preserves some of the mystery of hell and keeps us from thinking we know more than we do.

The reason sometimes offered for not taking the story of the rich man and Lazarus as a parable is simply the fact that in most parables, no names are given, but in this one, Lazarus is named. But there is a better explanation. The name Lazarus means *"God is his help."* That is part of the lesson of the parable. If he isn't named, we might think the only reason he goes to paradise is that he suffered in this life. The Bible doesn't teach that everyone who suffers gets saved in the end. But all those who put their faith in God as their help are saved. So the name is an essential part of the symbolism. The point of the parable is not to satisfy our curiosity about hell but to reveal the great reversals

that take place in the afterlife and to call us to evaluate our priorities in light of eternity.

**B. Hell is such an awful reality it can only be represented with very strong imagery**

There are four reasons in the story itself to take it symbolically. In **verse 24** the rich man says *send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.*

- 1.) No one who is literally engulfed in a fire can carry on the conversation that goes on from **verses 24 to 31**. Imagine standing in flames while carrying on a conversation about Abraham and Moses and your brothers and the possibility of their repentance.
- 2.) In **verse 24**. The rich man says, "*Send Lazarus to dip, the end of his finger in water.*" In what kind of literal scenario would that bring any actual relief? Are we to think that whatever moisture clings to the fingertip and doesn't evaporate in the heat is going to literally ease his hellish agony in the flames? The literal physical sense doesn't make sense. But the imagery makes the point, doesn't it?
- 3.) Something else that tells us this is not literal is the fact that the Bible teaches when people die, they are no longer in physical bodies. They are spiritual beings without physical bodies until the final resurrection takes place at the second coming of Christ. So how can you have spiritual beings suffering the physical effects of physical fires or the comforting effect of physical water?
- 4.) Another problem with taking it in a physical way is the fact that when you compare all the images of hell the images don't fit together in a literal way. In several places, Jesus and other writers in Scripture talk about hell as a place of absolute outer darkness. The apostle Peter describes hell as *blackest darkness*. You can't have flames of fire and black darkness in the same place at the same time. We're supposed to understand there are great mysteries about hell. We shouldn't think we know more than we do.

**Illustration:** The not-at-all-liberal theologian John Calvin said this:

Many persons, I am aware, have entered into ingenious debates about the eternal fire . . . but we must conclude from many passages of Scripture that it is a metaphorical expression.... let us satisfy ourselves that these forms of speech denote, in a manner suited to our feeble capacity, a dreadful torment which no man can now comprehend, and no language can express." <sup>4</sup>

J.I. Packer, R.C. Sproul, and John McArthur all say the same thing.<sup>5</sup> *There is a lot of mystery about the exact nature of hell but hell is a place of tragic suffering. And intimately related to that suffering is this:*

## **II. HELL IS A PLACE OF FULL AND FINAL SEPARATION FROM GOD AND GOODNESS.**

Look at **Luke 16:26**. It describes a great fixed chasm. This “chasm” pictures a final irreparable separation from God and goodness. What Jesus pictures in this story is what Paul describes in other Scriptures. In **2 Thessalonians 1:9**, Paul writes about the final judgment on the lost. He says *They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.*"

*It is human nature to take the blessings we enjoy in life for granted. It's hard, but...*

**A. Try to imagine what life might be like if you were to be fully and irreparably separated from God and his goodness.**

**James 1:17** says: *Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.* How much of the good we experience in our hearts and lives is from God? All of it. Theologians call that God's common grace. It is what makes all of life livable. So how can we begin to imagine what the final absence of God would be like?

**Illustration:** Imagine someone born blind. They have never seen the sun. You tell all about it, but they refuse to believe in what they have never seen. You tell them all the good things they experience and feel are because there is a sun in the sky, but they scoff at it. And yet, even if they refuse to believe in the sun, what would happen to them if the sun burned out and was gone. The sun, which they do not even acknowledge, is the only thing that makes their life livable and bearable, much less enjoyable. So someone says: "I don't believe in God, and I don't see any reason why I need him." But all the time, they are saying that everything, literally everything good that makes their life livable and enjoyable, comes from the very God they reject. Even the good people find in themselves, and in which they take pride, what we call our humanity, is ultimately from God. If God and his goodness were completely withdrawn, we would be left with only the ruin and despair of our hearts without even a hint or hope of relief or satisfaction.

**B. In that final separation from God, there is the loss of any hope of progress or healing; things just get worse.**

Think about how the rich man is pictured in the afterlife. Is he humbled as he looks at how he treated Lazarus? Is he repentant? No, not really. He doesn't get it. He still thinks he can order Lazarus around. He still expects service. He says, *"Hey Abraham, send Lazarus to run an errand for me. Send Lazarus to bring water. Send Lazarus with a message for my brothers."* He doesn't ask for forgiveness or take responsibility. He doesn't even ask to get out of hell. He asks for Lazarus to be sent in to serve him. People do not wise up in hell. They just go crazy and get worse because the common grace that restrained them and blessed them in life is now gone forever.

