

Introducing Hell

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- [0 : 0 0] Father, you are never in our debt. We are always in your debt, a great debt for your great grace offered freely to us.
- We ask, Father, that you would gently but deeply pour out your Holy Spirit upon us to grow within us a spirit of thankfulness and gratefulness for your great grace.
- And we ask, Father, that as we are gripped by grace, that grace will form how we live. And all this we ask in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen.
- Actually, just sorry, that was for the offertory. Just you can be seated and I'm going to say a prayer over the sermon because I'm going to talk about hell this morning, so we need to pray as we open the word.
- Let's just pray again. Father, we have a hard time remembering your promises. We ask that you help us to remember your promises and learn to live by them.
- [1 : 0 8] And Father, we have a hard time accepting your warnings. We ask, Father, that your Holy Spirit would move deeply in our hearts and minds so that we might remember and heed your warnings.
- And all this we ask in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen. So, Revelation 14.
- I don't know how carefully you were all listening, but if you were listening carefully, you might have heard John read about a lake of fire and torment and people being cast into a lake of fire.
- And if you have a King James Version of the Bible, it would have said not sulfur but brimstone. This is one of the texts that that whole idea of fire and brimstone comes from.
- So, it's a very, very sobering text. And for those of you who picked it up while it was being read, it becomes the elephant in the room as you listen to the text.
- [2 : 2 0] And as we all know in life, whenever possible, if there's an elephant in the room, you should talk about the elephant. Only foolish people pretend there's no elephant in the room when there's an elephant in the room.
- And in Canada, talking about a lake of fire and torment and judgment is about as un-Canadian a thing as you could possibly do.
- It makes us as unhip and uncool as you could possibly imagine and not as unhip as hip people always are because part of the way you become hip is by trying to be unhip.
- But this is like really unhip like in a completely different way than sort of imaginable in Canada. It's a very, very sobering text. It's not a text to joke about.
- And so, let's turn to Revelation 14 and we'll look at this text first. Revelation 14, and we're going to look right at the text that talks about hell. And we sort of will start from there.

[3 : 25] And if you turn to Revelation 14, if you don't have a Bible, there's extra Bibles here at the front. And Revelation is the last book in the Bible. And if you're wondering why we're talking about a text like this, if you're a guest, it's because here at Church of the Messiah, we preach and read through books of the Bible and we're going through the book of Revelation.

And this is the next chapter. We're going through about a chapter a week now. And if you look on the bulletin, I've titled this sermon, I think it's called Either Introducing Hell or an Introduction to Hell.

And that's because Introduction to Hell 101, I guess that would be an interesting course at university. And that's because in a couple of weeks, there's at least one more text that talks about the same thing, only in more depth.

So really, this is just a bit of an introduction to a topic that we will return to in a couple of weeks. And here's what it says, verses 9 to 11.

And another angel, a third, followed them. These are the two other angels. We'll go back and read the text from the beginning in a moment, but I wanted to get right to the elephant in the room. Verse 9 again.

[4 : 32] And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, verse 10. If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger.

And he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever.

And they have no rest day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image and whoever receives the mark of its name. Now, we all know, if you've been following along in these sermons or if you go back and listen to a couple of them online, if you're a guest here this morning, that the book of Revelation is filled with images and symbols, and obviously these are images and symbols.

But the thing is that this image of fire and brimstone and judgment and torment, it's not an image of something like a different way to talk about nightmares.

It's not like a primitive way of talking about parts of the world where there's maybe a lot of poverty and conflict. It's not a type of symbolism to talk about something in our collective unconscious or our subconscious.

[6 : 02] The Bible here, the Bible teaches that hell is real. That hell exists. And that hell is not empty.

The Bible teaches that hell is real. That hell exists. That hell is not empty. That's what the Bible teaches.

And so while on one hand, it's probably valid to understand that things like fire and brimstone are some type of symbols or analogies for something, they are images and symbols of a reality of what happens if human beings, any human being, ultimately is adamant in rejecting God and choosing something other than the living God as what they will serve and love and obey and trust and hope in.

and this talks about the final and eternal destiny of those who make such a choice. And it is a very, very sobering text.

And it's just an introduction to this topic.

[7 : 27] And the introduction, which will become a little bit more clear as we go back and start from the beginning, is really that the Bible teaches that hell exists. If you look in the bulletin every, most weeks, just about every week, I provide something called Going Deeper, which can be used for private study, but it's best if you do it with one or two other people and have a bit of a conversation, get connected with somebody while connecting with God's Word and connecting with Jesus.

And it's a very, very simple little discipline of going through the text. First, I invite you to, with sort of an introductory question to get to know other people and let them know you.

Then there's, I ask you just to sort of read the text again and then I take one or two or three parts of the text and I ask you to read some other text that throw some light on what you've just read in Revelation.

