

“What Do We Do About Hell?”

Reading: *Psalm 116; Luke 16:19-31*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

There are some hard issues that we need to wrestle with in our faith. We believe and wholeheartedly affirm that the Bible is the word of God, that He speaks to us through it and uses it to help us know Him. It tells us the truth about God and points us to Him. It is a book unlike any other. But even so, it raises some very hard questions, questions that people of faith have been struggling to answer for many generations. Some things are very clearly spelled out by the Bible, but there are other things that are either less clear or are difficult enough to wrap our minds around that we need to spend some time thinking about them. So we have a few weeks between the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of Lent, and we’re going to spend this time being challenged by what the Bible has to say on some very challenging topics.

And to get us started, we’re going to look at what I think may be one of the thorniest ideas in the Bible: hell. Do we really believe that there’s a fiery place somewhere in the middle of the earth where little red demons poke people with pitchforks and Satan sits on a throne made of skulls devising new ways to torment people? How can a loving God send people to hell for eternity? How do we fit hell into our message of the good news of Jesus Christ?

We have to begin by realizing that maybe the reason hell is such a complicated concept is not so much because of what the Bible says, but because of how we’ve added to the idea through the years. So before we ever start talking about the Bible, we have to clear away some of the clutter that gets in the way of reading the Bible. It’s like the difference between how the world views cherubim — cute little roly-poly child-angels — and how cherubim were imagined in biblical times — terrifying and powerful divine creatures with multiple wings and faces. Likewise, in our culture we have a fairly specific picture in mind when we start talking about hell, and if we’re honest, that picture probably comes from cartoons as much as it does from the Bible.

Ultimately a lot of our cultural ideas about hell go back to medieval paintings and writings, and especially from Dante’s *Inferno*. That’s the story of a man who is given a tour of heaven, hell, and purgatory, though of course it’s the part about hell that everyone remembers. He describes each level of hell as containing different types of sinners, and they all face an eternal torment that is ironically appropriate to whatever they did in life. And then we could add to that the German legend of Faust, the brilliant scholar who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for a life filled with success and pleasure. There are literally dozens of adaptations of the story, some of them in recent movies, and sometimes the Faustian character is able to trick the devil and regain his eternal soul, and sometimes the devil wins in the end, but it’s a very old and very popular story that adds this whole cultural dimension of thinking of the devil as a trickster, going “down to Georgia lookin’ for a soul to steal,” and if you’re wily enough, you might be able to out-trick Old Scratch.

So on a popular level, we have a picture that comes to mind when we start talking about hell and the devil, and it’s sort of a cartoonish view of hell and a superstitious view of the devil, and while not all of that stuff is completely contradictory to what the Bible says, we need to be aware of those popular ideas that can get in the way of our reading of the Bible. And then on top of that, there’s the fact that a lot of times the church has used hell as a scare tactic in our preaching. “Turn or burn” has

been the dominant message of the church at some points in our history. And while it's true that we need to warn people about the eternal consequences of their actions, sometimes we've been so angry and negative and unloving in our words that we've ended up turning people off to the gospel. So we have a lot of baggage about hell that we need to clear out of the way before we get a clearer view of what the Bible actually says.

So what, then, does the Bible actually tell us about hell? If you haven't noticed, the Bible is a very big book that was written by a lot of different people over a very long time, so the picture it paints is much more complex than "you die and your soul immediately either goes to the pearly gates (where you get wings and a harp) or to hell (where you get tormented by demons)." If we look at some of the oldest parts of the Bible, there's actually very little talk about what happens to you when you die. You just die and go to the grave, and sometimes they'll talk about being "gathered with your ancestors." But as time passed, there was a little more discussion about it. People started talking about "sheol," the grave, the place of the dead, a shadowy, gloomy, cave-like place that eventually claimed everyone (especially the wicked). Sheol was like an ever-hungry open mouth; it was never satisfied with enough souls. So, like the writer of Ecclesiastes says, everything is meaningless, because we all return to the dust one day, so you might as well enjoy life while you can.

But it bothered people that you couldn't count on justice in this life. There have always been an awful lot of bad people to do pretty well for themselves in life, and there have always been a lot of good people who suffer needlessly, and that doesn't seem to square with believing in a God who is powerful and cares about justice. So as we look at some of the later parts of the Old Testament, we start to see people thinking about death in more complex terms: we get hints of a hope of resurrection. If you can't count on justice in this life, then that must mean God hands out justice after we die, and therefore there must be a separation between the righteous dead and the wicked dead. By the time of Jesus, that thought had developed into a more mature idea of resurrection: your soul might get put in sort of a holding place for a time, but eventually God would reunite your soul with your resurrected body so that you could be judged, and some people said that only the righteous would be resurrected and sent to paradise, while some said that the wicked would also be resurrected and sent to be punished.