**We know that sometimes God's judgment consists of him giving people over to their own worst qualities. Romans 1:18 says:**

*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.* Notice Paul is talking about God's wrath, but what form does it take? Well, in the verses that follow, Paul talks about how people have refused to glorify or acknowledge God, and when he gets to **verse 24**, he picks up again on the theme of God's wrath and as he does a little phrase of four chilling words appears repeatedly.

*Therefore **God gave them up** in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.* In **verse 26**, the phrase appears again. ***God gave them up** to dishonorable passions.* It appears again in **verse 28**: *And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, **God gave them up** to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.* God's wrath here is seen, not in God getting some instrument of external punishment that he brings into your life but in him giving you over to the junk in your heart.

**Illustration:** C.S. Lewis had an interesting take on this, *"Christianity asserts we are all going to go on forever. Perhaps my bad temper or my jealousy are gradually getting worse, so gradually that the increase in my lifetime will not be very noticeable- but it might be absolute hell in a million years - in fact, if Christianity is true, hell is the precisely correct technical term for it... Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others... In each of us, there is something growing, which will BE hell unless it is nipped in the bud."*

When I first read Lewis's perspective, it occurred to me that part of the promise of heaven is not just that me, as I am now, will be placed in more pleasant surroundings. It is that sin, shame, anger, anxiety, hatred, and self-pity will all fall away, and the fruit of the Spirit will flourish in our hearts. What if in hell the exact opposite is true? What if the sweeter saner humanizing influences of God's common grace that all of humanity experiences is fully and finally lost, and all that is left is the destructive toxic, insane neurosis of sin and self-pity and all-consuming self-centeredness keeps gnawing away at you like a worm that will not die and like a fire that just keeps smoldering.

## Conclusion

As terrible as it is to consider the suffering and the separation of hell it also highlights the grace we are offered in Christ. The famous preacher, Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones, used this illustration: He said, "Imagine a friend comes to see me and says, 'I was at your house the other day, and a bill came due, and you weren't there, so I paid it.' How should I respond? The answer is, 'I have no idea how to respond until I know how big that bill was.' Was it just postage due? Or was it the IRS finally finding me and wanting ten years of back taxes and penalties with interests? What if it was an enormous debt? Until I know how much he paid, I don't know whether to smile and shake his hand or fall down to the ground and kiss his feet."

The darkest moment in the story of the crucifixion is when Jesus cries out, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* His physical pain, great as it was, was eclipsed by an even more intense sense of inner spiritual agony and God-forsakenness that none of us can fully understand. Jesus experienced the damnation we deserve compressed into those hours of darkness on the cross. ***Only when you accept the reality and the mystery of hell, only when you take tragic suffering and final separation from God seriously, do you understand the greatness of God's saving grace.*** The same Christ who suffered for you offers Himself to you today as a living Lord and Savior whose love is more redemptive, important gracious, and eternal than your wildest dreams. You don't earn the Salvation you so deeply need. You receive it when you come to him as Lord and trust in Him as Savior. The more you think about that, believe it, and take it to heart, the more powerfully it changes you from within. So receive and rest in him. Be renewed in your love for him. Be bold in sharing the good news about the Savior we so deeply need.

**Amen**

### **A Prayer for Receiving Christ.**

Almighty God, Have mercy on me, a sinner. I believe your Son Jesus Christ died for my sins and rose again as Lord and Savior. I turn to him as my Lord. I trust in him as my Savior from sin and judgment. Grant me the new and eternal life promised to all who come to Him in faith. I ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

### **A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal.**

Lord Jesus, my King, and Savior, renew me according to your grace. Open the eyes of my heart to clearly see the riches of saving grace you lavish on me in Christ. May I never take your grace for granted. May your healing presence strengthen my heart, and so work your goodness deeply into me that you fill my life with light from the inside out. In Jesus' name, Amen.

### **A Prayer for People Who Need Christ.**

Father, please send your Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of the people you have placed in my life, to draw them to Jesus and make them kingdom laborers.

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<sup>1</sup> *Saint John Chrysostom, Homilies on the First Epistles to the Corinthians, 9,1*

<sup>2</sup> *(Dorothy Sayers, A Matter of Eternity, ed. Rosamond Kent Sprague [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973], p. 86)*

<sup>3</sup> In Matthew 4:24, Jesus healed those afflicted with diseases and *torments or pains*. But the word *anguish* often describes emotional suffering. In Luke 2:48, when Joseph and Mary realized Jesus, as a child of twelve, was not with them as they left Jerusalem, they were in *anguish or distress* as they searched for their son.

<sup>4</sup> *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew Mark, and Luke, 1 -200*

<sup>5</sup> Contemporary conservative Bible teachers like R.C. Sproul and J.I. Packer have written that the *descriptions* of hell in the Bible are metaphors and analogies. Even as conservative a Bible teacher as John MacArthur writes: *"The fire in hell isn't like the fire we use to burn something.* (he is saying it is

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something else) *God uses the word fire to describe hell as a place of torment." John MacArthur, in the sermon, "Hell- the furnace of fire."*