

No Doubt About It
To Hell With Them
July 11, 2021

Good morning everyone.

Today is the next-to-last week of what has turned out to be *a very long series* dealing with doubt: those things that worry us or concern us or don't make sense to us concerning God and Christianity and the Bible.

Just so you know, when I first thought about doing this series and asked you all to fill out a card expressing your doubts, I wasn't expecting it to go this long.

In fact, it's hard to believe but way back when we began it, the Royals were actually in first place ... with the best record in all of MLB.

Anybody remember that?

That feels like such a long, long time ago.

Anyway, next week I'm going to close out this series with a message that's sort of a hodgepodge dealing with some of the questions and issues you all raised ...

... that didn't fit in any of the other messages or didn't seem to warrant a complete message.

Things like ...

- What about dinosaurs and the Bible?
- Why aren't followers of Jesus more loving?
- How could Jesus physically rise from dead and then ascend to Heaven

(which is a spiritual place)?

- Will the Royals ever be good again?

That wasn't a real question. I just threw that one in.

Anyway, point being, we're wrapping it all up next Sunday.

But *today* we're going to tackle what is probably the most challenging and doubt-inducing doctrine of the Christian faith.

In the words of some of the cards you all turned in:

- If God is love, why did He create Hell?
- If God is love and wants the best for people, why would He send anyone to hell?

- Is it really “free will” when we are told that if we don’t choose God, we will be tormented for eternity apart from God?

That’s more like coercion. It’s like having a gun to your head and being told that you will die unless you say, “Pineapple belongs on pizza.”

It’s hard to call that “unconditional love.” It’s more like ruling through fear under the guise of love.

Bottom line: because of its claim of a “God who so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” ...

... the greatest challenge to Christianity from an intellectual and philosophical angle is the doctrine of Hell. It just seems to be so *inconsistent* with the character of God and incredibly *manipulative*.

But this is more than just an intellectual or philosophical challenge.

It's also a deeply emotional one ...

... which was also expressed in some of the cards I got:

- How can it be fair that good people I love are going to hell?
- Is there a second chance? If some people do actually go to Hell, is there a way out?

From an emotional perspective, it's very hard for any follower of Jesus to think that their loved ones might spend eternity in such a place.

It just seems so *extreme* for what seems to be the relatively minor sin of "not believing."

But the challenge is *even greater* than intellectual and philosophical and emotional.

It's also *personal* because we're all going to die someday and we're going to experience whatever lies on the "other side."

Which is why ...

- It's much easier to not think about it or talk about it; to just ignore it.
- It's much easier to try and focus only on the positive aspects of believing in and following Jesus.

But the truth is that the doctrine of Hell has been part of Christianity from the beginning. It's not something that was thought up later and tacked on.

Instead, Hell is a place and an experience that Jesus and his disciples talked about and wrote about quite often and, in fact, for the express purpose of warning us 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 the greatest Christian missionary ever, Paul, wrote that ...

.... on the day when Jesus returns ...

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)*

One of Jesus' best friends, John, describing the scene on the Day of Final Judgment ...

... wrote that ...

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)

If you're here for the very first-time, aren't you glad you picked today to show up or tune in?

Hopefully, by the end you will be.

So, let's get into it. Let's talk about Hell.

Difficulties

And I think the place to begin is by laying out a few of the difficulties with this doctrine because things are not as simple as we might like them to be.

Three issues 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 all mean the same thing.ⁱ

Specifically, “hell” is an Anglo-Saxon word used in the King James Version to translate four separate words – one Hebrew word from the Old Testament and three Greek words from the New Testament.ⁱⁱ

The Hebrew word sometimes translated as Hell is “Sheol” – and that’s unfortunate, because Sheol simply refers to the place of

the dead. It's not meant to describe a place of punishment or reward.

In fact, everyone goes to Sheol – literally, the grave.

The three words in Greek that have been translated as “Hell” are Hades, Tartarus and Gehenna.

Hades, like Sheol, was also used by the Greeks to refer to the place of the dead. It was actually the name of the Greek god of the underworld and the name of the underworld itself.

In Greek thinking, the experience of Hades was good for some and bad for others.ⁱⁱⁱ

Tartarus is also from Greek mythology and was used to describe the place reserved for the worst of the worst. It was considered to be

“as far beneath Hades as the heaven is high above the earth.”^{iv}

Peter used Tartarus to describe where God has locked up some of the worst of the demons who rebelled when Satan rebelled.

