

**Series:** Hard Questions for Thoughtful Christians and Inquiring Skeptics

**Sermon:** Hell? Yes!

**Scripture:** Mark 9:43-48, 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10

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There are several reasons why I have decided to address the topic of hell in this series on “Hard Questions for Thoughtful Christians and Inquiring Skeptics.” First, it is clearly a biblical topic. Second, it is a neglected topic in our churches. Third, hell is under intense attack in our rationalistic, relativistic culture. And fourth, and most importantly, I want to warn those who are on their way there to stop and turn around before it’s too late.

Unfortunately, we cannot assume today that the people with whom we rub shoulders in our culture even believe in an afterlife, nor can we even take for granted (as my father could when he was pastoring 50 years ago) that everyone attending a Christian church believes in hell.

**Hell has all but disappeared from the cultural landscape today.**

**The doctrine of hell has fallen on hard times both in and out of the church.** A week ago an Associated Press article in the Wichita Eagle opened up with these words: “Belief in hell is going to you-know-where. And belief in heaven is in trouble, too.”<sup>i</sup> Renowned American church historian, Martin Marty of the University of Chicago, observed flatly regarding the past several decades, “Hell disappeared. And no one noticed.”<sup>ii</sup>

Only 23% of Europeans claim to believe in hell. That percentage is significantly higher here in the U.S., but according to Professor Jeffrey Burton Russell of the University of California, Santa Barbara we should take scant comfort in that, for “The way U. S. Christians conceive of both heaven and hell is so feeble and vague that it’s almost meaningless—vague ‘superstition.’”<sup>iii</sup> Hell is almost never mentioned in mainline churches, except to scoff at the idea. And even in evangelical churches (which supposedly accept the authority of Scripture), it is not nearly as common a topic for sermons as it was in the past or even as it is in the discourses of Jesus.

Furthermore, annihilationism is growing dramatically in popularity as an alternative to eternal conscious punishment, even among conservative Christians. Annihilationists believe that the lost person is destroyed in hell and actually ceases to exist. So hell, while it is serious is not permanent, thus not so difficult to swallow. As appealing as that viewpoint may be, I believe it is impossible to defend Scripturally, for the exact same terminology that is used of hell (“eternal” or “never-ending”) is also used of heaven. If one is temporary, then the other must also be.

Ajith Fernando, an Indian evangelist I heard speak at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, said that many evangelicals are ashamed of hell. They are bound by their faith to believe all that the Bible explicitly teaches, so they claim to believe in an eternal hell, but they wish that they didn’t have to. If they speak about the topic, which is not very often, they do so with a sense of shame, as if it were something very unjust.<sup>iv</sup>

Well, I suppose every single one of us wishes hell were not true, but we don't have to be ashamed of it. God Himself is not ashamed of it. In fact, I believe when we arrive at a truly biblical understanding of human sin and God's holiness, hell will actually seem inevitable, not shameful.

Of course, while hell has virtually disappeared from the religious scene, it has *not quite* disappeared from our vocabulary. Jon Braun writes,

*That word hell has become a conversational byword in our day. (People say) to one another, "Go to hell." They surely don't mean, "Go to the place of punishment of the wicked after death," though that is how the dictionary defines the word hell.*

*But why use the word hell? Why not instead, "What the "jail" are you doing?" Or, "I sure as "school" will." And why not say, "Oh, go to "(Cleveland)"? Simply because jail, school, and Cleveland, even for the (detractors) of each, have no real sting. . . .*

*When it comes right down to it, in the English language, hell is the strongest expletive available that carries the idea of ultimate deprivation, devastation, fear, torment, punishment, suffering, and loss. Whether or not the user of the term hell believes in an actual, literal hell is of little or no consequence. There is an inbuilt, inarticulated, yet understood bite in the very word itself.<sup>v</sup>*

Well, I'd like to ask why it is that, despite the frequent use of the term "hell" as an expletive, there is such an apparent lack of seriousness regarding the reality of hell? Why do people pretend the place doesn't exist? Why has hell fallen on hard times? I want to give you five reasons:

