

“So You’re Dead...Now What? What About Hell?”

Confessions of a pastor... Growing up as kid, I was pretty sure I was going to hell. I was pretty sure I was going to hell and that sounded good to me. I was the kid you didn’t want your kids playing with. I was the kid who learned all the dirty words and passed them along. I was the kid that was always in trouble. I was the kid who was always doing what he wasn’t supposed to be doing. I was the kid who had my mom crying all the time, teachers crying regularly, church staff members crying regularly. My friend Kyle’s mom was an elementary school teacher when I was in grade school. He told me years later that the teachers literally threw a party the day I graduated sixth grade so they didn’t have to put up with me anymore. They partied because they survived me.

Because I was a bad kid, the message I got indirectly most of the time, and occasionally directly, was that I was going to pay someday for what I was doing. One day I was going to hell. I’m pretty sure the director of the children’s choir at church told me that.

I wasn’t stupid as a kid. Far from it. I was bad and knew it, and I knew there would be consequences. But if heaven was about sitting on a cloud, playing a harp, being a good boy, then hell sounded like a lot more fun. That’s where the real party was going to be—at least in my mind. That’s where the fun people were going to be. That’s what I thought at times.

At other times I thought it was all just a ploy. Hell was just a scare tactic to make boys behave and keep the girls from playing “show me yours and I’ll show you mine.” Either way, whether hell was real or not, I didn’t care, or didn’t really know how to care. I just figured that I was going to hell anyway so why not live it up and take a few people with me. I was going to hell.

So we’re in the middle of this series on the afterlife and the central theme here is **How you understand the afterlife affects how you live this life**. And if we’re going to talk about heaven and what heaven might be like, which we’re going to do in two weeks, then we have to talk somewhere along the way about hell. What’s the Bible got to say about it; how do we as 21st century people look it?

I sent out an email asking for your thoughts about hell. One of you wrote this: “I am not particularly interested in hell. Having the experiences I have been through on Earth with respect to addiction and severe depression certainly seemed like hell to me. I try to live my life differently today so that I don’t have to exist in a ‘hell on earth’. I feel that if I live my life with faith as my guidepost, I will be ok in this life and the next one.” One man wrote: “Is Hell forever? What if someone in my family doesn’t believe in God or a relationship with Jesus, do they go to Hell? If someone asks for forgiveness on their death bed, does that mean they will go to Heaven?”

One woman wrote: “This topic has always left me angry in the past and saddened to think God would create this beautiful vast universe then allow evil to enter. If God is a loving God, why did he allow evil in the world, let alone in the hereafter?”

Several comments were about God’s love. How could a loving God send anybody to hell? And even if he did, would it really be forever? And didn’t Jesus say something about rescuing everybody? Wouldn’t that include people in hell?

Let’s see if we can find some answers to at least some of these questions by looking at what the Bible teaches about hell and by looking at our own experiences. Now, some of the questions you sent me were about judgment. How is it ultimately decided who goes where? What about children who die before they’re old enough to accept Christ? What about people who take their own lives? That’s next week when we’ll look at the final judgment.

Today is about hell. There are about 100 different passages of scripture in the Bible that deal with hell and/or punishment in the afterlife. As we look at what the Bible says it’s very important for us to recognize that any language that we use to talk about the afterlife, heaven or hell, any language that we use is only metaphorical. We cannot conceive of something that’s completely different from this. So the scripture writers used ideas that they were familiar with to try to communicate something that is other worldly. Let’s keep that in mind as we look at what the Bible says about hell.

The Bible uses a handful of words or names to describe hell. In the Old Testament there are several words that are used. The words **Sheol, the pit, the depths, the grave**. All these words are sometimes used to describe the place of the dead and sometimes used to describe the place where people were punished.

When we come to the New Testament, **the Greek word Hades is translated into the word hell**. Hades came to be understood in the same way as the word Sheol—a place where all the dead went, some to be punished for their wickedness.

Another word used in the New Testament is the word **gehenna**. Which means the valley of Hinnom. This is a literal place. It was just outside the city walls of Jerusalem. In Jesus' day it was where all the refuse from the city was taken and it was burned continuously. That's where garbage was burned along with the bodies of dead animals and the bodies of people who were not claimed. This valley of Gehenna was literally a place of fire, of stench, of rot and misery. So eventually Gehenna would become a word-picture of what hell would be like. Again the Bible is trying to paint a picture for us of an awful place where you don't want to go.