Finally, *Gehenna* was the name of a ravine on the south side of Jerusalem where pagan deities had been worshiped and all kinds of evil and atrocities such as child sacrifice had been committed.

Eventually, it became a garbage dump where fire burned continuously, and so the word *Gehenna* became synonymous with “a place of burning.”

It’s the word Jesus used when said to fear the One who could throw you into Hell.

Point being, there isn’t just one word that

describes a singular location or condition that you and I would think of as "Hell."

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

Much of the 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).

At some point I'm sure you've seen pictures like these which reflect that perspective.

As one commentator put it, "because the Bible doesn't give a lot of detail concerning the fate after death of the 'unsaved' ... Roman Catholic religious leaders (dissatisfied with this silence), along with artists and writers ...

... over the centuries embellished the few hints we have until they had created a vast, horrific Underworld so vividly detailed that it had incredible power over the minds of most Europeans.”^v

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

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

Apocalyptic language is a symbolic and 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 extreme language. Jesus himself made use of it quite often.

For example, sometimes Jesus talked about Hell being a fiery furnace (as we saw earlier).

But sometimes, he talked about as being a place of ...

*... outer darkness, where
there will be weeping and
gnashing of teeth. Matthew
8:11-12 (NLT)*

But how can it be totally dark when a fire is burning?

It's not possible. And Jesus wasn't stupid. He knew that.

But that's how apocalyptic language works. It uses extreme and sometimes contradictory imagery that's meant to communicate an "unknown" so powerfully destructive that it's beyond human words.

And therefore, it can't be taken 100% literally. That's not the intention.

That said, the fact that the language about Hell is symbolic shouldn't bring us any comfort. It just means there aren't words to describe how awful a place it is.^{vi}

Now, I point these things out to say that we need to avoid being too dogmatic about our understanding of this doctrine because there's some fuzziness here.

And, based on the use of apocalyptic

language, it's intentional. We're not meant to understand all of the particulars.

Understanding “Hell”

So, what 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.

That's because, again, there's some fuzziness here.

So, let me show you some of the various positions that have been taken by committed Christ-followers *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 and not ...

- What you came up with in your own mind.
- Or read in some novel.
- Or saw on some TV show.

Sometimes I hear people say "well, *my* God would never do something like <whatever>."

But that's just making God in your own image ... which, quite frankly, is pretty dumb.

See ...

- As much as I don't understand (or even like) certain things about God ...
- As much as I sometimes I wish things like Hell didn't exist ...

I actually *don't want* a "god" that fits my specific criteria for "what a god should be."

I don't want a god made in my image because that god can be no wiser, no more powerful and no better than me which, again, is dumb.

Anyway, the positions taken by serious committed Christ-followers ...

... all fall somewhere on what might be called an "experience of Hell spectrum"...

... (for lack of a better phrase) that looks like this:

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

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

At left end of the spectrum is the belief that Hell is ...

- God's direct and personal punishment.
- Divine retribution for the sins committed against Him and others.
- And a never-ending experience of agony.

To the right of that option ...

... is the position that Hell is something we actually do to ourselves.

In this case, the punishment we experience comes from being eternally isolated from God – on the outside of Heaven looking in (so to speak) – 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 might put the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory.

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

... is the idea that whatever Hell might be, it's

not never-ending judgment and suffering.

Instead, those who do not receive eternal *life* are, at some point, permanently 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, serious Christians would answer that differently but, for me, I would not put it on the right half of the spectrum.

That's because the idea of a "second chance" after death (as well as the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory) is nowhere stated explicitly in scripture.

Instead, it's a deductive hypothesis. In other words, it's saying "because God is love, God must do it that way."

But that's a pretty risky place to land, especially when there is so much stated *to the opposite* in scripture.

As to the position on the far right – the idea of

Hell being simply permanent destruction (as opposed to an experience that lasts for eternity) – that seems to have better support ... and I can almost go there.

However, what stops me is that when Jesus referred to the constantly smoldering garbage dump outside of Jerusalem, he was clearly using it as a metaphor of something *ongoing* ... after death.

For example, look again at His 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*.

So, what Jesus is saying is that after we die, God has the right to send us to the spiritual garbage dump.

