

The Importance of Hell

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by Tim Keller

In 2003 a research group discovered 64% of Americans expect to go to heaven when they die, but less than 1% think they might go to hell. Not only are there plenty of people today who don't believe in the Bible's teaching on everlasting punishment, even those who do find it an unreal and a remote concept. Nevertheless, it is a very important part of the Christian faith, for several reasons.

1. It is important because Jesus taught about it more than all other Biblical authors put together. Jesus speaks of "eternal fire and punishment" as the final abode of the angels and human beings who have rejected God (Matthew 25:41,46) He says that those who give into sin will be in danger of the "fire of hell" (Matthew 5:22; 18:8-9.) The word Jesus uses for 'hell' is Gehenna, a valley in which piles of garbage were daily burned as well as the corpses of those without families who could bury them. In Mark 9:43 Jesus speaks of a person going to "hell [gehenna], where 'their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'" Jesus is referring to the maggots that live in the corpses on the garbage heap. When all the flesh is consumed, the maggots die. Jesus is saying, however, that the spiritual decomposition of hell never ends, and that is why 'their worm does not die.'

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In Matthew 10:28 Jesus says, "Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." He is speaking to disciples, some of whom will eventually be tortured, sawn in half, flayed and burned alive. Yet, he says, that is a picnic compared to hell. Clearly, for Jesus hell was a real place, since he said that after judgment day people would experience it in their bodies. Hell is a place not only of physical but also of spiritual misery.

Jesus constantly depicted hell as painful fire and "outer darkness" (Matt 25:30; cf. Jude 6,7,13,) a place of unimaginably terrible misery and unhappiness. If Jesus, the Lord of Love and Author of Grace spoke about hell more often, and in a more vivid, blood-curdling manner than anyone else, it must be a crucial truth. But why was it so important to Jesus?

2. It is important because it shows how infinitely dependent we are on God for everything. Virtually all commentators and theologians believe that the Biblical images of fire and outer darkness are metaphorical. (Since souls are in hell right now, without bodies, how could the fire be literal, physical fire?) Even Jonathan Edwards pointed out that the Biblical language for hell was symbolic, but, he added, 'when metaphors are used in Scripture about spiritual things . . . they fall short of the literal truth.' (from "The Torments of Hell are Exceeding Great" in volume 14 of the Yale edition of Edwards

works.) To say that the Scriptural image of hell-fire is not wholly literal is of no comfort whatsoever. The reality will be far worse than the image. What, then, are the 'fire' and 'darkness' symbols for? They are vivid ways to describe what happens when we lose the presence of God. Darkness refers to the isolation, and fire to the disintegration of being separated from God. Away from the favor and face of God, we literally, horrifically, and endlessly fall apart.

In the teaching of Jesus the ultimate condemnation from the mouth of God is 'depart from me.' That is remarkable--to simply be away from God is the worst thing that can happen to us! Why? We were originally created to walk in God's immediate presence (Genesis 2.) In one sense, of course, God is everywhere and upholds everything. Only in him do we all speak and move and have our being (Acts 17:28.) In that sense, then, it is impossible to depart from the Lord; even hell cannot exist unless God upholds it. But the Bible says sin excludes us from God's 'face' (Isaiah 59:2.) All the life, joy, love, strength, and meaning we have looked for and longed for is found in his face (Psalm 16:11)-that is, in his favor, presence, fellowship, and pleasure.

Sin removes us from that aspect of his power that sustains and supports us. It is to us as water is to a fish-away from it our life slowly ebbs away. That is what has been happening to us throughout history. That is why, for Paul, the everlasting fire and destruction of hell is 'exclusion from the presence of the Lord.' (2 Thessalonians 1:9.) Separation from God and his blessings forever is the reality to which all the symbols point. For example, when Jesus speaks being 'destroyed' in hell, the word used is apollumi, meaning not to be annihilated out of existence but to be 'totaled' and ruined so as to be useless for its intended purpose.

The image of 'gehenna' and 'maggots' means decomposition. Once a body is dead it loses its beauty and strength and coherence, it begins to break into its constituent parts, to stink and to disintegrate. So what is a 'totaled' human soul? It does not cease to exist, but rather becomes completely incapable of all the things a human soul is for--reasoning, feeling, choosing, giving or receiving love or joy. Why? Because the human soul was built for worshipping and enjoying the true God, and all truly human life flows from that. In this world, all of humanity, even those who have turned away from God, still are supported by 'kindly providences' or 'common grace' (Acts 14:16-17; Psalm 104:10-30; James 1:17) keeping us still capable of wisdom, love, joy, and goodness. But when we lose God's supportive presence all together, the result is hell.

