

Should We Fear Hell?

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[0 : 0 0] Father, we come to what is potentially a challenging topic tonight. So I pray that we will be able to understand your word, that I'll be able to speak faithfully from it, and you'll help us to have the right fear.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, hopefully you've got a handout as well. It's got some Bible verses in there, so it'll be handy to follow along.

Well, how would you define hell? We had some up there on that video.

Well, to some extent, it sort of depends on the type of person you are, right? So for introverts, hell would be to stand up in a room full of strangers and reveal their innermost feelings, which for extroverts would be heaven.

And by contrast, for extroverts, hell would be to spend a whole week in a beautiful island with absolutely no one to talk to, which for introverts would be pure heaven.

[1 : 1 4] But more seriously, we look around the world, don't we, and we can see examples of hells on earth, war-torn countries where people live in the most absolutely heartbreaking conditions.

But what is hell really? Not on this side of death, but on beyond death, on the other side of death. Well, if you're an atheist, you probably think, oh, there's no such thing.

Hell is what Christians make up to scare others into believing. But I guess deep down, even if you're an atheist, I suspect you will have some lingering doubt.

What if hell does exist? Because you can't be absolutely certain, can you? You can't prove categorically that it doesn't exist. Because it actually lies beyond the reach of science.

And as far as I know, no one's actually gone there and come back to tell us the tale. And even if they did, they'll be pretty scorched.

[2 : 1 5] But even if they did, you still have to trust their word for it. Well, as a pastor, there'll be no surprises that I do believe in hell.

But today what I want to do is actually just show you what the Bible says about it. And more specifically, what Jesus himself says. Because as we'll see shortly, most of what's in the Bible about hell actually comes from the mouth of Jesus himself.

Now again, just like last week, I've printed a few verses, Bible verses on hell in the handout. But unlike last week where I said that there were actually too many verses on suffering to put on the one page, these verses on hell are pretty much all there is in the Bible.

I may have omitted one or two, and there may be a few others that allude indirectly by way of talking about judgment rather than hell. But this is pretty much it.

Now as you look at the page as well, just the right side of the handout, you'll see that there's very little in the Old Testament. I've only printed two. The Old Testament talks frequently about a place called Sheol.

[3 : 25] And we've got the spelling on the screen. But that means more like the grave or pit. Everyone sort of goes there, regardless of whether they're good or bad, whether they're safe or not.

However, there are two Old Testament passages that I think are of interest for us. The first, number one, is Daniel chapter 12 and verse 2 and 3. And here we read of a resurrection of sorts, where multitudes who are asleep will awake, presumably from Sheol, and some will be greeted with everlasting life and others with everlasting contempt.

Now as we look at the verse, it's not explicitly about hell. The words everlasting contempt may allude to it, but all the passage tells us is that there will be a universal day of reckoning.

And it will end happily for all. Now the other passage, the one number two on the other side, is the one from Isaiah, which Marty read a larger portion of.

And it comes, as you know, at the very end of Isaiah, where there's talk of a new heaven and a new earth. Here it says that there will come a time when those who worship the Lord will look upon the dead bodies of those who've rebelled, and the worms that eat them will not die, and the fire that burns them will not be quenched.

[4 : 52] Now that's the sort of the 2011 NIV translation that you're reading from your Bibles. But actually, that's not the most literal of translations, because the exact words there are that their worm will not die, and their fire will not be quenched.

Okay, so the NIV has interpreted it to mean that the worms and the fires are devouring the bodies, but actually it could also mean that the people themselves or the bodies are the worm or the fire.

So it's just not clear by the context whether this is talking about hell or not. The only reason why we do know that this is a direct reference to hell is because this is the verse that Jesus quotes in the Gospels.

You just have to look down there at number 4 in Mark chapter 9, right at the bottom where I've bolded it. This is the exact verse that Jesus quotes when he's talking about hell.

And so we do know that, based on Jesus' interpretation, that this passage is ultimately a description of hell. Well, let's now turn to the New Testament.

[6 : 02] And as I said earlier, most of the verses are actually Jesus' words. And if you think about it, that makes sense, doesn't it? Because if anyone were to know about hell, then it would be Jesus, wouldn't it?

He's the Son of God, the only one that is, in one sense, come from outside creation. And therefore, is able to tell us what's beyond creation. Of course, we still need to decide whether Jesus is trustworthy.

But we can do that by looking at the rest of the Gospels and deciding what else he did and said. And that's a topic for another time, so I won't get into that. But let's look closer at Jesus' words, because although he talks very clearly about the existence of hell, he doesn't give us a lot of detail about what it's like.

