

The Bible and the Afterlife: 2) The Inferno of Hell
Matthew 5:21-26, Matthew 22:1-14
April 26, 2009

I approach this morning's topic with some fear and trepidation. You may be afraid that I've flipped, for I tend to preach about the amazing grace of our loving God. Folks who are new to the congregation may be looking for the fire escape, fearful that they've stumbled upon a hellfire and brimstone preacher! That's not what you're in for today! We're in the midst of a sermon series called "The Bible and the Afterlife." We humans tend to be intrigued by what happens after our lives on earth end. Last week we looked at the Bible's promise of eternal life. Next week we'll consider what the Bible says about a final judgment. Then we'll take a glimpse of heaven, but today we consider what the Bible says about hell.

A story sets the tone for our exploration. A Minneapolis couple decided to go to Florida to thaw out during an icy winter. They planned to stay at the same hotel where they spent their honeymoon 20 years earlier. Due to hectic schedules, the husband left Minnesota and flew to Florida on Thursday; his wife was to fly down the following day.

The husband checked into the hotel and sat down at the computer in his room to send his wife an e-mail. However, he accidentally left out one letter in her e-mail address, and without realizing his error, sent the e-mail to an erroneous address.

Meanwhile, somewhere in Houston, a widow had just returned home from her husband's funeral. He was a minister who was called home to glory following a heart attack. The widow decided to check her e-mail, expecting messages from relatives and friends. After reading the first message, she screamed and fainted.

The widow's son rushed into the room, found his mother on the floor, and saw the computer screen, which read:

To: My Loving Wife

Subject: I've Arrived

I know you are surprised to hear from me. They have computers here now and you are allowed to send e-mails to your loved ones. I've just arrived and have been checked in. I see that everything has been prepared for your arrival tomorrow. Looking forward to seeing you then! Hope your journey is as uneventful as mine was.

P.S. It sure is hot down here!

The typical image of hell is of an underworld fiery furnace where those who don't qualify for heaven are imprisoned in everlasting punishment. But before we let our imaginations run wild, let's look at what the Bible says.

The Bible uses three different words which are variously translated as hell. The first word in the Hebrew Scriptures is Sheol. Sheol is a place underground where the shades of the dead reside. The idea probably arose from the practice of burying the bodies of the dead in the ground. The ancient Israelites had no concept of life after death or resurrection from the dead until late in their history. The dead had no life, but something of their former selves had a shadowy existence under the earth.ⁱ It wasn't necessarily an evil place, for even God's presence could be experienced there. The Psalmist writes, "If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there" (Psalm 139:8b).

The second word found in the scriptures is Hades. By the time of Jesus, popular notions about the fate of the dead had evolved under the influence of Greek mythology and the dualistic religious indigenous to the east of Palestine.ⁱⁱ In Greek mythology Hades is the brother of Zeus. He is made lord of the underworld, ruling over the dead. He is a greedy god who is concerned with increasing the number of his subjects and is exceedingly reluctant to allow any of them to leave. Life in the underworld of Hades is not particularly pleasant. It is like a miserable dream, full of shadows, without sunlight or hope. It is a joyless place where the dead eventually fade into nothingness. The kingdom of Hades is surrounded by several rivers, including the rivers of woe, lamentation, fire, and forgetfulness.ⁱⁱⁱ

The indigenous religions in Palestine contributed dualism – imagining good and evil realms in a state of constant warfare. From this tradition emerges the picture of a separation of the dead, in which the shades of the wicked are sent beneath the earth and the shades of the good lifted to heaven.

We can see how other cultural influences were significant in the evolving conception of the afterlife.

In addition to Sheol and Hades, the Bible also uses the Greek word, *gehenna*. The word literally means the Valley of the Hinnon. Long before Jesus' time it had been a place of human sacrifice to the Canaanite god Moloch. In the seventh century Before the Common Era, King Josiah instituted several religious reforms. He desecrated the altar to Moloch. The place became a continually burning garbage dump for the city of Jerusalem. Gehenna became a metaphor for a place of torment for great sinners and others who betrayed God.

Jesus uses the word in this morning's first passage from Matthew 5. "I say to you if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the Gehenna of fire." His listeners would have been familiar with the garbage dump with its perpetually smoldering fires and little organisms slowly consuming the rubbish. Jesus' warning is that people who violate the basic principles of responsible behavior can find themselves alienated from society, on the trash heap of life.^{iv}

These are the three words the Bible uses that are commonly interpreted as hell. Sheol and Hades are the abode of the dead in which people are mere shades of existence that eventually fade away. Gehenna is a continually burning garbage dump, a metaphor for punishment of the wicked. There is not unanimity of meaning of these biblical words. Other cultural influences have enhanced these words, perhaps beyond their original intention.