And that He says, is an experience to be *feared*.

In fact, He says it three times to drive home the point ... which doesn't make a lot of sense if Hell simply means we're obliterated; that we just burn up and we're gone.

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 position with most biblical support 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 self-inflicted freely embraced condition that does not end.^{vii}

- I think that position best accounts for the difficulties we saw earlier.
- I *also* 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.

In other words, instead of looking at just the end of the line (so to speak), we need to start

at the beginning.

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 point, spiritually, for all human beings?

It's not what most people think it is.

And we've talked about this on many occasions but let's look at it again.

Paul, writing to the Christ-followers of ancient Ephesus, 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, Paul says, already part of the kingdom of darkness and deserving of God's *wrath*.

And this is really important to understand because almost everyone believes we all start out as deserving of God's *blessing* and that it's ours to lose.

In other words, you're OK with God and

God's OK with you *unless* you do something really, really terrible. And then you need to ask forgiveness or do something to make up for it and all will be well ...

... unless, of course, it was really, really, really, really terrible – like Hitler or Saddam Hussein.

That's how people think it works. You start out *good* ...

- And as long as you're not really, really terrible ...
- As long as you're basically a good person – meaning that on some cosmic scale of good deeds vs. bad deeds the good outweighs the bad ...

... you're OK. You have nothing to worry about.

But Paul – and Jesus – both say it's just the opposite.

We start out *in danger* because our inborn nature is to sin – to not only fall short of God's intentions for our lives but to rebel against Him.

And we prove that nature day in and day out.

Which means that Hell is not a change in direction from where we begin but rather a foregone conclusion (unless God intervenes).

Or, as the great Christian philosopher C.S. Lewis once put it:

“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.”

So that's the beginning point. We're born into rebellion against God.

Now, let's talk about the next step in the journey.

And to do that we're going to look back at a passage we talked about several weeks ago from a letter that the Apostle Paul once wrote to a first-century group of Christians in Rome.

In that letter, Paul is making the point that people do not naturally embrace God or the truth about God but, instead, want to create gods (little "g") of their own design.

- Money
- Sex
- Power
- Prestige
- Privilege

- Approval
- Self

And when people do that – when we do that
...

Paul says that something terrible happens.

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. Romans 1:28 (NIV)

God's first response to the worldwide disloyalty and treason against Him is not to "send people to hell", but to give us over to whatever it is we want – to let whatever it is we desire have its way with us.

In fact, three times in this part of the letter, Paul repeats that same idea, that God "gives us over" ... that God says, "OK, it that's how

you want it, then go ahead. But there will be consequences.”

And to be clear, these aren't arbitrarily designed consequences of an angry vindictive God.

This isn't God saying, “if you don't do what I say, no cookies for you.”

This is God saying, “if you don't want me to be part of your life and part of your world, then you'll get to experience what it's like without me; without my presence and my power.”

And in that kind of world, Paul writes, people become ...

... filled with every kind of unrighteousness, wickedness, covetousness, malice.

*They are rife with envy,
murder, strife, deceit, hostility.*

*They are gossips, slanderers,
God-haters, insolent,
arrogant and boastful; they
invent ways of doing evil; they
disobey their parents.*

*They have no understanding,
no fidelity, no love, no mercy.
Romans 1:29-31 (NIV)*

And if you think Paul was overstating the case, just look around.

In our own culture we see it every day. There's less and less acknowledgment of God and more and more of those destructive behaviors and characteristics.

Paul is saying there's a link. There's a cause-and-effect relationship.

Now, just imagine if all of those behaviors and characteristics were allowed to manifest to their fullest extent.

- Imagine *no love* whatsoever – where no one cares about anyone else other than themselves.
- Imagine *no mercy* whatsoever – where every little offense is met with anger and brutal retribution and retaliation.
- Imagine *envy without limit* – where every good thing that happens to you is an occasion for someone else to be bitter and hateful because of your good fortune.

That sounds like a hellish way to live, doesn't it?

And that's the point.

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" – whatever its physical sensations might be – is just the natural outworking of that process for decades and centuries and millennia through eternity.

Tim Keller describes it like this:^{viii}

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.)

And that, friends, is how someone can wind up experiencing a forcibly imposed punishment at the hand of God AND a self-inflicted freely embraced condition of isolation *from* God at the same exact time.