**1. One reason is that this is the age of scientific enlightenment.** The assumption is made by many that science has rendered the supernatural unnecessary and has reduced reality to physical forces in the here and now. After all, knowledge must be supported by scientific evidence, and there is a lack of scientific evidence for life after death, so we must at the very least remain agnostic about the possibility of heaven or hell, if not reject it outright. Accompanying this view is often the following kind of reasoning:

*In the olden days folks couldn't figure out a way to keep bad people and little children in line. So they conjured up the idea of a monstrously grotesque place of gloomy darkness and frightening, everlasting torments. Armed with the threat of consignment to such a terrible place, they scared the stubborn and the young into submission to their cultural patterns.<sup>vi</sup>*

But, of course, today we have replaced such dilapidated and antiquated ideas with modern, relevant, and enlightened ways of keeping bad people and little children in line. And it should be evident to everyone that our modern ways are working so much better. Since hell was

jettisoned people are so much more civil than they used to be, so much more moral in their behavior, so much less inclined toward crime. (And lest anyone be distracted by my sarcasm, let me make it clear that I believe in hell, *not* because of its utility in preventing juvenile delinquency, but because God's Word teaches it).

**2. Another reason is that this is the age of pluralism.** Pluralism affirms that differing views must be tolerated. Postmodern pluralism sometimes even asserts that incompatible views are equally true. But the doctrine of hell proclaims an irreversible division of humanity into two groups, the saved and the lost. How unspeakably intolerant can you get!

**3. This is also the age of the human potential movement.** People are good and important and capable of great possibilities if only they would think positive thoughts about themselves, and if only people would treat them with respect. In such an environment it is unacceptable to tell people they are so sinful that unless they repent and turn to God they are doomed to everlasting punishment.

**4. This is also a feel-good generation.** Serious talk about hell does not make people feel good. Therefore, a lot of preachers have consciously chosen to avoid talking about judgment, choosing instead to speak only of the love of God. They want to be encouragers.

**5. Still another reason why hell has fallen on hard times is that today we are seeing astounding growth in eastern religions.** Buddhism and Hinduism teach reincarnation, which provides a delightful alternative to the unpleasant doctrine of hell. The New Age Movement borrows from these Eastern ideas and proclaims only acceptance by God—never His wrath. Stories abound about people with near-death experiences who have seen only light and pleasantness. (By the way, “If you were Satan and were trying to attract customers, wouldn't you make your destination seem attractive?”).

**Even those who believe in hell often don't consider it a *personal* threat.** That many people still have some remnant of belief in a place called hell is evidenced by opinion polls taken in Iowa and Minnesota. Surveys conducted by the Des Moines Register found that most people in these two midwestern states did, in fact, believe in an afterlife. But later, in a follow-up poll, the question was asked: “In line with this, can you think of anyone you know who might end up in hell?” And, second, “On a personal basis, where do you think you might end up—in heaven or hell?”

Only about 20% knew at least one person who was a sure bet to go to hell (a drunk driver, an axe murderer, a child abuser) but less than 5% of those who professed to believe in hell thought they themselves were in any danger of ending up there. Jon Braun writes, “Those twenty-to-one odds against going to hell testify that most Iowans must be saints or that the threat of hell is no longer real to them.”<sup>vii</sup>

But, in contrast to all this societal data, friends, the Bible speaks unambiguously about hell's existence. While we do not have time to do a detailed study of particular texts this morning, let

me read just a few verses from one of the Gospels—all words uttered by Jesus Christ Himself:

(Matthew 13:49-50) *"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."*

(Matthew 25:31-32) *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. 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."*

(Matthew 25:41) *"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.'"*

Then, consider one further word from Jesus, this one from the Gospel of Mark:

(Mark 9:43-48) *"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'"*

There is much more. In fact, Jesus speaks more about hell than He about about heaven or marriage or the Holy Spirit or the ordinances of the church. The purpose of my message today is to call us to begin to embrace once again an orthodox and biblical sobriety towards hell. But even more importantly, we must present a message of hope, namely that God has provided a way for human beings to escape hell and to be confident of their eternal destiny with him in heaven.

