

“Hell”

I am preaching this message, actually, in response to a request. On the back of our welcome sheet there is a section that says, “I wish the pastor would preach on this topic.” Some weeks back someone suggested that I speak on the “reality of hell.” Last week, I talked about heaven. This week, hell.

Many people today have a problem with the concept of hell. They say something like this, “I just can’t believe a loving God would punish people forever in hell.” Maybe some of us have been turned off by fire and brimstone preaching, or by Christians and churches always ready to judge people and condemn them.

An elderly priest, speaking to the young priest at the church, said, “It was a good idea to replace the first four rows of pew with plush bucket theater seats. It’s worked like a charm. The front of the church always fills first now. The young priest nodded and the old priest continued: “And you told me a little more beat to the music would bring young people back to church, so I supported you when you brought in that rock’n’roll gospel choir. We’re packed to the balcony.” “Thank you, Father,” the young cleric answered, “I’m pleased you’re open to new ideas.” “However, the elderly priest said, “I’m afraid you’ve gone too far with the drive-thru confessional.” “But Father,” the young priest protested, “my confessions and the donations have nearly doubled since I began that!” “I know, son, but the flashing neon sign on the church roof, ‘Toot’n’tell or Go To Hell’, is just going to have to go!”

I thought it would be interesting to see how many Americans say they believe in hell. The Pew Foundation research indicates that 72% of Americans say they believe in heaven, but only 58% believe in hell. Of those who said they *Christians*: 85% indicated that they believe in heaven, but only 70% believe in hell. (These are people who say they are Christians! And of those in mainline denominational churches, only 60% said they believe in hell).

I came across an interesting news article about *pastors*, and how willing pastors are to preach about hell. There was a gathering of pastors at the Beeson Institute Pastor’s School. One presenter asked the pastors there how many had ever preached on hell. No one had! One pastor commented that maybe it’s because of pressure from our culture not to preach anything negative, and to market Jesus in an appealing way. One of the school’s directors commented, “When you’re trying to market Jesus, sometimes there’s a tendency to mute traditional Christian symbols. Difficult doctrines are left by the wayside.”

Will you look with me at what Scripture says, and particularly what Jesus said, about hell. Time permits us to look at only *some* of what the Bible says about this topic.

In 2 Peter 2, verses 4 through 9, there are these words (using selections from this passage): “For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell...if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah ...then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.”

2 Thessalonians 1:5-10a says this: “All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just; He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people.”

Now that’s the Apostle Paul writing. *What about Jesus? Did Jesus believe in hell?* Here are just a *few* of the things Jesus said about judgment and hell. Matthew 10:28 contains these words of Jesus: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (i.e. fear God). In the parable of the last judgment Jesus says of those who didn’t respond to people who were hungry, thirsty, naked, etc.: “They will go into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:46).

In Matthew 13, Jesus explains to His disciples the meaning of the parable of the weeds: “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:40-42). Also in Matthew 13, in the parable of the fish net, Jesus draws this conclusion: “This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:49-50). Jesus once bluntly chastised the religious scribes and Pharisees: “You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?” (Matthew 23:33).

These harsh words of Christ may surprise us, because a lot of people have an overly sentimentalized, sugary version of Jesus. Now, no one was more loving and compassionate than Jesus. But He also warned that one could be shut out of the presence and kingdom of God.

Leslie Weatherhead was a famous British preacher and author. He was actually on the more liberal side theologically. Yet he once wrote: “Let us never forget that though the idea of hell was caricatured in a fantastic vulgarity by the generation of our great-grandfathers, we are doing our own generation a greater disservice if we are making light of sin and pretending that it does not matter, ‘that we are all going to the same place’, and that God will pat everyone on the head at last and say, ‘There, there, it doesn’t matter. I’m sure you didn’t mean it. Go and enjoy yourself.’ We need to remind ourselves that it was Jesus who gave us the Christian teaching about hell...it was *He* who spoke of the shut door, and the outer darkness, and the unquenchable fire.”

Someone has said, “If there were no hell, we would have to invent one.” I think what that person was getting at is this: If there is no judgement, no ultimate balancing of the scales of justice, does life make any sense? What kind of God would make no distinction between Mother

Theresa and Osama bin Laden in their eternal fate?

If I choose to ignore what Jesus said about hell do I have any right to claim what He said about heaven – or anything else, for that matter?

Maybe you're wondering: ***Are the descriptions of hell in the Bible meant to be taken literally?*** Did Jesus, for example, mean that hell is an actual furnace of fire? Some Christians believe hell is a physical place, a literal burning pit or lake of fire. I read a sermon by C.M. Ward, an evangelist. The sermon was written back in the 1960's. He claimed that scientists were discovering "lakes of fire" in the universe. *I don't know. (I Googled "lakes of fire in the universe" and came up with nothing!).*

Personally, I think much of what Scripture says about hell is *symbolism, imagery*. The word Jesus often used which is translated "hell" is the Greek word "Gehenna". Gehenna originally meant "valley of Hinnom", outside of Jerusalem. It was there that children were burned alive as a sacrifice to the pagan god Moloch. In the time of Jesus, Gehenna was Jerusalem's garbage dump, where rubbish was continually smoldering. That place came to symbolize a place that was worthless, putrid, horrific. I often wonder, if the Scriptures had been written in a frigid climate rather than a hot climate like Palestine, would descriptions of hell be depicted as a cold, icy wasteland?