And then you close by reading the book of Revelation again and then it's an invitation to pray in terms of what it is that God would like you to know or how has the Holy Spirit convicted you as you've read the text and how can you share that with others so they can pray for you.

And all I've done is, in terms of this particular text, all I've done is taken just what it says in the book of Matthew and Jesus says about hell and given you a selection of verses just in one gospel, not all four, but just one, to show that in fact Jesus teaches that hell exists.

[8 : 53] It's very sobering. Let's look at the beginning of the text and see how this doctrine of hell is surrounded or how it develops in the text of scripture. So go back to verse one.

Here's the thing. This text is not going to sort of do something to qualify or minimize this doctrine of hell. It's going to bring it to stark relief.

Okay? So here's how it begins. Verse one. Then I looked and behold on Mount Zion stood the Lamb and with him 144,000 who had his name and his father's name written on their foreheads.

Just sort of pause there for a second. If you go back, I didn't have time to talk about it much last week, but chapter 13 ends with the very, very famous idea of, well-known even in popular Canadian culture, of the mark of the beast and the number of the beast, 666.

And it presents this image of those who serve the beast are marked by the beast on their foreheads and on their hands. And they're marked with the number 666. And we're used to just reading the book chapter by chapter.

[10 : 03] Often there are devotions. We read a chapter, wait a day or two, and then read another chapter. But if you're reading this in the original letter, if you're reading this just as you would read a novel, you go immediately from the mark of the beast to this.

And the contrast is in verse 1, then I looked and behold on Mount Zion. And a way for you to understand very simply what Zion is. Zion is the capital of the kingdom of God.

That's what Zion is. Zion is the capital of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven. Then I looked and behold, and in the capital of the kingdom of God stood the lamb and with him 144,000, and the symbolic number of a vast number, a perfect number, a vast number, who had his name and his father's name written on their foreheads.

And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps. And they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders.

No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. It is those, these who have not defiled themselves with women for they are virgins.

[11 : 18] It is these who follow the lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the lamb. And in their mouth no lie was found for they are blameless.

Here's what this sort of is teaching right off the beginning. And it's not saying that the only people who are going to be in heaven are monks and nuns. What it's saying is all the way through the Bible there's, the analogy is given of the type of relationship that God desires to have with us as human beings.

And one of the most constant images in the Bible is of a very, very, very, very good marriage where the believer is like the woman. I'm like the woman. If you're a woman, you are a woman.

And we marry, I marry individually, in a sense, God. And the relationship that God desires to have with us is to be as intimate and as close and as faithful as a really, really, really good marriage.

Many of us might know many lousy marriages, but even when we have a lousy marriage, even when people we know of a lousy marriage, it implies that we have a sense of what a good marriage is.

[12 : 33] And the Bible is saying that if you imagine the best possible marriage that you can possibly imagine, that's the type of relationship that God desires. That's the type of intimacy and common life and sharing and openness and trust and faithfulness that God desires to have with us.

And so all the way through the Old Testament and in many places in the New Testament, when we go after something other than the living God, when there's some other being or some other cause or ourselves or a person, and we desire to serve that alone, to love that alone, to obey that alone, to trust in that alone, and to hope in that alone, the Bible compares it to adultery and a type of adultery.

And so this text here is just using imagery to try to describe that, first of all, only God redeems. Only God redeems.

And when he redeems an ordinary person like you or me, when we put our faith and trust in the Lamb and he redeems us, then we enter into a relationship with God and what is to characterize that relationship with God is the type of fidelity and desire to grow in intimacy that should characterize the best marriage.

And that's the image here before we get into this talk of hell, which is this image of intimacy with the living God, which is allowed or becomes possible because God redeems an ordinary people like you and me when we put our faith and trust in Jesus.

[14 : 15] That's, in a sense, us responding to God's marriage proposal and what makes it possible for us to become the bride of Jesus by what Jesus has done for us on the cross.

And that's our response to it and how we live, and that's what's pictured up in heaven. And then the text continues. And here's the thing. I was thinking about this morning when I was coming.

I had to be here really early, like really early to get some stuff here so Barbara could set it up for the early 8 o'clock service. And so I dropped it here and then I went and got a coffee and I came back.

And as I'm walking, there's just so many condos around here. And I'm not putting down people who live in condos. That's not the intent of this analogy. But what really, really struck me is how odd, here I am holding my coffee, walking in the street, looking at all the condos, how odd it is that surrounded by condos, I will talk about hell this morning.

Because, you see, one of the things which is sort of just very, very typical of our culture is we live in a consumerist culture. And I'm not knocking being able to buy things at a good price right now, but I'm saying what creates within us is an idea that our life is characterized by being able to consume things.