So what does the Bible actually tell us about that punishment? We really don't get a lot of detail about it, but what we do get is pretty unpleasant. It's not clear how literally Jesus intends us to take the parable we read for today in Luke 16, but even if it's mostly metaphorical, the imagery is still consistent with other parts of the Bible. It's a place of fire, fire that doesn't go out, and at one point Jesus says that everyone there will be "salted with fire," which is pretty compelling imagery. The book of Revelation envisions it as a lake of fire, and Satan is also cast in there to be punished in the end, implying that he's not ultimately its ruler. In spite of the fire, it's also associated with darkness, since in the parable of the talents, Jesus casts out the wicked servant into the outer darkness. It's cut off from the light of God. It's a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth," which shows us that it's full of pain and despair. At another time, Jesus says that the worms never die there, drawing from a prophecy of Isaiah, which is intended to show us that the worms don't die there because the place is so full of the dead that the worms never run out of food — it's a place of eternal death.

That's pretty much the extent of the details that the Bible gives us on hell. Unfortunately for Dante, the punishments are not nearly as imaginative as in his *Inferno*, and unfortunately for Faust,

you can't trick your way out. It's clear that there is a judgment made upon your life, and your eternal destiny is on the line: your decisions in life have eternal consequences. It's clear that hell is a place of punishment; being burned is terribly painful. It's clear that just as trusting in Christ can give you eternal life, rejecting Christ leaves you in eternal death. And it's clear that just as coming to Christ brings you into the presence of God who is often associated with radiant, glorious light, being cast out of God's presence means that you are in a place of impenetrable darkness.

The idea is not that God is some brute who's eagerly waiting for the chance to toss a few mortals into the bowels of hell because He enjoys it, the idea is that you and I were created to be eternal beings who live and breathe in the presence of our loving God, but through our sin we have cut ourselves off from Him and have to re-learn how to walk in the light. Hell is not being skewered by a demon for all eternity, hell is being a creature made for eternal life who is instead eternally dead because we have chosen to reject the source of our life. So while it might seem unjust or sadistic for God to send people to hell for eternity, death in hell does not result from one or two mistakes made in life: it comes as a result of living your life in defiance of God, choosing to make your allegiance with hell rather than heaven. If we desire to have nothing to do with God while we're alive, God will respect that desire when we die.

At this point in the sermon, there are a couple of directions I could go. I could take it in the direction that I imagine most sermons dealing with hell go, that if you're a sinner, you need to turn or burn. Here's how bad hell is, so be scared enough to turn to Jesus and be saved. And if that applies to you, it's certainly true that you need to hear that message. Hell is real, even if we don't know all the details about it. There are eternal consequences for your choices, and there is hope in Jesus Christ. But to be honest, ending the sermon on that note is simply too easy, because if you've already put your hope in Jesus, you don't need to hear a sermon like that. In fact, in some cases, a sermon like that can make us feel smug in our security. There's another way this sermon needs to end.

The terrifying reality of people around us living lives that cut them off from the God of life for all eternity ought to be a rallying call for the church. We live in the middle of a sea of drowning people, many of whom don't even know that there's an alternative. Here in the Poconos we like to think of this area as a nice quiet retreat, a place to rest and retire and vacation. But the reality is that there is a war for people's souls raging all around us. Who knows how many people there are within shouting distance of this church building, or of your house, who are plunging headlong into hell. And we know the one who can save them. In fact, Jesus can do more than save us from the hell of eternal death, He can even save us from the living death that some people experience every day in their addiction, their broken marriage, their out of control anger, their lust.

No matter where you are in your life, no matter how secure you are in your walk with Christ, no matter how comfortable you are in your spirituality, the terror of hell ought to motivate you beyond concern for your own eternal destiny to concern for the people you meet each day. The stakes are simply too high for us to be a complacent church. We cannot ignore the unvoiced cries of our neighbors. There's one other very important detail about hell that I didn't mention: when Jesus was speaking to Peter about the foundation of the church, Jesus said that the gates of hell would not be able to withstand us. The first generation of Christians spread out into the world to save the lost. The Pilgrim Holiness Church, which is what this church was before the Wesleyan Church was formed, was started around the turn of the last century as a network of Christians who were passionate about

reaching out to the poor and the lost wherever they were and however they could. We have it in our spiritual DNA to have broken hearts and willing hands for those who are on their way to hell.

Hell is real. Separation from God is terrible, both in this life and the next. Jesus came to save the lost, to the point that He was regularly criticized for spending so much of His time in the company of sinners. As Rich Mullins said, “the whores all seemed to love him and the drunks proposed a toast;” Jesus so loved the lost that He would reach out to them wherever they were to save them. So what do we do about hell? We charge its gates. We invade its turf and bring souls out of darkness and into the light. This is what the church is here for.



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