

QUESTION 6: “WHAT IS HELL?”

(Luke 16:19-31)

6.16.19

INTRODUCTION

Thanks largely to the last two chapters of the Bible — Revelation 21 and 22 — we are given some stunning visuals about what the future, eternal home for all the world’s Christians will look like. Truth be known, I think it’s probably a good thing that we are going to be given bodies brand new and fit for eternity, because I’m quite sure our broken, limited, finite earthly selves wouldn’t be able to take it all in. But I also know that I can’t wait, I absolutely can’t wait, for that moment, whenever it is, when I leave this world behind to be brought by my Lord and Savior to my new, eternal home — and, on top of all that, to actually be in his presence, to be able to put eyeballs on my Savior. There are no words for what that’s going to be like — and every day that passes is another day closer to that unimaginable day!

You see, Christians have been given a promise — an amazing, wonderful promise from Jesus Christ — that he is preparing a place for his followers in heaven. Think about that — Jesus said that he is going to prepare a place for his followers — us. You get the picture of something made custom-special just for us — as individual as we are. But the best part? How he ends that promise: ***“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am”*** — ***Jesus Christ, John 14:3.*** Jesus wants us to be with him in his home for all eternity. Wow!

Why these moments talking about heaven? Because it gives us a great point of contrast as we seek to understand the exact opposite of heaven and all that means. Our question today is overwhelming, maybe a bit scary, but incredibly important: “What is hell?” Shakespeare had Hamlet describing death like this: ***“the undiscovered country from whose bourn (realm, domain) no traveler returns — Hamlet, III,i.*** OK, so we all die. In fact, the statistics are rather sobering: Five out of every five people die! But despite that fact that there are only two options for what happens after we die, and those options apply to every one of us, very little is often said about hell — so much so that church historian Martin Marty was recently moved to write: “Hell disappeared. And no one noticed.” Considering that Christ talked more often about hell than heaven, I think it is safe to say that, as Christians, even as we know we have a home waiting for us in heaven, we need to notice hell. We need to be aware of it, know about it, and be able to talk about it. Today we’re going to be talking about it. So let’s get started.

TEXT (Luke 16:19-31) (read by youth reader)

TERMS

We often hear people saying something like, “That was hell,” or “You put me through hell.” There was a documentary made many years ago about the World War II battle on the island of Iwo Jima; it was called, “Our Time In Hell.” But mankind doesn’t have a clue what hell, the real deal, is going to be like, but I can promise you this: It is going to be infinitely far beyond anything anybody has ever experienced or imagined. So, to get some idea of what lies ahead, let’s get familiar with some history and terms:

Sheol: This is the OT, Hebrew word for the region where departed spirits dwell, and reflected the conviction — as old as Israel itself — that the soul continued its life even after the death of the body. It occurs 65 times in the OT. In the context of the KJV, “Sheol” is translated as “hell” 31 times, as “grave” 31 times, and as “pit” 3 times. Even though “grave” is one translation, the

writers also understood it to mean the place where departed spirits went following a person's death. Whether they were in a place of joy or torment, they were understood to be completely conscious of their surroundings. To fully appreciate what Sheol means, we need to understand four things:

- 1) While "grave" refers to that shallow place in the ground where a body is laid to rest, Sheol is instead thought of as a place far below the surface of the earth, a hollow place deep inside the planet.
- 2) Sheol is spoken of as a completely different and separate kind of existence than what we experience on earth, and it is often couched in terms of an existence in shadows and darkness; as the mother of Samuel said: "*[T]he wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness*" — *Hannah, I Samuel 2:9b*.
- 3) It was possible in Sheol to be reunited with ancestors, with those who have died before you. In fact, the Lord promised this to Abraham: "*You . . . will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age*" — *God speaking, Genesis 15:15*.
- 4) While everybody went to Sheol upon their death, it appears that the Sheol of the OT had different regions, reflecting different relationships with God — one for the righteous and one for the unrighteous. Based on that, it seems equally clear that not everyone in Sheol would have the same experiences. Asaph, one of the writers of the Psalms, said this in referring to his life with God: *Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me to glory* — *Psalm 73:23-24*. For the unrighteous, Job noted: "*The dead are in deep anguish, those beneath the waters and all that live in them*" — *Job 26:5*. And as Isaiah wrote of the unrighteous dead, far ahead of the final punishments of hell: *The sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling grips the godless: "Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?"* — *Isaiah 33:14*.