The word itself, hell, is translated from the Greek, Gehenna. And it's to be differentiated from another Greek word, Hades. So Hades, as a concept, is more like Sheol, a sort of intermediate resting place, whereas hell is a final destination.

It's a place where you end up finally if you don't go to heaven. It's either heaven or it's hell. Now, the word Gehenna actually is derived from an actual place just outside the walls of Jerusalem.

[7 : 26] It's a place called the Valley of Hinnom. And in the time of Jesus and before, it was actually an ancient garbage tip where people would just throw their garbage to be burned.

Now, here in Australia, where we've got loads of space, we throw our garbage and it goes into landfill, right? But in places like Singapore, where land is scarce, how they dispose of their rubbish is by incineration.

So there's a huge incinerator. I've got a picture of that in Singapore. Yep. And all it does is just burns rubbish 24-7. Okay? That's how much rubbish Singaporeans have.

But that's it. 24-7, it just keeps burning. And so the Valley of Hinnom was a bit like that. A 24-7 ancient incinerator.

And during Jesus' time, the word Gehenna or hell took on this connotation as a place of perpetual burning. And if you look at all the verses, that's how hell is most commonly described.

[8 : 31] It's a fire which never goes out. It's a blazing furnace. An eternal fire. Hell, therefore, has the characteristics of a perpetual fire. But it's not a literal fire, I don't think.

Because Jesus also uses the phrase the outer darkness to describe hell. So under passage 5 in Matthew 13, I haven't printed all the verses out, but some of the other references, for example, Matthew 8 and verse 12, uses the same phrase of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But instead of the image of fire, Jesus says the people are thrown outside into the darkness. And so if hell isn't, you know, if it's a literal fire, then it wouldn't be dark, isn't it?

So it's more metaphoric rather than literal. But whether the image is fire or outer darkness, both indicate that whoever goes there, whoever ends up there, is subject to torment.

And that's what the words weeping and gnashing of teeth are. That sort of grinding of teeth because you can't sort of tolerate the pain. It signals unrelenting turmoil and inability to find relief.

[9 : 45] I know this is a trivial example, but it's like having an itch and not being able to scratch it because you don't have a hand or whatever. Or being hungry and thirsty and never being able to satisfy that hunger or thirst.

So it's like you still have all your desires, bodily desires that humans have, but somehow there's just no way to satisfy them. Some of those Japanese movies, I don't know what you've seen, they've seen, there's cartoons of evil spirits and pictures of them just gorging themselves.

The cartoon I'm thinking of is Miyazaki's spiritual way. They're just gorging themselves, but they're never full. So I think hell might be a bit like that. You just keep eating, but you're actually in torture because the stomach gets bloated, but yet you still have that sensation of hunger.

Anyway, that's just me. It's conjecture from me, but I just imagine that that's what hell would be like. Now in Matthew chapter 25, that's in passage number four, coming back to that again, we also discover one more thing, and that is hell is prepared for the devil and his fallen angels.

They're banished there, not to rule over it, but actually to be punished. So this popular image of the devil ruling over hell with a pitchfork, taking delight in the people that come, you know, this image has no biblical basis.

[11 : 19] Hell's not the devil's domain. All right? God still rules over hell. Now, as we look at the other passages, who else joins the devil and his angels there?

Well, this is sort of described in a number of ways. So Jesus talks about those who are not in the kingdom as going to hell. And if you've followed his preaching since the start of his ministry, he's been preaching, repent, for the kingdom of God is near.

So those who are outside the kingdom are those who are unrepentant by Jesus' definition, those who don't turn to him in submission. Those who do are righteous before God, and those who don't are referred to the wicked.

So it's not about righteous doing good deeds, but righteous not being humble before God. In 2 Thessalonians, number 7, Paul on the other end talks about it in terms of the gospel, the good news of Jesus.

He says that the Lord will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. John, on the other hand, in Revelation, speaks like that.

[12 : 23] Passage number 9, anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of hell. But however they describe it, they're all really saying the same thing. Namely, that anyone who doesn't submit to the Lord, submit to Jesus as Lord, and trusts in his name for forgiveness, will end up in hell.

And when I say it like that, I know that many people are troubled by this. They have no problem with the devil going to hell. They have no problem with people like Osama bin Laden going to hell.

But what about people they love? Their family? Decent people that they know? And what about themselves? Is that where they're headed just because they can't bring themselves to believe in Jesus?

Surely this can't be consistent with God's character. Or as I put it in my outline as the next dot point, is God's name defamed by hell?

Can we still say he's loving and just if he allows people to suffer like that? Now, I don't doubt that these questions are sincere, but at its heart, I think they stem from a misconception, a number actually.

[13 : 40] Misconception of who God is, what he's like, and then also of what we're like. So let me try and tease these out, a couple of them. So misconception number one, ourselves.

