

## THE REALITY OF HELL

Perhaps you've heard the story about the message one man left on his tombstone. It said, "Consider, young man, as you walk by, as you are now, so once was I. As I am now, you soon shall be, so prepare, young man to follow me." That sounded pretty profound, but someone took a knife and scratched a response on the tombstone that read, "To follow you is not my intent; until I know which way you went!" The bible teaches us that this life is not all that there is. After death there exists two eternal realities. All of us shall spend eternity of one of two places.

Today we are continuing in our series Eternal Realities. Last week we talked about Blessings and Curses, the fact that the choices we make have consequences in this life. Today and next week we want to reflect on the fact that our choices also have consequences in the life to come.

Luke 16:19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. 20 At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores 21 and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. 22 "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 24 So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' 25 "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.' 27 "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, 28 for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

The Bible tells us that everything we see around us is temporary. It is what we don't see that is ultimately going to last. All of us were made to last forever. One millions years from today every person in this room will still exist. One day your heart is going to stop and that's going to be the end of your body here but it's certainly not going to be the end of you. This life we live is the warm up act, the preschool, the first lap around the racetrack, the first page of a book that goes on forever.

There are two eternal destinations we face after death. One is heaven and one is hell.

1. It is REAL (vs. 22-23a) – in hell...

C. S. Lewis was told about a gravestone inscription that read; "Here lies an atheist – all dressed up and nowhere to go." Lewis quietly replied, "I bet he wishes that were so."

In a national poll conducted several years ago by USA Today – only 60% of American adults said they believe in a hell. Less than 25% believed that they would go there and 25% believe their friends will be there. Many people including Christians reject the idea of hell. They do not understand why a loving God would send people to such a horrible place.

Universalism is the teaching that everybody goes to heaven. In the book *Love Wins: Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, pastor and author Rob Bell has been accused of saying that everyone goes to heaven. In most Hollywood movies, the afterlife is portrayed as being a wonderful place where everyone goes after death to be surrounded by friends and family.

The story is told of an army chaplain who reported to a new duty station. Upon arrival some of the men came to see him and asked him this question; Do you believe in a literal hell? He replied that he did not. The men asked him to resign and he asked them why. Their response to him was; ‘ If there is no Hell then we don’t need you and if there is a Hell we don’t want you to lead us astray.’”

The Bible teaches that hell is a very real place. The concept of hell was not invented by the church as a way of scaring your children to be good at bedtime. It is an actual place. In this passage Jesus gives us a very clear picture of what it is really like. Heaven and hell are very real.

John 14:2 In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.

Since creation God has been preparing heaven for us because this is not your permanent resting spot. This is not your permanent abode. I am grateful that we don’t live forever on this planet because nothing works on this planet. No relationship is perfect, no job is perfect, no body works perfectly. Everything’s broken on the planet because of sin. God has prepared a better place for us – a perfect place. Both heaven and hell are prepared places.

Matt 25:32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. 34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world... 41 "Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’

Like heaven, hell is also a real place. Satan rebelled against God. Hell was prepared for those who, like the devil, choose to run from God. Many people today reject the idea of Hell because they do not understand why a loving God would send people to such a terrible place. They see hell as a place of punishment but it really is not. It is a place of choice. God gave man a choice; to be with Him or apart from Him. Since God is everywhere He created one place in creation where He is not present. To run from God is to run to the only place in creation where God is not present which is Hell.

Hell exists because of God’s love. That may sound like a paradox but it is the truth. God in His love for us did not want us to simply love him because we had to. Love is always a choice. He did not want us to be robots – simple objects of love without option. God could have forced us to love Him but He did not. He gave us the choice. Free will is God’s greatest gift to mankind and also our worse curse. To be created in the image of God is to have the ability to choose our destiny.