Hades: The Greek translation of the Hebrew word "Sheol." It similarly means the world of departed spirits. Like the understanding from the OT, Hades, on no less authority than Christ, seemed understood as having two compartments. Our text today from Luke gives us some important insights into what the experience of Hades is like:

- 1) The rich man is fully conscious. He can see, he can speak, and he can feel; he is experiencing the pain of thirst and the desire of refreshment. In Hades, the idea is increased desire with decreased satisfaction. That will be a part of the torment; as the book of Proverbs tells us: *Death (Sheol/Hades) and Destruction are never satisfied* — *Proverbs 27:20a*.
- 2) The rich man is in an eternity that has been completely locked down; his life's outcome will never be changed. No matter how angry his protests or how sincere his apologies, his eternal outcome is settled.
- 3) The rich man is where he is because of full and complete justice. We live in a culture that is always complaining, always ready to cry, "That's not fair!" Notice that this guy never complains about where he is. He is in torment but never does he cry, "Foul!" In fact, quite the opposite occurs: He cries out for compassion and outreach to his five brothers who are still alive but apparently destined in his view for the same place as him. He appears ready to do anything to make sure they don't share his fate.
- 4) The rich man is not at his final destination. He is in hades, not in hell. Hell is what is the final destination that John talked about in the book of Revelation: *Then death and Hades*

were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire — Revelation 20:14-15, where the worst of all possible outcomes will occur for those who have chosen to spend eternity apart from the glorious presence of God the Father: ***They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever — Revelation 20:10b.*** In the meantime, for nonbelievers being held in Hades, the apostle Peter gives some insight: ***[T]he Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment — II Peter 2:9 (NIV 1984).*** The way this verse is phrased in the Greek tells us that the punishment of the unrighteous is ongoing, even while the final future judgment of Revelation 20 is still future.

So Hades, like Sheol, is an intermediate place of being held while awaiting final judgment. What is important to remember, though, is that something has changed regarding Hades. Ever since the ascension of Jesus Christ, his believers go directly to heaven. Hades now exists as only one compartment, its occupants only those waiting for their final judgment and sentence to eternal hell.

Now, after “Hades,” the most frequent Greek word used in the NT to describe hell is one we talked about a few weeks ago: *Gehenna*. Quick review: It comes from a place called *Ben Hinnom* — a valley outside of Jerusalem. The Israelites while participating in the worship of a false god called Molech conducted human sacrifice, and even child sacrifice, there. By the time of Christ, that valley had become the site of Jerusalem’s garbage dump; not only garbage was thrown there, but also the carcasses of dead animals and criminals as well (so maybe even Christ himself, if not provided a place for his burial by Joseph of Arimathea, may have had his body thrown there). That perpetual garbage provided nourishment for the worms that made that place their meals, and it was also known as the place where the fires that burned all that rubbish never went out. Very well did Jesus say when linking that place to the site of “eternal punishment” in hell that it was the place ***“where ‘the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is never quenched” — Jesus Christ, Mark 9:48 (quoting Isaiah 66:24).***

And the last term? Hell. Hell is what Hades will become. Hades is the present-tense. Hell is still in the future — but just as assured as heaven. It is the final eternal dwelling of all those who refused the offer of forgiveness of sins and redemption that Christ offered at the cross.

WHY DOES HELL EVEN EXIST?

