

Hot Topics
Hell
August 10, 2014

PRELUDE – What a Savior
Worship – Our God’s Alive / Mighty to Save

Drama – “Between Games”

Feature – “I Will Follow You Into the Dark” / Offering

Good morning everyone.

One day all of us are going to leave this world behind. But what will we find on the other side of death? Do we just follow one another into the darkness as the song we just heard would suggest?ⁱ Or is there “something else”?

Throughout the ages, most people have believed that when this life ends, we go to a place in keeping with the life we have lived here: live a good enough life and you go to good place such as paradise or heaven; live a bad enough life and you go to a bad place such as hell.

These days, however, even though most people still believe in an afterlife, more and more are rejecting the idea that there is a *bad place*; a place of eternal punishment (except for, perhaps, the vilest of the vile). In fact, one of the major objections to classical biblical Christian faith is the doctrine of Hell. As our drama illustrated, it’s so objectionable that most people don’t want to talk about it or even think about it.

- *It feels extreme.* How could a rational God send nice people to Hell for what seems to be relatively minor sin or a lack of faith?
- *It seems inconsistent.* It’s hard to reconcile the idea of “eternal torment” with the idea of “a gracious, merciful and loving God.”
- *It seems intolerant.* Other religions prescribe different paths to salvation – paths which, if Christian doctrine is correct, may actually lead to Hell. Can it be that all of them are wrong while Christianity is right?
- *It feels manipulative;* like trying to coerce people into believing through fear and terror. As one author describes it ...

“Throughout almost its entire time on Earth, the motor driving Christianity has been—in addition to the fear of death – fear of the devil and fear of hell.

“Even today, the existence of the devil and hell are cardinal doctrinal tenets of almost all Christian creeds, and many fundamentalist preachers still openly resort to terrorizing their followers with lurid, sadistic portraits of the suffering of nonbelievers after death.

“This is not an attempt to convince through logic and reason; it is not an attempt to appeal to the better nature of individuals; rather, it is an attempt to whip the flock into line through threats, through appeals to a base part of human nature—fear and cowardice.”ⁱⁱ

Those are strong words and probably a little overdramatic. But I suspect that if you haven’t had similar thoughts and feelings go through *your* mind whenever the issue of Hell has come up, you’ve had friends and family who have thought and felt these things.

Obviously, this presents those of us who are followers of Jesus (as He is revealed to us in the New Testament writings of His first followers) with something of a problem. On the one hand, we have what seems to be a very objectionable aspect of our faith – it’s seen by many as manipulative, intolerant, inconsistent and extreme. On the other hand, we have the fact that the doctrine of Hell has been part of Christian teaching from the beginning. It’s not something that was thought up later and tacked on. It’s actually something that Jesus and his disciples talked about and wrote about quite often and, in fact, for the purpose of warning about it.

For example, Jesus once said ...

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more they can do. But I will warn you whom you should fear: Fear the one who, after the killing, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!
Luke 12:4-5 (NET)

And he also said ...

As the weeds are collected and burned with fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather from his kingdom everything that causes sin as well as all lawbreakers. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matthew 14:41-42 (NET)

And Paul wrote that, one day, when Jesus returns with his mighty angels ...

With flaming fire he will mete out punishment on those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will undergo the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his strength.
2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 (NET)

And in John’s Revelation we read a slightly different take on that final judgment.

Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death—the lake of fire. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, that person was thrown into the lake of fire.
Revelation 20:14 (NET)

And there are many other passages we could read if we had the time.

So, how do we reconcile the tension between such a culturally offensive teaching and the urgency with which Jesus and the Church through the ages have communicated it? Is there any way to understand belief in Hell as more than just a scare tactic or a throwback to times when people didn’t have science or reason to dispel their fears of the bogeyman?

That’s what I want to talk to you about this morning.

Difficulties

But first, in the interest of putting all the cards on the table, I think we need to begin by laying out a few of the difficulties with this doctrine because things are not as straightforward as we might like them to be. There are three issues that I think need to be taken into consideration before we go forward.