Why is there so much suffering in the world? Why does God allow evil to flourish? The answer ultimately is love. Free will means the ability to choose God but it also means the ability to choose evil. Ultimately we know that the injustices of life will be dealt with. Suffering and pain will end and justice will be done.

2. It is BAD (vs. 23b-24) – where he was in torment

So what is hell like? In order to understand hell you have to understand what the word hell means. The word hell occurs 23 times in the new testament (KJV). There are basically 2 words or pictures used. The first word is used 12 times and is the Hebrew word GEHENAH which comes from the words GEHEE (valley) and HINNOM (sorrow).

The Valley of Hinnom was a garbage dump south of Jerusalem where garbage and dead animals were taken to be burned. The smell of burning decay and death must have been terrible. It was the worst possible place a Jew could imagine.

The second word which is used 10 times in the New Testament is the Greek word HADES which comes from HA (not) and EIDO (to see or perceive by any of the senses). From these 2 word pictures and from what the bible says we can see several aspects of what hell is like:

a. A place of PHYSICAL suffering

This passage says that in hell the rich man was in AGONY because of the fire. This word in the Greek is the word ODUNAO which is better translated sorrow or anguish. In the King James it is the word TORMENT. The word torment scares me more than the word agony because it means more than just intense physical pain – it means ongoing pain.

Have you ever really hurt yourself so that you were in intense pain? When I was at a youth camp for inner city kids I was showing them what not to do on a trampoline. I ended up breaking my arm. If you look you can see the places where the bones came through the skin. That was probably the most intense pain I have ever had. What was amazing to me was that after a little while I did not really feel the pain that bad. Adrenaline and shock set in so I could function. Our bodies are able to cope with extreme pain.

Compare this with a chronic injury. Like the person with a back injury and is in constant pain so they cannot find a comfortable position standing or laying down. Then think about living with that for a LONG time. What I am saying is that I think the pain of hell is not just the fire. If you combine the picture of fire with picture of darkness, you are left with the idea of torment. The torment will not be just a matter of intensity but a matter of duration. The rich man was longing for a momentary rest from the pain but did not receive any.

b. A place of RELATIONAL suffering

Hades is a place of complete darkness and loneliness. In this story the rich man was still able to see out of hell but Revelations tells us that someday hell itself is going to be thrown into the lake of fire. The doors of hell will be closed forever. People who think hell is going to be some great big party with all their evil friends don't get the point.

I'll take heaven for the climate and hell for the society -- Mark Twain

In a speech to the National Press Club, Ted Turner of CNN said, "Heaven is going to be a mighty slender place. And most of the people I know in life aren't going to be there. There are a few notable exceptions and I'll miss them. [Laughter] Remember, heaven is going to be perfect. And I don't really want to be there...Those of us that go to hell, which will be most of us in this room; most journalists are certainly going there. [Laughter] But, when we get to hell we'll have a chance to make things better because hell is supposed to be a mess. And heaven is perfect. Who wants to go to a place that's perfect? Boring. Boring." [Laughter]

Hell is not a party. Picture yourself in complete darkness. No sight. No sound. No smells. No touch. Nothingness. Think about what that would be like for an hour. Then a day. Then a month. How about forever. It sends chills down my back just thinking about it.

Hell is nothing but yourself for all eternity -- C. S. Lewis

c. A place of EMOTIONAL suffering

Matt 13:49 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 fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Several times when Jesus talked about hell He said it was a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. These are signs of emotional suffering -- a place of eternal sadness. Life is tough enough by itself, and sometimes people wish they could erase their memories like they erase a video tape. That's why so many people commit suicide: they want to erase the memories. However, there is no Alzheimer's in hell. Everyone will have a crystal-clear memory. Hell will be a place of eternal remembrance and regret.

Have you ever bought something on a whim and later regretted it? It's called "buyer's remorse." Fortunately, you can take a lot of things back for a refund or an exchange. In hell there will be something called "invitation remorse." It won't be over something you did, but it will be remorse over something you didn't do: accept Jesus. If you are here today without Jesus and you die in your sins, you will recall these exact words I'm speaking now. You will remember having the opportunity to respond but that you rejected that offer. The sad reality is that you will regret that decision forever.