And God doesn't need to use fire or physical torment by demons with pitchforks to accomplish that. All He needs to do is completely remove himself from the scene.

... 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; the place where God is simply *not*.

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.

You see, Hell is not filled with people who are deeply sorry for their sins.

It is filled with people who have devolved to the point where for all eternity they will shake their puny fist in the face of God Almighty.”^{ix}

It is filled with people who have devolved to a point of being *beyond* repentance, beyond alteration or change.

A point where ...

- Their hearts have become irreversibly hardened.
- They are frozen in their hatred of all things holy.
- They are intrinsically incapable of responding to God's love.
- They have lost their freedom to be other than they are.

And all of this is a condition they themselves have chosen and achieved.^x

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.

In fact, 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.

Takeaways

So that's what the journey to Hell looks like for anyone who winds up there.

And whether you agree or disagree with all the particulars of what I've said today, what I

hope is that ...

1. First of all, you will take the idea of Hell seriously because eternal misery is a horrifying possibility.

Jesus never encourages us to hope that "everything will turn out just fine in the end."^{xi}

Instead, he was *emphatic*, not that a place called hell exists, but that some people *will* be in torment, with "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Hell wasn't a joke to Him. And it shouldn't be to us, either.

Secondly, I hope you will stop thinking of Hell in terms of horror-movie images and instead ...

2. Be terrified of what it would be like to exist in a place 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 in this world, the rain continues to “fall on both the just and the unjust” – meaning that God’s goodness extends even to the worst people on the earth.

Even the worst people get a regular taste of God’s grace in hopes that His kindness would lead them to change their minds and turn to Him.

But there’s a day coming when there will be ...

- A place where that goodness is gone.
- A place where there is no longer the echo of God’s creative presence.

- A place where the image of God no longer exists in the character of men and women who populate it.

That place will be terrifying. That place will be Hell.

3. I also hope you will understand that the longer you harden your heart against God, the harder it will be for you to turn to Him later.

... the harder it will be for you to get off the road you're already on by default as one who is born a sinner.

Again, the truth isn't that we start out good and make God made enough to send us to Hell.

It's that we're already Hell-bound and Hell is where we end up ... unless ... unless ... God does something to intervene.

And the good news is that God HAS done something to intervene.

We sang about it right before this message.

*God so loved the world that
He gave his one and only Son
that whoever believes in Him
will live forever.*

... which is a paraphrase of what John wrote about Jesus.

So, the real question before us this day isn't whether or not Hell is fire that never ends or darkness or whatever else.

The real question is ...

*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, if

we've heard what God has already done in Jesus:

- That he lived the life we should have lived (perfect)
- That he died the death we should have died (as sinners)
- And that 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.

What hope is there if we say, "I don't want any part of that."

How are we going to escape? Honestly, I have no idea. I don't think there's any way.

Invitation

So, what I want to do today as we wrap this up is to help you – if you have not already done it – to say “yes” to God’s offer of salvation.

And right now, I want to you to listen very carefully because your eternal destiny might depend on these next few moments.

Paul writes ...

When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.

Titus 3:4-5a (NIV)

God’s saving of people who are sinners – people like you and me – is based on His mercy, not on our attempts to be righteous. It’s about what He has done not what we try to do.

- That means that we need to stop trusting in our own ability to stand before God.
- It means we need to admit that we are sinners in need of a savior and that Jesus is that savior.
- It means that we put our trust in him, instead of ourselves, to save us.

How do you do that?

It begins with just saying those things to God.

So, here is what I'm going to do. I'm going to pray a little prayer here, that if I was in that position. And I did this many years ago, when I came to this realization.

Some of you may be coming to this realization today. You're seeing the big

picture and you're going "oh man, I get it."

I'm going to pray today as if I was in your shoes, and you just pray along with me. There is no magic in these words, just a way of expressing these things to God.

Endnotes

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

ⁱⁱ Hell, Holman Bible Dictionary

ⁱⁱⁱ In Jesus story about the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man was in torment in Hades.

^{iv} Barclay's Daily Study Bible (NT)

^v <http://youall.com/HELL/medievalhell.htm>

^{vi} Childers, Alisa. Another Gospel?: A Lifelong Christian Seeks Truth in Response to Progressive Christianity (p. 191). Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

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

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

^{ix} From D.A. Carson

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

^{xi} Frederica Matthews-Greene