Difficulty #1. There are several words identified with (and sometimes translated as) “Hell” in the scriptures as we read them today, but they do not mean the same thing.ⁱⁱⁱ

For example, Sheol / Hades are Hebrew and Greek words which are sometimes translated as hell, but all they really mean is “grave”

or “place of the dead” (which can be a pleasant or not-so-pleasant experience) but they’re not meant to be thought of as hell. These words also contain the idea that those who are in those places will one day be resurrected for final judgment.

Gehenna is a Greek word that’s often translated as hell and it’s meant to refer to what was a garbage dump outside of Jerusalem where the fire continued unabated, burning up the refuse (including bodies of dead criminals or those who were unclaimed by family and friends). This is the word Jesus most often used that gets translated as Hell.

For example ...

*If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into fiery hell (Gehenna).
Matthew 18:9 (NET)*

Lakkon is a Greek word that means “the Pit.” It’s similar in meaning to the word Tartarus which, again, is sometimes translated as hell. It’s a word from Greek Mythology, that refers to “the dark place of fallen angels.” Peter uses it to describe where God has locked up some of the worst of the demons who rebelled when Satan rebelled.

Then, finally, there is a phrase that is often thought of as referring to Hell – the Lake of Fire (or “Second Death”) described in the end of the book of Revelation.

Bottom line, there is not one word that describes a singular location or condition that you and I would think of as Hell. Our image of Hell comes from a meshing together of these terms ... which can be problematic because it assumes you have them put together correctly in order to get the correct picture ... which also assumes that they are all describing the same thing, but, like in the case of Tartarus, they’re not.

Difficulty #2. We have been highly influenced in our understanding of what Hell is by the imagery from medieval times.

To quote one expert on the subject:^{iv}

Much of the popular, modern conception of Hell in both religious and secular circles has its roots not in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, but in the literature and art of the European Middle Ages (a period from approximately 500 AD to 1500 AD), and we saw some examples of that earlier.

The Bible doesn’t give a lot of detail concerning the fate after death of the “unsaved.” Dissatisfied with this silence, Roman Catholic religious leaders, along with artists and writers, embellished the few hints we have over the centuries until they had created a vast, horrific Underworld so vividly detailed that it had incredible power over the minds of most Europeans.”

I would add that it still has power over us today because it affects how we read and interpret the scripture.

Difficulty #3. The descriptions of judgment on evil and “sinners” are almost always apocalyptic (which can be very challenging to interpret accurately).

Apocalyptic language is a symbolic poetic way of writing that uses intentional extremes to describe the cosmic clash between the forces of Light and the forces of Darkness, a clash that will lead, ultimately, to the defeat of Darkness. Both the Old and New Testaments are full of this sort of language in describing this issue.

For example, in the Book of Revelation, which talks about the death and Hades being thrown into the Lake of Fire, we have to remember that John was first and foremost delivering a prophetic message of encouragement to first-century believers living under Roman persecution^v, telling them to endure because, in the end, evil and evildoers lose while Jesus and those who love him

win.

That doesn't mean that John wasn't talking about future events at the end of time and giving us a picture of the final Day of Judgment, but it *does* mean that the language and imagery he used to describe that meant a whole lot more to them than it does to us (which is why, I think, the great Reformer Martin Luther said – in exasperation – that “Revelation reveals nothing.”)

Much of John's language in Revelation comes directly from Old Testament prophets and what he wrote would have been interpreted in light of the understanding that people of his day concerning the writings of those prophets – an understanding that you and I simply do not have.

Now, the reason I point these things out is that we need to be careful of saying more than the Bible itself says about this issue. We need to avoid getting too dogmatic about parts of this doctrine that just aren't that clear.

And I say that to both believers *and* skeptics because both believers and skeptics often are – without even realizing it – discussing and debating a caricature of what can be said with confidence on this issue. In other words, the things we object to might not even be what the Bible is truly saying.

Understanding “Hell”

So, what is the Bible saying? And we can we say about this issue of Hell with confidence?

That's not a new question, by the way. It's been debated for centuries by serious and committed Christians. And for centuries, serious and committed Christians have answered it in different ways.

I think that's important to point out because what a person believes about Hell is not what determines their eternal destiny. In other words, you can be wrong on this doctrine and still be right with God. We see the things of eternity through a dull mirror, Paul wrote, which means that, sometimes, while the big picture is clear the details are not, so we shouldn't get too hung up on the details.