Jesus puts it this way in Matthew chapter 8. He doesn't call it hell, he just describes a place of punishment. He says it will be a place of utter darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt 8:12). In Matthew 13:42 he describes it as a, "fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (NIV). This is a good example of where we understand that the Bible is not trying to paint a literal picture of hell. It can't be a place of darkness and a place of fire at the same time. Jesus is using images, metaphors, to help you imagine an awful place. Human beings have a natural fear of darkness and we know that one of the most painful things to have happen is to be burned. These are the images of an awful, terrible place that you do not want to go to.

There are other images of hell. We find one in 2 Peter 2:4 where hell is referred to as gloomy dungeons, a place of judgment. Again, a place you don't want to go to.

And finally in the book of Isaiah, the very last line of that book. God says that those who do not choose life with him will be sent to a place where the worm doesn't die. Jesus makes reference to this in the Gospel of Mark. What does that mean? He's talking about maggots. Maggots that will eat the flesh and never die. They are continually consuming your flesh. That's a pretty graphic and gross image!

All these images are repulsive and scary. In fact, you could summarize all the Bible's teachings about hell in 5 seconds by saying, "Hell is a terrible, terrifying place, and you don't want to go there!"

But hell raises some troubling questions. One thing that many people have difficulty with is the idea that God would torment anyone eternally—forever and ever. We want the punishment to fit the crime, don't we? So why would God punish someone forever and ever? That punish doesn't seem to fit the crime. But I think that when we look closely at the scriptures we see a different picture. Let's look at 2 Thessalonians 1:9: **"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 majesty of his power" (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9, NIV)**. This seems to indicate that ultimately hell is about a separation from the presence of God. Yes, there's an element of punishment, but it's not forever. After the punishment comes the separation from God.

This is very important. If heaven is the place where we are in the immediate presence of God, then hell would be the opposite of that. We're told that God's presence is light and life. Without that there's a bone-chilling darkness. In God's presence there's healing and hope. In God's absence there's ongoing suffering, weeping, you're stuck in your sorrow and pain. In God's presence there is love, in God's absence there is only selfishness and predation.

This is a place where you would not want to go. A place where you long to be loved but no one can love you. You long for light but you are in utter darkness. A place of joylessness and hopelessness. That would be the opposite of being in the presence of God in heaven. That would be hell. And who would want to choose that?!

This passage from 2 Thessalonians even seems to tell us that even this separation from God could end at some point with final destruction. That those in hell would eventually cease to be. Maybe that points to God's grace.

Before we move on I've got to point out another important thing. Hell is not a dominant theme in the New Testament. It's not. Jesus spoke a lot more about the kingdom of God, prayer, stewardship, servanthood. But we have to recognize that Jesus spoke about hell, the apostles wrote about it. It's not something we can dismiss. And that leads to a question several of you sent me. Why would a loving God create hell and why would God send anyone there? So let's go there. **Why hell?**

One reason why there is hell is to fulfill the justice of God. Some people say that hell exists here on earth. Some say, "I don't believe in hell in the afterlife. I think people get their hell on earth." The idea here is that when you do wrong and you walk away from God you experience the consequences of that--you experience a hellish kind of existence here on earth.

Well, yes and no. Yes, sometimes when we walk away from God we experience a kind of hell on earth, but not always. There are times when the people you would think should experience hell on earth, they actually prosper. Psalm 73 talks about this. The writer asks, "Why do the wicked prosper?" We've all asked that question. Why are there people who do terrible things to other people, sometimes over and over again, and they never face the consequences of their actions? What do we make of murderers who are never caught? What about people who abuse children or the elderly and nobody ever knows? We recognize that there's an imbalance to justice in this life, and that points me to why I believe that hell is a necessary part of God's creation. Partly because it works out God's justice. Justice is not completely fulfilled here on this earth. And there are things that people do that even the worst punishment we can dish out is not enough to truly do justice. Hell ensures that justice is met.

Another important reason for the reality of hell is to allow us freedom of choice. We also recognize that if God has given us free choice, then hell is a necessary part of our existence as people who have the freedom to choose to follow God or not. God does not force any choices on us. And God will not force us to enter heaven and be with him. So there must be an alternative.