Now, by and large, I think people think of life in this way. They think they're born into this world in a neutral position, and then they make choices in life, either good or bad, that lead them either down the path to heaven or down the path to hell.

But actually, if you read the Bible, that's not the way the Bible describes it. Instead, the way the Bible describes it is that actually when we're born, all humans are actually on the path to hell.

We already live life in the realm of darkness under the sentence of judgment. So, in the famous passage in John chapter 3, many of you would know chapter 3 and verse 16, it says, For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him will have eternal life.

And, Pung, I think we have the slide. But then it goes on to say, whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already. Light has come into the world, but people love darkness and they will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.

[15 : 03] And so, you see, we're already in the dark and we actually need to come into the light in order to be saved. Paul, in Ephesians chapter 2, says something similar.

He says, next slide, For we were dead in our transgressions and sins, following the ruler of the kingdom of the air, that's the devil, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following his desires and thoughts.

Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. So, by nature, by birth, we deserve wrath, judgment, and hell is just our logical destination, all of us, unless God intervenes and rescues us.

In fact, if you think about it, life on earth is only bearable because of what Christians call God's common grace. That is, God's merciful care of us, regardless of whether we're Christians or not, for all humanity.

If that were not the case, if we didn't have God's common grace, life on earth would actually be hell. We don't think like that. We feel we're entitled to the good life, right?

[16 : 11] We're entitled to have material comfort, loving relationships, food, water, shelter, whatever. But all this only happens because God's grace is upon us. He's restraining evil so that we can function as a society.

If God so much as sort of lifted that restraining hand on evil, that hand of grace, evil will run rampant.

And, you know, we just need to look at places around the world to see glimpses of hell, really. And also, for ourselves, we tend to think we're lovable people.

I do, at least. We're decent. But that's only because God restrains the evil that we're capable of doing. But if we keep telling God we want nothing to do with Him, then a time will come when He will actually grant us that wish, when that restraining hand on evil will be lifted and will actually be left to our own sinfulness, our own devices.

And that's what hell will be like. Utter darkness because God's light, His gracious presence is absent. God will still reign over hell, but He will reign by His absence, in one sense, rather than His gracious presence.

[17 : 31] And so what we have on earth is this small window of opportunity where actually God gives us glimpses of hell and of heaven so that we can decide. Every time we see evil and sin abound, it's a warning of what hell will be like without God's grace.

And every time we experience goodness and joy, especially with our relationships, people we love, it's actually a foretaste of what heaven will be like. But even better because there will be no evil.

But we're given these glimpses so that we have a chance to change courses, to move from darkness to light, to turn to God so that we can avoid hell.

That's misconception number one. So misconception number two that I want to tease out is that of God. And again here, many people think nothing of being in God's presence, right? They think, oh, we just want to come into God's presence, you know?

Their image of God is that of Santa Claus, I think, something like that. Warm, cuddly, you know, sit on his lap to get a picture taken. He's the benevolent father in the sky, right?

[18 : 39] But again, this is not the image in the Bible because in the Old Testament when Moses was in God's presence, he had to be shielded from God's glory. When the people were at Mount Sinai, they actually trembled just hearing God's voice.

And the writer of Hebrews gives us this account. So in chapter 12, when he's comparing the people's experience at Mount Sinai with the Christian's experience, he says this of Mount Sinai, it's a mountain that can be touched that is burning with fire, but so fearful was God as he spoke that the people begged that no further would be spoken to them because they could not bear what was commanded.

And then right at the bottom, even for Moses, the sight was so terrifying that Moses said, I am trembling with fear. Now many of you would know, I'm not a scientist, but many of you would know that the ozone layer actually protects us from the sun's radiation, right?

Without it, we will be killed. And scientists even talk about the risk of solar flares, these large bursts of radiation from the sun that were it to hit the earth would actually wipe out civilization, even with the ozone layer intact.

That's the power and the energy from the sun that can kill us. And yet at the same time, the sun's energy is also the very thing that supports life on earth.

[20 : 07] Without the sun, we would be dead too, wouldn't we? And so it's the same with God. He's both terrifying and life-sustaining at the same time.

So we can't say to God, we only want God's love, but we don't want His justice or His holiness. Because without His justice, His love is just, I don't know, sentimental, sort of rom-com mushiness.

It isn't love at all, is it? No, God's justice underpins His love. And God's justice is motivated by His love. And because we're sinful by nature, deserving of God's wrath, as Paul puts it, to come into God's presence is actually a terrifying thing.

It's like being exposed to the sun without the ozone layer to feel the full force of a solar flare. And that's what hell, I think, is going to be like.

Coming into God's presence with our sinful nature fully exposed. I don't know whether you notice or realize, but hell is not the only thing that's described as a fire in the Bible.