Hell exists because of Satan’s rebellion against God. As Jesus himself said when talking to the disciples about end times, hell is ***“an eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 25:41b.*** God himself has prepared hell as the appropriate final destination for Satan and all those who had joined him in his defiance of God and supported his desire to be God. Then, after the sin that entered the world through the disobedience of Adam and Eve, hell also became the unfortunate but justifiable final destination for all those who, like Satan, rebelled by choosing to live for themselves instead of living for God. As C.S. Lewis said so well in his book *The Great Divorce*: “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell.”

WHAT WILL HELL BE LIKE?

One particular word used to describe hell is the word “destruction.” In the Greek, this refers to a destruction not of life (annihilation) but of well-being, of being alive but completely ruined. A

person will be more fully alive, with their senses more acute, their memories more accurate, than they ever were during their earthly existence. The receptors for taking in everything being experienced will have never been more perfect, more finely attuned. So everything that hell represents and contains will be intensified and magnified to an infinitely greater degree, in fact, to a greater degree than ever before.

Now that said, there will actually be three similarities between hell and heaven:

- 1) Both will be final, unchangeable destinations.
- 2) Both will be completely experienced with bodies and souls prepared for their respective destinations.
- 3) Both will be eternal; both will never end.

But after that, the differences are staggering — and here they are:

First of all, hell, like hades now, will be a place of torment, only more so. While several different words and phrases are used to describe this punishment — fire, burning sulfur, weeping, gnashing of teeth, outer darkness, destruction, lake of fire among them — the point of it all is neverending, uninterrupted agony. Hell's torments will be real, and will be experienced physically, mentally and emotionally more keenly than anything anybody ever imagined. We can't let ourselves be lulled into thinking that all the ways that the Bible describes the sufferings in hell are imaginary, or metaphors for something less intense. On the contrary, as Billy Graham noted, most of the symbols used in the Bible, such as fire, actually speak to a reality that is far more intense. And Charles Spurgeon, famed 19th century British pastor, responding to the question of whether the hellfire of the Bible was real, said: "Do not begin telling me that there is metaphorical fire: who cares for that? If a man were to threaten to give me a metaphorical blow on the head, I should care very little about it: he would be welcome to give me as many as he pleased." And John in describing the final judgments being applied to Satan and all who followed him made reference to "smoke," writing: ***[T]he smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever*** — ***Revelation 14:11***. We have no reason to think that John was seeing anything other than actual smoke, the result of something burning.

Second, hell will be a place of aloneness. Not necessarily alone from anybody else — the Bible doesn't address that specifically — but alone in the sense of abandonment, complete separation from God. This means complete separation from goodness, complete separation from love, complete separation from joy and happiness, and complete separation from purpose and fulfillment. And all those ideas people have suggested of being able to "hang out with all their friends in hell" is completely missing the point. Even if there is the ability to be with others, because it is occurring in hell, that will only add to the misery. There will be no support groups, no understanding friends available with which to ease our minds or bring us comfort. There will be no one to share our stories, to share our sorrows, to share our "what-ifs." There will be absolutely nothing in hell that will ever bring comfort of any kind. There will be no nothing available to dull the pain, to numb the reality. There will be no opportunities to "get away from it all." There will be no ability to unburden from the regrets of missed opportunities to claim Christ because, according to our text today, there will be the understanding of what was necessary to avoid hell in the first place. And whatever the thoughts of somebody that drive depression, manic behavior, or other mental/emotional issues, all psychological troubles will have no resolution but just an eternity of deepening grief and regret becoming worse. Even suicide will not exist — no matter how much it is desired. There will never be any relief or escape to even the slightest degree.

So what else will hell contain besides pain and a total sense of abandonment?