[15 : 31] And in a sense, our life is being able to consume or have enough money to have a nice condo, to have nice clothes, to have a nice car, to have nice holidays, to have nice food, to have luxuries.

And the entire, in a sense, people who get caught up in consumerism, and that's the whole horizon of their lives, it's actually a very, very tiny horizon.

It's a very, very tiny little world. And it's a very, very flat world. It's just defined by the types of things I can imagine eating or buying. And this text that we're looking at says that the real world, the real world, because the Bible is claiming that hell is real.

You might disagree with the Bible, but the Bible is claiming that hell is real. And the Bible is claiming that the lamb is real, and that redemption is real, and that there really is a living God, and that his desire is to have a relationship with us like the absolute best possible marriage we could ever imagine.

And that's the type of relationship that God desires us to grow into. And the Bible here is saying that, in a sense, it's as if, it's as if, it's as if life, real life intersects with and opens up to truly unimaginable heights and depths, which consumerism is blinding us to and stopping us from being able to, to just even imagine, to even begin to think about it.

[17 : 07] Like, if your entire life is consumed by what you can consume and own, and that's all you can sort of see, and if that's all that describes the height, the excitement of the best car you could imagine buying or the best holiday you could be, where the worst is losing that car or losing your job, but the Bible says that real human life intersects with and opens up to heights, intimacy, like with the living God that goes on for all eternity.

It's a type of a height that it's even hard for us to imagine. And it's also warning us that life intersects with and opens up to a depth, the reality of a depth of separation that's lower than we can possibly imagine.

And so the Bible is inviting us to understand that this is what real life is like, this intersection with and opening up to unimaginable heights and unimaginable depths, heights of blessing and depths of woe.

And it's in that context, then, that we come to verse 6. Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people.

This is the invitation for us to learn and to pray, to spread the gospel so that the gospel can be proclaimed in the heart language of every person on the planet.

[18 : 52] And even if we cannot pray and we are to pray for the farthest reaches of the planet, it's also to pray for the subcultures within our own community, to the gay culture, the different types of musical cultures and consumerist cultures and whatever their heart language is, is that we are to pray that the gospel can be presented to people in their heart language.

That's what's, that's this, it's a constant call in the scriptures to say that it's not that all the peoples of the world have to learn our language, but the gospel can be proclaimed, the good news of what Jesus did for us on the cross and this wonderful redemption and the possibility to be God's own forever, to be marked by him and we are to pray and we are to figure out a way to speak in the heart language, that gospel in the heart language of the recipients.

Verse six, and I saw another angel flying directly overhead with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people and he said with a loud voice, fear God and give him glory because the hour of his judgment has come and worship him who made heaven and earth and sea and springs of water.

Another angel a second followed saying, fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.

See, there's the image of the living God and departing from the living God as a type of pornea, a type of unfaithfulness like adultery. And another angel a third followed them saying with a loud voice, if anyone worships the beast in its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath poured full strength into the cup of his anger and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of his holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb and the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever and they have no rest day or night, these worshipers of the beast in its image and whoever receives the mark of its name.

[21 : 00] One of the things to understand about this text is that the Bible, God doesn't have this part of the Bible written to shut us up. He doesn't have this part of the Bible written to stop us talking to God.

This part of the Bible is written to start a conversation with God. But as we start a conversation with God, we have to understand that it's not the start of a negotiation with God.

It's the start of an honest conversation with God. God doesn't negotiate. And if we go looking at the Bible as being God's opening salvo in a negotiation, we're never going to understand the Bible or the Christian faith.

It's not the opening salvo, the first presentation in a negotiation. But it's never designed to silence us or to shut us up. It's designed for us to begin a true conversation, an honest conversation, a truth-seeking conversation, a heartfelt conversation with God.

And we can ask him, God, how is it that your justice goes along with hell? Or Father, is it the matter that justice demands hell? Father, you're not anger-driven, are you?

[22 : 28] Father, I worry when I read texts like this that you're an anger-driven man. I had an anger-driven father. I had an anger-driven mother. I have an anger-driven boss. And I have to confess before you, Father, when I read your word, I worry that you're anger-driven.

Are you anger-driven, Father? Father, why is it that I worry that you're anger-driven, but at the same time, I never worry that you're just like an immature little teenage boy or girl who gets crushes and that your love is like a crush?

Why is it, Father, that I sort of hope or long for that your love is mature and deep and wise, but I worry that when it comes to something like this with anger, that you're anger-driven, Father, why is it that I'm so confused when I read your word?

Why is it that I'm so mixed up? Why is it, Father, that when I read your word, I forget that I'm mixed up and confused and think you're mixed up and confused? Why is it, Father, that I think that you're on trial, but I never think I'm on trial?

