

GO TO HELL IF YOU WANT

INTRODUCTION

Tim sometimes dumps hard topics on me (just kidding), but I actually asked if I could do this one. Today we are going to talk about Hell. I've entitled this teaching, *Go To Hell If You Want*.

Hell has interested me from my youth, and I was afraid of it. My upbringing and the theological lens I was given placed a strong emphasis on Hell as a motivator. "You don't want to go there, so you better get baptized and live right." "Don't drink, smoke, cuss, chew, or go out with women who do."

Make no mistake—I think Hell is a motivator and is used by Jesus as such, but it is a "less-than" motivator. Hell is a negative motivator. Ideally, we want to be motivated in a positive way—by compelling love—and we'll come back to that in a little while.

What do you think about Hell? What questions do you have? It may be that you don't think about it all that much. The word hell has been used, abused, and misused in so many ways, and I think that's probably part of Satan's strategy. He wants us to minimize and trivialize things that are real to the point we don't think about their real significance and consequences.

Essentially, we've crafted a new word—**hellava**—that some use in the most inappropriate and ironic ways. Hellava is a slang word and an informal way of saying "hell of a," and is often used to describe something really good—things like a ball game, a steak, or a person.

David Platt once said, **"The way we talk about hell shows that we have no idea what we are talking about."**¹ I believe that's right.

This morning, I want to give us an idea of what we're talking about. I'll say right now that we may end up with more questions than answers because there is a lot we do not know about Hell. We will learn enough about it, however, to be clear that we don't want to go there or experience it, unless you want to. We'll also be clear that God doesn't want us to go there or experience it, unless we want to.

In fact, let's start there, and frame our discussion with these words from 2 Peter 3:9b. Peter says God is patient with humanity because,

He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.

In Matthew 18, Jesus talks about the precious nature of children and how we must become like children—humble—to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus then talks about people who mistreat, mislead, abuse, and cause children to stumble in life and especially in their relationship with God. He says these people are deserving of Hell.

Jesus then immediately broadens His teaching with a parable about sheep and the one that wanders off from the ninety-nine. Once the lost sheep is found, there is rejoicing. Again, we see the heart and the desire of God in these words of Matthew 18:14, as Jesus applies the parable to us:

In the same way, it is not my heavenly Father's will that even one of these little ones should perish.

Clearly, it is not God's desire to send anyone to Hell. But there is a Hell, and we have questions.

¹<https://x.com/plattdavid/status/298491497165246464>

DISCUSSION

We start with the word. The word translated as hell in our New Testaments is the Greek word, *Gehenna* (γέεννα), which literally means, Valley of Hinnom. The word *Gehenna* shows up 12 times in the Greek New Testament, and Jesus is one using the word 11 of those 12 times. His little brother, James (3:6), uses it the other time.

Jesus talks more about Hell than anyone else. We should pay attention.

When Jesus says, *Gehenna*, what is He talking about? He's not talking literally about The Valley of Hinnom which is located just to the southeast of Old City of Jerusalem. Instead, He's talking about something else. He's using *Gehenna* as a metaphor based on the Valley of Hinnom's horrible history.

During Old Testament times, some Israelites joined their pagan neighbors and sacrificed their children to the Ammonite god, Molek. I'll spare you the horrible details but know God speaks out against it.

Any Israelite or any foreigner residing in Israel who sacrifices any of his children to Molek is to be put to death.

–Leviticus 20:2 NIV

Sacrificing to Molek was supposed to lead to financial prosperity and future children for people giving up a child. The process was horrible; it involved fire—fire in the hollow figure of Molek and in the Valley of Hinnom. When Josiah—the 7th century B.C. King of Judah—comes along, he makes stunning reforms in the nation, and one of them involves Molek and the Valley of Hinnom.

Then the king defiled the altar of Topheth in the valley of Ben-Hinnom, so no one could ever again use it to sacrifice a son or daughter in the fire as an offering to Molech.

–2 Kings 23:10 NLT

The Valley of Hinnom was defiled, desecrated, and turned into a literal dumping ground for garbage, animal carcasses, and maybe even the bodies of criminals. It was a nasty, horrible place where fires were set and smoldered in an effort to offset the putrid smells.

Over time, the Valley of Hinnom, *Gehenna*, evolves into a picture and a concept of future punishment for people who rebel against God. The concept of this punishment includes horrible and terrible images of an eternal unquenchable fire, a lake of fire, a place of worms, weeping, and gnashing of teeth.

While everyone who reads the Bible and believes it, believes in Hell, there are differing ideas about Hell's nature that have been around for a long time. In preparation for this teaching, I read a couple of books. One of them is *Four Views on Hell*². The four main view views of Hell are:

1. Eternal Conscious Torment – I think is the mainstream view. It just says that Hell is forever and the people who go there will be conscious and experience it forever.
2. Annihilationism – which says that unbelievers will be destroyed or annihilated rather than suffering forever. The punishment is missing eternal life.
3. Universalism – which says that eventually everyone will be saved.
4. Purgatory – is a part of Catholic theology and teaches that a person can be purified by the flames of purgatory and then enter into Heaven.