- 1) Loss of strength: *They will all respond, they will say to you, “You also have become weak, as we are; you have become like us”* — *Isaiah 14:10*. The Hebrew word for “weak” used here is the same word used to describe Samson’s condition following the loss of his hair (*Judges 16:7*). As the psalmist relates: *I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength* — *Psalm 88:4*.
- 2) No rest: *[T]he wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. “There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked”* — *Isaiah 57:20-21*. This complete loss of rest is confirmed by John as he continued viewing the future: *“There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image, or for anyone who receives the mark of its name”* — *An angel, Revelation 14:9-11*.
- 3) No satisfaction: Pastor and teacher Erwin Lutzer sums up hell as a place of eternally increasing desire confronted by an eternal lack of fulfillment of those desires. The more one will want and wish, the less one will realize those wants and wishes granted. Addictions? Nothing to satisfy the craving. Appetites? Nothing to feed the need.
- 4) Darkness: The book of Revelation tells us in describing heaven that *the city (the new Jerusalem) does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb (Jesus) is its lamp* — *Revelation 21:23*. That must be amazing because John is so moved that he essentially tells us the same thing in the next chapter: *There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light* — *Revelation 22:5a*. It is appropriate to assume that hell, the complete absence of God, will be a place of complete, total, unchanging darkness.
- 5) No clothing: According to Job, *“The realm of the dead are naked before God; destruction lies uncovered”* — *Job 26:6*. The same Hebrew word used for “naked” here is also used to describe Adam and Eve before sin in the Garden of Eden. “Naked” also implies vulnerability and shame. Prisoners were stripped naked in Hitler’s concentration camps to increase their sense of vulnerability and shame. Jesus was naked during his crucifixion.
- 6) Fear: There will be neverending fear. The psalmist wrote: *How suddenly are they (the wicked) destroyed, completely swept away by terrors* — *Psalm 73:19*.
- 7) Hopelessness: Hell takes away all sense of relief of any kind from any of the torments that are being experienced. As Isaiah wrote: *[T]hose who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness* — *Isaiah 38:18b*.

Maybe pastor and teacher John MacArthur’s shares the final word on the subject of experiencing hell: “There is no way to describe hell. Nothing on earth can compare to it. No living person has any real idea of it. No madman in wildest flights of insanity ever beheld its horror. No man in delirium ever pictured a place so utterly terrible as this. No nightmare racing across a fevered mind ever produces a terror to match that of the mildest hell. No murder scene with splashed blood and oozing wound ever suggested a revulsion that could touch the border lands of hell. Let the most gifted writer exhaust his skill in describing this roaring cavern of unending flame, and he would not even brush in fancy the nearest edge of hell.”

PUSHBACK — DENIALS OF HELL

We talked a few weeks ago about the idea that, if God is indeed a God of love, how could something like hell even exist? Isn’t that contrary to who He is? If God is a God of love,

shouldn't everybody go to heaven? What is forgotten that God is also a God of perfect, complete and unchanging holiness, and that God is also a God of justice. God has to deal with sin because of who He is. God has to deal with rebellion, with lives lived contrary to his plans and purposes. And God absolutely has to deal with those who choose to ignore and turn away from the incredible sacrifice for sin that His Son provided on the cross. Everyone is offered a way to have a life wiped clean from sin; that's what Jesus offered when he died. If their sins aren't dealt with by claiming Christ's life, then their sins need to be dealt with by claiming the only other option: Hell. And what is particularly ironic is that critics of the idea of hell often ask how Christ, who identified himself as loving, could even think to associate himself with a doctrine as punitive and disgusting as hell. Yet we find the word *Gehenna*, the reference to the reality of hell taken from the history of the Valley of Ben Hinnom, used 12 times in the NT — and 11 of those times come from Christ himself. Clearly he was not afraid to associate himself with either the word or the concept.

Another talking point is the suggested injustice of a life lived for 80 years being condemned to a hell of eternal years. How is that fair? Erwin Lutzer provides an interesting answer in his book *One Minute After You Die*, where he says: “What if, from God’s viewpoint, the greatness of sin is determined by the greatness of the One against whom it is committed? [SNOWBALL EXAMPLE]. Then the guilt of sin is infinite because it is a violation of the character of an infinite Being. What if, in the nature of God, it is deemed that such infinite sins deserve an infinite penalty, a penalty which no one can ever repay?” And, as David pointed out in his confession to God of his sins with Bathsheba: ***Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight — David, Psalm 51:4.*** Ultimately, whether I am offending God by swearing like a madman after hitting my thumb with a hammer, or whether I am offending one of you with a lousy attitude or some other kind of brain deadness, before I am sinning against anyone else, I am sinning against God. In fact, as David tells it, God is the only “injured party” in sin because of the overwhelmingly huge impact of sin against him. Sin attacks God’s holiness, his purity, his very nature and character. Because God views sin as so incredibly serious, his response has to likewise be incredibly serious. Hell is the ultimate outcome of God’s attitude toward sin, toward ALL sin.