### **Hell is a terrible reality.**

**The imagery, while frightening, must not blind us to the reality.** Some people, I fear, are so focused on the imagery that they miss the message. Jesus speaks of hell under three primary symbols: punishment, destruction, and banishment into darkness. In Matthew 25:46 Jesus says of the wicked, "They will go away to eternal *punishment*, but the righteous to eternal life." In Matthew 10:28 He uses the second imagery: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can *destroy* both soul and body in hell." And in Matthew 8:12 He says of the unbelievers that they "will be thrown outside, into the *darkness*, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

The very fact that a lake of fire and outer darkness are contradictory images should tell us that the point of these verses is probably not to give us a literal description of hell. But it is quite certain that all these expressions are intended to suggest something unspeakably horrible, and any interpretation which does not face that fact is unacceptable. Yet I do not think it is wise to

focus too much on the literal imagery of hell any more than it is to focus too much on the imagery of heaven.

After all, it is not so much streets of gold or gates of pearl that make heaven attractive; it is the fact that Jesus is there. Likewise, it is not the Lake of Fire that makes hell hideous so much as the fact that the devil is there and that anyone who ends up there has been banished for all eternity from God's presence. He or she has lost forever the very purpose of human existence—to know God and to enjoy Him forever.

In 2 Thessalonians 1 a fascinating defense of hell is offered. I will begin reading in verse 6, where Paul is trying to comfort those who are experiencing awful persecution for their faith:

*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 majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.*

It's that phrase, "shut out from the presence of the Lord" that fascinates me. They will finally realize that God is exactly who He said He was all the time—a righteous, holy God full of goodness, mercy, and justice, but they will be shut off from all communication, fellowship, and joy with Him for all of eternity. That is the worst thing about hell. I am not denying at all that there will be physical pain as well, and deprivation, thirst, and other kinds of suffering. In fact, the Greek term "torment" is used at least 5 times in the NT to refer to punishment in hell, each time clearly implying conscious suffering. But all that is minor compared to being shut off from God.

**The population of hell will be significant.** I wish I had time this morning to go into detail about the inhabitants of hell, but let me just mention them (some will not surprise you, but others may):

1. **Satan** (Rev. 20:7-10)
2. **His angels or demons** (Matthew 25:41)
3. **The wicked** (Revelation 21:8)
4. **Unbelievers** (John 3:16-18)
5. **But there will also be some we would not expect:**
  - A. **Good people** (Romans 2:1-16)

**B. Religious people** (Romans 2:17-29)

**C. Even professing Christians** (Matthew 7:21-23)

(I would only add that there will also be some surprises regarding the population of heaven. Jesus said,

*“I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you (He clearly means, instead of you). For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.”*  
[Matthew 21:31-32]).

I have heard some people say, perhaps in a lame attempt at humor, that they want to go to hell because that’s where all their friends will be. That may be true, but what they fail to realize is that hell will be a place of isolation, not fellowship. There will be no partying there.

Quickly I move on to some philosophical arguments:

**Hell can be shown to be reasonable, perhaps even essential, as we critique some common objections to it.**

C. S. Lewis wrote a chapter on hell in his marvelous book, *The Problem of Pain*. Lewis, who was Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English Literature at both Oxford and Cambridge, and a brilliant apologist for the Christian faith, wrote,

*There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specially, of Our Lord’s own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason.*<sup>viii</sup>

It is that last phrase that I want to pick up on, for it is that last phrase that has been challenged so vigorously in our day and time. Is hell really reasonable, or are we just accepting with blind faith something that violates every good person’s sense of justice and equity? One of the first objections one hears is:

**1. God is too good.** How could a good, forgiving God send anyone to hell? The problem with this question lies in the use of the word “send.” It too easily connotes direct and arbitrary action on God’s part, as though He were sitting up in heaven with an air rifle picking off sinners for entertainment. The truth is that God is so full of mercy that He became man and died by torture to avert the very necessity of *any* of His creatures going to hell. Lewis wrote later in the same chapter, “I said glibly a moment ago that I would pay “any price” to remove this *doctrine* (of hell). I lied. I could not pay one-thousandth part of the price that God has already paid to remove the *fact* (of hell).”