On this earth you always have a chance to make up for things. In hell there will be an eternal gnashing of teeth -- disappointment with a decision you've made. You will not be able to blame anybody but yourself. Nothing but eternal regret.

d. A place of SPIRITUAL suffering

2 Thess 1:9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power

On this earth, as good or bad as it might be, we have evil people and good people. The Bible says God still sends the sun to shine on the evil and the good. We all benefit from the goodness of good. We still live in His creation although it's not perfect yet. We still benefit from His compassion and patience. In hell, there will be none of that. No compassion, no creativity, no patience. It's a place where we are separate from God forever.

I have heard many people say when they are going through a very difficult time that they are going through "hell" but it is not true. Our lowest days on earth will seem like a vacation compared to hell. It has been said that the pain of hell is not so much caused by the presence of evil as from the absence of good. Darkness is not dark because of the presence of darkness but because of the absence of light.

3. It is ETERNAL (vs. 26) – a great chasm has been fixed

Some Christians react against the ideas that hell is eternal. There is a belief called Annihilationism which says that people who are sent to hell eventually cease to exist after a certain period.

Catholics believe in Purgatory, an intermediary place between earth and hell. This is not in the Bible. The word is not even there. It's not something that Jesus or God taught. It was something that was created eight hundred years ago in the middle ages. In fact many Catholics don't even believe it any more. Pope John Paul II stated in a very public way that purgatory was not a real place.

Matt 25:46 Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life

Those are the only 2 options. Maybe some other time when I've been preaching you've used it for a good naptime. This would not be a good week to take a nap because your eternal destiny depends on this one. I want everybody to be absolutely certain when we finish here today that when you go out you know without a shadow of a doubt you're going to heaven. There's every reason you can settle that issue today. So I want you to listen as if your life depends on it. That last great truth about hell is:

4. It is AVOIDABLE (vs. 25, 27) – so that they will not also come

Deut 30:15 See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction... 19 This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

The rich man begged God to send someone back to tell his brothers that hell was real and that there was a way to avoid it. How many people in hell cry out for that same thing. The greatest truth about hell is that it is a choice. You do not have to go there.

The question is not "Why would a loving God send people to hell". The question is "Why would anyone choose hell over a loving God."

One day, when Vice-President Calvin Coolidge was presiding over the Senate, one senator angrily told another to go "straight to hell." The offended Senator complained to Coolidge as presiding officer, and Coolidge looked up from the book he had been leafing through while listening to the debate and wittily replied. "I've looked through the rule book," he said, "You don't have to go."

The good news is that through Christ our sins have been paid for. In Christ there is hope. How can you be sure today that you are going to heaven? What are the ABCs of salvation?

A – Admit your need

Admit that you are in need of a savior to get to heaven. That means I admit I'm not perfect. Only God is perfect. Admit that you have blown it and made mistakes. Recognize that you are a sinner in need of salvation. Owning up to it and recognizing your need is the first step.

B – Believe that Jesus died for you

Believing means more than just head knowledge. You can believe in something but not practice it. What I mean here is that you place your trust in Christ. You reach out to Him and rely on Him, you surrender to Him.

C – Commit yourself completely to Him

Making someone Lord of your life means that they call the shots. Surrendering your life to God means that you give Him control. This need to be in your heart but it also needs to be in a public way so that others can hold you accountable for your commitment. If you wish to receive Christ as savior make sure you tell your small group or me or someone else.

D – Depend on God’s promises

In order to remember that promise you are making today, God gave us two symbols – baptism and communion. He said He wants you to remember your decision and what He has done for you, what it cost Christ to get you into heaven. If you would like to make that decision today then now is your time. You can know today that you are heading for heaven.