[21 : 20] Do you know who else is? God. In Hebrews chapter 12, verse 29, He's described as a consuming fire. So we can't ask God to tone down His glory or stop being a consuming fire.

It's just like asking the sun to stop shining. It can't be done. God is God. He is who He is. He can't not be God. And actually, His very character underpins the entire creation.

And if you were to ask God to change, I suspect you may end up not existing at all. because it's His very character that has made this universe and therefore He's made us the way we are.

So as we head to the last point, I just want to ask, how do we solve this conundrum? How do we allow ourselves to be in God's presence, to enjoy Him rather than to be consumed by Him? Or in the way I put the question, what can deliver us from hell?

Well, I want to answer it under two headings. The first is what God has done for us. That is the love of God, the first point. The love He has already shown to us.

[22 : 36] And then secondly, I want to deal with it under how we then must respond, our fear of God. I know many people ask the question, they see the possibility of hell and they say, where is God's love in that?

I've already talked about it earlier. But friends, I think if you ask the question like that, you're actually looking for love in the wrong place.

Sorry to use that pun. It's like me taking hours to prepare a fantastic meal for my daughters, MasterChef quality, with love and care put into it, you know, for hours or whatever, only for them to say as I put the plates before them, Daddy, if you love me, you would feed me too.

It's outrageous. Or for someone to take a friend down to the city for a night on the town, to go to the best restaurant, to go to the best theater, front row seats, buy him the souvenir program as well and whatever, other souvenirs are to be bought, the t-shirt, whatever, whatever.

Only for the friend to say at the end of the night, oh, you didn't take me out for a coffee afterwards. Do you see what I'm getting at? We're looking at love at that end point when people have made a choice not to follow God and we say, oh, God is not love when really we should be looking at the main game because God's great love is shown to us in Jesus on the cross.

[24 : 12] John 3.16 says that, for God so loved the world that He gave His Son Jesus. That's where we need to look for proof of God's love. Not in that end bit, that coffee after the amazing night.

Now, why is the cross the greatest act of love by God? Well, I think many of you know that. Because God gave His Son in one sense to suffer hell for us. The wrath that we deserve, God placed on His Son.

But more than that, the relational separation that had to occur on the cross because God turned His back on Jesus. That was agony for this triune God not to be, in one sense, relationship together.

They are still relating, but in one sense, they had to be separated. That is hell for God. And so, Jesus has, in one sense, become our ozone layer by His death.

He is the one that feels the full force of God's holiness, shields us from it, so that we can come into His presence and enjoy fellowship with Him. So, how can we be delivered from hell?

[25 : 25] Well, let's remember the love of God on the cross. But then, secondly, we need to respond. We need to avail ourselves of that protection. And that is to fear Him. And when I say fear here, I don't mean being sort of scared witness by God.

No, to fear God is to show Him due respect and honor, to recognize God for who He is. Friends, I suppose you do know that not all fears are bad, right?

Some fears are actually good. Those warnings and scary pictures on the cigarette packets, they're designed to make us afraid to smoke, right?

So, is that a good fear? Yes. You don't want to die. And so, when Jesus warns us about hell and then it drives us to fear God, that is actually a good fear.

In our second reading today in passage number three, Jesus talks about these two types of fears. One is bad. He says, don't be afraid of those who can only kill the body and do no more.

[26 : 29] That is, we're so afraid of what others think of us in this life, what they can do to us, the suffering they can cause to us. But Jesus says, no, there's actually a worse thing than, you know, the worst they can do is kill you and even that is not the worst thing that can happen to you.

No. The fear that you need to fear most is God. Why? Because He's the one who after you're killed is able to decide your fate for eternity, whether it's heaven or hell.

So logically, who should you fear more? God. God, of course. the fear of God is a good fear, not a bad fear. And yet, so much of the time we're just preoccupied with all these other bad fears in His life that stops us fearing God.

But Jesus pleads with us, fear Him. Yes, I tell you, fear Him. He repeats Himself. And I guess that's my plea for all of you today as well.

If you don't yet know God, then don't let all the other fears stop you from finding about Him. If you haven't really considered His Son Jesus, then please, don't ignore it any longer.

[27 : 42] Come. Come and talk to me. We're going to run a course, as we do twice a year in August, a short course called Christianity Explored, looking at who Jesus is and why He matters.

Come to that. Let us show you how we can be confident in Jesus and who He is. Because if we fear God and trust in Jesus, then there's no need to fear hell.

We're covered. We're covered by the death of Jesus. But if we don't have Jesus, then I guess the question is, what will you have when you come face to face with God?

How are you confident that you will not be consumed by God? I'm doing in