3. It is important because it unveils the seriousness and danger of living life for yourself. In Romans 1-2 Paul explains that God, in his wrath against those who reject him, 'gives them up' to the sinful passions of their hearts. Commentators (cf. Douglas Moo) point out that this cannot mean God impels people to sin, since in Ephesians 4:19 it is said that sinners give themselves up to their sinful desires. It means that the worst (and fairest) punishment God can give a person is to allow them their sinful hearts' deepest desire.

What is that? The desire of the sinful human heart is for independence. We want to choose and go our own way (Isaiah 53:6.) This is no idle 'wandering from the path.' As Jeremiah puts it, 'No one repents . . . each pursues his own course like a horse charging into battle. (8:6)' (We want to get away from God-but, as we have seen, this is the very thing that is most destructive to us. Cain is warned not to sin because sin is slavery. (Genesis 4:7; John 8:34.) It destroys your ability to choose, love, enjoy. Sin also brings blindness-the more you reject the truth about God the more incapable you are of perceiving any truth about yourself or the world (Isaiah 29:9-10; Romans 1:21.)

What is hell, then? It is God actively giving us up to what we have freely chosen-to go our own way, be our own "the master of our fate, the captain of our soul," to get away from him and his control. It is God banishing us to regions we have desperately tried to get into all our lives. J.I.Packer writes: "*Scripture sees hell as self-chosen . . . [H]ell appears as God's gesture of respect for human choice. All receive what they actually chose, either to be with God forever, worshipping him, or without God forever, worshipping themselves.*" (J.I.Packer, Concise Theology p.262-263.) If the thing you most want is to worship God in the beauty of his holiness, then that is what you will get (Ps 96:9-13.) If the thing you most want is to be your own master, then the holiness of God will become an agony, and the presence of God a terror you will flee forever (Rev 6:16; cf. Is 6:1-6.)

Why is this so extremely important to stress in our preaching and teaching today? The idea of hell is implausible to people because they see it as unfair that infinite punishment would be meted out for comparably minor, finite false steps (like not embracing Christianity.) Also, almost no one knows anyone (including themselves) that seem to be bad enough to merit hell. But the Biblical teaching on hell answers both of these objections. First, it tells us that people only get in the afterlife what they have most wanted-either to have God as Savior and Master or to be their own Saviors and Masters. Secondly, it tells us that hell is a natural consequence. Even in this world it is clear that self-centeredness rather than God-centeredness makes you miserable and blind. The more self-centered, self-absorbed, self-pitying, and self-justifying people are, the more breakdowns occur, relationally, psychologically, and even physically. They also go deeper into denial about the source of their problems.

On the other hand, a soul that has decided to center its life on God and his glory moves toward increasing joy and wholeness. We can see both of these 'trajectories' even in this life. But if, as the Bible teaches, our souls will go on forever, then just imagine where these two kinds of souls will be in a billion years. Hell is simply one's freely chosen path going on forever. We wanted to get away from God, and God, in his infinite justice, sends us where we wanted to go.

In the parable of Luke 16:19ff, Jesus tells us of a rich man who goes to hell and who is now in torment and horrible thirst because of the fire (v.24) But there are interesting insights into what is going on in his soul. He urges Abraham to send a messenger to go and warn his still-living brothers about the reality of hell. Commentators have pointed out that this is not a gesture of compassion, but rather an effort at blame-shifting. He is

saying that he did not have a chance, he did not have adequate information to avoid hell. That is clearly his point, because Abraham says forcefully that people in this life have been well-informed through the Scriptures. It is intriguing to find exactly what we would expect—even knowing he is in hell and knowing God has sent him there, he is deeply in denial, angry at God, unable to admit that it was a just decision, wishing he could be less miserable (v.24) but in no way willing to repent or seek the presence of God.

I believe one of the reasons the Bible tells us about hell is so it can act like 'smelling salts' about the true danger and seriousness of even minor sins. However, I've found that only stressing the symbols of hell (fire and darkness) in preaching rather than going into what the symbols refer to (eternal, spiritual decomposition) actually prevents modern people from finding hell a deterrent. Some years ago I remember a man who said that talk about the fires of hell simply didn't scare him, it seemed too far-fetched, even silly. So I read him lines from C.S. Lewis:

Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others . . . but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine. It is not a question of God 'sending us' to hell. In each of us there is something growing, which will BE Hell unless it is nipped in the bud.

To my surprise he got very quiet and said, "Now that scares me to death." He almost immediately began to see that hell was a) perfectly fair and just, and b) something that he realized he might be headed for if he didn't change. If we really want skeptics and non-believers to be properly frightened by hell, we cannot simply repeat over and over that 'hell is a place of fire.' We must go deeper into the realities that the Biblical images represent. When we do so, we will find that even secular people can be affected.

