

Must We Still Believe in Hell?

Psalm 84; Mark 9:42-48

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Let me begin with a confession. This sermon has been brewing within me for a long time. I've discussed it with colleagues. I have researched. I've prayed. Now I'm ready to share it with you. Like me, I suspect many of you have struggled with this question too. Must we still believe in hell?

Here's the issue. On one hand, we speak of God as the most loving entity that exists—patient, forgiving, and accepting. God is Unconditional Love, we are apt to say. Then on the other hand, the church has taught that God has prepared a place of eternal punishment, torment, for sinners who reject God. Eternal. With fire. Demons. Excruciating pain. Where the worm never dies. I'm convinced those two statements are fundamentally incompatible. Either God is not as loving as we say, or our concept of hell is wrong. I cannot compromise on the love of God. That is the clearest picture in the entire Bible. God *is* love, John writes in one of his epistles. So if God is as loving as we believe and teach, how then do we deal with the church's teaching about hell? Today I'm going to tell you how I've dealt with this. I'm not asking you to agree with me. I'm simply asking you to give me a hearing. Then you evaluate what you hear against your understanding of scripture and decide what you believe. That's the way we do things as Baptists.

I'm going to take a position today against the traditional teaching of the church through history. I do so with a strong measure of humility, but also with firm conviction. The church's traditional teaching about hell has caused tremendous injury to the human psyche. It has created a religion of fear. It has presented God as nothing short of a monster. Time has come—actually it has long since past—to reimagine the church's traditional teaching about hell.

So what is the traditional church teaching about hell? Every one of you knows. It is ubiquitous. We absorb it in childhood and carry it

with us throughout our lives. It is well articulated in a sermon by the eighteenth century revivalist Jonathan Edwards. You may have been required to read this sermon in high school literature class. It is titled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Edwards described in great detail the fiery pit of hell, its flames raging and glowing, demons prowling, and sinners enduring unimaginable suffering. These are his words:

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in! It is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath that you are held over in the hand of that God whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of Divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it and burn it asunder.... It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite, horrible misery.... You will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages in wrestling with the Almighty, merciless vengeance.

The people listened with rapt attention, some holding tightly to the pews so they didn't slip into the fiery pit below, others interrupting the sermon to ask how they might be saved, and yet others moaning in misery or weeping aloud. That is what the church has taught about hell.

Let's bring it a little closer to home. Here's what the *Baptist Faith and Message*, our confession of faith, says. It is far less colorful.

God, in His own time and in His own way, will bring the world to its appropriate end. According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment....

In his commentary on the *Baptist Faith and Message*, the late Dr. Herschel Hobbs writes, "Baptists believe that...following judgment, the

saved shall be forever with the Lord in glory and the lost forever with the devil in hell.... That state will be eternal.”

I am Baptist. Proud to be so. I’ve said before that if you cut me I bleed Baptist. But I am a Baptist who does not believe in that kind of hell nor that kind of God. I want to tell you why now.

Four words in the Bible have been translated as hell. One is insignificant and used only once, so I won’t give any time to it. The first word is *sheol*, a Hebrew word found 65 times in the Old Testament. It refers to the grave, the place of *all* the dead. *Sheol* is a neutral term, not a place of judgment. It simply refers to the shadowy realm of the dead. In ancient Judaism, the dead were buried in communal caves. Over time people came to believe that the spirits of the dead lived underneath these caves. *Sheol* is not hell, not as Jonathan Edwards preached about it.

The second word is *hades*. It is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *sheol*. *Hades* appears eleven times in the New Testament, four of those in the book of Revelation. Like *sheol*, all dead persons went to *hades*. Unlike *sheol*, *hades* was a place of judgment, like in Greek mythology. Some of you will recall that Hades was the name of a god in Greek mythology. He was the ruler of the dead. He assigned people their place in the afterlife based on the lives they lived. In the New Testament, *hades* was a place of judgment but not a place of punishment, except possibly in Luke 16, the parable of the rich man who died and went to *hades*. There in fires of torment he begged Abraham for mercy. But *hades* is not hell as Jonathan Edwards preached about it.

The third and most important word is *gehenna*. This word is used twelve times. *Gehenna* was the name of a valley just outside of Jerusalem, sometimes referred to as the Valley of Hinnom. When I went to Israel a few years ago, our hotel room looked out over the Valley of Hinnom. I told people I had a bird’s eye view of hell! *Gehenna* during biblical days was a revolting place. In the Old Testament, some of the kings of Judah sacrificed children by fire in *gehenna*. By the time of the New Testament, *gehenna* was a large landfill. Human waste was dumped there. All the refuse of the city of Jerusalem was dumped there. The fires burned constantly. Because of rotting food and animals,

maggots thrived. The smell of burning sewage and rotting flesh caused breathing problems and nausea for the citizens of nearby Jerusalem. *Gehenna* was literally a place of never ending fire where the worms never died. But was it hell as Jonathan Edwards preached? No, I don't think so.

This is the word Jesus used in our text from Mark 9. If someone causes a "little one" to sin, he said, it would be better for that person to have a millstone hung around his neck and be thrown into the sea, the sea being a mysterious, frightening, and threatening place for first century Jews. And if your hand or foot or eye causes you to sin, Jesus said it would be better cut it off or pluck it out than to go to *gehenna*, another frightening and threatening place. They all knew the dangers of the sea. Sometimes their men went out to sea and never came back. They all knew about *gehenna* too, that valley out there with unquenchable fire, that place where children had been sacrificed, where the maggots never died. I'm convinced *gehenna* was not hell either, not as Jonathan Edwards preached about it. *Gehenna* was a metaphor for living one's life without God.

The church's traditional teaching about hell comes more from the writings of Dante and medieval art than from Jesus or the New Testament. Dante was a 14th century intellectual and devout Roman Catholic. His poem the *Divine Comedy* is regarded as the most important poem to come out of the Middle Ages and the greatest literary work in the Italian language. The poem describes Dante's travels through Hell, Purgatory, and eventually into Heaven. The Roman poet Virgil, who represents the epitome of human knowledge, led him. While traveling through hell, Dante saw and described the horrible punishment of sinners. Over time Dante's ideas about hell played upon the imaginations of medieval men and women, especially those given to superstition. Jonathan Edwards' hell was born. It was codified in the great art adorning the ceilings, walls, and tapestries of the church. In time, Dante's concept of hell became the church's teaching about hell.

So what was Jesus saying about *gehenna* in Mark 9? Here's what I believe. Jesus was saying that if you choose to live a life of sin, hurting children or hurting yourself, it is like choosing to live out there in *gehenna*, the repulsive valley of Hinnom. If you choose to live your life

without God, faith, and no concern for your neighbor or personal righteousness, it's like choosing to live out there in *gehenna*, where the garbage burns, where the smell is sickening, and maggots never die. Why would you choose to live there, when God has made you for so much more? A God of love—patient, forgiving, and accepting—invites you into a better way. That is the message of Jesus.

So must we still believe in hell? No, not the kind of hell that makes God into a monster. I'm sure some of my more conservative colleagues would be very critical of me. So be it. I stake my life on the God of love and God's invitation to a better way, a way that lifts us and the entire human family. That, I'm convinced, is the message of Jesus and the message the world desperately needs today.

Closing Prayer

Most loving One, forgive us for so misrepresenting you. Open us to the expansive love that you are. Amen.

Note: parts of this sermon came from research by Dr. Bruce Gourley in an article titled "Stoking the Flames: A Brief History of Hell and How It Got in the Bible," published in *Nurturing Faith Journal*, January-February, 2017