For me, perhaps the best description of hell in the Bible is found in a verse of Scripture we have already read. It is 2 Thessalonians 1:9, describing those who do not obey the gospel of Christ: "They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might." I can't think of anything worse than that! To be totally cut off – forever – from God. To be separated from our Creator, the Source of all life, and joy, and love, and hope, and goodness. *Hell is where God isn't!*

Certainly much more could be said about hell and what it may be like, but the more pressing issue is this: *Will you, will I, spend forever in the presence of God in heaven, or wind up on the outside, excluded from the glory and presence of God?*

A common misconception is that everyone is going to heaven. Or at least everyone except the real bad dudes like Hitler, Saddam Hussein, serial rapists, or the person in my neighborhood who's a total jerk! That's not what Jesus taught. Some words of Jesus we looked at last week are appropriate here: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matthew 7:13-14).

God doesn't want anyone to be shut out of His kingdom! 1 Timothy 2:4 says God "desires everyone to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." We were meant to spend forever with our Creator, but a catastrophe has happened to the human race. It's called "sin". We all sin. We all break God's laws and commands. We all fall short of living as God created us to live. *This sin separates us from God.*

But God took the initiative to overcome this separation by sending Jesus – to forgive our sins and bring us back into a right relationship with our Creator. In Jesus’ suffering, and death on the cross, Jesus *went through hell* for us so that we won’t have to go to hell. When we accept God’s gift of forgiveness and reconciliation provided through Christ, we are promised eternal life with God in heaven rather than eternal separation from God in hell. Romans 8:1 tells us: “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.”

I have heard some people say, “Well, I believe hell is right here on earth.” That’s not true. This life on earth is not the ultimate hell Jesus described. *But there is some truth in that: We can get a little taste of hell right now.*

You’ve probably seen those bulletin bloopers. Here’s one: “At the evening service tonight, the sermon topic will be, ‘What Is Hell?’ Come early and listen to our choir practice.” Here’s another slipup someone made in typing the bulletin: “Smile at someone who is hard to love. Say ‘hell’ to someone who doesn’t care much about you.” Matt Groening, creator and producer of *The Simpsons* TV show, once said, “Technically, I am an agnostic, but I definitely believe in hell – especially after watching the fall TV schedule.”

Seriously, I believe we can already experience a preview of hell (just as Jesus’ disciples can experience a preview of heaven through life in the Spirit). *We can experience a little taste of hell individually when any of us chooses to live without God, or ignore or break God’s moral laws.* I don’t know about you, but there have been times when I have failed God so miserably that I’ve felt guilty, ashamed, and estranged from God. Many who choose to ignore or reject Christ and go their own way wind up living life without meaning or purpose, or chained to destructive habits, or feeling hopeless and lost – that can be a little slice of hell on earth.

We can experience something of hell on earth collectively, in the atrocities that result from man’s inhumanity to man. In the horror of war, in the empty stare of starving children. I think it was Gen. Norman Schwartzkoff, during the first Gulf War, when he was flying into Kuwait after oil refineries had been blown up and oil reserves set afire, who said if there were ever a picture of what hell is like, that was it. I recently watched that epic documentary on Vietnam on PBS. After seeing this, I can’t help but think that that was it’s own kind of hell.

But the Good News of the gospel is that there is One who has overcome even the powers of hell and death for us – our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. When we turn from our sins and give ourselves over to Him, He can save us from the hell of being separated from our loving Creator both in this life and in the life to come!

One closing thought. *Some people ask, “Will those who turn their back on God, or reject Christ, get a second chance?”* Only God knows for sure, but the unmistakable impression I get when I read the New Testament is that we don’t get a second chance. There is an urgency about choosing Christ *now* as God’s gift of eternal life in heaven. 2 Corinthians 6:2 says, “Now is the acceptable time, behold now is the day of salvation.”

Jesus told a parable about a rich man, and a beggar named Lazarus. It's found in Luke, chapter 16. Day after day Lazarus sat by the rich man's table, begging. Both died. The beggar went to heaven (Abraham's bosom). The rich man went to hell (hades). The rich man asks for some cool water to relieve his anguish. Father Abraham says, "I can't do it, because there's a great gulf between us." The rich man responds, "Then please send someone to my home back on earth. I have 5 brothers. Warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment." Father Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the prophets. Let them hear them." "No," the rich man pleads, "but if someone goes back from the dead, they will turn from their evil ways." Father Abraham answers: "If they don't hear Moses and the prophets, they won't be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

Do you sense urgency here? You and I have the words of the prophets, the words of the New Testament. And we've even got Someone who has risen from the dead: Jesus!

What more do we need?

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