We run from the presence of God and therefore God actively gives us up to our desire (Romans 1:24, 26.) Hell is therefore a prison in which the doors are first locked from the inside by us and therefore are locked from the outside by God (Luke 16:26.) Every indication is that those doors continue to stay forever barred from the inside. Though every knee and tongue in hell knows that Jesus is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11,) no one can seek or want that Lordship without the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3.) This is why we can say that no one goes to hell who does not choose both to go and to stay there. What could be more fair than that?

4. The doctrine of hell is important because it is the only way to know how much Jesus loved us and how much he did for us. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus says that no physical destruction can be compared with the spiritual destruction of hell, of losing the presence of God. But this is exactly what happened to Jesus on the cross—he was forsaken by the Father (Matthew 27:46.) In Luke 16:24 the rich man in hell is desperately thirsty (v.24) and on the cross Jesus said "I thirst" (John 19:28.) The water of life, the presence of God, was taken from him. The point is this. Unless we come to grips with this "terrible" doctrine, we will never even begin to understand the depths of what Jesus did

for us on the cross. His body was being destroyed in the worst possible way, but that was a flea bite compared to what was happening to his soul. When he cried out that his God had forsaken him he was experiencing hell itself. But consider--if our debt for sin is so great that it is never paid off there, but our hell stretches on for eternity, then what are we to conclude from the fact that Jesus said the payment was "finished" (John 19:30) after only three hours? We learn that what he felt on the cross was far worse and deeper than all of our deserved hells put together.

And this makes emotional sense when we consider the relationship he lost. If a mild acquaintance denounces you and rejects you--that hurts. If a good friend does the same--that hurts far worse. However, if your spouse walks out on you saying, "I never want to see you again," that is far more devastating still. The longer, deeper, and more intimate the relationship, the more tortuous is any separation. But the Son's relationship with the Father was beginningless and infinitely greater than the most intimate and passionate human relationship. When Jesus was cut off from God he went into the deepest pit and most powerful furnace, beyond all imagining. He experienced the full wrath of the Father. And he did it voluntarily, for us.

Fairly often I meet people who say, "I have a personal relationship with a loving God, and yet I don't believe in Jesus Christ at all." Why, I ask? "My God is too loving to pour out infinite suffering on anyone for sin." But this shows a deep misunderstanding of both God and the cross. On the cross, God HIMSELF, incarnated as Jesus, took the punishment. He didn't visit it on a third party, however willing.

So the question becomes: what did it cost your kind of god to love us and embrace us? What did he endure in order to receive us? Where did this god agonize, cry out, and where were his nails and thorns? The only answer is: "I don't think that was necessary." But then ironically, in our effort to make God more loving, we have made him less loving. His love, in the end, needed to take no action. It was sentimentality, not love at all. The worship of a god like this will be at most impersonal, cognitive, and ethical. There will be no joyful self-abandonment, no humble boldness, no constant sense of wonder. We could not sing to him "love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." Only through the cross could our separation from God be removed, and we will spend all eternity loving and praising God for what he has done (Rev 5:9-14.)

And if Jesus did not experience hell itself for us, then we ourselves are devalued. In Isaiah, we are told, "The results of his suffering he shall see, and shall be satisfied" (Isaiah 53:11). This is a stupendous thought. Jesus suffered infinitely more than any human soul in eternal hell, yet he looks at us and says, "It was worth it." What could make us feel more loved and valued than that? The Savior presented in the gospel waded through hell itself rather than lose us, and no other savior ever depicted has loved us at such a cost.

Conclusion The doctrine of hell is crucial--without it we can't understand our complete dependence on God, the character and danger of even the smallest sins, and the true scope of the costly love of Jesus. Nevertheless, it is possible to stress the doctrine of hell

in unwise ways. Many, for fear of doctrinal compromise, want to put all the emphasis on God's active judgment, and none on the self-chosen character of hell. Ironically, as we have seen, this unBiblical imbalance often makes it less of a deterrent to non-believers rather than more of one. And some can preach hell in such a way that people reform their lives only out of a self-interested fear of avoiding consequences, not out of love and loyalty to the one who embraced and experienced hell in our place. The distinction between those two motives is all-important. The first creates a moralist, the second a born-again believer.

We must come to grips with the fact that Jesus said more about hell than Daniel, Isaiah, Paul, John, Peter put together. Before we dismiss this, we have to realize we are saying to Jesus, the pre-eminent teacher of love and grace in history, "I am less barbaric than you, Jesus--I am more compassionate and wiser than you." Surely that should give us pause! Indeed, upon reflection, it is because of the doctrine of judgment and hell that Jesus' proclamations of grace and love are so astounding.