

Sermon Notes



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This Is Why It Is Called Good News – part 6

Psalms 100, Romans 8:31-32

I come from a faith tradition that did not hold to the doctrine of original sin. For those who don't know what I'm talking about, the doctrine of original sin states that all of us, from birth, bear the sin of Adam and Eve. Our default destination is hell. The only way to escape from eternal torment is to believe in Jesus and be baptized (and/or make a personal decision, public profession, etc.).

About 60% of Americans believe in hell. And why wouldn't they? Churches have taught it as a solid, biblical doctrine (or, in Catholicism, as a teaching of the church) for nearly 1500 years. It is the rare person, indeed, who will do their own research and see if what they've been taught is valid.

In my faith tradition, as well as in most evangelical protestant churches, we were also taught that we could "think" we were saved, only to hear "depart from me, I never knew you" from God and be tossed into a torture pit forever. That was terrifying.

When I tried to ask what happened to those born in other countries where Jesus has not been taught, I was given vague answers such as "We have to trust that God will do the right thing, but Jesus is the only way, and without him there is no salvation."

I had questions. When Jesus was resurrected, was that when everyone else on earth, from Outer Mongolia to Malaysia to Kenya to Peru to Sweden to Greenland, suddenly became culpable, doomed for eternity because they would never hear the story?

Is getting into heaven mainly dependent on where and when you were born? If so...how is that fair? How could a God who describes and defines Himself as love do such a thing?

As one writer asks, "What of the millions of Native Americans annihilated by European settlers? The Aztecs and Mayans killed by disease and pestilence brought by Spanish missionaries and conquistadors? The African captives who perished aboard slave ships crossing the Atlantic? The 18-year-old Hindi girl murdered in a brothel after being sold into sex slavery as a child? The 16-year-old Muslim boy accidentally bombed by an American drone strike in Iraq?"

Meghan O'Gieblyn, a former Christian, wrote, "If you took into consideration all of the people who'd ever lived – including centuries upon centuries when entire continents were cut off from the spread of Christianity – then the vast majority of humanity was going to spend eternity in hell." To which my faith tradition would say, well, yes.

I think all of us would admit, if not publicly, at least in our most private thoughts, that we would be okay with Adolph Hitler roasting in a torture pit for a good long time, what about the 6 million Jews who were killed by his evil plans? Do they share the same pit as Hitler? How does that make any sense? ("We are not to question God!" I'm not. I'm questioning what we say He said)

What about the more than 4 billion people on earth today who have no chance of hearing the gospel of Jesus before they die? In one heartbeat, they go from being loved by God to being thrown away into a painful darkness forever? None of them chose to be born. None of them chose where to be born. Yet, because of when and where they were born and to whom they were born, from birth, they are in an express elevator to hell.

Or are they? Is that what the Bible really teaches?

We started with the Hebrew Scriptures last week. There is no place of eternal punishment in any passage of the entire Old Testament. Nowhere in the OT is there any discussion of heaven and hell as places of reward or punishment. In the 64 instances where it mentions Sheol, almost all refer to the grave, death, or a place where both the righteous and the unrighteous go (Ecclesiastes).

In the New Testament, we find a lot more discussion of what happens after death. Jesus never says the word "hell." I know the King James Version says he did, but they got that from the other versions they were modernizing, and they took their information from Augustine and Aquinas. It wasn't until the 17th century that the word "hell" was plugged in for "Sheol." I recommend listening to last week's lesson, which provides a detailed overview of Sheol.

Jesus does say Gehenna 11 times in the Synoptic Gospels. Gehenna was a valley where they burned trash and the corpses of criminals. It was designated for that purpose because the Israelites once used it as a place to sacrifice children to false gods. It was a word that dredged up deep cultural shame and regret.

The word Hades originally referred to the Greek god of the Underworld, before becoming synonymous with the realm of the Underworld itself. Tartarus was used once, by Peter. It was commonly used to refer to the place where the Titans, gods who had been defeated, were kept, in the lowest part of the Underworld.

When Jesus referred to Gehenna, he was not referring to a place like hell. He was using the language of Jeremiah 7:30-34. The Valley of Hinnom, in Greek, is Gehenna. Jeremiah was foretelling the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Jesus was using that prophecy to warn them that Jerusalem was going to fall again, which it did catastrophically in 70 AD.

NT Wright said, "Most of the passages in the New Testament which have been thought by the church to refer to people going into eternal punishment after they die don't in fact refer to any such thing. The great majority of them have to do with the way God acts within the world and history...I can categorically say that Jesus's language about the awful punishment in store for those who rejected his message must be read as predictions of the awful future that awaited the nation of Israel if she rejected the way of peace he was proposing." And, true enough, less than 40 years after Jesus's death, it happened just as he said it would.

The first-century historian, Josephus, said that during the siege of 70 AD, the bodies of Jewish citizens were dumped and left to rot in the Valley of Hinnom, just as they were back in 586 BC. The people rejecting Jesus wanted a warrior-like Messiah who would bring violence to the land. Jesus warned them what would happen if they rejected the Prince of Peace.

We have time today to look at the two stories Jesus told that are often used by proponents of everlasting torture in hell to bolster their position. The first is the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The second is the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. There is a significant issue with using these as accurate descriptions of the afterlife.

First, Jesus didn't have to make up all the stories he told. There was a long Rabbinic tradition of using stories about the afterlife to teach lessons on how to live in this life. This story was probably around for a long time and is very similar to a much older Egyptian story about an abused slave who is allowed to see his wealthy abusers being tormented in the afterlife while he enjoys paradise.

In both stories, those invited into paradise (the garden) are not going there because they believe in Jesus or have made a public profession of that belief. They are going to paradise because of how they treated the poor and marginalized. So...is Jesus really talking about the afterlife or is he making a broader point about what it looks like to live out the kingdom of heaven here, now?

One last point. Without playing linguistic games, the word for "torment" in the Rich Man and Lazarus story also commonly meant "touchstone." That was a type of stone a jeweler would use to test the authenticity of gold or silver. The rich man, though he looked blessed and godly on the outside, was seeing his true self revealed. A stretch? Okay, we have a lot more to say on the subject.

Which makes us different from Paul as he never mentioned the eternal tortures of hell in any of his sermons or letters. Not once. He does speak of a similar idea to that of using a touchstone, however. He mentions fire in the context of judgment...but the flames result in the salvation of those who pass through them.

Next week, we look at the doctrine of annihilationism. I think you may be surprised at how many ideas about the afterlife are in the New Testament. In the meantime, God is love. He meant it when He said it, and He means it now. Trust Him. He's got you.