We can draw at least one conclusion from the study of these words: the stereotypical image of hell as an everlasting torture chamber of punishment for the wicked is not biblical. Even the idea of Hades, although certainly not a pleasant place to live, is not a fiery furnace. Although the garbage heap of Gehenna may continually burn, what is thrown in the garbage heap is devoured by the fire; the objects thrown in the dump do not remain on fire for eternity. They are destroyed; their lives simply cease to exist. Hell is nothingness, nonexistence.

This helps us address some of the concerns that the traditional view of hell raises. We wonder about good people who live upright lives doing good to others, but who have chosen not to believe in God or have not been introduced to God. Although God desires relationship with us, God does respect our freedom of choice and does not force friendship. God allows us to become the sort of persons we choose to become. God in his mercy does not impose unending torment upon those who choose not to enter into relationship with him.

The picture of hell as a fiery furnace of punishment suggests that God is a cruel and sadistic torturer. This image stands in stark contrast to the God revealed in Jesus Christ as boundlessly merciful. A god who tortured those who rebel against him would be incongruent with the God of Jesus who commands us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. I would find it difficult to honor and respect a god who is a bloodthirsty monster. The idea of hell as the end of life satisfies this moral challenge about the nature of God.

One final question is answered by the idea of hell as elimination of life at death. How can the reign of God exist in all its fullness if there is also place of endless suffering and torment? The biblical vision points toward the fullness of time when God will reign triumphant over the forces of sin and evil. There will no longer be a power struggle between good and evil. The goodness of God will prevail, with no threat from forces of evil.^v

The understanding of hell as the destruction of life is not nearly as pleasant as eternal life with God, but it is a more biblical vision than the idea of hell as an endless torture chamber. God respects our freedom to choose life with God or life alienated from God here and now as well as into eternity.

Rabbi Harold Kushner relates the story about a man who died after having led a thoroughly selfish, immoral life. Moments later, he found himself in a world of bright sunlight, soft music and figures all dressed in white. "Boy, I never

expected this,” he said to himself. “I guess God has a soft spot in his heart for a clever rascal like me.” He turned to a figure in a white robe and said, “Buddy, I’ve got something to celebrate. Can I buy you a drink?” The figure answered, “If you mean alcoholic beverages, we don’t have any of that around here.” “No booze, huh? Well, then, what about a game of cards? Pinochle, draw poker, you name it.” “I’m sorry but we don’t gamble here either.” “Well, what do you do all day,” the man asked. “We read the Psalms a lot. There is a Bible class every morning and a prayer circle in the afternoon.” “Psalms! Bible study all day long! Boy, I’ll tell you, heaven isn’t what it’s cracked up to be.” At which point the figure in the white smiled and said, “I see that you don’t understand. We’re in heaven; you’re in hell.”

Rabbi Kushner reflects that, “Heaven, the story suggests, is having learned to do and enjoy the things that make us human, the things that only human beings can do. And by contrast, the worst kind of hell I can imagine is not fire and brimstone and little red figures with pitchforks. The worst hell is the realization that you could have been a real human being, and now it’s too late. You could have known the satisfaction of caring for another person, of being generous and truthful and loyal, of having developed your mind and your heart, of controlling your instincts instead of letting them control you, and you never did.”^{vi}

Reinhold Niebuhr said that we shouldn’t concern ourselves too much with the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell. It is enough for us now to be on the road with Christ, and to seek and cherish God, for heaven is only heaven because God is there, and exclusion from God’s presence, even if you were reclining on a cloud while cherubs fed you Godiva, would still be hell.^{vii}

Rather than fixate upon the brownstone in heaven or the brimstone in hell, our lives are most importantly fixed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who came not to condemn the world, but that the world might have life abundant. Jesus doesn’t use hell to scare the hell out of us, but rather to point us to right living in relationship with God and one another. Let us exercise our God-given freedom of choice and choose life!

ⁱ James Rowe Adams, *From Literal to Literary: The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors* (Rising Star Press, 2005), p. 122.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 122.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Hades,” Online Etymology Dictionary, www.etymonline.com, retrieved April 25, 2009.

^{iv} Adams, *ibid*, p. 123.

^v Clark H. Pinnock, “The Nature of Hell.”

^{vi} Rabbi Harold Kushner, *When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough* (New York: Pocket Books, 1986), pp. 156-157.

^{vii} Julie Pennington-Russell, “Why Stand Gazing?” in *Heaven and Hell: Christian Reflection* (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2002), p. 41.