WHY SHOULD A CHRISTIAN CARE ABOUT HELL?

Remember God’s words through the prophet Ezekiel? ***“As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live” — God speaking, Ezekiel 33:11a.*** That is how God views mankind, that he desires that everybody be changed from a life of wickedness to a life of repentance and forgiveness through surrendering to his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. That is why Paul wrote: ***[God our Savior] wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth — Paul, I Timothy 2:4.*** That is why Peter wrote that the Lord is ***not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance — II Peter 3:9b.*** This is why God has placed us here; this is the very reason that the body of Christ even exists — to impact the world with a message of repentance, forgiveness and God’s incredible love as demonstrated by the life, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Remember that kids’ chorus? *Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight.* The impact of Christ is intended for everybody because EVERYBODY is precious in his sight. Our culture has so many ways by which it looks at people. Folks, Christians are NOT a part of this culture. We are not to look at

people like our culture does. When we become a child of the King, we become a part of HIS culture. We look at others the way God does. We passionately care for others the way God does. We reach out to others the way God does. And we love without limits — exactly the way God does. We are here for him, as his ambassadors, for his outcome. As Paul said so well: ***[W]e are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do — Paul, Ephesians 2:10.*** God didn't place us here and prepare us here for ourselves and our agendas. While we have many skills and many passions, we are to be driven by one purpose: God's kingdom work here on earth. As President John F. Kennedy said in January 1961 at the conclusion of his inaugural address: "[H]ere on earth God's work must truly be our own."

CONCLUSION

As we close, one final thought: Our culture is afraid to die. It really is. How do I know this? Because our culture is afraid to grow old. How many products don't we see advertised that promise to keep us young — our skin young, our minds young, our bodies young? And yet, one absolute truth remains: We die. Our bodies have a rather undignified end awaiting them; as God declared to Adam and Eve upon their disobedience in the Garden of Eden: ***"By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return" — God speaking, Genesis 3:19.*** But what so many people get wrong is the fact that nobody dies; we just get rid of the packaging. Our souls — the most basic essence of who and what we are — will continue on. Everybody has an eternal life that is even now being lived. The only question is one of destination, of which there are only two options: heaven or hell.

And while people say that a God of love would never conceive of a place called hell, God has already proven beyond words to describe it that he is a God of love, in fact, a God of the greatest love ever conceived, when he sent his "one and only Son" into the world, leaving the unspeakable glories of heaven to live as a man and to die as a man, living a life of complete and total perfection to offer a gift of amazing grace that would please his perfect Heavenly Father: taking onto himself the sins of the whole world, and then offering his life as a substitute for anybody's life who would put their faith and trust in him. As a result, they could be seen by God as perfect as he was, because his perfect life would dwell in theirs. The result? The horrors of hell — which is what we deserve — for the wonders of heaven — which is what we've been offered. That is what this God of love chose to do.

American poet Walt Whitman published a book entitled, *Leaves Of Grass*, in 1892. Among the works collected in that book was a poem called "Oh Me! Oh Life!" which went like this:

*Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish . . .
What good amid these, O me, O life?*

Answer:

*That you are here — that life exists, and identity,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.*

We know that hell is real — and waiting — for anybody resisting the call of Christ. But, if you're a Christian here today, then you know the most powerful play of all [EXPAND]. What

will your verse be? What verse has God written for you? What will your verse mean for the Kingdom? Let's pray!