The expectation that God should forgive the evil person *while he remains* what he is, is based on a confusion between condoning and forgiving. To condone an evil is simply to ignore it, to treat it as if it were good. Forgiveness, on the other hand, acknowledges the evil but the one offering it agrees to pay the price himself. Furthermore, we must realize that forgiveness needs to be accepted as well as offered if it is to be complete: and a person who admits no guilt can accept no forgiveness.

**2. Man is too good.** Many, of course, deny the depravity of man altogether, but even those who acknowledge the sinfulness of mankind often allege that there is an unacceptable disproportion between eternal damnation and the seriousness of sins committed. Should anyone pay eternally for mistakes committed temporally? The essential problem here, of course, is that we have an inherent tendency to minimize sin, especially our own. But God has an absolute standard—His own holiness. And against that standard we are all dead in trespasses and sins.

Furthermore, we tend to minimize the fact that God has revealed Himself in nature and conscience, as well as minimize the opportunities He has given us to repent. And of course the most terrible mistake of all is to minimize the seriousness of turning one's back on the One who died a cross-death for us.<sup>ix</sup> The author of Hebrews makes this point when, after mentioning the death penalty for lawbreakers under the Law of Moses, he says, "How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot?" (Hebrews 10:29)

**3. Punishment that does not end in reform is valueless.** Retribution is viewed as an unenlightened concept unworthy of our advanced culture. The whole philosophy underlying judicial punishment is being seriously challenged today, and even the term "penal institution" is falling into disrepute. Of course, even political liberals acknowledge that some criminals need to be removed from society for our protection, but they want them to be made as comfortable as possible, and rehabilitation is viewed as the sole goal of incarceration. After all, criminals are victims too, and punishment is vengeful.

The same argument is used against hell. A God who would take vengeance on His creatures is not one who deserves to be worshiped. Let me respond this way: Think of the most vile and evil person you know or of whom you have read. Think of a Hitler or an Idi Amin or a Wayne Gacy or a Timothy McVeigh. Imagine this person, who has gained power and influence by a continued course of treachery and cruelty, by exploiting his victims for purely selfish ends. Suppose he does all this without any remorse whatever, thinking to the very end that God and man are fools whom he has got the best of. Can you really desire that such a person be granted bliss for all eternity, or even that he be granted the privilege of extinction? Can *this* life be all there is for such a person? *That* is a notion that seems immoral to me.

We do not have to be motivated by a desire for such a wretched person's pain as such. Our motive can and should be simply a truly ethical demand that sooner or later right must triumph over wrong.

**4. How could any charitable believer enjoy heaven while knowing that even one soul was still in hell?** The best answer to this objection may be a question, “Do we fancy ourselves more merciful than God?” If God can enjoy His heaven and His angels and His redeemed family while hell exists, cannot we? Perhaps the knowledge of hell and the people in it will be one of those things which God promises to erase from our minds. Isaiah 65:17 reads, “Behold I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.”

**5. How can the same place serve as the destiny of heinous murderers and soccer moms who simply fail to believe in Jesus?** I think that’s a legitimate question. And the answer is that all the lost will go to the same hell, but not all will spend it the same way. I believe strongly there will be degrees of punishment in hell (just as there are degrees of blessedness in heaven). Jesus clearly teaches this in Matt. 11:20-24 and in Luke 12:47, 48. In both passages He makes it clear that the greater the opportunity and knowledge, the greater the punishment. Perhaps other factors will be taken into consideration, too, like the level of evil committed or the number of people harmed.

**6. The ultimate loss of a single soul in hell means the defeat of omnipotence.**

C. S. Lewis responds,

*And so it does. In creating beings with free will, omnipotence from the outset submits to the possibility of such defeat. (But) What you call defeat, I call miracle: for to make things which are not (Himself), and thus to become, in a sense capable of being resisted by (His) own handiwork, is the most astonishing and unimaginable of all the feats we attribute to (God).<sup>x</sup>*

God can said to be defeated only if one can demonstrate that God intended to save everyone and failed to do so; only if it can be demonstrated that a world in which men are free to reject God is morally inferior to one in which they could not do so.