²Preston Sprinkle (Editor), *Four Views on Hell: Second Edition*.

Of those 4 views, the first two—eternal conscious punishment and annihilationism—are the only two that I can see being possible based on Scripture. The other two face too many Scriptural challenges, in my view. Those who argue for the first two views make compelling cases. I hope for annihilation for the lost, but I don't know. I do know there is a lot of things that are way beyond our understanding. I also know we should be motivated to share the Good News of Jesus with the lost.

Jesus speaks about Hell several times, and in Matthew 18, after talking about the need for us all to be humble—like children—to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. He says this in verses 6-9:

If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!

Jesus then continues with an idea that He also uses in the Sermon on the Mount when talking about lust.³ This is not easy to hear but hear it.

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

—Matthew 18:8,9 NIV

Wow! We don't like hearing this kind of teaching, so we don't talk about it much. It doesn't fit our modern sensibilities. Remember, though, this is Jesus speaking. What are we to make of these words?

Clearly, these words are not to be taken literally. If they were, most of us would have died from self-mutilation. Clearly, also, Jesus is speaking and warning people to take Hell seriously. Jesus is full of grace and truth. Here, he is drilling down on a truth that is hard to hear.

I know this is a heavy discussion, and I promise you it's going to get better—a lot better—in just a few minutes. We're talking about this because the idea of Hell coming from a loving God just doesn't seem to fit. It keeps some people from Him. They ask,

How Could a God of Love Send People to Hell?

Remember, the desire of God is that no one is lost and that everyone would repent and receive eternal life through Jesus. If God's desire is for everyone to be saved—for everyone to receive eternal life with Him in Paradise—then why doesn't He just do it? Why is there Hell? Why do people go there?

These questions usher us into a deeper theological conversation about God's nature and our free will. As an act of love, God created humanity with free will—the ability and agency to love Him and obey Him or not. Adam and Eve rebelled. They separated themselves from God. Somehow, somehow, their rebellion is a part of our DNA. We get to a certain point in life, and we start making choices that are contrary to God's will.

When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned.

—Romans 5:12 NLT

³Matthew 5:27-30.

It's true of physical death; this is why we die. But there is something much deeper and worse than physical death, and that is separation from God, which is Hell, which is called the Second Death⁴.

God does not want this to happen. He sends Jesus to take our sins and to reverse the curse of sin.

There is a great difference between Adam's sin and God's gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ. And the result of God's gracious gift is very different from the result of that one man's sin. For Adam's sin led to condemnation, but God's free gift leads to our being made right with God, even though we are guilty of many sins.

—Romans 5:15,16 NLT

We have the choice to accept God's free and wonderful gift of Jesus. If we reject Jesus and choose a life apart from Him, then we get what we want and deserve which is separation from God.

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.

— C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

A couple of weeks ago, I read Max Lucado's new book about the End Times. In that book, he says, "Spend a life telling God to leave you alone, and in the end, he will do just that. God sends no one to hell. They volunteer."⁵ You can go to Hell if you want.

Conclusion

Max continues,

The good news about this bad news is that it need not be your news. Christ has done everything possible to steer us in the direction of heaven. Remember the question, "How can a loving God send people to hell?" We can fairly ask it from another perspective. "How can a just God allow sinners in heaven?" The answer? Jesus Christ. He became flesh. He lived a perfect life. He died a sinner's death. He rose from the dead to validate his authority over life and death. What more could he do? He, in essence, places himself between us and the doorway of Hell and says, "Over my dead body."⁶

When we receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior and when we put Him on in baptism—clothing ourselves with Christ, as it says in Galatians 3:26,27—the Father no longer sees our sins. He sees His Son and thus, sees us as holy, perfect, and blameless. As we walk with Jesus, our sins constantly are forgiven. Grace, mercy, and love provide a perfect path into the presence of God now and forever. No one needs to go to Hell. It's as simple as turning to Jesus and asking Him to save you.

If you're on the highway to Hell, then it's time to make an exit. You can go to Hell if you want to, but I pray you'll see the amazing compelling love of God and be drawn into His life.

⁴See Revelation 2:11; 20:6,14; and 21:8.

⁵Max Lucado, *What Happens Next: A Traveler's Guide Through the End of This Age*, 162-3

⁶*What Happens Next?* 165.

Communion

As we take communion this morning, I want to ask you to close your eyes and imagine standing at the foot of the cross. Imagine Jesus suspended between Heaven and Earth—beaten and bloodied almost beyond recognition; precious blood drips from His head, His hands, and His feet.

This is a picture of sin, and it's also a picture of love. Tim Keller said Jesus had to die to take our sins but was glad to die so we could be with Him and experience eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

—John 3:16-18 NIV

As you commune this morning, thank God for what He has done for you, and also think about this. If God is so concerned and interested in people not going to Hell, shouldn't we share that concern? As you stand at the Cross, think about those who need to stand with you, to see what you see, and to know what you know. Then, this week, tell them about your communion this morning.

Prayer.