Now, as I prepared for this message and studied the various positions that have been taken by serious and committed-to-Christ believers *based on what the Bible says* – and by the way, that's also very important to note because if you're a follower of Jesus, remember, what you believe about these kinds of things needs to be rooted in what the scripture says, not what you come up with in your own mind or what you heard from Oprah or in some song or movie ...

... anyway, the positions taken by serious and committed-to-Christ believers, it seems to me ...

... all fall somewhere on an “experience of Hell spectrum” (for lack of a better phrase) that looks like this:

X-----X-----X-----X

God-directed	Self-inflicted	Temporary	Final
Eternal Torture	Eternal Exclusion	Purging Destruction	

At left end of the spectrum

... is the belief that Hell is God's direct and personal punishment; a never-ending experience of agony born of Divine retribution for the sins committed against Him and others.

To the right of that option,

... there is the position that Hell is something we do to ourselves. In this case, the punishment is a result of being eternally isolated – on the outside of Heaven looking in – by our own freewill choice to reject God and his offer of salvation.

To the right of that ...

... is the idea that regardless of whether Hell is God's direct punishment or a self-inflicted exclusion, there is a possibility that people can still repent and be saved after they are purged from the sin on their soul. This position is also known as Universalism – that everyone in the end will be saved. It's also where you would put the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory.

Then, at the very end of the spectrum ...

... is the idea that there is no place or condition of eternal suffering; instead, those who do not receive eternal *life* are, at some point, destroyed. That's the punishment.

Now, there is biblical evidence for all of those ideas (which is why they are all represented on the spectrum). And there are an infinite number of slight variations of those ideas which will fall somewhere on the line. And, obviously, I think, there is a natural attraction to *the right side of the line* because it seems to be more loving for people to get a second chance or to simply go out of existence than to be eternally suffering in some way.

The question is ... what point on the line best fits the biblical data?

Again, good Christians would answer that differently but, for me, I would not put it on the right half of the spectrum. The idea of a second chance after death (as well as the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory) is nowhere stated explicitly in scripture. It's a deductive hypothesis and that's a pretty risky place to land, especially when there is so much stated *to the opposite* in scripture.

And the idea of Hell being simply a final destruction (as opposed to a destiny that lasts for eternity) seems to have better support ... and I can almost go there ... However, what stops me is that when Jesus referred to the smoldering garbage dump outside of Jerusalem, he was clearly using it as a metaphor of something ongoing ... after death.

For example, look at that statement we read earlier.

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more they can do. But I will warn you whom you should fear: Fear the one who, after the killing, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!
Luke 12:4-5 (NET)

And again, the word translated hell is GeHenna. What Jesus is saying is that after we die, God has the authority to send us to the spiritual garbage dump. Whether that's a literal fire or a metaphorical device isn't the point. The point is there is an experience to be feared after death – which doesn't make a lot of sense if the metaphor of Gehenna simply means we're obliterated - we just burn up and we're gone.

This fits well with what the Old Testament prophet Daniel wrote – and his vision is actually reflected and expanded on in much of what we read in Revelation.

God spoke to Daniel about the last days and said:

There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time

your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered.

Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Daniel 12:1-2 (NIV)

So, for me, personally, I think the most-straightforward reading of the scripture points to something between the first two positions on the left side.

In fact, I think you can make a case that the most supported biblical position is two sides of the same coin with those two ideas being the sides. Hell is at the same time a forcibly-imposed punishment AND a freely-embraced condition by us that does not end.^{vi}

I think that position best takes into account the difficulties we saw earlier. And also I think it's the best fit based on what we know of our condition as fallen human beings and our need for salvation. That's important because the end of someone who "goes to hell" needs to line up with where we all start – as sinners in need of a savior. Instead of looking at just the end of the line (so to speak), we should start at the beginning and see where it naturally leads.

Journey to Hell

So, let's do that. Let's start at the beginning and take a journey to Hell. The question is ... what is the beginning for all human beings?

We've talked about this on many occasions but let's just read the scripture again.

