
Hell - A Reality or a Metaphor?

The word Gospel means good news, and it's not good news to tell people that they are going to hell. However, there is a hell for those who don't accept God's offer of grace, and I believe it's important for people to understand this.

I've been appalled at the doctrine of "ultimate reconciliation," or "universalism," that has crept into the body of Christ today. This doctrine teaches that God will ultimately reconcile everyone to Himself, even the devil and those in hell. Some variations of this say that hell is only a state of mind and not a real place or that those in hell will only suffer punishment for a limited time. Nothing could be further from the truth.

As I prayed about this, the Lord reminded me that faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). Then He asked me, "When is the last time you taught from Scripture about hell?" I realized I had never taught a whole message on hell. I certainly believe it exists and have mentioned it, but I have never taught on hell.

I'm always emphasizing the unconditional love and grace of God. I make no apologies for that. That's what changed my life. I'm excited about God's love for me. But understanding the justice and wrath of God against sin makes me appreciate my salvation even more. Trivializing sin blocks us from receiving a full revelation of God's love (Luke 7:47). So, here goes my teaching on hell.

God didn't just look the other way or change His attitude toward sin. He paid for our sins in full through the sacrifice of His Son (2 Cor. 5:21). Anyone who rejects or ignores such a great sacrifice will spend eternity paying for that.

Sin has to be judged (Rom. 6:23), and it was judged, in the flesh of Jesus (1 Pet. 2:24). But those who don't make Jesus their Lord will have hell to pay for the greatest sin of all—rejecting Jesus' sacrifice (John 16:8-9).

The sacrifice that Jesus made was infinitely greater than we have ever imagined. Not only does the Bible teach that He was not recognizable as a human being (Is. 52:14) while hanging on the cross, but it also teaches that He actually became sin (2 Cor. 5:21).

Just before He died, Jesus said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). God forsook Jesus. He could not look upon the sin that Jesus had become. And if He forsook His only Son, what chance would any of us have? That is why, for those who foolishly ignore this great sacrifice, there is a real hell.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word she'owl was translated "hell" thirty-one times and "grave" thirty-one times. Nearly every time it's translated "grave," it's talking about where the godly go after death, and when it's translated "hell," it's talking about the destination of the ungodly.

Before Jesus' resurrection, everyone went into the center of the earth when they died. It was separated into two compartments. One was called "Abraham's bosom," or "paradise," while the other was called "hell," a place of torment (Luke 16:23-28).

In the story about Lazarus and the rich man, the rich man spoke to Abraham from hell, the place of torment. Luke 16:22-26 says,

"And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip

of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed.”

There is so much that we can learn from this passage. For one, it makes it clear that in she’owl, or hell, those who were in torment could see those across the gulf. They could hear, thirst, feel pain and sorrow, and even communicate with those in paradise. But the one thing that the people in hell will never be able to do is die.

After the Resurrection, things concerning hell changed. Jesus went to hell, took the keys of hell and death (Rev. 1:18), and set the captives free—those who were in Abraham’s bosom.

Ephesians 4: 9-10 says,

“Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.”

After defeating the devil and setting the captives free, Jesus took those in Abraham’s bosom to heaven with Him, where all believers go now. But we will not live in heaven forever. We only live in heaven until the end of the age. Then God is going to make a new heaven and a new earth, and all the believers will live there with Jesus in the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1-4).

After that, hell will no longer be in the center of the earth, but it will be cast into a place that the Bible calls the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14), a place that was prepared for Satan and his angels (Matt. 25:41).

In Matthew 25, we read the story of the nations coming to the Lord on His throne where He divides the sheep from the goats.

In Matthew 25:34, He said to the righteous,

“Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

But to the unrighteous, He said,

“Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41).

Although it was never intended for man, hell is an awful place where those who reject so great a sacrifice will join the devil and his angels for eternity (Rev. 20:10).

The Scripture, in Luke, also shows that the people God honors are not necessarily the same people the world honors (Luke 16:15). This rich man had a beautiful home, fancy clothes, and the best of everything. He had it all, but he never showed the beggar any mercy. When he died, I guarantee you he had a fancy funeral. Thousands of people may have gathered, all talking about how great his accomplishments were.

Yet the Bible says only that he was buried, left to rot in the grave. On the other hand, the beggar who was most despised on earth was carried away by angels. Which of the two would you rather have been? When you see this from an eternal perspective, it makes the suffering of this earth pale in comparison to what God has prepared for us (Rom. 8:18).

That is why we have a section of a wall at Charis Bible College-Colorado dedicated to those we call “Heroes of the Faith.” These are graduates, like our extension school directors, who are giving their lives selflessly to take this message around the world. I believe that these are the people God honors, and it would serve all of us well to do the same (1 Sam. 2:30).

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We can also see from Scripture that there are no second chances. There is no purgatory, as the Catholic Church teaches. There is no ultimate reconciliation. On earth, the rich man rejected God and went directly to hell. When the rich man pleaded for mercy, Abraham could do nothing. There will be no mercy, no hope, and no goodness of any kind in hell, ever.

There isn't a single person on this earth who deserves anything good from God. And there is absolutely nothing people can do to gain His favor. If that offends you, then you have just experienced the offense of the cross (Gal. 5:11). In comparison to God's standards, man's righteousness is no better than filthy rags (Is. 64:6). But God loves man so much that He sent Jesus, a Lamb without spot, to be a sacrifice for sin.

If Jesus died for past, present, and future sins—which He did—then what determines whether we spend eternity with Him or in hell? The Bible makes it clear that the Holy Spirit convicts us of one sin, and it's the only sin that will cause people to go to hell. That is the sin of rejecting the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

“And when he [the Holy Spirit] is come, he will reprove the world of sin [singular], and of righteousness, and of judgment: Of sin, because they believe not on me” (John 16:8-9, brackets mine).

To say the least, avoiding hell is big. However, what Jesus accomplished on the cross is far more than the avoidance of hell. I have just completed a new series called *The Power of the Cross*. In that series, I teach on five subjects: “The True Meaning of the Cross,” “The Offense of the Cross,” “The Enemies of the Cross,” “Saved from Hell by the Cross,” and “It is Finished.”

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