After wrestling with all these objections, Lewis concludes his chapter on the defense of hell with one of the most profound paragraphs in print anywhere in any language:

*In the long run the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell is itself a question: “What are you asking God to do?” To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does.<sup>xi</sup>*

**Hell makes sense as a punishment for the wicked *only* when there is a Heaven to reward the righteous.**

Paul states in 1 Cor. 15:19, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more

than all men.” I’ve heard people say, “Even if Christianity were false, the Christian life is the best life there is, for it stresses honesty in business, kindness to neighbors, and peace with one’s enemies.” But Paul disagrees. Sure, a Christian may (all other things being equal) live longer, healthier and happier, but if believers arrive at their lifestyle through the delusion of a hope based upon resurrection and eternity in Heaven, when, in fact, that is all just a pipe dream, then they are indeed pitiable creatures—no better off than the people who live good lives under the delusion of any other false religious system.

If heaven is a delusion it would make a lot more sense to grab for all the gusto they can get in the shortest time possible, to lie, steal, cheat, to get more money, and spend it like it was going out of style on every conceivable kind of pleasure—legitimate or not. And why not? Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow it’s all over. Frankly, friends, a lot of people live like that and we shouldn’t be surprised! They are living consistently with their philosophy of life. Why would you expect them to live any other way? If there is no God, if there is no judgment, if there is no heaven or hell, then self-interest is the only interest that makes any sense.

**Conclusion:** Friends, please understand that this life is *not* all there is. This life is preparation for the next and that what we do in this life will affect how and where we spend all of eternity. I firmly believe that all those (and only those) who put their faith in Jesus Christ will spend eternity in the glory of God’s presence, in a place called heaven, specially prepared for redeemed mankind. All others will spend eternity in a place not prepared for mankind at all, but rather a place prepared for the Devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41).

Think with me finally about what becomes of the Christian faith if hell is fictitious. If there is no hell . . . then we must say that the biblical warnings about the danger and destructiveness of sin are thoroughly exaggerated. We must say that the agonizing sufferings of Jesus on the cross were shockingly unnecessary. And we must say that the choice between life and death with which the whole Bible confronts us is a colossal bluff.

But the warnings are not exaggerated, and the sufferings of Christ were not unnecessary, and the Bible is not a colossal bluff. Hell is real and hell is terrible.

Yet no one *has* to go there. Though we are sinners and deserve hell, God intervened in our hopeless condition by sending His one and only Son to die on the cross. And God accepted the death of Jesus as full payment for our sin. By turning in faith to Jesus and putting our trust in Him and Him alone, we can be saved, can escape the tragedy of hell, and can spend eternity with God.

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i. Richard N. Ostling, *In search of heaven and hell*, Wichita Eagle, July 29, 2006.

ii. Irwin Lutzer, *One Minute After You Die*, 97.

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iii. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Paradise Misaid: How We Lost Heaven and How we Can Regain It*, quoted by Richard N. Ostling, *In search of heaven and hell*, Wichita Eagle, July 29, 2006.

iv. Ajith Fernando, *Crucial Questions About Hell*, 22.

v. Jon Braun, *Whatever Happened to Hell?*, 11.

vi. Braun, 14.

vii. Braun, 19, 20.

viii. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 118.

ix. Another form of the same objection about disproportion consists in saying that death ought not to be final, that there ought to be a second chance. And, in fact, many religions have developed a doctrine of second chances. But in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Abraham speaks for God when he says to the rich man in torment, a man who has begged for someone to go and warn his five brothers lest they also join him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31).

Another chance won’t make any difference; a thousand chances won’t change anything. You want proof? Someone did, very soon after that parable was told, rise from the dead and try to convince them of the truth about the afterlife, and sure enough, they did not believe.

x. Lewis, 127.

xi. Lewis, 128.