Paul, writing to the Ephesians, put it this way:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. Ephesians 2:1-3 (NIV)

By nature, at the time we were born, we were already dead in sins and deserving of God's wrath. We were already part of the kingdom of darkness. And this is really important to understand because a lot of people believe we start out as deserving of God's blessing (and Heaven) and that it's ours to lose. The Bible says it's just the opposite. Hell is not a change from where we begin but rather a foregone conclusion unless God intervenes.

But let's continue the journey in Paul's letter to the Romans chapter 1.

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who suppress the truth by their unrighteousness, because what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. Romans 1:18 (NIV)

For since the creation of the world [God's] invisible attributes—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, because they are understood through what has been made. So people are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or give him thanks, but they became futile in their thoughts and their senseless hearts were darkened.

Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for an image resembling mortal human beings or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Romans 1:18-23 (NIV)

In other words, instead of worshipping God, people decide to worship the things of this world. In Paul's day that was often images made of wood or stone or metal. In our day, we're much more sophisticated and we don't do that kind of thing. Instead, we worship

money or power or position. We don't bow down to a statue; we bow down to the opinion of other people. We worship our own comfort. We worship our own opinions.

But listen to what happens when God is replaced by something or someone else.

Just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what should not be done.

God says, "If that's how you want it then go ahead."

And the result is, Paul writes, that they are ...

... filled with every kind of unrighteousness, wickedness, covetousness, malice. They are rife with envy, murder, strife, deceit, hostility. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, contrivers of all sorts of evil, disobedient to parents, senseless, covenant-breakers, heartless, ruthless. Romans 1:29-31 (NIV)

Imagine if all of those terrible qualities were allowed to manifest to their fullest extent. That sounds like a hellish way to live doesn't it?

And that's the point. And you have to get this if you want to understand why hell is not some unjust punishment for comparably minor false steps and mistakes.

What Paul is saying in Romans 1 is that God's wrath and judgment is Him simply giving someone over to the misery of their sin. And "Hell" is the natural outworking of that process for decades and centuries and millennia – through eternity.

The worst (and fairest) punishment God can give a person is to allow them their sinful hearts' deepest desire.

Tim Keller describes it like this:^{vii}

Hell is God actively giving us up to what we have freely chosen-to go our own way, be our own "the master of our fate, the captain of our soul," to get away from him and his control. It is God banishing us to regions we have desperately tried to get into all our lives.

If the thing you most want is to worship God in the beauty of his holiness, then that is what you will get (Ps 96:9-13.) If the thing you most want is to be your own master, then the holiness of God will become an agony, and the presence of God a terror you will flee forever (Rev 6:16; cf. Is 6:1-6.)

C.S. Lewis, describing how bad attitudes develop, put it this way:

Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others . . . but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer. Then there will be no "you" left to criticize the mood or even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine.

It is not a question of God 'sending us' to hell. In each of us there is something growing, which will BE Hell unless it is nipped in the bud.

In the final judgment God ratifies and confirms the eternal condition of spiritual agony.

And that, friends, is how someone can wind up experiencing a forcibly-imposed punishment at the hand of God and a freely-

embraced condition of isolation at the same exact time.

And God doesn't need to use fire or physical torment by demons with pitchforks to accomplish that. He just creates a place where He isn't and says, "OK, here you go" ... which, by the way fits the Biblical understanding of Hell very well because the most consistent imagery for Hell – one repeatedly used by Jesus and reiterated in Revelation – is being thrown outside of the Kingdom of God where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

By the way, this understanding of Hell also answers the question of why a second chance isn't very likely. It would never be accepted by people in this condition, even if it was offered.

D.A. Carson explains it this way:

“Hell is not filled with people who are deeply sorry for their sins It is filled with people who for all eternity still shake their puny fist in the face of God almighty in an endless existence of evil, and corruption, and shame, and the wrath of God.”

Along the same lines, “those who are damned,” writes an Orthodox priest, “exist in a condition beyond repentance, beyond alteration or change. Their hearts are irreversibly hardened. They are frozen in their hatred of all things holy. They are constitutionally incapable of responding to the love of their Creator with gratitude and joy. They have lost their freedom to be other than they are. And God exacts his vengeance by refusing to deliver the damned from the spiritual condition they themselves have achieved.”^{viii}

I don't know about you but to me that sounds a heck of a lot scarier – and a lot more real and a lot more plausible – than fire and brimstone. I'm not sure I could think of a worse display of God's wrath on my life than to be left alone with my sinful nature allowed to grow uninhibited for all eternity and to be forced to live with others who are in the same condition. It would be far worse than any zombie movie you've ever seen.