Father, why is it when I read your word like that? You see, the Bible is inviting us to actually open up and have a real deep conversation with God, not to shut us up, but to start us talking to him.

[23 : 36] And I just watched, I didn't care for it, I watched the new Thor movie that came out, I guess, in the summer, but it just came out in DVD. I don't know how many of you watch movies like Thor. Norse God has a hammer, he flings it like this and then it does all sorts of amazing things.

The hammer is almost like another character in the movie. And one of the things if you ever watch a Thor movie or an Avengers movie is that, you know, Thor's fighting with his hands and he's doing this and he's doing that and he's doing that, but the antenna viewer knows that at some point in time, there's always the hammer.

Like at some point in time, this beast or this monster is fighting Thor, but at some point in time, Thor will reach out his hand like this with a serious look in his eyes and the hammer will hurtle across some infinite distance and come into his hand and then he can throw it and it does all sorts of things and the day is rescued.

And so in other words, whenever you watch a Thor movie, you always have to say to yourself, remember the hammer. But for Christians, whenever you read anything in the Bible, what are we supposed to do?

We're supposed to say, remember the cross. Remember the cross. That every part of the Bible is to in a sense help us to understand the cross more.

[24 : 57] In every part of the Bible, the cross helps us to understand that part of the Bible. And so for us as Christians, even as we're reading all of this about the wrath of God and everything like that, what is it that we are to remember is that one of the fundamental images in the Old Testament of the wrath of God is as if all of God's anger or wrath is like a type of poison that's in a cup and all of God's judgment.

It's like a cup that we drink. And what is the New Testament image? How is it that Jesus and the cross completely and utterly transforms that image? How is it that if we are to remember the cross when we read the text of Scripture, we are to remember that it's as if I come and there's a cup that I must drink that contains within it the wrath of God and the judgment of God and there is a cup like that that has my name on it and the wonder of the cross, the image of the cross is that what's happening on the cross is that Jesus in effect comes and takes the cup that has George Gilbert Sinclair written on it and he takes that cup and he drinks my cup for me.

You can't read to read anything in the New Testament or the Old Testament without remembering the cross is to not understand what's being written and that's the way that we are to understand even this talk of hell of the full drinking of the wrath of God is that I had such a cup with my name written on it and so do you and on the cross Jesus in a sense is saying George I will drink your cup for you that cup that will only lead to your damnation I the innocent lamb of God I will drink that in your stead and you can have my innocence before the Father and that's why in verse 12 it goes right into this here is a call for the endurance of the saints those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus and I heard a voice from heaven saying write this blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on blessed indeed says the spirit that they may rest from their labors for their deeds follow once again this

God doesn't say these things to stop conversation but to begin a serious conversation a conversation that can go on for all eternity in blessedness just in closing before my prayer the last there's two separate images which help to once again bring before us the seriousness of it and these are now two images of the second coming of Jesus and one is an image of the harvest of wheat and the other one is an image of the harvest of grapes and in this growing in grace for instance this week I show some of the different New Testament references of the wheat harvest and we are to understand that this is referring to one event the return of Jesus but the two radically different outcomes of the one event of the return of Jesus for those who put their faith in Jesus when he returns we're gathered to him those of us who continue in rebellion against the living God the return of Jesus means the beginning of judgment and so the first image is an image of Jesus coming to bring us to himself and the second image is an image a horrific image of the consequences of our unrelenting rebellion we'll read this and then we'll stand and pray and I looked and behold a white cloud and seated on the cloud one like a son of man with a golden crown on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand and another angel came out of the temple calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud put in your sickle and reap for the hour to reap has come for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe it's a good image it's ripe there's a great harvest let's bring it in so he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth and the earth was reaped then another angel came out of the temple in heaven and he too had a sharp sickle and another angel came out from the altar the angel who has authority over the fire and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth for its grapes are ripe so the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God and the wine press was trodden outside the city and blood flowed from the wine press as high as a horse's bridle for 1600 stadia life is not defined by our consumerist culture real life intersects with and opens up to unimaginable heights and depths

God redeems only God redeems come to Jesus let's stand Father it is very easy for us to be so molded and formed by our consumer culture that we view your word as a type of cafeteria where we can pick just bypass the bean sprouts and the broccoli and things that we don't like and we can eat the things that we do like but we give you thanks and praise Father that your word is not constrained by our consumerist culture that you both warn us of eternal consequences of rejection and you beckon us with eternal promises of intimacy with you we ask

[31 : 33] Father that your Holy Spirit would reform and renew our mind and heart so that we are not conformed to this world but as your grace enters into our life and forms us as we are gripped by the gospel our life is changed as we desire to bring you glory and enjoy your presence forever and this we ask in Jesus' name Amen