The Scriptures point our ability to choose over and over again: "**Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:15, NIV).** Moses said to the people, "**I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life..." (Deuteronomy 30:19, NIV).** Throughout the scriptures we see that God really has given us the choice. Next week we'll be looking at the question, what about those who've never really had a choice either because they were raised in a culture where there was no Christianity, or maybe they did but they never had the chance to see a credible representation of Christianity.

But most of us have a choice. In Matthew 22 Jesus says this is what it's like. It's like a party that a king is throwing. He invites all kinds of people, ultimately everybody, to this party. Some people give excuses for not coming to the party, some kill the messengers, some accept the invite and come and party like it's 1999 and it's the best party ever! But he doesn't make anybody come.

We look at the doctrine of hell and say, "How could a good and loving God send people to hell?" But the witness of scripture is that God doesn't send anybody to hell. We choose what to do with our lives. We choose to accept or reject his love and his invitations. You see, God sends out his invitations to you over and over and over again. He says, "I want you to come. This is what eternity looks like." And he warns us saying, "But this is what happens when you walk away from me. Please, please don't go there."

Clearly God is more interested in getting people to the party, than in keeping people out. He doesn't want anybody to go hell and he doesn't send anybody there, but we can choose. And that's why the Bible gives us these pictures of hell that are so awful—to tell us, "Don't do it. Don't go to that place of utter darkness where God's presence isn't felt. Instead choose life."

And at the same if we've made that choice, then Jesus has challenged us to share the good news so that others can choose to come to the party too. Understanding the reality of hell should in some way motivate us to invest our lives in other people and invite them to connect with God.

I want to end with this story. One man's near death experience. This is told by a man who was an art professor at Northern Kentucky University. He did not believe in God at all. He went to church when he was kid but did not believe any of that stuff anymore. He and his wife were traveling through Europe on an art tour. They were in Paris in their hotel and suddenly he was struck with severe pain in his abdomen. He said that it felt like somebody had shot him. He fell to the ground in his hotel room and was then taken to the hospital. It was a weekend and the staff at the hospital was sparse. He ended up lying there for 10 hours before someone was able to check him and treat him. It ended up that he had a perforated stomach. Later, his doctors in America were surprised that he survived the experience.

During that 10 hours of waiting he felt his life slipping away. He was sure that he was dying. He said that he expected death to just be a slipping away into darkness, ceasing to exist, no thoughts, no nothing. But he said, "This is not how I want to die. At this age and in a foreign hospital. But there was nothing I could do."

He said, "The next thing I know I'm standing up in the hospital room and I'm thinking, 'How am I standing up here?'" He said, "I had a body, I'm standing up. I can see my wife sitting there and there was my body lying there on the bed. There was someone out in the hall and they began to call my name. So I walked out into the hall and there was a group of people there and they began to talk to me and they invited me to come with them. They were very pleasant and nice people...to begin with. But as I followed them they began to smirk and they began to turn on me, they began to strike me and began to tear me apart. I was terrified. I fell to the ground and they continued to lash out at me.

"While they're doing this I hear this voice say to me, 'Pray.' I said, 'I don't pray. I don't even know what to pray.' The voice just said 'pray.' I couldn't think of any prayers. All I could think of was the national anthem. So I started saying that. I remembered some parts of Psalm 23 so I started saying that. And as I started saying those words, the people around me became more angry, but they were pushed away. And finally as I continued to say these words, they disappeared."

He said, "But now I was in the dark. I always imagined death to be a dark place but I was in a darkness that was so dark that it frightened me and I cried out, 'Who can save me?!' As I lay there I had this deep desire to know that someone loved me. I didn't feel either of those things [being safe or loved]. In the darkness as I was lying there terrified, I began to remember the words to a song I learned when I was a small child. 'Jesus loves me this I know...' I didn't even remember all the words, I just sang the ones I knew over and over again. And finally I saw a pin-prick of light in the darkness and I shouted out with everything I had, 'Jesus save me!' And he did."

That man went on to leave his career in the art world and he became a pastor. I don't know his whole story, but I know that that part of the story seems consistent with what we read in the scriptures about a place of darkness, and weeping, and loneliness; a place where there is a desperate longing for love, because God is not there. That place is hell. And this man seems to have been given a second chance.

All of that leads me to give this invitation to you. In the end all that the Bible says about hell is meant for one thing and that is to convince you to respond to God's grace. Why would you turn your back on God's grace? Why would you turn your back on the party?! Why would you not want to spend eternity in a place where there is joy and hope and absolute love? Why would you turn away from that? Choose life. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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