Conclusion

Now, whether or not you agree with my position on this, what I hope is that through all of this:

- You will take the idea of Hell seriously because eternal misery is a horrifying possibility. Jesus was emphatic, not that a place called hell exists, but rather that some will be in torment, with “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” He nowhere encourages us to hope that he was just kidding about this and everything will turn out fine. ^{ix} It's just not there.
- I hope that you will stop thinking that “people aren't really that bad so it's really unfair that God would send someone – anyone – to Hell.” We start out Hell-bound and Hell is where we end up unless God does something to intervene.
- And I hope you will not get freaked out by imagining horror-movie images of hell but that you will be terrified of what it would be like to live in a world that is completely devoid of God's presence. The pain and suffering of this world is nothing compared to what that would be like. Here, the rain continues to fall on both the just and the unjust. In other words, that rain that is falling is a sign of God's goodness, even to the worst people on the earth. But there's a day coming when there's going to be a place where that goodness is gone, where there's not going to be a force of good. There's not going to be the echo of God's creative presence; there's not going to be any image any longer of God remaining in the character of men and women who populate it.
- ... which is why I also hope you will understand that the longer you harden your heart against the grace and mercy offered in Jesus – the way that God has made for you to escape from this destiny – the harder it will be for you to turn and accept Him as savior later. At some point, to use Lewis' example, there will be no you left to reject God; just the rejection itself going on forever like a machine.

Now, at this point, I know that some of you are thinking “I’ve never thought of it this way before and it kind of makes some sense. But how can it be fair that I even have the chance to trust in Christ when so many others in this world have never and will never hear of him? How can it be fair that they, or babies, or people who cannot comprehend this kind of stuff – how is it fair to them?”

Honestly, I don’t know the answer to that one. I mean, we do know that “God desires all people everywhere would be saved” (1 Tim 2:4), but we don’t know if that desire will ever be fulfilled, and in a way we could now understand. We don’t know what God is going to do in those situations. We have to trust that God is good and God is gracious and God is just and He will do what is right.

But what we do know is that if we’ve heard the gospel, which we have, that we’re now commanded to believe it (and to share it with others). If God has some emergency back-up plan, it’s not been revealed to us.^x

So, the question we (all of us who have heard the gospel) must consider is not “what’s going to happen to them?” It’s this:

How will we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? Hebrews 2:3 (NET)

What hope is there if we’ve heard the truth, we’ve heard what God wants to do in Jesus - that he lived the life we should have lived (perfect); he died the death we should have died (as sinners) and through our faith in him and what he’s done we can be saved, we can be rescued and we can be taken off the trajectory to hell and put on the trajectory to eternal life - and we say, “I don’t want any part of that.” How are we going to escape?

We’re not. That’s a rhetorical question because Peter says:

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” Acts 4:12 (NIV)

What is very clear in the scripture is that there is no other hope for those who hear of Jesus and reject Him.

<prayer>

Feature – “I Choose Jesus”

CLOSING COMMENTS

And I hope you’ve chosen Jesus.

Sometime next month (in September) we’re going to have a baptism as part of one of our services. And scripture says that when we come to the point of choosing Jesus we should follow him in baptism. We’ll talk about that more in the coming weeks and invite you to be a part of that.

Endnotes

ⁱ I’m referring to the song I Will Follow You Into the Dark by Death Cab for Cutie.

ⁱⁱ Chaz Bufe, 20 Reasons to Abandon Christianity

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.arn.org/docs/boohier/the-problem-of-hell.html>

^{iv} <http://youall.com/HELL/medievalhell.htm>

^v Revelation 1:1-2

^{vi} <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heaven-hell/>

^{vii} http://www.redeemer.com/redeemer-report/article/the_importance_of_hell

^{viii} <http://afkimel.wordpress.com/2013/05/10/hell-and-the-torturous-vision-of-christ/>

^{ix} Frederica Matthews-Greene

^x Greene